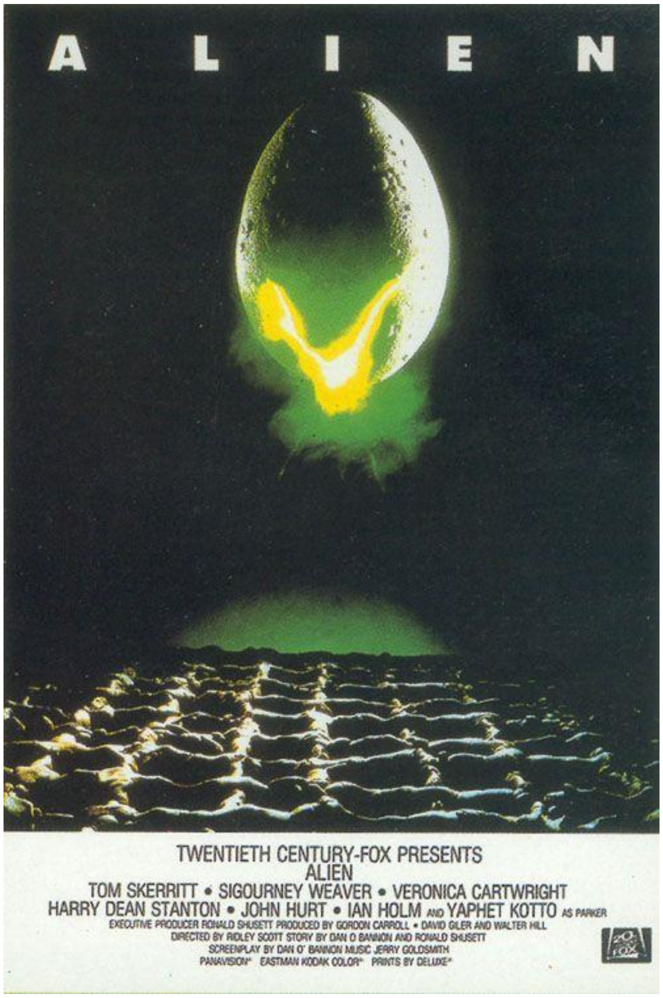
A L I E N
TWENTIETH CENTURY-FOX PRESENTS
ALIEN
TOM SKERRITT • SIGOURNEY WEAVER • VERONICA CARTWRIGHT
HARRY DEAN STANTON • JOHN HURT • IAN HOLM AND YAPHET KOTTO AS PARKER
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER RONALD SHUSETT PRODUCED BY GORDON CARROLL • DAVID GILER AND WALTER HILL
DIRECTED BY RIDLEY SCOTT STORY BY DAN O BANNON AND RONALD SHUSETT
SCREENPLAY BY DAN O' BANNON MUSIC JERRY GOLDSMITH
PANAVISION® EASTMAN KODAK COLOR® PRINTS BY DELUXE®
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ALIEN—THE MOTHER OF ALL MONSTER FILMS

Retrospective by Dr. John L. Flynn

Introduction

In some distant region of uncharted space, the battered commercial starship Nostromo, with its vast cargo of oil and precious minerals in tow, receives a message of unknown origin from a planetoid in the vicinity. Its crew of seven astronauts--five men and two women--are awakened from their "hypersleep," a kind of suspended animation, to investigate the transmission. Setting down upon the barren world, they discover an awesome galactic horror--an indestructible alien that threatens to destroy each of them. Those few, tantalizing details of plot, revealed by publicist Charles Lippincott during a slide presentation at the 1978 World Science Fiction Convention in Phoenix, Arizona, first introduced audiences to an upcoming, major motion picture from Twentieth Century-Fox. At first glance, the storyline may have seemed to most fans of science fiction and horror films as a grisly hybrid of the most lurid elements from “The Thing” (1951), “It! The Terror from Beyond Space” (1958), “Fiend Without a Face” (1958), and “Night of the Blood Beast” (1958), but “Alien” was far more than just a "B" movie with a multi-million dollar budget and ad campaign. And even though Fox's decision to commit $9.5 million in funding was based not on its "original" storyline but rather the audience’s enthusiastic response to “The Omen” (1976) and “Star Wars” (1977), two previous summer blockbusters, the film was also much more than just a cinematic commodity. It was a masterpiece in the making.

"’Alien’ is like a gothic horror film in space," author Dan O'Bannon first explained his original concept for the motion picture nearly twenty-five years ago. "I was fascinated and excited with the notion of having some form of uncontrollable monstrosity loose on board a space vessel. The thing is breaking down every barrier the crew puts up, and nothing can kill it. There's nowhere to run, once they reach the opposite end of the ship. I liked the concept of a newly discovered planet where the human explorers (read invaders) uncover a form of life which is different. Their misinterpretation of this alien leads to most of the problems."

The relentless death-struggle between a small crew and the cosmic creature in “Alien,” though clearly derivative of numerous science fiction and horror films and the pulp adventure stories of the thirties and forties, was exactly the kind of motion picture Twentieth Century-Fox wanted to make into a summer blockbuster. Produced by Gordon

Carroll, David Giler and Walter Hill with break taking imagination, and utilizing some of the most innovative and spectacular special effects even filmed, the familiar story was carefully engineered to plunge audiences into a maelstrom of terror and suspense. But somewhere between that original story by O'Bannon and its debut in 1979, the motion picture developed into something very special.

Origins

The struggle between humans and their otherworldly counterparts is so archetypal that it can be traced back to the earliest works of modern science fiction. H. G. Wells, recognized as one of the genre's founding fathers, envisioned the first confrontation between humans and aliens in his classic tale of science fiction, The War of the Worlds (1898). Ever since his superior Martians first invaded the English countryside, the idea of two highly successful species competing for resources and survival has fascinated science fiction writers. Frederic Brown's classic story "Arena" (1944) finds the fate of a human-alien conflict being decided by single combatants on an equally-alien world. The aliens in Arthur Clarke's Childhood's End (1953) and Clifford Simak's "Kindergarten" (1953) remain totally indifferent to man's existence as though humans are mere ants beneath their feet. Similarly, the man-eating plants in John Wyndham's Day of the Triffids (1951), the monster wasps of Keith Roberts' The Furies (1966), or the aquatic demons of Brian Aldiss' "The Saliva Tree" (1966) view humans as simply a means to propagate their own species. These stories, and countless others like them, have all told the same, familiar tale. Humans have been threatened by alien creatures in pulp fiction as often as helpless heroines have been threatened by mustached villains in melodrama. Sometimes the stories are allegories of racism and xenophobia, reflections of cold war paranoia or metaphors for incurable diseases; but more often than not, they are simple adventure tales which force humans to confront their worst nightmares.

