



THE KING OF

HOW A TWENTYSOMETHING WITH ONLY A SCHLOCKY KILLER-FISH MOVIE TO HIS NAME



THE QUEEN

PITCHED ONE OF THE GREATEST SEQUELS EVER MADE. OH, AND BECAME JAMES CAMERON

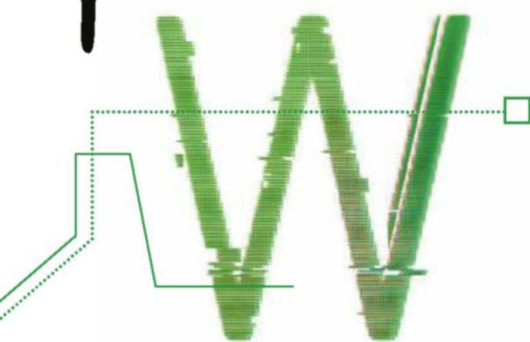
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James Cameron and Sigourney Weaver establish just how gooey the alien goo is.



WHEN THE TERMINATOR CLIMBED up the 1984 box office and established James Cameron's name, the director held a meeting to pitch his follow-up. In attendance were three producers — David Giler, Walter Hill and the late Gordon Carroll — whose outfit Brandywine had produced *Alien*. The trio were expecting the works from the young Canadian: a hard sell, perhaps a draft budget, maybe a slideshow.

In walked Cameron, not so much as a sheet of A4 about his person. He strode to a chalkboard and wrote "ALIEN" in capital letters. Pausing to allow the perplexed producers to take that in, he added an "S". Another pause, and Cameron drew another line — "ALIENS". And grinned.

"We greenlit the project that day for \$18 million," Carroll later recalled.

"I was writing away and it was, 'Aliens this, and aliens that,' and it was just *right*," recalls Cameron. "It had all the power of the first title, and it also implied the plurality of the threat."

The sheer mic-drop hubris of the gesture only adds to the Cameron myth. The college dropout and former truck driver, fired from his (disowned) directorial debut *Piranha II: The Spawning*, was now on track to become one of the most successful filmmakers ever. And it was *Aliens* that confirmed not only his prodigious talent but his unrelenting will to do things entirely on his own terms.

Getting to that meeting had been a battle — one in which self-belief was his weapon of choice.

On the day *Alien* opened, Cameron and his friend, former combat journalist Randal Frakes, headed out in Cameron's battered Chevrolet to see it. After the credits rolled, they sat dumbstruck, blown away by Ridley Scott's film.

"It had a great effect on me," says Cameron. "It created such a benchmark for visual design in science-fiction." Cameron didn't respond as an avid fan boy, though. He felt like a rival, sick with envy. "It was like someone had reached into my brain and yanked out a whole lot of stuff," he recalls. "I was pissed off. That's when I got busy."

So began the intense period in which the Cameron legend is rooted. He got his break as

a model-maker at Roger Corman's B-movie New World Pictures, where he was tasked with replicating the junkyard genius of *Alien* for Corman's killer stowaway knock-off *Galaxy Of Terror*. He went on — as a matte artist and director of photography: special visual-effects — to help fashion a dystopian Manhattan for his hero John Carpenter's *Escape From New York*. Meanwhile, he wrote a story about water-dwelling aliens called *The Abyss*. And in the throes of a flu-born fever dream, he envisioned a ravaged metal endoskeleton crawling from flames, and *The Terminator* was born.

Significantly, Cameron also wrote a science-fiction treatment he intended to call 'ET' before he heard about Steven Spielberg's latest movie and retitled it 'Mother'. That saw a genetically engineered alien attempt to protect her young. There was an evil company — the Triworld Development Corporation — building better worlds. And there was a female lead, says Cameron, "very much like Ripley". When hero and alien eventually fight, the hero is "encased" in what Cameron later called a "power-loader".

