

The Resurrection of Dan O'Bannon



Photo: Eric Lasher

Like the extraterrestrial he created, Dan O'Bannon's career just keeps on mutating.

Dan O'Bannon first burst onto the fantasy cinema scene with *Dark Star*—which he co-wrote with director John Carpenter and starred in—and subsequently with his darker version (co-scripted by Ronald Shusett) of the same story, *Alien*. The film was an immediate hit, made stars of Sigourney Weaver and director Ridley Scott and is regarded as one of the best horror films ever.

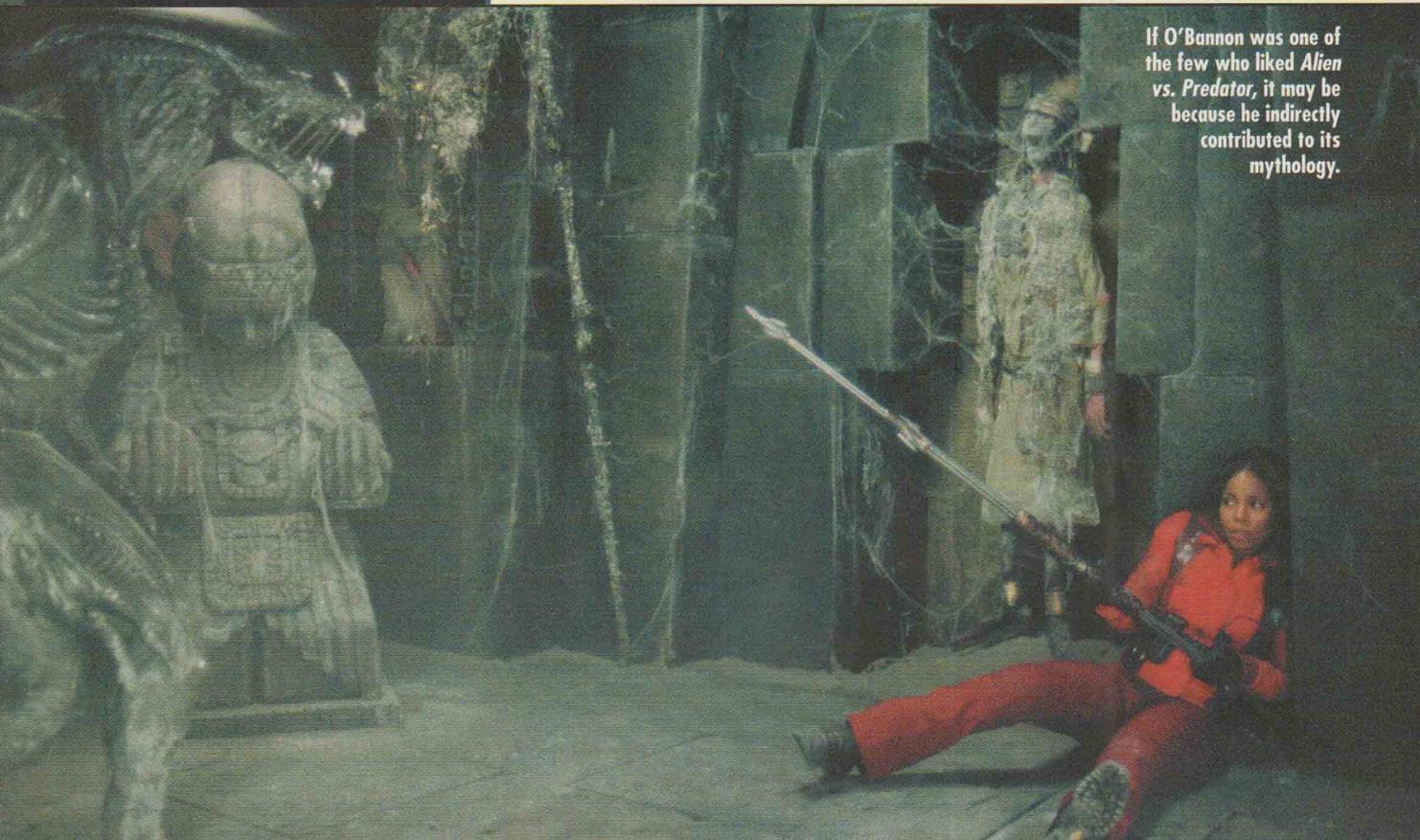
O'Bannon has since had a strange career as a filmmaker, with *Return of the Living Dead*—which spawned numerous imitations and (now four) sequels—and *The Resurrected* his only directorial efforts to date. He has been busier as a screenwriter, and his work has been helmed by many of the genre's best-known filmmakers: Scott, Paul Verhoeven, Tobe Hooper, etc. Then, following a pair of lower-budgeted Canadian projects (*Screamers* and *Bleeders*, a.k.a. *Hemoglobin*), he vanished from the movie scene. It turns out he was disappointed by the industry, especially by the fact that he didn't get final cut on *The Resurrected*. Fans wondered what had happened to the man behind the concept of one of the scariest movies ever made. As it turns out, he was simply living his life...