"Alien" and its sequels fit that classic mold perfectly, recalling not only the best pulp adventure stories of the thirties and forties but also the best from the science fiction films of the fifties and sixties.. Thus, when the intrepid crew of the Nostromo first encounter the remains of an extraterrestrial culture in the form of a derelict spacecraft, it should surprise no one that other, earlier explorers have been that way before. One of the earliest journeys in pulp fiction, before the notion became such a heavy cliche, took place during The Voyage of the Space Beagle (serialized in Astounding Science Fiction between 1939-1943) by A. E. Van Vogt. His series of short stories, later collected into novel form (1950), followed the adventures of the crew and technicians of an exploratory survey ship. Their discovery of a great alien derelict and the psychic presence that haunts it evokes an encounter of the deadliest kind.

By the late forties and early fifties, that plotline had become so commonplace in pulp fiction that it was rarely invoked by science fiction writers. But since Hollywood often fails to keep up with literary trends, period science fiction films involving a derelict spaceship and its deadly cargo appeared somewhat unique. The most direct influence on "Alien" came be seen in "The Thing From Another World" (1951), "It! The Terror From Beyond Space"(1958), "Planet of the Vampires" (1965), "Queen of Blood" (1966) and other motion pictures.

The Ron Shusett-Dan O'Bannon Collaboration

The story for "Alien" (1979) was originally conceived by Dan O'Bannon in the summer of 1972 as two separate script ideas, and only later evolved, after numerous revisions and rewrites, into the blueprint for the highly successful film. O'Bannon was the talented, University of Southern California film student who had not only co-written the science fiction satire “Dark Star” (1974), with John Carpenter, but also produced the visual effects for the film and starred as the character Pinback. While still working on the cult parody, he decided to write yet another screenplay, similar in theme to “Dark Star” but totally different in tone. Entitled "Memory," the story provided the backbone of what would eventually become the first half of “Alien”—a crew of astronauts discover a dormant creature on an alien planet. Before he could work out the complex second half, however, O'Bannon shelved the screenplay in order to work for George Lucas on the original “Star Wars.” Dan O’Bannon provided some of the computer animation and graphic efforts.

Early in 1975, once he had completed his work for Lucas, O'Bannon was hired by European surrealist filmmaker Alexandro Jodorowsky to engineer some of the visual effects for his proposed multimillion-dollar adaptation of Frank Herbert's Dune. Dan O'Bannon traveled to Europe and met with Jodorowsky and three of the best fantasy artists in the world, including surrealist painter Hans Rudi Giger of Switzerland, Heavy Metal artist Jean "Moebius" Girard of France, and Chris Foss of England. After less than six months of preproduction in Paris, however, the film project folded under heavy financial problems. O'Bannon had not been paid by Jodorowsky, and used the remainder of his savings for a one-way ticket home. Broke and depressed, he found himself back at square one. "’Dune’ collapsed so badly," Dan later revealed, "that I ended up in Los Angeles without any money, without an apartment, without a car, with half of my belongings back in Paris and the other half in storage."

With no where else to turn, O'Bannon accepted the invitation of a friend, producer and screenwriter Ron Shusett, to camp out on his couch for a few weeks "to get his act together." He struggled for more than a week to put the demons behind him, then turned again to his own writing, in particular his treatment for “Alien.” Both he and Shusett spent weeks, working through the stacks and stacks of notes and partially completed story ideas. Finally, after nearly a month, Shusett suggested that the two of them work collaboratively on one project, and try to sell the story idea to one of the big studios. Dan O'Bannon accepted his proposition and began discussing possible story concepts. Ron had been toying with an adaptation of Philip K. Dick's short story "We Can Remember It for You Wholesale," and offered his idea for “Total Recall.” O'Bannon was still not satisfied with "Memory," but nonetheless offered his concept. While Dan liked Shusett's idea, the latter did not think much of his thriller. "I thought it was just a good B-movie," said Ron Shusett long after the fact, "which showed a lack of vision on my part." The two writers turned their attention to an early draft of what would eventually become “Total Recall,” but failed to get beyond the first third. They turned back to "Memory," and struggled for weeks to figure out the rest of the story.

During one of their frequent brainstorming sessions, Shusett recalled another story idea O'Bannon had started to write in the early seventies and later abandoned. The story was titled "Gremlins" (no relation to the Joe Dante- Steven Spielberg film), and dealt with the little monsters that harass a B-17 bomber crew on a night raid over Tokyo during World War II. Ron suggested they combine plot lines, and use the premise for the second half of an alien stalking the crewmen aboard their own ship. Dan O'Bannon liked the synthesis of ideas. Within a few days, he was hard at work on the script for “Star Beast,” the working title of the film.

Unfortunately, O'Bannon's first screen treatment was little more than a retread of “It! The Terror from Beyond Space” and “Queen of Blood” (1966). Set in the year 2087 A.D., the script began aboard the commercial starship Snark with the interception of a radio transmission of unknown origin. Awakened from hypersleep, the crew diverts to the source of the signal, a storm-swept planetoid, and discovers the remains of a downed spacecraft and its sole inhabitant, a skeletal pilot. The crew takes a number of scientific readings, and return to their ship with a misshapen skull as proof of their findings. The skull carries the host of an alien creature inside, which quickly matures to full size and begins terrorizing the crew once they have set course for home. Evading capture by the beast, the crew eventually joins forces to blast the creature into space. O'Bannon was not at all pleased with his first draft, and explained his frustration to Shusett: "’Star Beast’ is just a simple monster movie which needs some brand new inspirational idea. It will fall right into place, if we can come up with a simple way of making the monster amazing." But neither could of a way of making their "star beast" unique.

