

"ALIEN", A SCIENCE-FICTION CLASSIC

Interview with H.R. Giger on the 20th Anniversary of the film

Javier Martinez de Pisón

The Alien creature epitomizes the extraterrestrial horror and science-fiction film character. In fact, Alien is to sci-fi films what Frankenstein or Dracula were to the horror genre - a character which has evolved into a classic, in this case by exposing the fears of man in the space age. As such, it has become a character of mythological proportions.

The creation of such a character was the work of a visionary who has dreamt of a future in which man has fused with machines in a symbiosis he calls "biomechanics." H.R. Giger, one of the great Surrealist artists of the end of the century, won the Oscar in 1980 for his design of the Alien creature and its otherworldly environment, a concept which incorporated into the film the aesthetics of mechanical and organic beings he has envisioned in his paintings and in his Necronomicon books.

Giger says that the first film that interested him was Jean Cocteau's *The Beauty and the Beast*. His first attempt at films dates back to a 1976 project in which he briefly worked: Salvador Dali recommended Giger to Chilean filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky, who was then trying to make the sci-fi film *Dune*, a project that never materialized and that was one of four attempts to bring the film to the screen, which was a disappointment when it was finally released in 1984. Shortly after in 1977, writer Dan O'Bannon contacted Giger to paint some designs for a sci-fi/horror screenplay he had co-written with Ronald Shusett to help pitch the story to the studio. Giger produced three paintings of an early "Face-Hugger" Alien creature for \$1,000. One year later, the film was in pre-production with a budget of \$9 million, but relatively unknown director Ridley Scott realized the key to the film was the alien creature. O'Bannon then showed Scott a copy of H.R. Giger's *Necronomicon* book and Scott knew right away he had his Alien. "That's it, Good God, there is it," said Scott, pale with emotion.

The transcendence of the Alien movie, however, is deeply rooted in the powerful and disturbing imagination of Giger, whose work continuously asks metaphysical questions and involves intellectual and spiritual explorations of the human race. Births and death are in fact two major references in his work, as well as the overpopulation of the planet, the latter eloquently depicted in paintings of bullet children and his recent sculptures of *Birth Machine Babies*. Seven years ago, Giger stopped doing his trademark translucent air-brush paintings, and is now dedicated to sculpture. In addition, he has opened the Giger Museum in a medieval castle overlooking the Swiss town of Gruyères, where much of his work is now in exhibition, including designs and sculptures from Alien. In the following conversation, he talks about the complex working details of the Alien movie, for

which he designed the creature in all of its forms, such as the Face-Hugger, an octopus-like form which attaches itself to faces; the Space-Jockey, an alien which is fused with his ship; the Egg Silo where this monstrous species hatch, as well as the alien ship and planet.

How did you like the Alien movie?

At the beginning I was not very happy because I was expecting to see things that were shot but finally cut out of the film, and the time the Alien was seen on screen was very limited. Afterwards I realized that it was much better it didn't work the way I wanted; otherwise the Alien would have been seen too much and it wouldn't have built such a tension. There are some truly amazing shots of the Alien moving very slow. What I didn't like much was the end of the film when you can see that the Alien is just a man in a rubber suit. But the people at 20th Century Fox thought that a full figure shot was needed.

The Alien creature is based in your paintings *Necronom V* and *IV*. How much of a change happened from the original paintings to the final result?

Not a lot. Because you never use your first design, we went on to experiment with other things. We used performers from a circus, joining two guys together to get the monstrosity of the alien movement, but it looked really phony, not frightening. Then we came back to the designs without eyes from *Necronom V* and *Necronom IV*, which have some type of protruding pipes behind it, so it was a combination of those two paintings. Then Ridley Scott wanted a tail because it adds movement. I had drawn the Alien with two rows of teeth and Scott asked me if I could actually build it. Up to this time the only creature we had was somebody in a rubber suit. We made a cast in plastercine with a live model and added pipes and tubes from cars. We made a mold and I worked on the chest first, and then on the upper torso.

What's for you the best feature of the Alien creature?

The fact that it has no eyes. I think it makes the creature look more dangerous and mysterious because you never know what he is looking at or what he is thinking. Most monsters have



Nr. 396, Whack (detail), 1978, acrylic on paper/wood, 100 x 140 cm

eyes, and in fact it was very difficult to convince the producer to make the Alien blind.

What about the Chest-Burster?

Ridley Scott asked me to do something based on a crucifixion painting by Francis Bacon, in which the only thing of the figure you see is a mouth and some flesh behind. He wanted something like that which could go into the stomach or come out of it. First it was designed as a little dinosaur and I didn't like it at all, but finally we gave him a worm-like shape with no legs. Dan O'Bannon, when he was writing the script, had a stomach pain and he wanted the pain to go away and came up with the idea of the pain leaving through the stomach, so he invented that. That was one of the strongest scenes in the film. I believe the strongest, scariest feeling is to see an alien-worm inside a person's body moving under his skin. Prior to the filming of the scene Scott kept everything very secret and when actress Veronica Cartwright saw the Alien bursting out from the chest she was so frightened that she fell over backwards.

