

sci-fi Invasion!
The Science Fiction Magazine
SUMMER 1998 EDITION

Father of the Beast

When Giger created *The Alien* over 20 years ago, he spawned the one nightmare he couldn't control: His own
By Patrick Sauriol

How many people would want to take credit for two decades of murder, terror and mayhem? Giger, for one, is not only willing to take credit, but he's willing to fight for it. For more than 20 years, movie audiences have been frightened by the creations of the Swiss-born painter, sculptor and visionary via the *Alien* movies. But for Giger, the two decades have included a bumpy relationship with Twentieth Century Fox. He says that when Sigourney Weaver and the crew of the *Nostromo* encountered death in 1979 in the first of four *Alien* films, he began a relationship with 20th Century Fox that included snubs, unfair practices and a lack of fair crediting. When he was left out of the credits of "*Alien Resurrection*" altogether, he decided it was the final straw.

It's almost ironic, then, that Giger has chosen 1998, almost 20 years after the cinematic debut of his creature, to publish H.R. Giger's *Alien Diaries*, his handwritten journals chronicling the original film's production, complete with sketches and notes. As these are released to the public, and as Giger's displeasure grows, *Invasion!* sounded out Giger on his claims and his long history with cinema's most evil E.T.

ALIEN ORIGINS

The man who would someday change the way people think about alien life, Hans Rudi Giger (rhymes with "eager") was born on Feb. 5, 1940, in the small town of Chur, Switzerland. Even as a child, he was fascinated with creating things, often sculpting with plasticene while sitting in his highchair near the window in his home's only sunny place. "I always liked to do drawings and things like that," recalls Giger. "When I was a small boy, I wanted to be the architect of castles." But because his father was a pharmacist, the young Giger learned about the darker side of life at a young age. "When I was about five years old, my father got a human skull. I took it; that was something special," he chuckles, searching for the proper English translation. "I was very young, and it was a little frightening. But I was proud to have a skull. My interest in skulls and bones came very early." It wasn't an influence that Dr. Seuss would approve, but the exposure helped direct his later career path. Before that happened, though, the grown Giger pursued his father's request to have a solid profession by enrolling in an interior architectural and industrial design school, from which he graduated in 1965.

While learning his trade, he began developing a new art style that incorporated his technical skills with his love of skulls and bones. Called "biomechanics" by Giger, it was a mixture of biological, mechanical, sensual and technological shapes fused into a form of dark beauty, a look that movie audiences today readily associate with the *Alien*. "[Biomechanics] is already in the world—biologic and mechanic, these two things together," explains Giger. "Maybe little cells are already parts of a machine. I did the paintings I couldn't find. I invented things, or I wrote on paper what I could see or feel."

Once he completed his degree, Giger put his education to use in a steady job designing office furniture—but he'd stay up all night doing his own paintings, sculptures and sketchings. After three years, his passion for art made him quit his steady job and pursue his dream of becoming a full-time artist. Soon, his work was attracting notice, and in 1969, Giger crafted his first extraterrestrial for the short film, "*Swissmade 2069*." Even in this work, his use of long back-head designs and bone-like body shapes were evident. His first exposure to Hollywood came in 1975. For the initial attempt at bringing Frank Herbert's *Dune* to the silver screen, director Alexandro Jodorowsky hired Giger to design the world of the cruel Harkonnens. Unfortunately, Giger's work never made it to the screen; in a time when sci-fi pictures weren't considered "commercial," the project never materialized. It was actually only one of four separate attempts to bring *Dune* to the screen that fizzled before the critically disappointing 1984 production.

THE BIRTH

It was during this low point of movie science fiction that Giger's big break, and ultimately the beginning of his current troubles, came along. In 1997 writer Dan O'Bannon contacted him with an idea: Would he be interested in painting some designs for a sci-fi/horror screenplay O'Bannon had co-written with Ronald Shusett to help pitch his story to the studios more clearly? Giger agreed, and O'Bannon paid him \$1,000 for three paintings showing an early "facehugger" concept. One year later, "*Alien*" was in pre-production at 20th Century Fox with a budget of \$9 million. When relatively unknown director Ridley Scott reviewed the screenplay, he realized the key to making the film work lay with the creature's look. Scott searched in vain for something that could be both believable and frightening. His search was over when O'Bannon showed him a French copy of H.R. Giger's *Necronomicon*, just sent to him by the artist, still wet from the printer. When he saw "*Necronom IV*" and "*V*," paintings completed in 1976, Scott knew he'd found his creature. "The beauty almost