While he and Shusett were trying to devise a brilliant, nightmarish creature for the core of the story, O'Bannon found it difficult to shake the images of H.R. Giger's early conceptual designs for the failed “Dune.” His designs and the handful of paintings, which were later gathered into the art book Neronomicon, had a profound effect on O'Bannon's work. Finally, after having discussed H.R. Giger's work with Shusett, Ron had an inspirational nightmare of his own. He woke O'Bannon up in the middle of the night and said, "Dan, I have the idea. I know what the monster does. The monster screws the human being. It plants the seed, grows and emerges from the body of the human—a hybrid monster. It's in there, and we don't know until it comes out and escapes in the ship, and all during the movie, it's chasing them and changing into different forms." Shusett's idea, which no one had ever thought of before, broke the block, and just that quickly, the story fell right into place.

Within three weeks, they had worked out the whole story outline to the project now called “Alien.” Their original intent was to produce a low-budget feature that they could package and sell independently. Shusett began searching for the financing, while O'Bannon sequestered himself in solitude for three months to write the complete script. Dan emerged from that solitude only a few times, first to argue over the greater potential of the story (if sold to a major studio) with his partner, and to hire Ron Cobb, a former political cartoonist and illustrator, to complete several preliminary sketches. O'Bannon was determined to direct “Alien” himself. He felt qualified, having substituted for Carpenter during the “Dark Star” shoot, and didn't want his project lost in development hell. However, after several rejections from the major studios, Dan relented, agreeing to circulate their modest little script (and some Cobb illustrations) without his name attached as director.

A mutual friend of theirs, Mark Haggard, passed the script to writer-director Walter Hill who had only months before founded Brandywine Productions with producer Gordon Carroll and writer David Giler. Their independent production company had reviewed over three hundred script submissions, and despite the fact O'Bannon's screenplay needed work, Hill felt “Alien” was the most commercially viable of all the works they had read. After several weeks of negotiations, Brandywine optioned the script in October 1976. "From that point on," Dan remembers, "it just sort of exploded in all directions."

The Original Screen Story

The preface to the original script, which O'Bannon and Shusett sold to Brandywine Productions, begins with a variation of the epigram, a definition: "Alien, adjective- strange, foreign, distant, remote, hostile, repugnant. . ." O'Bannon's subsequent narrative generally parallels the finished film, scene for scene, with the exception of several critical differences. Set in the year 2087 A.D., the story opens aboard the starship Snark with the interception of an indecipherable radio transmission. Awakened from hypersleep by the ship's talking computer (reminiscent of HAL-9000), the six-man crew of astronauts diverts the ship to a small asteroid and sets down on its storm-swept, hostile surface. Standard, Broussard and Melkonis leave the ship (with simple breathing masks) to search for the source of the transmission, and discover a derelict spacecraft. Gaining entry through several gaping holes, perforated in the ship's fuselage, they find the skeletal pilot and an empty alien egg (but no egg chamber, as in the finished film). Broussard also notices that the pilot has scratched out what appears to be the image of a triangle on the panel in front of him. They take the skull of the fossilized alien (referring to him as "Poor Yurick") back with them to the ship, as proof of their findings.

Upon return to the Snark, their companions (Hunter, Roby and Faust) reveal that they've discovered an ancient stone pyramid - suggestive of the scrawled triangle – on the horizon. After reviewing the data they've collected from the derelict in holographic form, the crew investigates the pyramid, and finds a secret room, containing a pedestal with rows of leathery urns—the egg chamber. Broussard accidentally awakens one of the eggs, and a small alien creature springs out, attaching itself to his face, wrapping its tentacles around his head. Melkonis and Standard come quickly to his aide, and carry him back to their starship's infirmary. Though efforts to break its grasp fail, the alien parasite soon drops off as strangely as it once held onto the astronaut's face. The crew breathes a collective sigh of relief, while speculating on its origins. Humanity has apparently not discovered any other lifeforms in its exploration of the galaxy, and questions about the alien creature's life cycle and indigenous nature consume the crew. Broussard is simply happy to be rid of the parasite, and anxious to leave the planetoid far behind. His fellow crewmembers set course for earth, totally unaware that he is now playing host to some deadly predator. Shortly after lift-off, as they prepare to return to hypersleep, the alien rips a massive hole in Broussard's chest and escapes, during the ensuing pandemonium, into the lower decks of the starship.

Once the creature grows to maturity, it begins stalking the other members of the crew, mysteriously vanishing after each attack. Working feverishly against time with the data collected from the pyramid, Roby and Standard manage to unscramble some of the hieroglyphics. The tomb was once a fertility temple where the aliens stored their eggs and had mating rituals. The creature, itself, has four distinct life stages--from egg to face-hugger, then adult warrior to cocoon. It doesn't simply eat all of its victims, but rather transforms some of them into spores to foster a new generation of creatures. When attempts to poison the alien with gas fail, and Standard is captured, Roby discovers a room in the lower decks of the ship where the creature has cocooned several of the others. Still conscious, Standard begs his companion to kill him, and Roby obliges by torching him with a flamethrower. Alone, and near the point of collapse, Roby sets the ship to self-destructs before escaping in a lifepod.

Dan O'Bannon's original script for “Alien” is both highly original and derivative, interesting and remarkably unsophisticated, unusual and clearly the result of a neophyte talent hitting upon a concept unable or unprepared to develop fully. Whereas O'Bannon's nightmarish creature is brilliantly realized, his plotline seems borrowed from a handful of classic science fiction films. By having his characters discover a derelict spacecraft and its fossilized pilot, Dan's plot structure provides an eerie introduction to the story; but their subsequent journeys on the planetoid's surface needlessly complicates the plot. The characters themselves are not particularly interesting; their personalities (beyond perhaps Roby) are largely interchangeable. In fact, the notion of an all-male crew must have been a miscalculation on the part of O'Bannon, considering he and his partner Shusett's intent was to produce something commercially viable. The dialogue is equally weak, relying too much on tense, artificial machismo or the "Jesus, gadzooks" quality of bad B-movies. O'Bannon does manage to heighten suspense by keeping the mystery of the pyramid (and its strange occupants) locked safely away in its hieroglyphics; but, by the time the astronauts finally figure out the puzzle, there's really only one thing left to do: DESTROY THE ALIEN!! The ending then turns on a somewhat predictable countdown to destruction, like dozens of other motion pictures before it. But the screenplay was imaginative enough to attract Brandywine Productions.

