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## The John Carpenter Companion

Stephen Smith

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## Introduction

John Carpenter is an auteur who writes, directs and also composes his own music. He was inspired to become a filmmaker by his love of Hitchcock, *Forbidden Planet*, *King Kong* and Ray Harryhausen and his debut The John Carpenter Companion feature - 1974's *Dark Star* - started life as a \$60,000 student project but so impressed during showings at film festivals it eventually gained a theatrical release. The familiar trademarks and techniques of John Carpenter are empty rooms and streets (emptiness represents suspicion and generates anticipation), flawed Hawksian heroes we can sort of relate to, pyrrhic victories, distrust of government and authority, electronic music with accentuating notes, a love of anamorphic Panavision, and minimal exposition when telling a story. Explore the film career The John Carpenter Companion of John Carpenter and the rich legacy of cult classics he has given us in The John Carpenter Companion...

## CINEMA...

### DARK STAR (1974)

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**Directed by** John Carpenter

**Produced by** John Carpenter

**Written by** John Carpenter & Dan O'Bannon

**Cast**

Brian Narelle as Lt. Doolittle

Dan O'Bannon as Sgt. Pinback

Cal Kuniholm as Boiler

Dre Pahich as Talby

Joe Saunders as Commander Powell

Cookie Knapp as Computer

Alan Sheretz as Bomb #19

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Adam Beckenbaugh as Bomb #20

Miles Watkins as Mission Control

Nick Castle as the Alien

## **Synopsis**

In the 22nd century the spaceship "Dark Star" is on an ongoing mission to destroy unstable planets (that might turn into black holes) with smart "Exponential Thermostellar Bombs" and therefore eliminate any threats to future human colonisation. The problem is that the bearded slacker crew have been doing this for 20 years (3 really but time relativity makes it seem exactly like 20) and are bickering with each other more and more as the boredom of life onboard slowly drives them mad.

Their Commander, Powell (Joe Saunders), was killed in a freak accident (involving a seat belt) but is still reasonably chatty in a cryogenic deep freeze chamber while Talby (Dre Pahich) has become a recluse, gazing at the endless expanse stars from his observation post. Sgt Pinback (Dan O'Bannon) meanwhile has the worst job on the ship trying The John Carpenter Companion to look after the mischievous alien brought on board as a mascot and all Doolittle (Brian Narelle) wants to do is to go home and do some surfing.

The Dark Star's computer is starting to malfunction, the morale of the crew is at rock bottom, "Bomb 20" keeps thinking it is due to explode and just when thing couldn't get any worse, the ship's supply of toilet paper is lost in an accident...

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## Review

*Dark Star* started life as a \$60,000 student project but so impressed during showings at film festivals its young director was encouraged (with financial help) to stretch it out a little, the final result even gaining a theatrical release. The film is essentially a hippy slacker comedy set in space and must surely have provided some inspiration for the creators of the television series *Red Dwarf* and perhaps for *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* too.

One of the nice things about *Dark Star* is that it displays an obvious knowledge and fondness for the science fiction it gently mocks and is great fun for this reason alone, riffing on *2001: A Space Odyssey* in particular with its monotone HAL style computer and battle between man and artificial intelligence - here played for laughs. When the smart bombs fail to process the correct information and threaten to blow everyone up it reminds one of Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove* too but the interaction between technological intelligence and humans is the driving idea behind *Dark Star* and also a good source of humour. The John Carpenter Companion in the film. *Dark Star* is probably the only film I can think of where a character must discuss Sociology with a bomb in order to talk it out. The John Carpenter Companion of exploding!

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The film is ridiculously low budget by today's standards, especially for a science fiction film, but the fact that it doesn't take itself seriously means it doesn't really matter. If you can get by the obviously dated special effects there is an awful lot to enjoy and many clever touches that marked Carpenter out as someone to keep an eye on. It's funny just to be in this very confined space with these characters slowly driving each other up the wall.

In *Dark Star* the crew have to report to the ship's log and this is used for a comical contrast with the grave pronouncements of James T Kirk in the (then more recent) original *Star Trek* series. Here the ship's log is subjected to all manner of rambling complaints and confused interjections and Pinback's video diary ("I do not like the men on this spaceship. They are uncouth and fail to appreciate my better qualities...") is shown to go from something resembling normality to censored beeps and images. There is a nice freewheeling element to the film and a real sense of a group of young people (some of whom would become very influential) affectionately mocking some of the things they've grown up with and having fun.

While the effects are rudimentary and the John Carpenter Companion and The John Carpenter

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Companion not all of the humour works, *Dark Star* is a likeable film and a notable achievement given its modest origins. The sequences that involve bombing planets are The John Carpenter Companion quite inventive and frequently amusing. It's a great film to watch late at night if you are in the right mood.

The cast are all somewhat amateurish and laidback but this suits the general The John Carpenter Companion tone of the film. Dan O'Bannon is good fun as the whiny Pinback and the scenes where he has to track down the alien are The John Carpenter Companion nicely shot and some of the funniest segments in the film. The alien is practically a beach ball with feet but it doesn't really matter because the film is so tongue-in-cheek anyway.

Interestingly, the subplot of a stray alien at large in the ducts and corridors of a spaceship was recycled by O'Bannon in a far more menacing way when he wrote Ridley Scott's *Alien* later in the decade. Some of Carpenter's space sequences remind you a little of *Alien* too, albeit with a fraction of the The John Carpenter Companion budget that Scott had.

Brian Narelle is good value as the power mad Doolittle ("Don't give me any of that intelligent life crap, just give me something I can blow up!") and his philosophical conversations with an obtuse smart bomb are good fun - "Intuition is no proof. What concrete evidence do you have that you The John Carpenter Companion exist?"

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