Death and the Maiden

The first outer-space chick flick? Years before Thelma and Louise, Ridley Scott gave Ellen Ripley the power

by Edward Gross

George Lucas made the solar system safe for children—until Ridley Scott showed up. As quickly as *Star Wars* remade cinematic sci-fi, *Alien* remade it again—into something much darker. Better lock up the wookies at night, unless you want to find nothing but dog food in the morning.

It was *Dark Star's* Dan O'Bannon who first recognized the potential in bringing horror back to deep space. A fan of the '50s alien invasion movies (see page 8), O'Bannon wasn't especially interested in the fairy tale tenor" the genre was taking after *Star* Wars. His answer: *Space Beast,* a straightforward scream-fest set on a spaceship. "I was writing dialogue," he reflected in *The Book of Alien,* "and one of the characters said, 'What are we going to do about the alien?' The word came out of the page at me, and I said, 'Alien. It's a noun and an adjective.' So I went in the other room and shook [writing partner Ron Shusett] awake and told him. He said, 'Okay' and went back to sleep. But I knew I had found a really hot title."

The first draft of the screenplay, however, was little more than technical updating of old classics like *Forbidden Planet* and *It! The Terror From Beyond Space.* According to John L. Flynn, author of *Dissecting Aliens,* it was Shusett who came up with the concept that really jumpstarted the project. "Dan, I have the idea. I know what the monster does," Shusett said. "The monster screws: the human being. It plants its seed, [which] grows and emerges from the body of the human—a hybrid monster. It's in the [human], and we don't know it until it comes out and escapes, and all during the movie it's chasing the [crew] and changing into different forms."

It was graphic imagery—some would say tasteless—but it was exactly what the writers needed to elevate *Alien* beyond the low-water mark of "B" movie conventions. Now excited by the project, O'Bannon wanted to direct the film himself as a low-budget effort, but Shusett understood that they had a major-studio project on their hands and insisted they chase the money. Eventually, *Alien* ended up at Brandywine Productions, whose co-founder, Walter Hill, one of Hollywood's most reliable writer-directors *(The Getaway, 48 Hours),* loved the premise—if not the script itself. Hill and fellow Brandywine exec David Giler rewrote the script, concentrating on building tension instead of on the effects gags and spaceship gizmos O'Bannon and Shusett relied on. The team also elevated Warrant Officer Ellen Ripley to the role of hero, a decision that broke the SF mold and would make a star of then-unknown Yale Drama School grad Sigourney Weaver.

Shortly after *Alien's* release, Walter Hill, who is currently in litigation with Twentieth Century Fox over *Alien Resurrection,* gave *Cinefantastique* his take on the original O'Bannon-Shusett screenplay. "[It] was, in any kind of literary sense, remarkably unsophisticated," he said. "It

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had not even B-picture merit. . . . Nobody could take it seriously. It wasn't a professional job. It was poorly written. It had a 'Jesus, gadzooks' quality, and no real differentiation in characters. But there was no question in my mind that they wanted to do a science-fiction version of *Jaws*. It was put together with a lot of cunning. To my mind, they had worked out a very interesting problem. How do you destroy a creature you can't kill without destroying your own life-support system? Tthis is a good notion, but the script had a lot of junk in it, like holograms and other current 'pop' stuff."

So why did sole credit go to O'Bannon (with a shared story credit with Shusett) after a Writers Guild arbitration? Producer David Giler explained at the time: "All I can say is it's a totally ridiculous and arbitrary process. You just can't tell with the Writers Guild. In the end, the plot in O'Bannon's [original script] and the one in [the final version] are basically the same. And yet, they're as different as night and day It's subtler than the Writers Guild is equipped to handle. Though the storylines are basically the same, what happens to the characters has been changed drastically. That is what has been altered."