Brandywine Productions

Months before O'Bannon had finished his original script for “Alien,” writer-director Walter Hill, producer Gordon Carroll and writer David Giler joined forces to create Brandywine Productions. Carroll, who had worked as a line producer for more than fifteen years, had known both Hill and Giler for some time, and when he finally introduced his mutual friends, the three began talking casually about the formation of their own company. (Hill and Giler worked right down the hall from one another in offices on the Twentieth Century-Fox lot.) When executives at Fox agreed to provide them with offices in exchange for a first- refusal production agreement, Carroll, Hill and Giler became independent producers.

Brandywine Productions reviewed over three hundred script submissions before taking a six-month option on O'Bannon's screenplay for $1000. Walter Hill was not only interested in the project from a production point of view but he also expressed an interest in directing the film as well. For Hill, “Alien” was “a science fiction version of ‘Jaws,’” and therefore very commercial. But when Brandywine was unable to attract a single studio, Hill rewrote significant passages and punched up most of the dialogue. Their six-month option was quickly running out, and they had to move fast in order to salvage their first project. Since Brandywine had a first-refusal production agreement with Twentieth Century-Fox, the rewrite was submitted first to Fox executives. Even though the studio had previously turned down the O'Bannon script, they agreed to commit development money to the project based on the revisions made by Hill.

When Twentieth Century-Fox finally agreed to develop “Alien” as a project, late inn March 1977, the decision was based entirely upon Walter Hill's rewrite. Completed over a three-day period, his rewrite maintained much of Dan O'Bannon's original material, including the discovery of the derelict spacecraft, the sighting of the pyramid, and the invasion of the alien parasite. But since Hill had always been concerned with the script's one-dimensional characterization, he tried to add an element of discord, suggesting that the astronauts didn't really like one another. Descriptions of action and dialogue were either shortened or tightened, and some scenes were completely rewritten from scratch. Several names were also changed to add a more contemporary feel. Broussard became Dallas, Roby became Ripley, and Faust became Faraday. The single, most important change in Hill's rewrite was he addition of subplot that would function as a catalyst for action when the Alien was off screen. Walter relied on O'Bannon's talking computer to provide that subplot by making the machine (now named "Mother") indifferent to the survival of its crew. Thus, when Ripley goes to "pull the plug," he learns that the computer has been conducting its own experiment in Darwinian evolution: "Two highly successful species in immediate competition for resources and survival. In the interests of pure scientific research I removed myself from the struggle." This exchange added dimension to the story, and gave the classic B-movie plot a sense of purpose and theme.

Overall, Hill had revised about 30% of Dan O'Bannon's original script, enough to garner a development deal with Fox but not enough to "green light" the project. Still more changes were needed before the script could go before the camera, and Hill called upon his writing counterpart at Brandywine. "Basically, it was a pastiche of Fifties movies," David Giler explained his first impression of the script. "Really terrible. Just awful. It was amateurishly written, although the central idea was sound. We took it and rewrote it completely, added Ash and the robot subplot. We added the cat, Jones. We also changed the characters around. We fleshed it out, basically. If we had shot the original O'Bannon script, we would have had a remake of “It! The Terror from Beyond Space.”

The first collaborative efforts of Walter Hill and David Giler on “Alien took place at the former's home in the Hollywood Hills in the fall of 1977. Giler's first concern addressed the issue of the talking computer. Although he liked the added dimension Hill had given the script, he felt the concept of the ship's computer was far too close to HAL 9000 in Stanley Kubrick's “2001: A Space Odyssey” (1968). Hill, on the other hand, felt the conflict between man and machine was a necessary subplot. The two writers tossed around many ideas before settling on a compromise: the introduction of Ash, a robotic science officer who has been placed aboard to both study and protect the alien parasite. "Mother" was retained as the ship's computer, but much of the material written for its character was now shifted to Ash.

Hill and Giler next revised the cast of characters by replacing O'Bannon's West Point cadets with "space-going truck drivers." In addition to the mysterious Ash, they made two of the characters female, one black and created a realistic hierarchy of command. Captain, first officer, warrant officer, science officer and engineer were titles substituted for the buttoned-down heroes in the original script. Their seven characters - Ripley, Dallas, Kane, Ash, Lambert, Parker and Brett - are far more complicated individuals than those first envisioned in Broussard, Roby, Standard, Melkonis, Hunter and Faust. The writers even went as far as dealing with the crew's sexuality, by including an intimate moment between Ripley and Dallas (later deleted during the actual production). To further streamline the plot, only one excursion outside the ship was made. Hill found O'Bannon's pyramid to be a fascinating concept, and even expanded the sequence to include an entire city in his initial rewrite. However, Giler was convinced the second expedition merely delayed the meeting with the alien unnecessarily, adding texture but little substance to the overall work. The egg chamber was then moved aboard the ship. Regrettably, they also had to cut the dead, indigenous society and the discovery of the strange hieroglyphics.

By the time he had finished his final rewrite on the film, Hill had simply tired of the project. "Even though I was intrigued by ‘Alien,’" he revealed, "I'd grown out of love with the idea of doing it." Hill had also committed to do a western, the still unproduced “Last Gun,” and later made “The Warriors” instead. His Herculean efforts as well as the contributions of David Giler are clearly evident in the film.

