

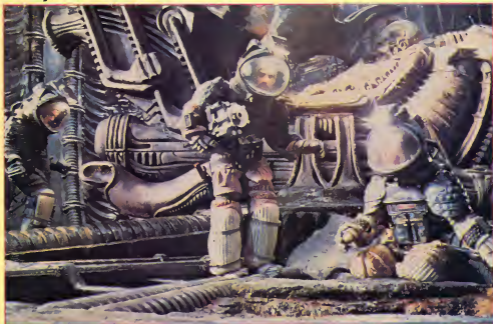
MORE ALIEN PAINTINGS BY RON COBB • BUCK ROGERS SPECIAL EFFECTS

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ALIEN IS HERE!

AND SCREENWRITER DAN O'BANNON TALKS ABOUT IT



**DIRECTOR ROBERT WISE (STAR TREK)
INTERVIEWED • FIRST MEN IN THE MOON
DRACULA HAS RISEN FROM THE GRAVE**



DAN O'BANNON ON ALIEN

ALIEN SCREENPLAY WRITER SPEAKS HIS MIND

Interview by ED SUNDEN II

FF: You got a new movie coming out—*Alien*.

O'BANNON: Right.

FF: And you went through all kinds of hassle and trouble with it.

O'BANNON: Yeah, I wrote the first half of *Alien* in 1972. I was just looking through my notes. I've kept a running journal for about the last ten years.

At the time I'd written the first half of it but I didn't have a title for it. Back then we were still working on *Dark Star*, the picture derives some elements from *Dark Star*. It was like, while we were in

ALIEN began as a simple story called "Gremlins" about a World War II B-17 bomber crew on a mission over Tokyo who are terrorized by a horde of midget monsters.

the midst of doing *Dark Star* I had a secondary thought on it—the same movie, but in a completely different light.

FF: Why didn't you direct *Alien*?

O'BANNON: I was going to, but my partner, Ron Shusett, wanted to go to the studios, and with the studios there was no way. Back in '76 I had hit a really bad career and economic slump. I was in a terrible situation.

FF: Ron Cobb was telling me you were sleeping on Shusett's couch.

O'BANNON: Yeah, right, that was when *Dune* fell through. And incidentally, I

Last issue copy editor, Ed Sunden II, coughed a lot of "Alien" ground with concept artist Ron Cobb. Dan's interview took place four days later, January 30, with Dan in the midst of an arbitration over his screen credit. Material from subsequent phone conversations has been added to fill in gaps and to widen the scope of the interview. The arbitration by the Writer's Guild has ended and Dan now has full screenplay credit. Though Dan is a bit embittered in light of all of the problems that came with the making of "Alien," at 33 Dan now has a solid footing in the movie industry.

Dan O'Bannon was the co-author-director responsible for design, editing, and special effects on "Dark Star." He co-starred as Sgt. Pinback. Pinback's scenes with his alien, a mean-looking, very mischievous beachball with feet are notable high points of humor in SF film.

Dan went from "Dark Star" to pre-production work on Jodorowsky's "Dune" (Frank Herbert's novel), to effects work on "Star Wars" and his most recent movie "Alien" opened over the Memorial Day weekend.

Photo above: a somber Dan O'Bannon sits engulfed by the dirty lit computer cortex of the Nostromo and reminisces about "the good old *Dark Star* days" when life as an SF screenplay writer and spaceship controls were both much simpler.



hear that Dino DeLaurentis now has picked up *Dune*, but I bet you it won't be the same picture that Jodorowsky was going to make.

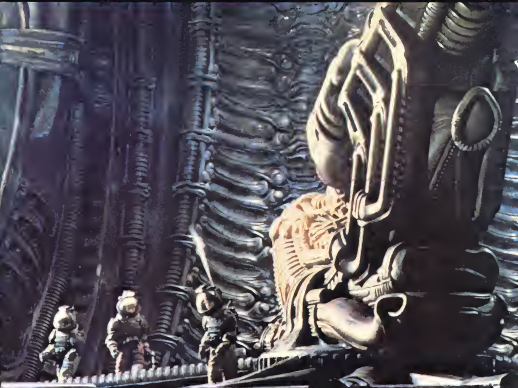
So, there I was on his sofa, didn't have any prospects at all. It was a terrible situation; I couldn't stay on his sofa indefinitely so I hauled myself up out of black depression and said I was going to do something—I'm going to write a script.