No matter which version of the script you're talking about, the storyline is straightforward: The crew of the mining vessel Nostromo makes an unscheduled detour to an alien planet under the orders of their superiors, "The Company." There they inadvertently pick up a parasitic lifeform that enters one of the crewmen, gestates and then bursts through his chest before going through a series of physical changes, all the while dispatching crewmembers one by one. Warrant Officer Ripley (Weaver) ultimately learns that the ship's computer, as well as an onboard android, has taken a very Hal 9000-like approach to this mission, and has made the crew expendable. The Company's only priority is to bring the creature to Earth for its bio-weapons division, paving the way not only for sci-fi's first post-feminism heroine (Ripley) but also for dual villains (the unstoppable alien and the massive, immoral "Company"), which provided Brandywine and Fox with a variety of insta-premises for sequels.

he script, of course, is the irreplaceable building block of a great movie—and O'Bannon and Shusett, as well as Hill and Giler, have received due credit over the years. But the ultimate authority in the movie business—the chief builder of the

THE EVOLUTION OF AN ACTION HEROINE: Weaver [with Veronica Cartwright] was a mild-mannered warrant officer in *Alien* before getting tough with a ship-load of marines in the sequel [above]

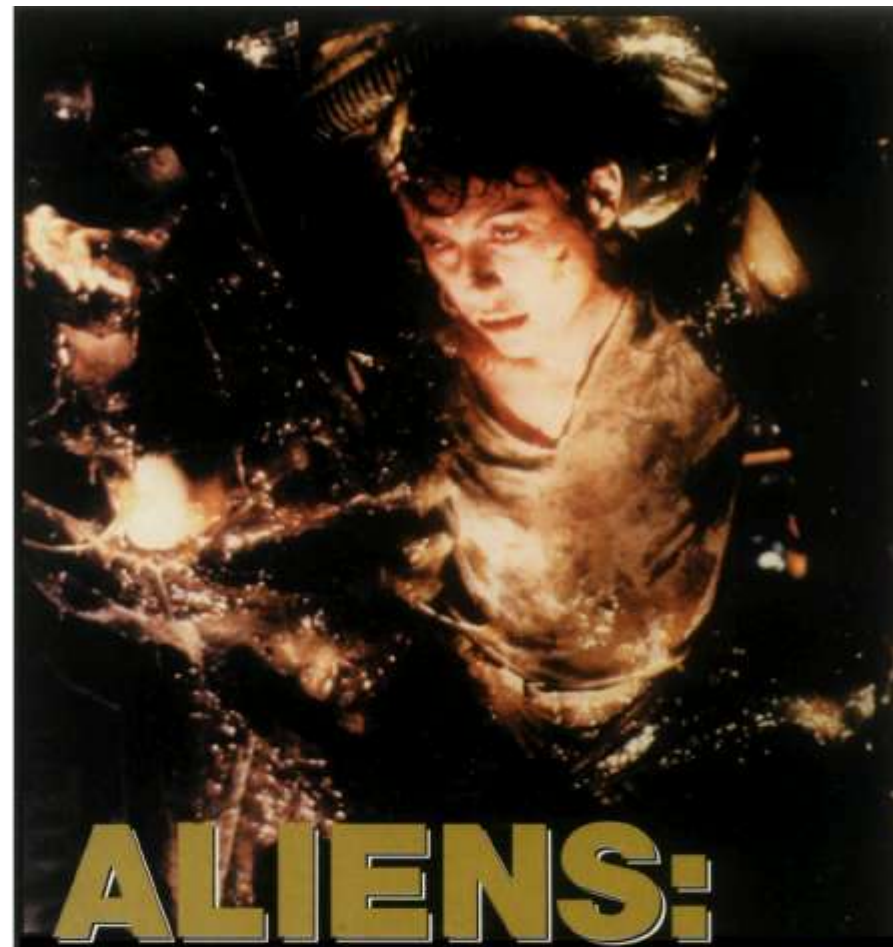
product—is the director, and Ridley Scott took the source material for *Alien* and unquestionably made it into *his* movie.