Because the final shooting script, with substantial amounts of new material added by Walter Hill and David Giler, had significantly changed the original screenplay by Dan O'Bannon, Twentieth Century-Fox recommended to the Writers Guild of America that the partners at Brandywine receive sole credit. O'Bannon (along with Ronald Shusett) would be credited with the story idea but nothing more. This request triggered an arbitration hearing by the WGA in which both sides were required to submit their original material for an independent evaluation. Experts reviewed both scripts and their subsequent rewrites, and ultimately declined Fox's request. Even though three people were probably responsible for the final shooting script, O'Bannon was awarded sole screenplay credit. The Guild felt that producers often "tinker" with a writer's words (prior to putting them before the camera), but that there would have been no words (or idea, for that matter) had O'Bannon not first written them. Unfair as the ruling may have seemed, it did cause a number of terse moments (before and after filming) between Hill & Giler and O'Bannon.

Enter: Ridley Scott

After Walter Hill had decided not to direct “Alien,” the three partners at Brandwine Productions began looking for the right candidate for the job. They discussed both Steven Spielberg and Brian DePalma, but neither of them were available. (Spielberg had just completed “Close Encounters of the Third Kind,” and was set to begin “1941,” while DePalma had just finished “Carrie,” and was starting work on “The Fury.”) Searching for a suitable director who was, at the same time available, Hill, Giler and Gordon Carroll each made list of possible candidates, which included Tobe Hooper and Ridley Scott. David Giler recalled having seen Scott's “The Duellists” (1976) at the Cannes Film festival, and arranged to have Sandy Leiberson, a Twentieth Century-Fox executive in London, deliver a copy of the “Alien” script to him.

After “The Duellists,” Ridley Scott had planned to make “Tristan and Iseult,” an Arthurian tale about knights and sorcery, but could not find a studio or independent financing. So, when the script arrived from Leiberson, Scott read it, and two months later, after his Arthurian film had fallen through, he contacted Hill and Giler to find out if it was still available. They said "yes" and, within two days, Ridley Scott was in Los Angeles to discuss his vision of the project.

No sooner had Scott agreed to make the film than he found himself confronted with the most difficult and complex problem of the shoot: how to make the alien creature look otherworldly enough to satisfy contemporary audiences weaned on “Star Wars” and “Close Encounters of the Third Kind.” Most previous attempts by fellow filmmakers to depict extraterrestrial life forms had come down to men in rubber suits (like Ray "Crash" Corrigan in “It! The Terror from Beyond Space” or elaborate mechanical contrivances that rarely (if ever) produced a convincing alien. Stanley Kubrick, the director Ridley Scott most admired, had decided not to introduce his extraterrestrials in “2001: A Space Odyssey” after months of costly experimentation failed to render the monolith-builders believable. Douglas Trumbull had run into a similar problem during production of “Silent Running” (1971), and ended up dropping the alien-subplot from the final shooting script. Ridley knew he did not have that luxury—the alien was central to his story, and he had not one but three different creatures to imagine.

"Just after I got to Hollywood, Dan O'Bannon came in with a copy of Giger's Necronomicon and said, 'What do you think of this?' I started leafing through it until I came to this one half-page painting, and I just stopped and said: 'Good God, I don't believe it! That's it!'" Ridley Scott had settled upon Giger's "Necronom IV," a startling and nightmarish creature that was part-insect, part-human and part-serpentine. He didn't have to see any more paintings or sketches to know that H.R. Giger was essential to the project. In early February 1978, Scott, Gordon Carroll and David Giler flew to Zurich, and met with the Swiss surrealist painter at his home. They discussed the film at length, and ultimately agreed to Giger's very modest terms.

H.R. Giger’s *Alien*

The Alien itself was the film's most important design and greatest technical achievement. Conceived and designed by the surrealist Hans Rudi Giger as a "biomechanical," the Alien evolves through several distinctive phases. Giger worked closely with Ridley Scott throughout the entire production, designing the creature in its various forms. The "face-hugger," which attaches to Kane's head, was clearly sexual in appearance, with a long, tightly-coiled tail for launching itself, two finger-like protrusions for holding onto its victim and an inseminating organ which it thrusts down the victim's throat. The "chest-buster," inspired from a painting by Francis Bacon, was envisioned as a mouth and small body, as this second alien had to literally eat its way out of the victim. And finally the Alien creature in its final state--the key to the whole production--had to be tall, graceful and menacing, thoroughly convincing and totally alien in appearance. H. R. Giger's designs for the final creature were, in fact, an extension of the "Necronom IV" upon which Ridley Scott had first lighted. Though part insectoid and part serpentine, the alien was still essentially man-like in appearance. To distract from its human shape, the Swiss surrealist endowed the creature with a long, phallic head, seemingly life-less eyes, a vile array of teeth, and an elongated tail. In addition to designing the three aliens, Giger sculpted and constructed the Alien suit, while Carlo Rambaldi worked on articulating the Alien head (through cables and remotes).

The suit, which consisted of fifteen separate pieces, was made by Giger at a cost of $250,000 to fit over the 6'10" frame of twenty-six year-old Nigerian Bolaji Badejo. Badejo had been a graphic arts student in London when a twist of fate brought him to the attention of Ridley Scott. The director had been looking for basketball players, and had tested Peter Mayhew (Chewbacca in “Star Wars”), but it was Badejo's combination of height and slimness that convinced Scott he was right for the role. Bolaji was signed in May, and Giger was given four months to build the suit around him. Each of the parts were, therefore, customized to fit over the tall, slim Nigerian. Over a one-piece black body suit, the rib cage was pulled on like a sweater and the legs were put on like a pair of pants (zipped up the side). The arms were pulled on separately like sleeves, fitted over with gloves, and the feet were worn like shoes. The head and tail were placed on last, with cables and wires securely hidden. (Various body parts and a full second suit were also constructed for the stunt man.)

By the time Giger had finished with the Alien suit, he had created a fully-realized monster. But the final problem was how to make it look both menacing and totally convincing on screen. "I never liked horror films before," Ridley Scott commented, "because in the end it's always been a man in a rubber suit. Well, there's no way to deal with that. The most important thing in a film of this type is not what you see, but the effect of what you think you saw. It's like a sort of afterburn--that's the reason I decided to limit the creature's appearances." Because the alien is only glimpsed but never fully seen, it sustains an atmosphere of mystery and terror.