Two years later, his creative surge temporarily stalled, Cameron was at a loose end. He was ready to shoot *The Terminator* with rising star Arnold Schwarzenegger, but the Austrian bodybuilder was contractually forced to make a sequel to *Conan The Barbarian* first, so



Above: Cameron gives Michael Biehn and Ricco Ross a pep talk.
Here: Alien roar.



Above: The Alien Queen prepares for her close-up.
Below: Carrie Henn and Sigourney Weaver take pointers.



The Terminator's rampage was put on hold for eight months. Rather than relaxing, Cameron went looking for scriptwriting work and ended up in the Brandywine offices.

Giler and Hill were old-school producers who had risen to prominence during the '70s. Giler had written political thriller *The Parallax View* and the crime comedy *Fun With Dick And Jane*. Hill was a director renowned for terse thrillers such as *The Driver* and *The Warriors*. They were unsentimental types, whose reworking of Dan O'Bannon's *Alien* had given the film its gritty aesthetic. The LA setting and chase-movie thrust of *The Terminator* appealed to their sensibilities, so Giler persuaded Hill to get this guy in for a meeting — but not about 'Alien 2'.

Instead, the pair offered the young director a *Spartacus* remake set in space. Cameron, being Cameron, arrived with a host of mechanised, heavy-metal ideas. However, as he recalls ruefully, Giler quite literally wanted swords-and-sandals on another planet. There, the meeting stalled. It was more out of social awkwardness than intent that, as Cameron gathered his notes, Giler mentioned they also had 'Alien 2'.

Cameron describes "pinball machine lights and bells" going off inside his head. He and 'Alien 2', he says, went together like "peas and carrots". Keeping his cool, he asked what they had in

mind. Giler replied, "Ripley and soldiers". That pretty much covered it, as their notes had just a half-page description roughly corresponding to the opening 20 minutes.

"There was nothing specific," recalls Cameron. Ripley meets these vague military types and heads back to the planet LV-426, where Kane (John Hurt) had seen hundreds of eggs. There was no real sense of story. He laughs, "I'll never forget this. It just finished saying, 'And then some bullshit happens...'"

After receiving Giler and Hill's blessing to write a treatment for 'Alien 2' that very day, Cameron was commissioned by Carolco Pictures to write *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, then called *The Mission*. And in the delay, he was also reworking *The Terminator* script. For three months in 1983, Cameron wrote the three simultaneously.

To compartmentalise, he used different desks for each and listened to specific music. The *Apocalypse Now* soundtrack boomed for *Rambo*, while it was Gustav Holst's *The Planets* for 'Alien 2'. Living off pots of coffee and Big Mac coupons his mum sent, Cameron thrived. "He was like a kid in a candy store," recalls his friend Michael Biehn, who would join him at a shooting range to blow off steam. As 'Alien 2' took shape, 'Mother' came in handy. Cameron transformed that

