In history as we know it, NASA cancelled the Apollo 18 mission to the moon due to financial constraints. But in Apollo 18, the movie, there really was such a mission to the moon: a top-secret mission nobody would ever know about...until now.

The purpose of this mission? Ostensibly, to place some sensors on the surface of the moon so that we could better spy on the Soviet Union. But as the astronauts assigned to the task go about their mission, they begin to slowly suspect something much more sinister is going on. What are those strange noises that keep interfering with their radio transmissions? What steals the American flag the astronauts so proudly planted in the lunar surface? Was that really something moving out there in the crater? And when the astronauts discover a Russian spacecraft abandoned on the moon with nothing but blood inside, things begin to go bad in a hurry.

Apollo 18 may not be everybody’s idea of a quality thriller. It’s filmed in that pseudo-documentary style made popular—for a while—by the Blair Witch Project, and director Gonzalo Lopez-Gallego tries hard to give the film a feeling of realism, as though it really were newly-discovered footage from NASA. The special effects consist primarily of establishing a realistic lunar setting for our main characters to wander around in, and when the alien menace inevitably begins to manifest itself it does so in a subtle, low-key fashion that eschews buckets of blood or giant roaring monsters. The evil that slowly, deliberately stalks the astronauts is a slow-moving one, and there is quite a bit of time invested in getting to know the characters’ personalities. The result is a subtle, simmering thriller, peopled by characters who are more than victims waiting to be gobbled up by whatever is waiting for them on the moon, but very nearly real people whom the viewer establishes a strong dramatic empathy with.

Yes, Apollo 18 is similar to the aforementioned Blair Witch Project, but in this reviewer’s opinion it is far superior. The acting and direction are more competent, and while the story remains ambiguous for quite some time, we know exactly what happens in the exciting finale. If perhaps not to everyone’s taste, Apollo 18 is at least an admirable effort to make a horror film that defies the popular clichés.