When was it decided to bring you into the project to build the creature?

After I completed the preproduction paintings in Zurich and delivered them to London. Three weeks later producer Gordon Carol asked me to come to Shepperton Studios in England because nobody wanted to build the monster, it was too complicated and risky. I thought I would be there for two weeks but I spent five or six months. It was very hard work and a lot of stress. I first built the Alien and then began to design the Alien world because nobody thought about things like the inside of the egg chambers or the planet's surface, which Scott wanted to base on some of my paintings, so I did air-brushes overnight to discuss next day with him.

How was the work on the Alien planet?

Everything was filmed in stages. I wanted the whole landscape made of bones but the bones we got from a slaughter house were very smelly and the wrong scale for what we needed. What I wanted to do but couldn't was to make the planet completely biomechanical, with bones and engines from motorcycles, a mixture of tubes and pipes in real size. As with most things in film, the final result was a compromise. My interest for bones began when I was five years old and my father got a human skull from a representative of a pharmaceutical company. I was a little frightened but at the same time I was proud to have it. In fact, there was a skull inside the Alien even though when I made it I knew nobody would see it, but I wanted that if you looked inside you could see a skull.

What was the inspiration for the Space Jockey?

Ridley Scott pointed to a part on the top of my painting Necronom V and asked me to do something like it. As for the chair in which he sits, I thought it had to be mechanical but not with normal arms and legs that could be moved with the feet or the hands. I liked very much the stone tablet in 2001 Space Odyssey, because it seemed to have some interior-like computer. So I thought that the outside could be very normal-looking and the whole machinery could go inside.

What is the relationship between the Space Jockey and the Alien Eggs?

They always told me that the Space Jockey was another alien race, so he is not part of the Alien or the Eggs. To save money, the Egg Chamber and the Space Jockey chamber were the same. The inside of the Egg Silo were elements of my painting, and was actually the entrance to a round silo which ended up in another set. I built an area around the Egg to balance

it upright in a very organic way, like the tentacles of an octopus. Several of the Eggs were made of transparent polyester and later on covered with plaster. They had to be transparent because you had to see the movements of the Alien's face.

Alien is now considered a classic such as 2001 Space Odyssey or Star Wars, as a film whose impact changed motion pictures forever. How does that makes you feel?

I didn't know it would become so successful. It was only years later I finally realized how well the film was made. I think Scott Ridley did a fabulous work. When the work was finished I realized it was something special and I remember Gordon Carol saying, 'You will be famous for this film.' As a fine artist, I had problems with the film, but I think it has given me a lot of exposure. People know me as the father of Alien and that's OK. If only 20th Century Fox would also see that.

What did you think about Aliens, Alien 3 and Alien Resurrection?

Aliens was also terrific. I am sorry I was not asked to work on it. At first I thought, 'This is like a war film,' but it is really powerful. But I didn't like the ribbed cranium of the Alien warrior, although you couldn't see the aliens very much. However I loved the Alien Queen designed by James Cameron. As for Alien 3, most people are surprised to hear that I actually liked the finished film, especially after the way I had been treated by the studio during the making of the movie. Before there was a final script, I was asked to make new designs for a faster and more graceful Alien for director David Fincher. I welcomed the opportunity to make improvements on my original designs. I built my new Alien 3 full size in my basement, eliminating the useless pipes on the back, adding razor-like lion claws between his fingers and a lethal new tongue. I corrected many things. The skull I left approximately the same but I gave the new Alien beautiful sensuous lips. In addition, the creature has a collar underneath the neck that becomes as lethal as an ax. I also tried to make a second skin with holes like those in a saxophone that would give off sounds when the wind passes through and allow the Alien to communicate. I wanted to show the Alien in different ways because then you don't have to rely on shadows of the creature, but it couldn't be done. After a month of work I was quite unhappy to realize that they did not care about my designs at all.

I also like Alien Resurrection as a story



SPACE-JOCKEY INTO THE WRACK SEQUENCE OF THE FILM ALIEN © 1979

and the creatures in the film are even closer to my original designs than the ones which appeared in the two previous Films. I was sorry that I was not asked to work with Jean-Pierre Jeunet, I am a great fan of his others films. The Aliens themselves were not well sculpted or sharply defined. It seemed as if no molds had been made and as if the creatures were roughly shaped with mud. The high contrast lighting helped a lot to cover up the missing detail work. My problems with the sequels, for the most part, were with my treatment by the studio, not so much with the Films themselves. I liked them all.

How was your experience going to the Academy Awards in 1980?

I was very surprised but to some extent I must have expected to win because I was already up on my feet when they announced the award.

Did you plan you own Giger's Alien documentary film while you were actually involved in the project?