[overtook] the horrific aspects of the drawing,” remembers Scott. “I remember the color draining from my face...‘That’s it. Good God, there it is.’” But Fox executives, and even Giger himself, weren’t convinced it was that simple. When Scott told Giger he’d found his monster, the artist wanted to design something from scratch instead of using the existing paintings. But Scott held his ground with both camps. “I said [to Giger], ‘Don’t fix it if it’s not broke,’” says Scott. “Believe me, we will have an immense number of problems anyway just making this work and not making this look like a guy in a rubber suit.”

In their essence, those paintings nearly replicate the creature’s final look, but that still left room for developing details. Since the paintings never showed the mouth, for instance, Scott came up with the notion that the “tongue” could have its own set of teeth. Other ideas, such as placing live maggots inside the translucent skull in order to give the illusion of a “moving brain,” proved unworkable. There was also the question of whether the Alien should have a pair of eyes, as it did in the paintings. While producer Gordon Carroll felt there had to be eyes, Giger disagreed, having changed his mind from his original design. “I said, ‘No, no eyes,’” recalls Giger. If the creature lacked eyes, he argued, “You can’t see where the monster is looking. It’s much more dangerous. You don’t know what the creature is doing.” In the following months Giger completed the rest of his preproduction paintings in his studio in Zurich and then delivered them to the production office in London. After being paid and told that the need for his continuing services were not anticipated, Giger returned to Switzerland. Three weeks later he was rehired, and upon his arrival at Shepperton Studios in England, Giger discovered that the set designers were having no luck interpreting his designs and constructing them three dimensionally.

Eventually, Scott coaxed Giger himself into creating the Alien’s full-body suit, further immersing the artist in the Alien’s creation. “I was terribly frightened I wouldn’t be ready in time,” says Giger. “I was a complete beginner. They asked, ‘Who wants to do that?’ and nobody wanted to do it. I said I could try!” Giger crafted the entire head structure and one-half of the body suit—made of a myriad of materials, including rubber, latex, pipes, plasticene and bones. Eventually, Giger’s original three-week stay in England lasted five months, as he designed and oversaw the construction of not just the planet’s surface and every aspect of the Alien’s four-stage life cycle, but the interior and exterior of the derelict spacecraft and the mummified “Space Jockey” creature the astronauts find inside the vessel and the landscape for the desolate world where the Nostromo found the Alien. Surprisingly, the man who gave birth to the famous creature found working on the otherworldly setting to be more fascinating. “I was much more free to do an environment because the creature needed much more [time],” says Giger. “[Designing] the creature is a boring thing! You do that and that...after modeling you give it to other

people. I liked to do the world the Alien was coming from. It was my world.” During this time, Giger poured out his thoughts into the journals that will become H.R. Giger’s Alien Diaries, writing down his notes and preserving a record of each day’s events.

When “Alien” debuted in the autumn of 1979, the picture’s success exceeded everyone’s expectations. In 1980, Giger received an Oscar for “Best Achievement in Visual Effects” for his contribution. Giger quickly shares credit for the creature’s success with Carlo Rambaldi, who operated the Alien’s head, and Ridley Scott, who he calls “a genius.”

The Academy Award took Giger by surprise. “I never thought I’d get a prize or something like that,” he admits. “When I did [the work on “Alien”], I wasn’t very happy with the things I did. I was always ashamed. It always looks to you like somebody in a costume. In the imagination of the people, it became stronger than the reality.” Once Giger received both an Oscar and international acclaim, other filmmakers began knocking on his door. During the ‘80s, he collaborated on a Debbie Harry music video (before MTV was on the air), painted album covers and worked on a number of film projects, including “Poltergeist II” (see Ghost Story sidebar), the unproduced “The Tourist” (see Tourist Trap sidebar) and the second unsuccessful “Dune” attempt, this time with Scott directing. Ironically, his newfound Hollywood fame was a mixed blessing, since it interfered with his standing in the art community. It was a conflict that still troubles him to this day. “I realized that the museums stopped buying my art. Since I worked on a movie, in their eyes I was not serious anymore,” says Giger. “In a group show, the media came because of me, and that was terrible. I said, ‘There were other people, please interview them,’ but they wanted to interview only me. It was embarrassed.”