And after haggling over it a little while, Ron and I agreed to do something together. I said, "I've got a great first half of a script and I've never known what the second half of it was," and I gave it to him and he read it. And he thought about it and he said, "You had another idea for a film, and it wasn't a science fiction, it wasn't a space movie." It was an idea I had called "Gremlins," about a bomber in the second World War, a B-17 bomber bombing Tokyo on a bombing mission at night through a rain storm.

Now on the way back, it's a several hour flight back to their Pacific island base, Gremlins get into the airplane. And they have to fight these things off. He said, "Why don't you make that the second half?" Put it in the spaceship? And I said, "Yeah, that would work."



Photos: above, the crew of the *Nostromo*, plus their mascot Jones the cat, are a definite exception to the rule that future astronauts should be freshly scrubbed stereotypes straight out of the Space Academy. Below, the landing party from the *Nostromo* discover the alien "gunner" on board the derelict. Opposite page, three space-suited figures stand beneath the *Nostromo*, dwarfed by its gigantic landing gear.





Photos: Above, the crew of the "Nostromo." Left to right: Harry Dean Stanton, Yaphet Kotto, Ian Holm, John Hurt, Tom Skerritt, Veronica Cartwright and Sigourney Weaver. Below left, Tom Skerritt as Capt. Dallas is engulfed by his computerized control console.



That's good, that's great."

And so we talked the story out and I wrote it for a period of about three months with continual discussions and me pounding away on the typewriter. My belongings were in storage, but I carted out of storage that desk and that file cabinet and that chair, and stuck it in Ron's front room so I could work. And the traveling typewriter and I wrote it because I planned to direct it. I wanted to do it for about half a million. I was going to take it around. But when it got done, Ron wanted to go and try the studios. Well, he did, and it worked the first shot out. And that was it as far as me directing it.

FF: Who was it taken to, Brandywine?

O'BANNON: It was taken to Brandywine Productions by a fellow named Mark Haggard, Ronnie Shusett made a finder's arrangement with him. A finder's arrangement means that if he puts it in contact with somebody who finances a movie, he gets a certain agreed-upon sum. Haggard knew Walter Hill and he took it to Walter's company, Brandywine, which was Walter Hill and Gordon Carroll and David Giler.

They read it, they called us in and Gordon said to us, "We've read 300 scripts and this is the first one we've all agreed on." Okay? Great compliment. And they proceeded to make a deal with



Photos: above, the landing crew from the Nostromo make their way across the "bio-organic" terrain of the alien planetoid as they approach the derelict spacecraft. Inside the derelict, Dallas inspects the skeletal remains of its alien pilot.

us. And we got into a lot of haggling, there was at least a month of negotiating. Finally we made a deal, an option deal, and they took it to Fox with whom they'd just made some kind of production arrangement for their company. And Fox immediately expressed interest and Brandywine exercised the option which was a real surprise 'cause it was the first time in my life I'd ever had an option exercised. I'd sold many options but I'd always had them revert. I'd never had them fork over the cash on the barrelhead.

FF: Typical. Happens all the time.

O'BANNON: What happens?

FF: Options reverting. You realize that probably half of everything that Heinlein has ever written has at one time or another been optioned, and with the exception of one story, it's always reverted.

O'BANNON: Well, this one didn't revert. They'd payed us wham!-landslide—cash! It was interesting because it came just in time to pay my medical expenses. I'd been under such stress and other problems plus not taking care of myself, that I came down with a very bad stomach ailment in 1977. I was sick a great deal of that year, I was in and out of the hospital. Then Fox hired me, they put me on salary to go in and design the whole movie. So I hired Ron Cobb and I asked for Chris Foss who





Above, an ill-fated crewmember is about to be lowered into a subterranean chamber inside the derelict spacecraft.

was in England and they actually hired him and flew him over.

FF: You'd worked with Foss on the *Dune* project?

OBANNON: Yeah. And I tried to get Cobb on to *Dune*, but it never worked out. So I felt a debt of honor to Cobb because there Ron was with his bags packed on my word and it never happened. So I felt real upset about that, and I felt like I owed him one, and so I really warbled to make sure he was on *Alien*. But of course that was hardly the principal reason. The principal reason is because he's so good.

You know, Ron Cobb gave continual input to the film right from the very start. He gave us one of the major plot elements, the monster has an incredibly corrosive bloodstream, one of the reasons the monster can't be cut up or fired at is that its blood would eat right through the ship. That was Ron's idea and I want everyone to know it.

FF: I think we both agree that Ron's incredible!

OBANNON: And I got them both, and we spent the whole summer in some little offices there, designing it.

FF: You spent seven months designing before they found a director for it?