"I got married, had a kid and just lost interest for a while in chasing that constant Hollywood grind," O'Bannon says. "I was interested in my family, taking it easy and stuff. I tried to completely write down movies in my own heart, because they've changed so much."

Luckily, he thought about it again and one simple element changed his mind. "I haven't completely ruled Hollywood out because I can't think of a better way of making money," he laughs. "Two years ago I had decided to forego Hollywood, but lately I thought about that decision and said, 'Wait a minute, that's stupid. There's a lot of money there!' There's still a project or two of mine that I would very much like to put on the big screen. If I get lucky and sell an occasional script, I can get a lot of cash. I can't turn my back on Hollywood completely, because of the possibilities of an occasional big sale, the practical value of that income. I wish I could say I'm through with it, but it still has some value to me. In the meantime, I've invested my sincere creative heart in other projects that are a little less grandiose than a film, but they were things that I was actually able to do without interference."

Nevertheless, getting back into the business wasn't as easy as you would

If O'Bannon was one of the few who liked *Alien* vs. *Predator*, it may be because he indirectly contributed to its mythology.



After years of inactivity, the creator of "Alien" is coming back to scare us again.

By NICANOR LORETI

Alien was set in the future, but the screenwriter says its creatures had a very old inspiration.

Photo: Copyright 1979/2003 Fox

think. "When I got interested again, I was cold. I was nobody in the business, plus at the same time the moviemaking industry itself has completely changed," he explains. "Everybody does business at every level and all of the people have changed. So when I decided to get back to work and re-enter the Hollywood mainstream, I found out it wasn't there anymore. I had to spend the last couple of years building up my existence again. All of my representatives—my lawyer, my agent, my manager—were gone. I had to get a completely new team. And this time they're all younger than me, so I'll die first [laughs]."

Yet while the filmmaking machine has changed significantly during the last 10 years, O'Bannon feels the public hasn't even noticed. "Hollywood inside now is very different from what the public sees on the outside," he says. "They still have big studios making blockbusters with big stars, but boy...right behind those blockbusters, everything is different."

A few months ago, O'Bannon and Shuset received "screen story" credit on *Alien vs. Predator*, even though they had nothing to do with the actual script. Turns out, the filmmakers used material from the first *Alien* screenplay that never made

it into the actual movie. "Well, I was surprised," O'Bannon says. "This credit arbitration procedure... The only time I did ever really care was on the first picture, *Alien*. I fought really hard for my credit there. Every movie subsequently, if some other writer wanted to have a credit, my general tendency was not to bother. Sometimes I've had co-writers who have cared, so I had to arbitrate. Don Jakob [his co-scripter on *Lifeforce*, *Invaders from Mars* and *Blue Thunder*] was always concerned about credit.

"What happened in the case of *Alien vs. Predator* was complex," he continues. "Ronnie Shuset was very concerned and wanted me to be involved, and I said, 'OK, we'll go after an arbitration, after my original spec screenplay.' They took everything they could find that had not been filmed in the first *Alien*. They found a particular element from my screenplay, which was the big pyramid. They also used the legendary cocoon scene, which was shot but never used back then. They just took ideas from that first script in order to put together a story, and it was on that basis [that we got credit], and also because the situation among the guys who wrote the finished screenplay was so massively con-

fused and because Ronnie's and my situation was so clear. There's so much going on that you have to care. You have to say, 'Oh, my God! There goes my career, I have to care!' Buddha says, 'Suffering comes through desire,' you know?