CONTROVERSY BREWS

In 1986, Scott’s film was followed by James Cameron’s successful sequel, “Aliens,” this time without Giger’s involvement. While he enjoyed the film (“I like the fight at the end very much”) and liked some of the new Alien designs, he also had complaints.

The one new creature that impressed Giger was the Alien Queen, a larger female that gave birth to the other Aliens much like a Queen Bee produces drones for her hive. “The Alien Queen is very complicated, like the way I would have done,” he observes. “I like how she moves, and the scenes with Ripley are very good.”

His reservations revolve around the hordes of warrior drones themselves, which were slightly updated from the Alien seen in the first film. Instead of the smooth cranium the beast sported in the original movie, the new heads were ribbed. “The Aliens are not good,” he contends. “They’re a little cheaply done; they have no translucent shell on their head.”

It was this kind of candid criticism that earned

Giger a reputation for being difficult to work with in Hollywood. In a town where your next job may depend on what you don't say about your last job, everyone chooses their words carefully. Since Giger doesn't consider himself primarily a film designer, he brings a different attitude to the system. He often expresses his opinion, positive or negative, regardless of the consequences. "They always say 'Giger

is difficult' because I write about the problems I had working with some people," he says. "It's not very good to be so open."

With that reputation preceding him, Giger returned to the Alien franchise in 1990 to design the creatures for the third movie, helmed by David Fincher. Giger leaped at the chance to improve on his original design for "Alien3" and hoped that working with Fincher would be similar to his collaboration with Ridley Scott. Unfortunately, a new contract could not be agreed upon, and Giger suggested they base their agreement upon the original contract from "Alien" as a compromise.

Without a final script in place, Giger was asked to generate designs for a new Alien, a fast-moving and graceful predator that Fincher compared to a puma. Giger removed the large, unwieldy pipe-like parts from the Alien's back (which he originally placed there to provide visual counterbalance for the long head the actor would wear), then conceived an elaborate new head design with a translucent skull. He designed a conical tongue covered with barbed hooks that would rip into and tear apart a victim. Lion-like claws also were incorporated between the creature's fingers, making the beast more cat-like. Giger not only completed designs, chopped them up into fax-sized pieces, and faxed them from Switzerland to the film's production in England, but he built a life-size model of the creature in his basement. He even made a short film of the sculpture that he sent to Fincher. Giger's offer to supply a cast of the model if the producers would cover the cost for molds was deemed unnecessary, however. In all, Giger's involvement with the production lasted just one month. When the film opened in 1992 and Giger attended a screening, he was shocked.

His contractual credit was gone. Instead, he was acknowledged with only "Original Alien Design." Giger believes the additional credit "Alien Effects Designed and created by Alec Gillis and Tom Woodruff Jr." gave audiences the impression that he had no direct involvement in the movie. When the film was submitted for Oscar consideration, Giger's name again was omitted. "Everyone knew that I was working on the film, but nobody said anything," says Giger. Fox finally agreed to change his credit to "Alien3 Creature Design" on the video release, but the damage already was done. Legal expenses alone for Giger totaled \$40,000.

Giger claims his involvement with the film was kept hidden. "They made the audience think Giger was not working on the film," he says. "In the end, my name was not on the movie. It was very hard just to get it accepted that I worked on the film." After this disappointment, Giger was next asked to create

the extraterrestrial beauty Sil in "Species" (see New Species sidebar). Even though demand for his fine art was at an all-time high, his interest had shifted towards sculpture and large, three-dimensional design work. "People still want my airbrush paintings, but I have stopped with this," says Giger. "After 20 years of working with an airbrush, I finally have had enough."