That atmosphere of mystery and terror was also carried forward in Giger's designs for the alien landscape, the derelict and the space jockey. Originally hired for just the Alien designs, Giger soon found himself prevailed upon by Scott, Carroll and Giler to produce additional work for the movie. The alien world, as described in the original script, was a planetoid, approximately 1200 kilometers in diameter with a gravity level equivalent to .86 of Earth gravity, orbiting a large ringed world. Its freezing atmosphere was made up of xenite, nitrogen, carbon dioxide, and methane with a surface structure of rock on top of a lava base. Although never mentioned in the final film, the planetoid was named "Acheron." Translating those concepts into a convincingly foreign landscape required the talents of the noted artist and surrealist.

Preproduction: “In Space No One Can Hear You Scream”

Once Ridley Scott was satisfied with Giger's work on various preproduction aspects of the film, the director began assembling his cast and crew. Since political cartoonist Ron Cobb and futuristic designer Chris Foss had already been hired by Dan O'Bannon to produce certain designs for the ship Nostromo, Scott added Jean "Moebius" Giraud to his art department to work on the costumes and spacesuits. "As the film involved three specific aspects--the planet, everything to do with the alien and the Earth ship--we decided that any one of those elements should be a full-time job for a designer," Scott explained. Their fully-functional, realistic hardware provided an excellent contrast with Giger's otherworldly concepts for the planet and the two alien cultures. Michael Seymour also hired Roger Christian and Les Dilley, both of whom had won an Academy Award for “Star Wars” (1977), as art directors, with Ian Whittaker being retained as the set decorator. “Alien” had one of the strongest art departments of any motion picture that had been produced up to that time.

For reasons of economy, Gordon Carroll, David Giler and Ridley Scott decided to make the film at Shepperton Studios, just outside London. The original budget of $4.5 million quickly esculated to $13 million, which was totally unacceptable to Twentieth Century-Fox. Carroll and Giler tried negotiating with the executives, asking for $9.5 but finally settling for $9 million. Since “Star Wars” had cost about $9 million to make, Fox expected Brandywine to see that “Alien” didn't cost any more. The Producers also had to negotiate for time. Twentieth Century-Fox wanted to release the motion picture on May 25, 1979, two years to the day after “Star Wars” had debuted, and insisted upon a tight production schedule. They started talking about 17 weeks of shooting, and finally settled upon 16 weeks, with less than four months of post-production. With time of the essence, Scott took the script and drew storyboards for every key sequence in the film. Ridley knew he could maintain a tight shooting schedule if he simply followed his storyboards. He would also have to oversee the set construction and the special effects.

One of the most remarkable, complex and ingenious sets ever designed for a motion picture--that of the gigantic commerical space-tug Nostromo--was built over several large sound stages. Since the script called for a well-used, slightly battered spacecraft, they had to make the sets look lived-in. So the "A" (or top) level was constructed first, filling much of the giant "C" soundstage at Shepperton. Later sequences for the film were staged on the lower levels of the ship, built separately on other soundstages. "B" level, the general maintenance area, and "C" level, containing the vast engine rooms plus a seemingly endless network of complex machinery-filled corridors and the landing gear, were painstakingly constructed by Les Dilley, Roger Christian and crew of 100 technicians.

While all the interior and planet surface sequences for ALIEN were scheduled to be filmed at Shepperton Studios, the six months of special effects and model photography were completed at the Bray Studios, in Windsor, about fifteen miles away. Once the home of Hammer Films, the Bray Studios had once played host to hundreds of motion picture productions. Now, the studios were witnessing a most unusual production, with dozens of complex visuals. Most of the visual effects were completed under the direction of Brian Johnson, who was working simultaneously on the effects for “The Empire Strikes Back” (1980), and the supervision of Nick Allder. Their highly-complex and technical wizardry contributed to many of the breathtaking sequences that took place in space and on the planet surface.

While Gordon Carroll, David Giler and Ridley Scott worked on preproduction at Shepperton Studios, Casting Directors Mary Selway and Mary Goldberg began looking for the five actors and two actresses to fill the roles of “Alien.” Their initial choice for the role of Kane, however, proved problematic. Jon Finch was first signed to play the executive officer; but after several days of shooting the noted British thespian was hospitalized with a diabetic ailment and had to be replaced by John Hurt. Hurt had already spent years on stage and in front of the camera, and had just won critical acclaim for his turn as Max in “Midnight Express”(1978). (Years later, John Hurt would spoof his role as Kane in Mel Brooks’s “Spaceballs”(1987). Tom Skerritt was cast against type as Dallas, the Nostromo's low-key captain. The role of Ash, the ship's uptight science officer, was awarded to Ian Holm. A former student of the Royal College of Dramatic Arts and one of England's most reputable Shakespearean actors, Holm found the character of Ash very different from the kinds of role he had often played. Yaphet Kotto also brought an impressive body of stage and motion picture work to his characterization of Parker, the ship's sarcastic engineer. The well-know character actor Harry Dean-Stanton was cast, partially for comic relief, in the role of Brett, the ship's laconic engineering technician who blindly follows Parker's instructions. British-born Veronica Cartwright, who grew up in the United States with her equally-famous sister Angela, was the perfect choice for Lambert, the ship's high-strung navigator. Fresh from her encounter with the pod people in Philip Kaufman's remake of “Invasion of the Body Snatchers” (1978), Veronica had been working in motion pictures and television since she was six. But the pivotal role of Warrant Officer Ripley was to prove much more difficult to cast.

Initially, David Giler and Gordon Carroll had considered Meryl Streep for the part. Even though she had yet to make her mark as the tortured wife in “The Deer Hunter” (1978) and in other high profile roles, Streep was still well regarded by the industry. Her turn as "Inga" in the television miniseries “Holocaust” (1978) had critics buzzing, so much in fact that Meryl passed on the role of Ripley because it was after all only a horror film. The part was then offered to Sigourney Weaver, who voiced similar objections. "I didn't want to be in a science fiction picture," she reflected years later, "but I thought this was an interesting woman to play." Sigourney finally did accept Carroll’s offer, but Twentieth Century-Fox was not keen on hiring a virtual unknown to head-up the multi-million dollar project. Weaver agreed to do a screen test, and flew to London to shoot the infamous cocoon scene that was later discarded. She stepped right into the character of Ripley, and did such a great job on the screen test that Fox and Ridley Scott were assured they had found their lead. After all these years, it is so hard to imagine anyone else in the role of Warrant Officer Ripley.