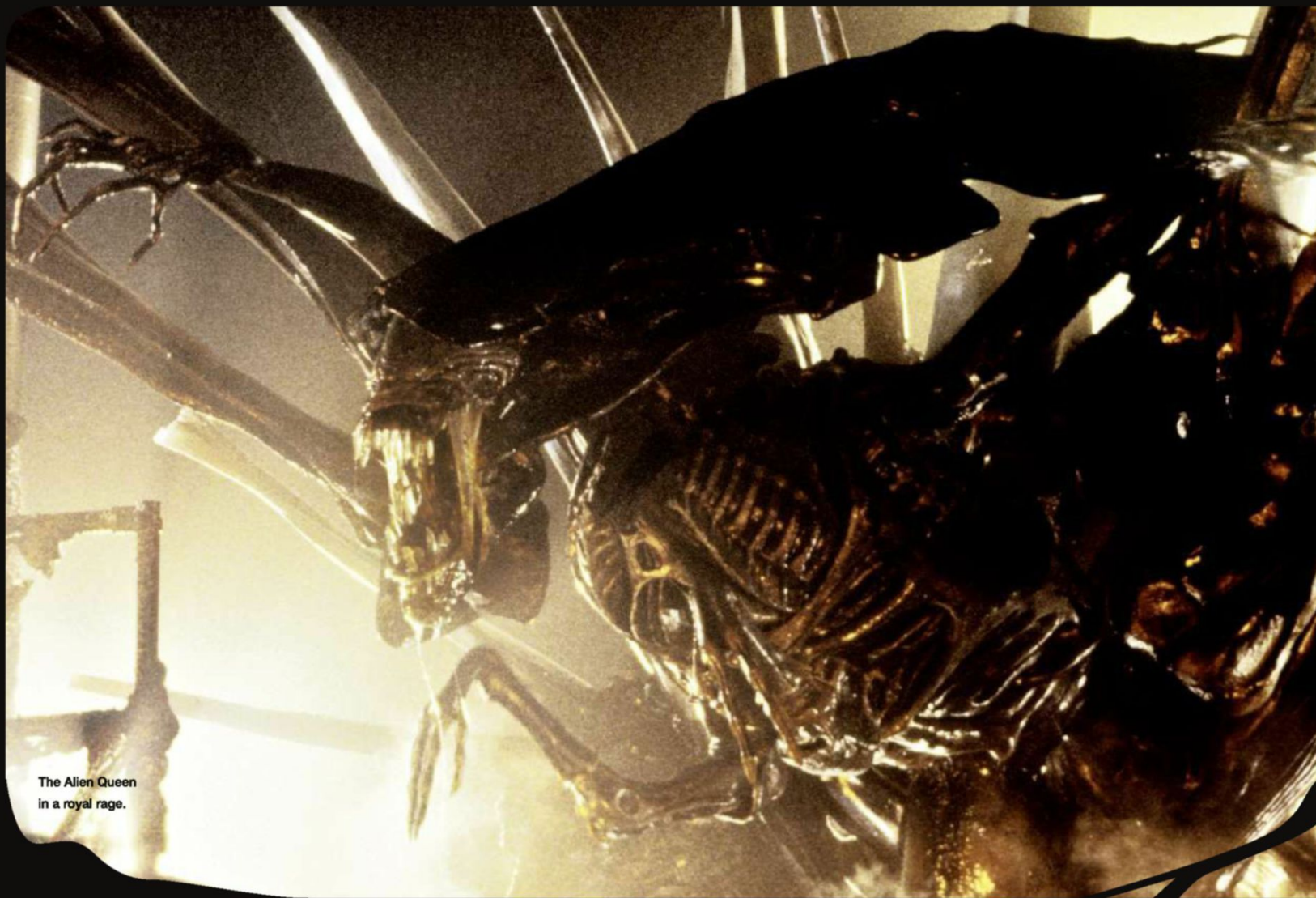
story's lead into Ripley and added an outfit of cocksure Marines. "I just grabbed all the stuff that I had been thinking about and slammed it together," he says. "It felt very mercenary at the time."

Not only that, but concepts from *Rambo* began bleeding into outer space. Re-watching *Apocalypse Now* and reading reportage such as Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, the Vietnam war was on his mind. LV-426 became a metaphor for America's foolhardy campaign in Southeast Asia.

"There was a definite parallel to Vietnam," says Cameron, "a technologically superior military force defeated by a determined, asymmetric enemy." The Aliens are the Vietcong. The gung-ho Marines, so confident in their firepower, are humbled. And Rambo and Ripley both confront their trauma.

On 9 July 1984, Lawrence Gordon, an old compatriot of Hill's who had produced *The Driver*, became head of 20th Century Fox. He was staggered that an *Alien* sequel still hadn't been made, and fast-tracked the project. "It was a no-brainer," he shrugs. Giler remembers the greenlight differently.

He recalls a studio executive stopping him in the car park and asking where they were with the sequel. "I told him the story was a cross between *Southern Comfort* and *The Magnificent Seven*." After that, he says, they were on.