No, but I demanded in my contract the right to photograph everything for my books, and later on when they saw that I was filming they allowed me to do it. My name was not even in the main title credits for the film or even on the poster because, at the time, I had no idea of how those things worked. The real satisfaction was being able to see my creature, my paintings and my biomechanical world come alive.

How did you work with Carlo Rambaldi, who designed the movement of the Alien creature?

Very nicely, because Rambaldi is a Surrealist painter like me, so we got along pretty well. But the film people didn't realize how good he was until after they saw that his designs made with wires worked and made the Alien move, because everybody else was working with radio controls and the guy who did the tail of the creature couldn't even make it move. Rambaldi even did something he wasn't asked for, which was to give movement to the Alien's neck.

How and why did you decide to establish a museum for you art?

I am aware it is unusual for an artist to open his own museum. My reasons for that decision were practical and logical. First of all, there is a continuous demand by collectors and admirers of my art to see the original creations on display. Galleries and museums could only exhibit some of my art for a couple of months a year. Most of the time my paintings sat all year round in a storage hall, which had quite a substantial monthly bill attached to it. Now that my art is on permanent display, I have time to ensure that the rooms and surroundings look suitable. One blessing is

that the museum is at an ideal location, since large group of tourists visit the town of Gruyères in summer, since the town is famous for its traditional beauty. Recently we have added some detailed pages about the museum on my website "www.hrgiger.com." The best thing that could happen now is if a sponsor comes forward, so the next stages, which are the Giger Bar and the train ride through the Chateau could be built more rapidly.

What about the Giger VIP room in New York City's Limelight club?

The idea was presented to me through my long time agent, Leslie Barany, who happens to be based in New York. The Limelight proposal was to create a Giger environment for the VIP Room of the newly reopened club and to call it the HR Giger Room. Over a period of six months I visited New York twice and supervised the project long distance via faxes and videos. The existing Gothic architecture of the 200 year old church fit well with my design ideas and my art and made my job much easier. The HR Giger Room is a great honor in a great city, a place I have always loved and have been inspired by. I spent lots of time in New York in the past. The fascinating landscape of endless skyscrapers inspired me to paint a whole series in 1980, my New York series. The Limelight has granted me complete autonomy over the room and to Leslie, who is also its curator. I think we have created a very comfortable and unusual space for art. The HR Giger Room is, for now, a permanent installation of more than two dozen of my works with the approximate value of US\$200,000. That is apart from the elements which are not for sale and serve only as decoration, such as the winged sculptures which are also on display near entrance of the Giger Museum and the window light boxes which were made with eight of my paintings, plus the mural "The Way of the Magician," which is the focal point of the room.

Looking back on your film career, it appears to have been entirely unanticipated and, if I understand you correctly, a mixed blessing for you. Why?

A film career brings with it a certain attention which is not appreciated in the fine art world. Many museums and galleries you do not consider you a serious artist if you also work for the movies. It is an embarrassment to be a celebrity when I am in a group show with others artist and the media only wants to interview me. On the other hand, my work in films presented me with wonderful opportunities not usually given to painters or sculp-

tors, and is in large part responsible for the spreading influence of my biomechanical vision.

Where did you get the idea for the book "Giger under your Skin"?

The project is the idea of Leslie Barany, my friend and agent, who he has been for the last few years collecting photographs from all over the world of tattoos in which my artwork has been used. Some of them are previewed in the Taschen book "www.hrgiger.com." When we had announced the idea for this book we had no idea how much of this material existed. The amount of material we received has been overwhelming. In the meantime I had the obligation to my publisher to First complete and deliver The Mystery of San Gottardo, another project very important to me. This book is now available in German. The French and English translations are now completed and I hope will be published next. Soon after I hope will come the tattoo book. The timing should be appropriate since the extreme dedication of my tattoo fans is one of the things which will carry my work into the next century.

As an artist, what is important for you?

To be flexible and unique, and mainly to have the freedom to seek new mediums and the curiosity for new ideas. For example, when I started to use the airbrush, way before it became fashion, it was inconceivable for most airbrush users to paint without using stencils. I had created an extra-terrestrial, a costume with a polyster armour, nine years before such characters appeared in the movie Star Wars. There comes a time, I believe when one does has to change the technique after having used it long enough. Although everyone seems to want me to continue airbrush painting, I have moved on to other projects, specifically to sculpture which is what interests me most right now. In some ways, it's a little bit like film when I work in complicated multi-piece sculptures like my Zodiac Fountain. Again, I am a working with other technical people in the making of molds and the castings, and bringing my ideas into a three dimensional reality.

To learn more about the world and work of the Swiss Surrealist artist H.R. Giger, visit his official website at www.hrgiger.com and also the Museum H.R. Giger in the Chateau St. Germain in Gruyères, Switzerland. Tel: +41 (0) 26 921-2200.

Special thanks to Megan Rush at Leslie Barany Communications/NYC for her help in coordinating the H.R.Giger interview for FX.