Production Details

Principal photography on ALIEN was scheduled to begin on July 5, 1978, at Shepperton Studios, but was pushed back to July 25th to give the technicians enough time to finish the sets. Throughout the first four weeks, with the three phases of the Alien yet to be completed, Director Ridley Scott concentrated on the sequences leading to the discovery of the derelict on the planetoid Acheron. Since the Nostromo sets were still not complete, things got off to a slow start. A major sequence photographed during this period was the landing party's descent onto the planetoid surface. Subsequent scenes were filmed in some of the ship's completed sections. Because rehearsal time had been kept to a minimum, this was the first time most of the actors had worked with one another. The early scenes were tense and business-like, reflecting the distrust and tension the crew of the Nostromo was supposed to have towards each other.

The "chest-buster" scene, ALIEN's most talked about and most copied visual sequence, was filmed late in August 1978. Since the "chest-burster" was the first alien form to be completed by Roger Dicken and his crew, it was also the first creature to be filmed. The scene held a few shocking surprises for the cast, since none of them knew exactly what they were going to see. On the day before, all shots leading up to the alien's unexpected appearance were completed, consisting mostly of the crew eating dinner and Kane's initial convulsions. When filming wrapped for the night, the production crew went to work preparing for the next day's difficult shoot.

In the morning, no actors except John Hurt were allowed onto the set. The table in the mess had a large hole cut into it in which the actor was fitted with just his head, shoulders and arms above. A fiberglass chest piece was attached to Hurt's shoulders, and then fitted with a t-shirt, which gave the appearance he was still lying on the table. The artificial chest was then filled with several tubes to squirt fake blood, and a single hand puppet, operated by Roger Dicken and Nick Allder, was positioned below. The director and crew also dressed in white smocks and covered their equipment in plastic. After several hours, the scene was ready for the rest of the cast members. On cue, with three cameras rolling to capture effective reaction shots which were of genuine surprise, the "chest-burster" ripped through Hurt's artificial chest and sprayed blood all over the others, most especially Veronica Cartwright. The scene was then completed using wires to help the alien race across the table.

On September 6, the Alien appeared on the set for the first time for a scene which corresponded to the creature's first appearance in the film. While searching for the cat on "C" level, Brett wanders into the chamber which houses the landing gear, and passes to refresh himself under the stream of water flowing from above. The Alien suddenly appears, and carries him away. Ridley Scott filmed several variations of the scene with the monster descending from above onto Harry Dean Stanton, but none of them worked. In one set-up, Badejo was strapped to a see-saw which, when raised into the air more than twenty feet, made him very dizzy and nauseous. He declined a second take, and stunt man Eddie Powell took over. Eventually, after several more tries, Scott successfully filmed the stuntman being lowered head-first by wires.

The infamous cocoon scene, which was later discarded, was filmed on September 25, 1978. Ripley, alone in the Nostromo with the alien patiently stalking her, hears a sound coming from one of the ship's storage areas. She enters the compartment with a flamethrower in hand only to discover Dallas, partially devoured yet still alive, caught in a cocoon. Near him, Brett is gradually being transformed into one of the alien spores. The Captain begs Ripley to kill him, and she accedes to his wishes by incinerating the whole compartment. The scene took several days to complete, and was printed for inclusion in the final cut. "That sequence was quite spooky, and it actually worked very well," Ridley Scott declared. "I like it because it was a brief way of explaining what had happened on the derelict and what was now happening on the Nostromo." (But Scott later relented, believing the scene slowed the pace of the film, and ended up cutting it from the final print.)

In December of 1978, with the final shots of Ripley in the hypersleep chamber having just been completed, principal photography on “Alien” wrapped. A few days later, all of the sets were completely gone, and the stages were ready for the next production.

During post-production, Ridley Scott worked with editor Terry Rawlings to transform the thousands of feet of raw footage into a rough cut. They trimmed much of the footage in which the characters argued and openly insulted one another, and elimitated most of the overt sexual or violent actions. Scott also wisely chose to limit the number of appearances of the Alien. Citing the original “Jaws” (1975) by Steven Spielberg, the British director proved that the most convincing movie monsters were the ones that appear on screen the least.

Scott had some very definite ideas about the musical score as well, and discussed the possibility of hiring the Japanese composer Tomita with Gordon Carroll and David Giler, but they were reluctant to deal with someone who had never scored a motion picture. Jerry Goldsmith, the veteran of hundreds of film and television scores, was subsequently hired to produce the musical score for “Alien.” During the late seventies, Goldsmith was at the top of his form. Having just won an Academy Award for his haunting music in “The Omen” (1976), the veteran composer had already produced themes for a half dozen films, including “Islands in the Stream” (1977), “Capricorn One” (1978), “Damien—Omen II”(1978), “The Boys from Brazil” (1978), “Coma” (1978) and “The Swarm” (1978) when he turned to “Alien.” His work was well received by Carroll and Giler, and dominates much of the final film. Unfortunately, Scott was dissatisfied with several key themes, including the climatic one, and hired conductor Lionel Newman with his own funds to replace several Goldsmith themes with material from “Freud” (1962) and Howard Hanson's Symphony #2.

With less than a few weeks remaining, the final cut of the film was ready for its cinematic debut.

The Theatrical Release

Released on Friday, May 25, 1979, two years to the day after “Star Wars” burst onto the scene, “Alien” quickly shot to the top of the box office in its first weekend. Although the motion picture faced stiff competition from other major releases, including “Rocky II,” “Escape from Alcatraz,” “The Jerk,” “Moonraker,” “Airport 1979,” “Meatballs,” and reissues of “Jaws” and “Star Wars,” it continued selling tickets throughout the summer. Critical reaction to the film was generally mixed, with some reviewers crediting Ridley Scott with its breathtaking pace and nonstop action, while others proclaimed its derivative nature. David Denby wrote in the June 4th New Yorker: "’Alien’ . . . works on your nerves and emotions with the practiced hand of a torturer extracting a confession. They movie is terrifying, but not in a way that is remotely enjoyable." Frederick Pohl, a noted science fiction author, wrote: "The story of ‘Alien’ is a lot like the early work of A.E. Van Vogt . . . and not very complicated, though . . . the effects are superb." Most moviegoers, some who had spent hours in front of their local theatre lined up around the block, declared the film a success. The film grossed a whopping $40 million in domestic theatre rentals ($100 million worldwide), and proved that science fiction and horror films were worthy summer blockbusters.