The Alien Queen
in a royal rage.

As far as Cameron was concerned, from that very first meeting this was a director-writer deal. But there had been no written commitment from Giler and Hill, or Fox, to that effect. Cameron would have to make his own destiny.

With the success of *The Terminator*, which he finally made during the spring of 1984, Cameron made it impossible for Gordon to say no. "Sometimes a director fits hand in glove," the Fox chief claimed later, with 20/20 hindsight.

Cameron didn't buy lunch for months. "I had all these agents and producers calling me," he recalls. "Suddenly I was a viable director. It instantly cemented the 'Alien 2' deal. So, naturally, then I had people trying to talk me out of doing 'Alien 2'."

One was Julia Phillips, co-producer of *Taxi Driver* and *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*, who lured Cameron to a hip restaurant for some frank talk. They had barely opened the menu when she told him he shouldn't do the sequel. "I said, 'Why?'" remembers Cameron. "And she said, 'Because anything that is good in your movie will be attributed to Ridley Scott.'"

He was unperturbed. "Yeah, but I want to do it. It'll be cool." It never crossed Cameron's mind to give the London-based Scott a call. He knew he was going to honour *Alien*. "I didn't see how talking to Ridley would help me make my story."

There remained one final hurdle. Given that expectations for *Alien* had been low, Fox hadn't signed Sigourney Weaver for a sequel. That was a worry for Cameron, who had kept her picture on his desk as he wrote and was led to believe that she was all signed up. "The movie was about her," he says. "Every scene."

Cameron called Weaver in France, where she was shooting a comedy called *One Woman Or Two* with Gérard Depardieu. "Look, you don't know me from Adam," he began, "but I just wrote this script I'm calling *Aliens*." He asked if he could send her a copy of the script.

Weaver had always said no to a sequel. "Why do something that's already been done?" she kept saying. Giler half-joked that they would open her hypersleep capsule lid and Ripley would "dissolve into dust". Even after Cameron's overture she remained dubious, worried the project had been handed to a young hothead to cash in on what was now seen as a genre classic. But she agreed to a meeting, and showed up with ideas for Ripley. She instructed the director on the things she wanted to happen. "She wanted to die in the film, she wanted not to use guns, and she wanted to make love to the Alien," remembers Cameron.

For Cameron, the script was a *fait accompli* and he stood firm, nixing every one of her ideas (all of which would colour the next two sequels). He was terrified she would bolt, but she listened

carefully. Changed irrevocably by the events on the Nostromo, he said, Ripley was fighting for her future. "The story was about someone who has to regroup," said Weaver on release, "who goes back because if she stays inside her room, she knows she will slowly unravel."

Cameron admits that his "tug of war" with Weaver had a positive effect on the final script. It got him to think outside the box and see that, as he puts it, "her motivation was on a higher plane." He respected that she knew Ripley better than anyone. For her part, Weaver was won over. "Jim is incredibly open to things," she says. "I always felt he trusted my instincts."

The characterisation of Ripley is one of the film's great strengths. She is not simply an action hero; her gender is both a defining characteristic and completely beside the point. Ripley takes charge because she is the one most capable of doing so. She thrives under pressure — not so different from Cameron. Still, the deal was not yet done. Weaver knew she was worth more to the sequel than the original, and financial negotiations with Fox reached an impasse.

Cameron, about to head to Maui to marry his producing partner Gale Anne Hurd, told Fox that by the time he returned, if Weaver hadn't been locked in, he was out. His bluff was called, for when he got back there was still no deal. Time for Plan B: he called to Schwarzenegger's

ALTERNATE ALIENS

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO ORIGINAL DIRECTOR SCOTT'S ALIEN SEQUEL?