ALIEN INSURRECTION

But problems again surfaced with the release of "Alien Resurrection." A fan of French director Jean-Pierre Jeunet's previous films (such as "The City of Lost Children"), Giger says he would've liked to have worked with the director on the new Aliens movie, but he wasn't asked. Nevertheless, he still assumed he would receive credit for the original creature design. Once more, he didn't. Instead the credit for "Alien Effects Designers and Creators" was listed as Amalgamated Dynamics, Inc., the FX firm owned by Woodruff and Gillis. Following the omission, Giger came out swinging on his official website [www.HRGiger.com]. In an excerpt from his letter sent to 20th Century Fox, Giger wrote: "The creatures in 'Alien Resurrection' are even closer to my original Alien designs than the ones that appear in 'Aliens' and 'Alien 3'. What would it look like without my Alien life forms? In all likelihood, all the sequels to 'Alien' would not even exist! The designs and my credit have been stolen from me, since I alone have designed the Alien." In an area of the

site reserved for "Public Response," Giger has solicited the comments of his web visitors. To date, over one thousand fans of the films have responded with an overwhelming majority supporting Giger's position. Many expressed their outrage by urging legal action.

Leslie Barany, Giger's agent, shares Giger's exasperation. He notes that while "[James] Cameron had the good sense to list Giger's name on 'Aliens,'" that crediting was one of the few exceptions, not the rule. For example, Barany points out that Fox never bothered to instruct Dark Horse Comics to include Giger's name in the credits for its Aliens comic book titles-but Publisher Mike Richardson included the credit after the first few issues upon being contacted by Giger. "Why does Fox disassociate Giger from the franchise?" asks Barany. "Why do Dan O'Bannon and Ronald Shusett continue to receive 'Based on Characters By' credit and not Giger? The only character of theirs to survive the first film was Ripley while all of Giger's critters made it into the sequels."

As the controversy brews, the question being raised is whether Giger's initial work and subsequent credit are limited simply to "Alien" or can be used any time for a sequel, regardless of his involvement, as was the case for the second and fourth films? Sequel rights in Giger's contract for work done in "Alien" may be fuzzy in these matters, but nonetheless, Giger has an opinion. "I'm not happy when I do something for a film and when they make a second film, they use my work," answers Giger. "I don't like that."

When contacted, Woodruff and Gillis said they had the highest respect for Giger's work and were unaware of any problems he had with "Alien Resurrection." Officials at 20th Century Fox said they were working to resolve the matter and had offered Giger an 'Original Design By' credit in the video release.

"For Giger, this is too little too late," says Barany. "He doesn't believe that Fox could accidentally deny him credit two films in a row. Fox must think him a fool, expecting him to be happy with a video-release credit and just go away quietly. No one bothers to study the credits on video. It's a gesture that did nothing to compensate [for] the damage and humiliation done to Giger with 'Alien3.' And now the situation has been compounded by this slap in the face with 'Alien Resurrection.'"

But an even larger question has arisen, regarding whether Fox had the right to not credit or compensate Giger for the Alien design used in the second and fourth movies. "We are going back to the original contracts to examine them in the light of the sequels," says Barany. "When the original Alien was made, [no sequels] were anticipated. It was before the era of sequels, and besides, they had killed the monster [at the end of 'Alien']."

BIOMECHANICAL BLISS

Although the controversy remains unresolved, 1998 will be a banner year for Giger. In addition to

the publication of H.R. Giger's Alien Diaries, the Giger Museum in the castle complex of Chateau St. Germain Gruyeres in the French part of Switzerland will open its doors in June. He has spent several years buying back the works he sold to museums and is now designing the interior architecture for the museum, itself a renovated castle. This year also will see the release of "The Mystery of San Gottardo," a book he's been working on since 1989. Written and illustrated by Giger, the story features a race of biomechanoids living in secret within the dark recesses of Switzerland's mountains. It will be published by Taschen in seven languages.

Even though he sees his experiences with the past two "Alien" films as less than ideal, Giger looks back on his unanticipated film career as a wonderful opportunity and hopes to work on more projects. "If they ask me to work on another 'Alien,' I'd do it," he says. He's also at peace regarding the influence his biomechanical visions have had on science-fiction films for the past two decades. Flashing a mischievous grin, he says, "If they do it better, then yeah, [it's] okay. But mostly it doesn't look better!"

Patrick Sauriol is the regular writer for Invasion!'s Coming Attractions department. He'd like to get a little credit for his poodle-juggling act, but hasn't voiced any complaints.