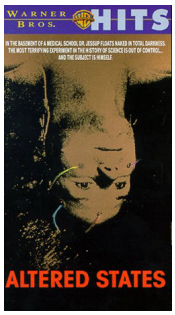
My need to hold onto outdated technology was finally rewarded when Fango's Bekah McKendry stumbled upon a box of VHS tapes discarded from a local Blockbuster. Yeah, I have a VCR. And yeah, I have a sizable collection of VHS tapes that I still watch. Some movies just work better on VHS—it manages to capture the original feeling of the film, and in the case of Ken Russell's 1980 film ALTERED STATES, the format manages to make a cult classic still feel relevant. Why would Blockbuster ever throw this away?

ALTERED STATES stars a very young William Hurt in his debut performance as Harvard scientist Eddie Jessup, obsessed with quantifying and qualifying the altered states of consciousness that we humans occasionally find ourselves in. A man who professed to once see visions of angels and saints until he lost his faith after his father's death, Jessup is simultaneously a scientist and a man of faith—faith in his hypothesis that altered states are as real as our normal, waking states. He is also pretty nuts.



Working from the tenets of the basic mad-scientist film, ALTERED STATES works hard to ground its outlandish premises in some foundational reality. There are plenty of conversations with big science-y words, lots of yelling about ethical experiments and medical practices and numerous references to Jessup's seemingly crazy ideas and behaviors as more intellectual fervor than straight-up insanity.

Convinced that altered states can manifest themselves as physical realities, Jessup experiments on himself with multiple hallucinogenics and isolation chambers, the sensory deprivation they induce intended to intensify his hallucinations. He achieves some minor success, but it isn't until a trip to Mexico yields a powerful hallucinogen that these other realities begin to make themselves tangible. Oh, and tangible they become. Jessup begins to genetically

regress into early man, at one point becoming fully Cro-Magnon, beating a security guard and breaking into a zoo to feast on live sheep. The genetic switch, however, wears off, and Jessup becomes even more deeply committed to repeating the experiment and documenting his success.

Of course, it goes badly—and here we venture into spoiler territory. Jessup regresses so far that he becomes a primordial nothingness, inexplicably disappearing into a swirling vortex of fog, light, and water. His only salvation comes from his estranged wife Emily (Blair Brown), who attempts to save him. In the process, Jessup is literally genetically reborn in a killer hallucination of biological cell development coupled with rad lasers and strobe lights. Later that evening, Jessup professes that the only thing which saved him from a nothingless void was his love for his family. This is a problem, as the rest of the film has set up how incredibly dispassionate Jessup is about his family; he considers them distractions, and the main reason his scientific work had suffered to that point. It is only when he ditches his family that he actually makes some progress—and he couldn't be happier. Then all of a sudden, a brief look into a black hole gives him a change of heart? It's a cheap and cheesy way to resolve a film that in many ways rewarded him for jettisoning his familial responsibilities. This tacky Hollywood ending is ALTERED STATES' primary weakness.

This conclusion notwithstanding, ALTERED STATES stands the test of time, and the VHS format actually enhances the hallucination scenes—their graininess, overexposed colors and early digital effects read as believable in this low-tech format. It's no surprise that these visuals are among the most aesthetically successful parts of the film—they are protracted, crazy, nonsensical and incredibly fund to watch. Hurt is buoyed by a solid supporting case including Brown, Bob Balaban (always a scene-stealer) and Charles Haid; a very young Drew Barrymore makes an appearance as one of Jessup's daughters.

If you can look past the tacked-on ending, ALTERED STATES is a solid hybrid of the mad-scientist genre and the monster movie, and absolutely worth resurrection.