The British helmer, whose filmography includes *Blade Runner, Thelma & Louise* and *G.I. Jane*, cut his professional teeth as a director of television commercials, gaining an impressive reputation for both quality and quantity—he helmed 2,000 commercials in 10 years, many of them award winners. He made his motion picture debut at 35 with 1976's *The Duellists* before turning to *Alien.*

Unlike many directors, Scott does not employ a "reader"—a person who examines the various scripts offered to a director and recommends those he or she believes the director will be interested in. "You've got to go through the chore of reading the book, the screenplay, whatever yourself," he told journalist James Delson. "I read *Alien* and thought, 'Jesus Christ!' It was so simple, so linear, that no one would have spotted it for me. This is why you must read yourself. I think, honestly, even with a Walter Hill screenplay, the normal director with a TV or theater background would have ditched it. But it hit me between the eyeballs. I thought it was amazing."

It was also in a genre he'd been itching to get into. "Science fiction is really an opportunity or a stage on which anything goes. The problem is, that's what tends to happen," Scott said in a recent Internet interview. "I think the genre has become abused, with what are essentially weak ideas and screenplays, which are driven by technology rather than story and character. Characterization [in *Alien*] was in the attitudes, in the very spartan choice of language, and what they talked about. Like the first conversation after they wake up [from suspended animation]; it's about shares of stock in the company. It seemed to me a very natural, very human kind of character painting.

"What little science fiction I'd seen [before making *Alien*] had been too similar," he continued. *"2001* was my personal revelation, and I began to speculate on what else could be done in space. Then came *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind,* and I realized the tremendous quality that was possible in making these films stand head and shoulders above the usual quickie space flick or horror movie. The fact that the story happens to be set in space is really incidental. The space-tug could be an old cargo ship in the South Seas, with a crew of seven who happen to land on an island instead of a planet and encounter a horror of some kind. It's the story that matters—the actual setting could be practically anywhere at any time."



ALIENS: Back to the Nest

James Cameron refashioned the *Alien* mythos when he took up the assignment of writing and directing the sequel to Ridley Scott's classic horror yarn. And Cameron's vision—hordes of aliens serving as "drones" to a queen—prospered in part because of what Scott cut out of his original.

In the early stages of preproduction for *Alien* in 1978, H.R. Giger created detailed illustrations of the alien egg, face hugger, chest burster and full-grown warrior. Based on these drawings, Scott established the alien life cycle: The creature begins as a face hugger in a pod of unknown origin, which springs out and attaches itself to a host. The face hugger then deposits an embryo that grows into a parasite; the parasite emerges in a spectacularly bloody fashion and metamorphoses quickly into an adult.

What wasn't established in the film: The adult alien cocoons its victims, depositing them within alien larvae that consume the hosts slowly and transform them into pods, or eggs. That missing stage in the alien's life cycle, designed by Giger and filmed but removed by Scott, gave Cameron six years later the freedom to breed 'em.

"Had that [concept of cocooning] existed in the first film, my story wouldn't have worked," Cameron has said. "In my story, the eggs came from [a queen]. I focused on the idea of a hierarchical hive structure where the central figure is a giant queen whose role it is to further the species."

With Giger unavailable, Cameron turned to Academy Award-winning effects maven Stan Winston to create his remarkably fertile 15-foot queen alien. "We tried to be as true to the original film as we could," said Winston, "without disallowing ourselves a little bit of artistic freedom."

The final result: heart-pounding egg-citement.—*Douglas Perry*

BUILDING THE SCARE: The creation of the unearthly home of the alien fascinated Ridley Scott

Of course, the real appeal —and challenge—for the director was in visualizing the horror.

"When you take on a subject like this, after the initial flush of excitement, the problem of what the hell it's going to look like suddenly starts hanging over you like a thundercloud," Scott said in *Dissecting Aliens.* "How do we do the beast in its various forms? One had to see it at some point or other. So I arrived in Hollywood with that misgiving and ended up going through about seven months worth of preproduction drawings without finding anything I really liked. There was the usual blob and clawed creature and all that sort of stuff, which wouldn't have been right even if we'd done them well. I would have been embarrassed by them rather than proud."

Scott wasn't the only one tying himself in knots trying to figure out a look for the creature. According to O'Bannon, the director actually brought in contortionists and had them twist and turn their bodies and walk around. Scott knew the alien couldn't just be a guy in a rubber suit—the monster had to be unusual, fantastical, *and* very realistic. But in the pre-digital age, how was that to be done?