"I did give them one idea [for *AVP*] that they did not use," O'Bannon reveals, "and I'll tell you what it was. The most obvious creative thing you have to solve on a movie like this is: What's the connection between the species? What they came up with was that Predators bred Aliens as part of a complicated ritual. But my idea was, what if the Predators *are* the Aliens? In the first *Alien* movie, there's a part in the end when they blow up the ship. And it still has one stage left, and my idea was that if it metamorphosed one more time it would have become the Predator, but they didn't use it. It was good, though! My one great idea for them and they didn't use it."

Surprisingly, O'Bannon enjoyed the critic- and audience-maligned movie, even if he doesn't like the notion of *Alien* sequels in the first place. "I thought *AVP* was totally enjoyable, anyway. I mean, artistically, there isn't any excuse for any of the *Alien* sequels. I wrote that to be a

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When O'Bannon helmed *Return of the Living Dead*, he probably had no idea how often they would return.

Once the producers were done editing *The Resurrected*, O'Bannon's movie was as mangled as its lead creature.



stand-alone, without the intent of doing sequels to it. It doesn't lend itself to more movies. You're automatically stuck with a film that is not going to be as exciting as the original. My opinion is that if you're gonna do a sequel, you're still under the same obligation to be as interesting and original as the first story, whatever it was. Some movies lend themselves to sequels, and they make good follow-ups to 'em. In this case, a valid sequel to *Alien* would have been more different from the original than they have been. I mean, there would have had to be a connection of some sort to the first film, and the mood would have had to be the same, but you shouldn't have to see what was going to happen because you saw the first one.

"[James] Cameron did one of the few things one could have done to make a half-decent sequel, which is he turned it on its head and made an action-adventure film," O'Bannon continues. "But it still wasn't different enough. If I had been involved, I would have turned the whole project upside down altogether, or I would have been much more radical in the treatment of the *Alien* itself. So if you saw the movie, there would be plenty of surprises and

shocks again, not just finding out that they have a Queen. When I first thought about sequelizing *Alien*, when that came up, I found it a difficult task, being as concerned as I am with maintaining high standards in terms of the story. I thought it was impossible to do. If I had done it, it would have been an entirely different movie, with only a nominal link to the original. And if I'm gonna do that, I might as well call it something different."

Ironically, one of the several irons O'Bannon now has in the fire is an update of a work attempted by several artists before: a new and definitive version of *The Necronomicon*, the "book" created by H.P. Lovecraft. According to O'Bannon, his version (based on the work of the late French author Jean-Baptiste Cohen) will be the one to end them all.

"There have been a couple of books published as the *Necronomicon* during the last four decades," he notes. "Well, I'm sorry to have to tell you that those books are frauds. They're not actually the *Necronomicon*. This is the first time that the actual content of the *Necronomicon* will be widely available to the public. Unfortunately, the author, Jean-Baptiste Cohen, is deceased. He died very young, at 25, in 1999, and didn't quite finish this particular dissertation. He wrote most of it, but his death interrupted its completion. I had to finish the last part."

But what exactly is the *Necronomicon*? "It's a *grimoire*, or a book of black magic spells," O'Bannon explains. "It's legendarily known as the blackest of them all. It was written by an Arabic scholar. The central theme of the *Necronomicon* is that our world, the Earth, was once inhabited by another race, who in practicing black magic lost their foothold here and were expelled. Yet they continued to live outside our realm, waiting to take possession of the Earth again. And the *Necronomicon* contains incantations to hasten their return, as well as other spells to repel them. That's the basic content of the book."