THE PROPOSAL

There were what *Alien* producer David Giler calls “preliminary discussions” about a sequel in 1979. He gave no credence to the most popular theory — that an Alien impregnated Jonesy, the cat — but he and co-producer Walter Hill had discussed how the Alien, ejected from the airlock, might have clung to the outside of the shuttle.

There were also discussions of a new expedition to LV-426, the appearance of the space jockeys, and the planet exploding.

THE DIRECTOR

Ridley Scott was keen to return to the franchise he established. He felt *Alien* had missed “prognosis” scenes, explaining the creature’s origin. In 2003, he revealed to *Empire* how he saw the eggs as “biomechanoid weapons”, which “you would seed... onto the surface [of a planet] and then sit back and watch as the planet’s population is overrun by Aliens.”

THE DELAY

Why didn’t he make ‘Alien 2’? “They didn’t ask me!”, he said. “To this day I have no idea why. It hurt my feelings, really, because I thought we did quite a good job on the first one.” To be fair, his dance card was full. He had been hired by Dino De Laurentiis to adapt *Dune* before bowing out to make *Blade Runner*, and was in post-production on *Legend* when Cameron began *Aliens*. So timing really wasn’t on Scott’s side here.

THE BACK-BURNER

The truth is that in 1979 and the early ’80s, Fox just wasn’t interested in making the sequel. After Alan Ladd Jr (who greenlit *Alien*) has been deposed as studio head, his replacement, Norman Levy, a real company man, wouldn’t even hear about it. “He thought it would be a disaster,” grumbled Giler. It took Cameron to change things, with Scott waiting until 2012’s *Prometheus* to explore his own ideas.



Above: Cameron oversees his puppet masters at work.
Here: Human incubator post-chest-burst.

agent, who happened to work at the same firm as Weaver’s (ICM), and told him he had decided to drop Ripley to go with an older version of the LV-426 colony’s sole survivor, Newt. Later that day, Weaver signed on for \$1 million — 30 times more than she received for the first film.

Weaver is emphatic: without Cameron Ripley would still be drifting in space. “[The sequel] was always a joke, and I think it took someone as confident as Jim to attempt it.”

Shooting from September 1985 to April 1986 at Pinewood Studios and at the decommissioned Acton Lane Power Station, the making of *Aliens* became its own legend, with its own bullshit. Cameron tussled with a British crew who had worshipped Scott, and who were instantly riled by this Canadian interloper. He led by example, throwing himself into the melee, hands on with everything (he was especially adept with Alien goo), and bonding with his Marines. Bill Paxton recounts how his director, wanting to test the soldiers’ body armour, had the actor repeatedly run full tilt into the nearest wall until it cracked.

By taking Scott’s haunted-house-in-space and making it a combat movie, Cameron was able to “graft on my own filmmaking style”. It’s still scary as hell, but with an emphasis on character and momentum. Cameron says, “We

tried to deflect criticism by making the film more thematically consistent with *Terminator* than with *Alien*. A follows B in a domino principle where, once something starts, nothing can stop it.” As the late critic Roger Ebert said, “I have never seen a movie that maintains such a pitch of intensity for so long; it’s like being on some kind of hair-raising carnival ride that never stops.”

In 1992, in the aftermath of *Alien 3*, Sigourney Weaver took its deflated director, David Fincher, to dinner. Unhelpfully, she also brought James Cameron. They’d barely swapped pleasantries when Cameron challenged his replacement: “You killed Newt?”

Truthfully, when Cameron saw *Alien 3* he wanted to wring Fincher’s neck. “But I got over it because he’s such a good director,” he says. Still, Cameron knows how much of a disappointment it was to fans. “I think there’s an art to making sequels — you’ve got to make it cool and fresh, but not at the expense of the things people really cared about from the previous film.”

Aliens made \$131 million worldwide and earned Weaver an Oscar nomination with six others (it won Visual Effects and Sound Effects Editing), and is now considered a benchmark for sequels. No-one puts that down to Ridley Scott. ●

ALIENS IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DOWNLOAD