When the contortionists didn't solve the problem, Scott found a book of photos of an African tribe that still lived a primitive lifestyle. "They're all very tall, and there were some very impressive photographs of these tall, thin, powerful-looking men with very supple, gleaming muscles," O'Bannon has said. "They're very graceful, sort of sensual, and at the same time powerful and very handsome, but almost ethereal—almost not human. That image burned itself into Ridley's brain. He liked that power and grace and strength. Then they found their actor, a remarkable seven-foot African man."

nd then came Giger. "Dan O'Bannon came in with a copy of H.R. Giger's *Necronomicon* and said, 'What do you think of this?' I nearly fell over," Scott has said. "I started leafing through it until I came to this one half-page painting and I just stopped and said, 'Good God, 1 don't believe it. That's it.' I'd never been so cer-

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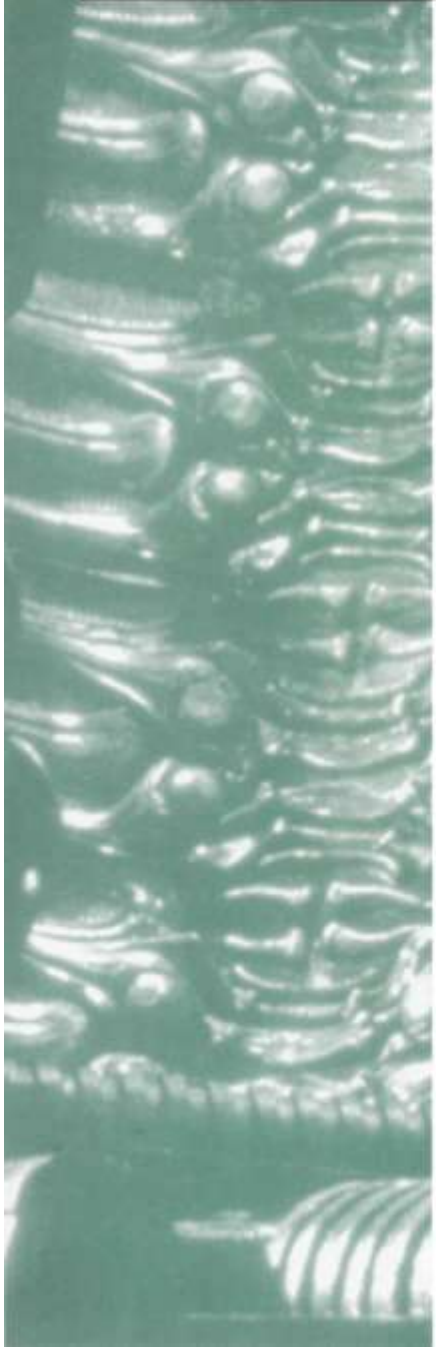
tain about anything in my life. I thought we would be arguing for months about what the beast was going to be. Looking at the painting, I thought, 'If we can do that, that's it.'"

The Swiss surrealist was hired to work on the film, and it was Scott's hope that the artist would be able to design an outfit that fit the body type of the man he'd chosen. Giger, answering to no muse but his own, equipped the man with pipes and tubes, as well as sores and joints and strange shapes. The end result was unprecedented—and Scott loved it. From there, the production's plaster shop took a full-body cast of the actor and mounted it, standing up straight, on a wooden base. Giger had it placed in his studio and began to add clay, bones, screws, an air-conditioning duct, even a human skull.

"The face of this thing is a real human skull," O'Bannon, who witnessed the artist at work, told *Fantastic Films* magazine. "He took a human skull and jammed it right on the front, riveted it in place and then started modifying it. It was such a beautiful human skull. It had been a real person, not like one of those plastic model kits, and he takes out his hack-saw and he saws the jawbone off and extends [it] like six inches. He puts an extension on it, and creates this distorted jawbone. Then he starts attaching other fixtures to it and building a new extension on the back of it. He's doing this to a real human skull. When he finally [finished], a cast was made of it. It was a craftsman who actually cast the rubber costume of Giger's sculpture. When they were finished casting in rubber, he used his airbrush and painted the costume the same way he does his paintings. I truly believe that that monster in *Alien* is absolutely unique looking. I think it is two strides beyond any monster costume in any movie ever before."

