

Ridley scott "alien" film scene analysis essay

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An analysis of how Ridley Scott creates suspense and tension through the use of sound, cinematography and performance in the air duct scene from "Alien". In this scene, we follow the character Dallas (Tom Skerrit) as he searches for the alien in the ship's air ducts, whilst communicating with the rest of his crew. At this point the audience are already aware of how dangerous the alien is, as it had already killed Kane (John Hurt) and Brett (Harry Dean Stanton) Not only this but Dallas had previously asked the ship's computer "What are my chances?" referring to killing the alien, and the computer replied "Can not compute" so before the scene has even started suspense is created as the audience fear for Dallas' life. Straight away the sound of a diegetic alarm is heard, which immediately gives a sense of panic and fear, this is coupled with a shot of the air lock which has high key lighting, this contrasts with the next shot where the camera zooms out to reveal Ash (Ian Holme) and Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in a low key lit room; Although Ash and Ripley aren't directly in danger the low key lighting still sets a dark and gloomy tone for the rest of the scene. At this point, quiet non-diegetic ominous music comes in which again helps set a tense atmosphere, even though Dallas isn't in the scene yet.

When Dallas is eventually shown making his way into the shaft there is a shot of the hatch closing on him, representing that Dallas is cut off and alone in there with the alien; the repetitive diegetic sound of Dallas on Lambert's tracker also shows how he is alone and puts the audience at ease as we know the alien isn't there yet, therefore there is a huge impact later in the scene when the alien is eventually picked up as we know that he is unsafe and is no longer alone. Whilst this is happening Dallas stares through the hatch as

it closes, showing to the audience that he doesn't want to be there, and that something bad could happen to him. As Dallas is crawling through the shafts, there are various shots in front and behind him, which is showing the claustrophobic environment he is in, this shows how vulnerable Dallas is as he is unable to move properly which again makes the audience fear even more for his life. The ominous orchestral music comes and goes during the scene, which is unlike other film scenes where the music will just build and then the villain/monster will appear, in this case the music builds and then dies down again, this helps keep the audience on edge as we have no idea when the alien will jump out.

The diegetic sound of Dallas' heavy breathing shows how he is scared, we as an audience can empathize with him as we too would be extremely scared, therefore we share the fear of the moment with Dallas and want him to survive. The only light in the shaft is coming from Dallas' flame thrower and torch, meaning the scene is very dark; this creates suspense as we can't see what is in front or behind him, this makes the scene even scarier as the alien could be anywhere but we simply can't see it. As Dallas reaches the third junction, a disturbing orchestral note is played representing that he is getting closer to danger, we can also hear a very quiet, non-diegetic heartbeat sound, which has a similar effect of Dallas' heavy breathing by showing the audience that he is scared. When Dallas says "Close all the hatches behind me" the music gets louder and there is a zoom in on Ripley's face to show her reaction and how she also knows he is in danger. The closing of the hatches behind Dallas is showing that there is no turning back and the only way he is going to survive is by killing the alien, however

because of Dallas' vulnerability, we know that this is unlikely. After Dallas has made his way into the third junction, Lambert picks up the alien on her tracking device " I think I've got it" this is followed by a build in music which again unsettles the audience because Dallas is getting closer to it. The close ups on the tracking device shows the audience the direction that the alien is heading in, however because of the different levels in the air ducts, it doesn't exactly show us or Dallas where the alien is, and because of the low key lighting, it makes it even more difficult to see the alien, therefore we know Dallas' chances of survival are very low.

Lambert then says " I've lost the signal" which unsettles the audience as we now have completely no idea where the alien is. Shortly after there is a close up on Dallas' hand in a strange slimy substance, which has quite clearly come from the alien, when he looks at the slime, the music builds again because it's obvious that the alien is very close now. The constant cuts to the rest of the crew shows their reactions and how they fear for Dallas the same way the audience do.