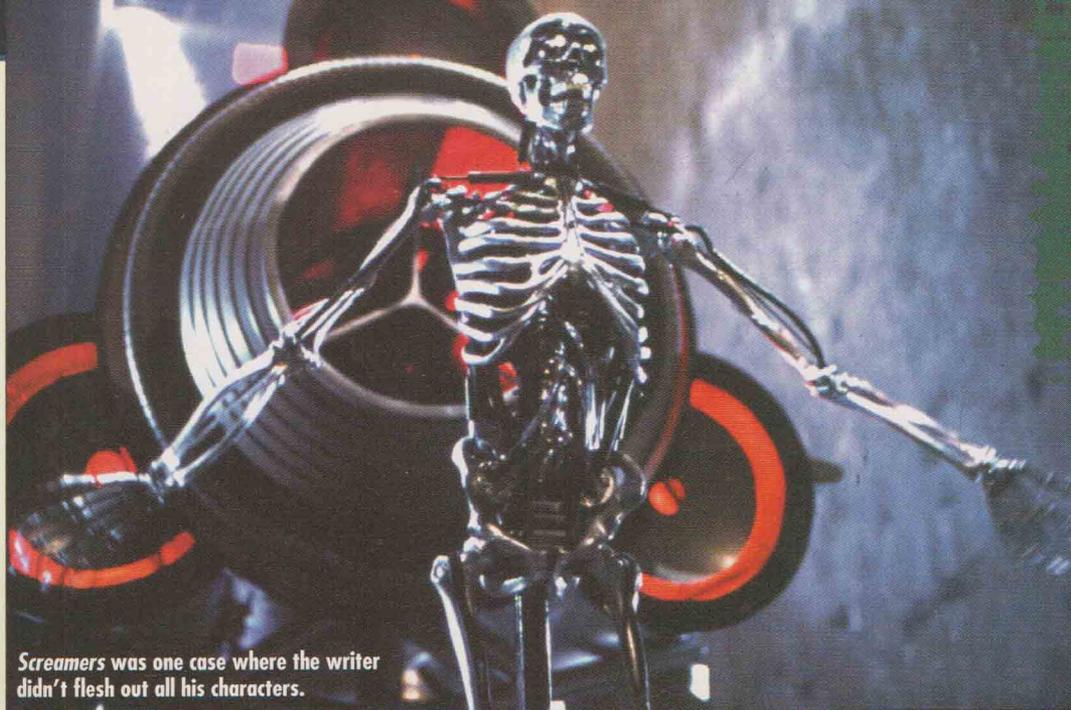
His main impetus to take on this project was his dissatisfaction with all the currently available editions. "When I first bought a *Necronomicon*, I was dying to read it," O'Bannon recalls. "I was really interested. I think it was the British one, written by Colin Wilson [author of *The Space Vampires*, the inspiration for *Lifeforce*]. I enjoyed that, but I was really disappointed by the parts they chose to publish. A couple of years later, another one was put out, this time in America. I bought it, took it home and had the same reaction. They're really not worthy of Lovecraft. They've just taken the name. Even Lovecraft himself used to say that he didn't have the imagination to write the *Necronomicon*. And that should have been a warning to everyone. If he didn't have the imagination, no one else should mess with it. So I got fed up with these other fake *Necronomicons*—not because they were fake,

but because they were not any good. It was an amazing coincidence, but at that exact moment I came across a copy of Cohen's work. And I decided that it was a good time for me to make this translation into English and show people what the *Necronomicon* should be."

O'Bannon has been fascinated by Lovecraft's legacy since his childhood; *The Resurrected* was based on the author's *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*. "I first encountered Lovecraft's writings when I was 11 years old," he says. "I read a story of his called 'The Colour Out of Space,' and it was riveting to me. I hunted down more Lovecraft stories; they were hard to find back in the '60s, when I was a kid. They weren't as widely published as they are now. I was fascinated by his profound sense of imagination. Of course it was a morbid imagination, but that's all right, I have morbid taste. In a dark way, in a kind of scary realm, Lovecraft's writings are what you might call numinous—that is, invested with a sense of the supernatural. Lovecraft was able to add a dark and scary quality to his stories. Very few other authors can achieve that. I've always been a terrific admirer of his stuff. And *Alien* was strongly inspired by Lovecraft, except he laid out all of his stories here on Earth. The Old Ones come to us; in *Alien*, people go to the Old Ones. You might say that the *Alien* is a minor or lesser Old One."

