

# Film

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## Ridley Scott

**Of the four films in the new *Alien* DVD box set, the first is still the finest. Ian Nathan asks Ridley Scott how he had the guts for it**

When Ridley Scott first saw *Star Wars*, he had a great time. Here was a fairytale in space, sparkling like a department store, bursting at the seams with new ideas and film-making technology. So, the next year, when he came to make *Star Beast*, a lean, mean tale of a ravenous alien stuck on board a spaceship, he knew exactly what to do: ignore everything that George Lucas had done.

"I wanted to do the truck driver version, the hard-nosed version," recalls Scott of his second movie and first masterpiece. "It was supposed to be the antithesis of *Star Wars*. The reality, the beauty of something absolutely about function."

*Alien*, as his film was sensibly renamed, robbed science fiction of its fantasy to reveal a deadly, pragmatic world in which every switch and swivel and light on the set worked. Its legacy has traversed two decades and three sequels, a set of films adhering to Scott's smelted-Gothic design ethic. At its dark heart lies H. R. Giger's Freudian bio-mechanoid nightmare, a walking phallus with steaming saliva and a severe overbite problem.

There's no such thing as a quadrilogy; look in any dictionary you like. But to celebrate (almost) 25 years since Scott first scared the living daylights out of a generation, the set of four films has been repackaged in an impressive nine-disc box set under that name. Dozy made-up title aside, there is little doubt that this completist feast of extended cuts, documentaries and commentaries will be hard to resist.

*Alien*, the first film, comes in two forms: the original 1979 release and Scott's recent director's cut — an efficiently tinkered-with version that includes Tom Skerritt's fabled cocooning and some early crew bitchiness. It was here that greatness was born in a spume of blood and bits of John Hurt.

Scott may have been the sixth choice for Dan O'Bannon and Ron Shusett's hardboiled script — Scott refrains from mentioning who the others were — but he immediately "got it". "I loved the minimal dialogue, the minimalist characterisation — what do you need to know? Once this thing is loose, I don't want to have scenes talking about mum and dad back on the planet." Scott also loved the fact that nothing really happens for 42 minutes and then everything happens. You couldn't get away with it today.

It was during an early production meeting that someone suggested that Scott take a look at the work of an eccentric Swiss artist name Giger. He was handed a copy of the *Necronomicon*, a recently published book of the artist's paintings. Flicking through the freaky S&M-flavoured prints, he happened upon an image — the infamous sideview of the creature — and knew that there was no need to look any further. "Giger kept wanting to redesign it but what was the point? That was the one."

The discs hint at the subsequent complex and often difficult relationship between the potty artist and the stiff studio, especially once Scott had exited the series (Giger had little to do with the further movies). Indeed, a multitude of urban legends has grown up around the making of the films — three tough, quasi-disastrous shoots and one cosy one (pertinently for *Resurrection*, the emptiest of the films) — but the profusion of documentary evidence that swells this package goes a long way to setting things straight. The reason for Jon Finch's brief spell as the implanted Kane is actually revealed — a diabetic spasm forced him out and Scott had to cajole John Hurt to play the role.

Then there is "that" breakfast table. "Among the bacon and eggs", as Scott defines the moment in which a simple dramatic device was transformed into something disgusting, shocking, invasive, sexual and downright extraordinary. The Alien embryo, implanted among Hurt's internal organs, explodes outwards, splattering the crew of the *Nostromo* with steam-cleaned giblets from the local abattoir.

"The reactions were going to be the most difficult thing," explains Scott. "If an actor just acts terrified, he never quite goes over-the-top, and you don't get that look of raw, animal fear. I wanted a hardcore reaction."

With the obvious exception of Hurt, busily being mounted with a prosthetic chest through which the mechanical baby Alien would make its sudden bid for freedom, the cast were excluded from the set. Something was going on, there was an air of excitement among the crew who were gathering to watch. By the time they were granted permission to come and shoot the scene there was a palpable nervousness among the actors. What the hell

was going to happen? All it said in the script was something along the lines of: "The Alien exits Kane. . ." And, boy, did it.

As soon as the scene hit the beat, Scott hit the hoses. Fake blood and cow entrails sprayed everywhere. Those reactions were real. "This jet of blood about three feet long caught Veronica Cartwright smack in the kisser and knocked her off her feet," laughs Scott. "She was screaming, drenched in blood. It was pretty convincing."

Convincing? This was the gold seal standard of cinematic shockers, a transcendent moment that lifted a simple bogeyman-in-space idea to a level of unprecedented provocation. Right there, over the breakfast table, *Alien* power-hosed its way into the vaults of classic cinema. No one had ever experienced anything like it.

"We had a preview in Dallas," the executive producer, Ivor Powell, recalls. "I shall never forget it. Several women hurled themselves out of the cinema during the chest-burster scene. When Ash gets his head taken off, one of the ushers fainted. There was panic among the Fox ranks: 'Are we going to get lynched?'"

After such an impact, Scott, to his surprise, was not offered the sequel. "I would have wanted it, you know," he admits, "but I do like Jim's. His is the action one." He doesn't even seem to want to recognise that two more films were made.

While the *Quadrilogy's* differing versions of the sequels are of interest, it is hard to argue that any of them improves on the originals. James Cameron's 1986 follow-up is present in its original and familiar (if a touch inferior) special edition. *Aliens* was an unabashed action movie and a gem of a sequel, enhancing Scott's precision with terrifying overload. It also gave Sigourney Weaver's Ripley the chance to open out her character from the officious but industrious company queen of *Alien* into the determined feminist icon that we know and love. The two subsequent sequels can be viewed either as depressing deviants choking on bad ideas and studio interference or as flawed but absorbing attempts to vary the nature of the beast. There is certainly a lot to be said for the darkening arc that Ripley traverses, all but shedding her humanity by *Resurrection*.

*Alien3* is the most controversial film. Awash in production torment, it divorced itself from the compulsive horror of its predecessors for a depressed, quasi-religious gloom. As a movie it has its qualities, and the 139-minute extended cut is a little more coherent, but as an *Alien* movie it stinks like a stale kipper. Significantly, the much-maligned director of the third instalment, David Fincher, is the only major name not to contribute to

the DVD extras, which even has temporary employees Renny Harlin and Vincent Ward chipping in.

*Resurrection*, meanwhile, got it all wrong: the Gallic jokiness provided by Jean-Pierre Jeunet was out of whack with the necessary air of primal terror, while the ending is plain silly. Still, as ever, there is no doubting Weaver's teasing contribution as a faux-Ripley beefed up with Alien blood. The new cut tops-and-tails the movie with incomplete effects shots, including a touch-down on Earth — the ideal setting for a fifth film.

Whether there will be another is a matter for the studio gods to decide. We'll discount the franchise-melding antics (which Weaver deems "terrible") of *Alien v Predator*, currently shooting in Prague. Scott doesn't wish to go back (how could he better himself?), although there has been talk of a heavenly partnership with Cameron to work out an idea. "There's always room for it to grow," Scott says, citing the weird spacecraft from *Alien* as the launching pad for a new film. "Like, who was the Jockey? He wasn't an Alien, he was another race. I think it was a battleship carrying biomechanoid weapons, the weapons were the eggs. You drop a load of Aliens on an enemy planet, it's like bacteriological warfare." A thought beyond even Bush's worst nightmares.

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*The Alien Quadrilogy is released on DVD on December 8*