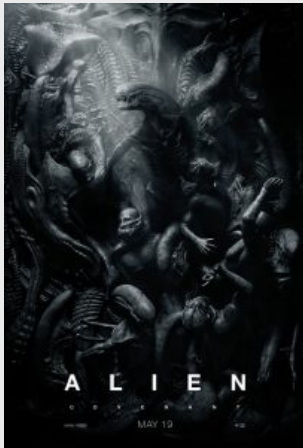


# ALIEN: COVENANT Is All About The Missed Opportunities



***Alien: Covenant* (2017)**

**Screenplay by John Logan and Dante Harper**

**Story by Jack Paglen and Michael Green**

**Directed by Ridley Scott**

**Scott Free Productions/Brandywine Productions/20th Century Fox**

**122 minutes, rated R**

Well, *Alien: Covenant* sure is pretty.

That's not actually a compliment.

First of all, this is as much of a spoiler-free review as I can make it, which means this is something of a shortish dive into the issues in Ridley Scott's latest return to one of the worlds that both defined and influenced genre film for decades. For a in-depth and likely quite entertainingly spoiler-rich review, stay tuned for a special ***Zombocalypse Now*** podcast, where Dustin Adair and I will hold forth at length about what went wrong here.

Because there is so much that went wrong.



This would also be a thing that is going wrong, but for different reasons.

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is a damn shame, because it is a great looking film, and there is a much better story hiding inside *Alien: Covenant*, one we get but glimpses of throughout. And it's also a shame because we have a really fine cast here, who one has to think spent a lot of time developing and portraying some interesting and complex characters, only to find most of their work lying on some cutting-room floor.

It is the cutting aspect that ultimately is the biggest offender here, and if there is not some future director's cut coming where this film works a helluva lot better - at least in pacing - I'd be surprised. No, I take that back. I'd be disappointed. Surprised is more or less the state overall I was in watching this film, but not for the right reasons.

I was surprised how poorly edited this film was.

I was surprised how much the cast was wasted.

I was surprised how much the big story ideas that *Prometheus* set up were just tossed out the window.

I was surprised how *dull* it all was.

The edit, oh ye gods, the edit. I am an editor, and one of the ways I describe editing film is to think of it as a musical piece. The best films have an internal rhythm that you can actually feel, just like a song, with repeated motifs, crescendos and refrains, counterpoints and diminuendos. *Alien: Covenant* is just over two hours long, and most of an hour goes by before the story really starts. Oh, things *happen* the first hour, but where there should be the kind of character development that gives you a reason to care about these people when the chest-bursting starts, there's just... things happening. *And there's no rhythm to it.* No sense of build, no sense of tension, and no

release or respite required because of it.



If you can remember the names of more than three of these people after the movie ends, you win a herd of unicorns.

On the plus side, the crew of the *Covenant* isn't quite as mind-numbingly stupid as the crew of the *Prometheus*. They aren't always terribly bright, though, so it's not the greatest of praise. It does make one yearn for a film where the kind of people these missions *would by necessity require* got to go through these kinds of situations, but apparently that would just mean watching the original *Alien* again. At least there the characters had a believable sense of self-preservation.

On the minus side though, all that promising camaraderie we saw in the preview clips that came out with the trailers is almost completely absent in the actual film. There is all kinds of information about the characters that - if you are watching *the film itself* - you simply will never know. That all the crew is made up of married couples, strait and gay? Not actually *in the film*, and quite frankly, aside from a very few lines and scenes, the relationships between most of the human characters in the film are rather vague. This may have something to do with those preview clips *not* being in the actual film for some reason.

Details about those relationships are introduced in a throwaway manner and ignored later, when they should *matter* later. Or they are brought back in a critical scene, but because they weren't fleshed out when they should have been, they simply fall flat. Billy Crudup gets the worst of that particular sin thrust upon him, as a man forced to become captain without the confidence one needs to actually lead. This would be an interesting story thread to follow, as would his devout

religious faith and his perceptions of how his fellow crew members perceive that faith. In this universe of creator-aliens, godlike beings and xenomorphs that have a bit of the demon about them, a character of faith *should* be an interesting one to follow, but again, the cutting-room floor seems to be where most of that ended up.

And this *matters*. There is a scene, late in the film, where Crudup's character faces a moment where, if we knew just a *bit* more about the man, the impact would have been actually powerful. A scene at the beginning - where, spoiler-of-a-kind, James Franco spends about his entire 2-3 minutes in this film - should have devastating emotional impact for Katherine Waterston's Daniels, but because we see so little of what necessarily must precede it, falls thuddingly flat. And it isn't her fault, or Crudup's fault, or Danny McBride's, or any of the rest of the cast's fault. They all act their hearts out - pun kind of intended - but it feels like they've had the context that their parts should have inhabited chopped out. It especially hurts in Waterston's case, because here we have another strong female genre character - something *Alien* pioneered - whose role as the lead character in the film would have considerably more impact if we actually spent real time with getting to know her.

(Yes, by the way, Michael Fassbender is, in fact, one of the best parts of the film. But without diving into spoilers it's hard to tell you why that is also an issue. And it is an issue. For the reasons above. And below.)



Guy Pearce has more dialogue than about half of the rest of the cast. For... Reasons.

Then again, there is the chance it was the script itself letting them down. If the first half of the film just sort of happens, the second half happens in a way that is all too predictable. Not in the details so much - there are a few quite interesting details that the film doesn't develop anywhere near enough - but in the broad actions of character and story. Characters wander off to die

stupidly because the script tells them to, not because it makes any sense. Characters trust explanations that are questionable on their face, and fail to ask questions when staying alive would demand it. And - and especially after *Prometheus* and the many valid criticisms applied to it - one shouldn't have to point out that none of this would have happened this way if people would just put the damn environmental suits on and keep them on when in an alien environment.

Most importantly though, *Alien: Covenant* is just *dull*. Yes, there are action sequences, and some of them are quite good, but around them are long stretches where, again, things just happen. Where dread should be building, it doesn't. Grand discussions about fate, free will and the dynamic between creator and the created tease at big ideas that just aren't there. Admittedly beautiful production design gives glimpses of alien wonders and horrors that lie unexplored. It's a movie that is more wasted potential than anything else, because there is a much better movie trapped inside it. A movie about gods and monsters and madness and creation and faith and family... instead of a film that is not bad so much as terribly, terribly disappointing.