After all these years, one thing O'Bannon feels is very important is his communication with the audience. He feels that he has never been able to say things his way without interference. "One thing I've always wanted, and never did have, was the opportunity to speak directly to the public in my own creative voice," he notes. "I've always had it filtered through other people, who were interpreting my voice. The *Necronomicon* will be the first time I've ever done [it all my way]. The closest I've gotten was doing interviews like this. During an interview, I get to speak in my own voice. The *Necronomicon* will be the first time a work of mine will be available for the public in its pure form. So, I'm picky."

And when will we be able to see the finished book? O'Bannon says it might be sooner than expected. "I'm gonna self-publish, because I don't have any contacts in that world, and I want to be able to control the thing in terms of the quality and artistic content, and to make it look really, really close to the first distribution. I want to get this thing out into the world looking its best, and then I'll see if I can get a mainstream publisher interested in putting out an edition. Believe it or not, my reputation from *Alien* carries very little weight so



Screamers was one case where the writer didn't flesh out all his characters.

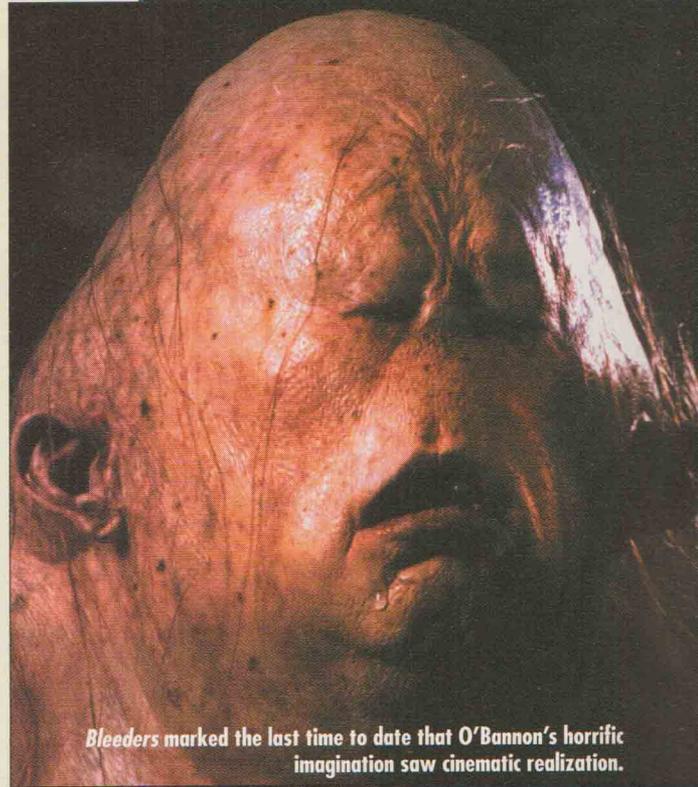
far at publishing houses. If the *Necronomicon* does well and people like it, that will improve the quality of whatever deal I might get for it. So anybody who might be interested in this will have to contact me through my website."

Recently, O'Bannon began talks with the video game industry to bring his dark vision to that media. First up may be a zombie game for Ubisoft. But the most exciting news is that he also has another film project in his hands: a science fiction script that he wants to direct as well.

"The tone of this project is much closer to *Total Recall* than to *Alien*," O'Bannon says. "It's not a scary and dark movie, it's a big, exciting adventure like *North by Northwest*. I wrote it long ago, and reread it recently, so I could approach it with some freshness. And it's really worth putting on the screen. The problem is, the only person in the world who can direct it is me, because anybody else would f**k it up. Nobody else could make this movie as well as me. Any other director can be better than me on another project, but nobody is better than me for this one. I care so much about this project, and I've seen so much of my original material interpreted by other people and not be as good as I wanted. I'm not gonna make another director's career for him. Especially because I should direct this; I know how to get this wonderful script onto the screen."

Are you listening,  Hollywood?

"Alien was strongly inspired by Lovecraft, except he [set] his stories on Earth...in *Alien*, people go to the Old Ones."



Bleeders marked the last time to date that O'Bannon's horrific imagination saw cinematic realization.

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