The film, however, was not without its controversy. Science fiction author A.E. Van Vogt, who had written The Voyage of the Space Beagle, found far too many parallels between his novel and the film. He requested payment from producers Gordon Carroll and David Giler for using his original story. But no one at Brandywine Productions took his claim seriously. Similar accusations were also made by United Artists and director Edward L Cahn over the various similarities between “It! The Terror from Beyond Space”(1958) and Twentieth Century-Fox's “Alien, but nothing ever came of these accusations either.

In February of 1980, “Alien” was honored with two award nominations from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for the Best Achievement in Art Direction (for Michael Seymour, Les Dilley, Roger Christian and Ian Whittaker) and the Best Achievement in Visual Effects (H.R. Giger, Nick Allder and Brian Johnson). At the actual Academy Awards ceremony, “Alien” lost out in the category of Art Direction, but won against “Star Trek—The Motion Picture,” Disney’s “The Black Hole,” and Steven Spielberg's “1941” in the category of visual effects. H.R. Giger's work on “Alien” was not only recognized by his peers for outstanding achievement, but also his creation has become one of the legendary movie monsters. The film was also honored with a "Hugo" award from the World Science Fiction community.

In 1992, several scenes that were cut from the initial release were added to a documentary on the making of “Alien” for the special edition of the film on home video. While scenes like the infamous cocoon sequence were not restored to the film, they were finally available for fans to enjoy and marvel.

Critical Commentary

From the mysterious-looking egg in the theatrical trailers to the tag line on the poster: "In space no one can hear you scream," audience members knew they were in for an exhilerating experience, a rollercoaster ride of sheer terror and suspense. And Twentieth Century-Fox's production of “Alien” delivered all the chills and excitement that it promised, and so much more. Over the years, since its initial release in May 1979, the film has become accepted as a genuine screen classic, a startling tale of otherworldly terror and primal human fear that fuses classic elements of science fiction and horror. “Alien’s” enduring popularity and success can be attributed to many key elements, from the archetypal nature of the story to the visual style of its director Ridley Scott to the contributions of the many artists and technicians, but its true essence lies in the screen magic these numerous storytelling and filmmaking techniques combined to create. Even though so few surprises remain today, audiences still continue to be hypnotized by the overall visual experience of the film.

H.R. Giger's incredible imagination for things that are both strange and frightening is largely responsible for “Alien’s” most important element, the innovative design of the creature itself. The film doesn't simply present a roaring monster in a rubber suit (with a visible zipper) like so many motion pictures before it, but takes the time to introduce not one but three distinct stages in the creature's evolution. The two early, post-egg stages are both provocative and compelling, disquieting and repulsive. The final, humanoid form, with its gargoyle-like head and shark-like jaws, is the ultimate movie monster, and by keeping the alien hidden or half-glimpsed by the audience, director Ridley Scott magnifies it beyond our wildest imaginations. Even more intriguing is that the title creature doesn't possess any sort of biological flaw. By creating a monster that could only be destroyed by human resourcefulness, the producers have added an extra dimension of true horror.

“Alien” is also a triumph of production design, set decoration, special effects, costumes, and makeup. Credit for the distinctive look of the film belongs entirely to the very gifted H.R. Giger. Although many of his designs for the motion picture seem somewhat familiar today, they established a pattern that would be copied in other films throughout the decade. Ron Cobb, Jean "Moebius" Giraud and Chris Foss also deserve special recognition for their contributions to the film. Particularly effective is the extraordinary way in which Michael Seymour, John Mollo, Les Dilley and Roger Christian helped to bring most of their designs to life. The film, as a whole, has relatively few special effects, but Brian Johnson's model work and the optical genius of Nick Allder's visual effects stand head-and-shoulders above what was currently being offered in other films. [If you need further convincing, simply rent “Moonraker,” “The Black Hole,” or “1941” on DVD, and you'll see a distinct difference.] Jerry Goldsmith's haunting score, which was orchestrated by Lionel Newman, contributes to the overall atmosphere, and binds the other elements nicely together.

Ridley Scott is truly a brilliant visual stylist. He has taken special pains to create a believable environment in which to unleash his monster. His documentary-like style with the camera helps to evoke a much more realistic portrait of the central characters. The members of the Nostromo are not stereotyped as space-going philosophers, but rather are portrayed as instellar truck drivers. They are not the least glamorized by his camera work; in fact, quite the opposite is true--he photographs them with warts and all.

Scott also manages to avoid the trap of depicting helpless females in jeopardy; by treating Ripley and Lambert as equals of their male counterparts, they function much like real people. “Alien” is without a doubt Scott's most accomplished work. Sigourney Weaver is very striking as Warrant Officer Ripley. She begins as one of the anonymous members of the crew, and gradually reveals a considerable depth of character as the film builds toward its dramatic climax. John Hurt is particularly effective as the doomed astronaut Kane. Ian Holm also performs wonders as the robot Ash, while Tom Skerritt continues a low-key performance as the soft-spoken Captain Dallas. Yaphet Kotto, Harry Dean Stanton and Veronica Cartwright provide the perfect balance for the larger-than-life alien creature which does attempt to command every scene.

“Alien,” like “Star Wars,” may have had its roots in the pulp science fiction adventures of the thirties and forties, but the story itself is somewhat universal in nature--seemingly drawn from the earliest cave etchings of primitive man. No matter how familiar it may be to modern audiences, and no matter how many audiences connected the film to “The Thing” (1951) or “It! The Terror Beyond Space,” its superb depiction of the classic conflict between man and the unknown forces of nature continues to affect all who experience it.

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