It had been a long, strange trip for the alien's creator. H.R. Giger supposedly had his interest in paint-



ing piqued by a *Life* magazine pictorial on Jean Cocteau's 1946 version of *Beauty and the Beast.* In the 1950s, he began working as a draftsman for the Meissen architectural firm, and followed that with a stint in art school. He soon began to explore his bizarre imagination on canvas, where he found success if not fame or fortune.

"Some people say my paintings show a future world and maybe they do," Giger has said. "But I paint from reality. I put several things and ideas together, and perhaps, when I have finished, it could show the future. If people want to interpret my work as warnings about too much overpopulation, disease and mechanization in the future, then that is up to them. I like to combine human beings, creatures and biomechanics. And I love to work with bones—they are elemental and functional and, after all, are part of human beings. I have many bones in my home in Zurich, and I study them and use them as models. Some people say my work is often depressing and pessimistic, with the emphasis on death, blood, overcrowding, strange beings and so on, but I don't really think it is. There is hope and a kind of beauty in there somewhere, if you look for it."

Indeed, the artist even refuses to accept that his famous alien is evil. "It's easy to feel that way because [it] kills almost the entire crew," he told *Questar* magazine. "However, I had nothing to do with the plot of the film —it's very violent and quite ugly. You see, I love my creatures. Maybe they do terribly evil things, but they are still nice to look at. They are elegant, sleek—nice in a strange way, I suppose. What I hate to see in films are unformed things like slime."

Whatever the alien's true nature, it isn't the result of parental neglect. Giger worked on every aspect of the alien, from the "face-hugger"—which ejects itself out of its egg and attaches to the face of a Nostromo crewmember before entering his body and gestating there —to the "chest-burster," which rips free from its human

"womb," to the full-grown creature.

"The first creature is like a crab sitting in the egg," Giger has said. "I worked as an industrial designer in Zurich, so when they told me what the alien had to do, I could see the beast in terms of its functions. I designed the face-hugger with a tightly coiled tail so it could jump out of its egg, using the tail as a spring. I gave the first one a tail the shape of a spring, because its function commanded that it could jump out at the face. And also two hands so it could grab a hold of the head.

"The second [form of the] alien was born through the crab," he added, noting that the chest-burster was inspired by modern Irish expressionist Francis Bacon, who, like Giger, dealt with grisly subjects. "Bacon did a crucifixion in 1945, and there is a kind of beast in it that has a head that is only a mouth. Ridley said he wanted something like that. It was logical. This beast has to come out, to chew and claw its way out of a man's chest. The only important thing is teeth. I tried to do several things with the chest-burster. At first it had these two little arms, but they were kind of like freak arms. Now he's like the long skull of the big alien—a long skull with teeth and a tail.

"The big problem was with the [full-grown] monster," he concluded. "In the first design, he had big black eyes, but somebody said he looked too much like a Hell's Angel, all in black with the black goggles. Then I thought it would be even more frightening if there were no eyes. [So I] made him blind. So when the camera conies close, you see only the holes of the skull. Now that's really frightening. Because even without eyes he always knows exactly where his victims are, and he attacks directly, suddenly, unerringly. I started thinking that that long skull ought to have a function, too. I prefer always to have these big long heads for the monster. Every object needs to have a function. So if it has a long head, there's space for a long tongue. And I also gave his tongue teeth. I thought it was very good as a filmic device."

The alien, in the end, was the film: *Alien* would succeed or fail based on the creature. So, like a Hollywood publicist of yore, Scott decided to keep his unknown star shrouded in mystery, a decision Giger embraced. "More often than not, horror films show the monster for much too long," Giger has said. "And once you have seen it you can leave the theater. There is no point in watching on. So we decided to show the monster very briefly, detail by detail, reserving a full view for the end. Otherwise it may well have been dull."

The alien can be accused of almost anything but that. •

SCARE TACTICS: In the bigger-budgeted sequels, the drooling, squawking creature evolved [opposite]. For the bewildered crew of the Nostromo [above], however, the slimy face hugger was scary enough