OBANNON: No, They had a director—Walter Hill. Hill was scheduled from the beginning to direct the picture. But finally in the summer of '77, Walter Hill withdrew from directing *Alien* to go do *The Driver*. Instead, He preferred to do *The Driver*. And that left them without a director.

The monster has an incredibly corrosive bloodstream. It can't be cut up or fired at or its blood would eat right through the ship!

FF: So they got Ridley Scott?

OBANNON: No, it didn't happen that quickly. Gordon had to go out and look for other directors and the very moment he started to look the Directors Guild went on strike. They were on strike for several months. All we could try to do was get some preliminaries out so when the strike was settled, maybe then Gordon could make some moves. When it was all over Fox said, "Here." They handed Brandywine a list. And Ridley was at the top of the list and they said, "Pick one." So they took the first one.

I remember getting this call from Gordon Carroll. He said, "You must meet Ridley. You're going to like him." I was real skeptical because we'd had a difficult time even to that point. I went in, and there he was, Ronnie Shusett had feverishly rushed up to him and shoved a copy of the original draft of the script into his hands because Giler and Hill had begun to rewrite it. We were disturbed by the content of the rewrite. Ridley read it and he said, "Oh yes. We have to go back to the first way, defi-

nately." So it was Giler and Hill's turn to be disturbed. As a result, the entire remainder of the production ended up being a battle between camps. One camp wanting one version of the film and another camp wanting the other version.

FF: And all of you inextricably involved?

OBANNON: Yes, inextricably involved, right. And boy, believe me, I was inextricably involved, because if there was any way that they could have pried me loose and gotten me out of their hair they would have. 'Cause I was such a thorn in their side.

I remember being faced with what I considered a moral decision. My agent, my manager, and everybody else was going over to England to start working on the film proper, and they said, "Be sure not to antagonize anybody 'cause their so important, it's your first project and it's a major studio, everybody's liable to be on you to make friends." I got over there and I found that the confusion was so great and the babble of voices was so loud that I couldn't make myself heard without being obnoxious. I couldn't make any impact and there were things that I felt so strongly about that I wanted to have heard. I wanted to win points, certain points I felt very strongly about it.

So I finally decided, "All right, I'm going to go against good advice for my career, I'm going to fight." And my reasoning was, in 40 years I'd still be able to sleep with myself. That I wouldn't look back and say, "You know, there's *Alien*



Yaphet Kotto and Veronica Cartwright stalk the alien monster in the lower maintenance hangers of the *Nostromo*.

and it stinks and if I had fought, maybe it wouldn't." And I looked forward to that in my own frame of mind. And I decided, "All right, I'll fight," even though that it's tactically the wrong thing to do.

There are inspirations for *Alien*—I had a lot of second thoughts about *Dark Star*, that was one of them. Well, another source was that I met Giger when we were working on *Dune*, and I'd looked at his picture books and when I got back to America I was still haunted by his work. It was on my mind and when we sat down to do *Alien* I ended up visualizing the thing as I was writing it, as we were thinking it out and I was writing it, I found myself visualizing it as a Giger painting. And I wrote this script. But then I was thinking of a half million dollar picture done here in LA. There would be no money to either import this guy or to pay him, so I knew I wouldn't be able to have him. So at first I thought I would have Cobb doing that monster—he's quite superb—it just didn't happen to be any of his (Cobb's) monsters that I had landed upon in my head when I was thinking about the script. Well when they started to do it the big way, the first guy I started pushing at them to do the monster was Giger. I had a heck of a time trying to get the producers to hire Giger. They really didn't want to get involved because he's not a movie professional, he was some "wing-ding," in Zurich. They wanted to find somebody who had done this before, that they could count on.

Well, when Ridley came to the pro-

Giger constructed the monster of clay, skulls, pipes, tubing, veterinary and medical supplies and a veritable graveyard of bones.

ject; while Ronnie was rushing up with the original draft of the script I was rushing up with copies of Giger's work. Ridley saw Giger's stuff he was snowed. He said, "This is it!" I really won some of the very major things that I planned in the beginning, some of the very broad strokes.

I had this vision right on this very sofa, of a Giger monster around which a science fiction horror movie was based and it ended up happening. In fact the design that they ended up getting, almost by coincidence, I had settled on in my own mind. One of Giger's designs that I liked and I wanted to see as the monster. Later on Ridley went through Giger's work and he found quite a different source of inspiration and he had Giger design from that. But the funny thing was, when it got done—when Giger ended up adapting it and designing it and shaping it up—it ended up being similar to the thing that I'd had in mind that I had never mentioned. I was just so happy to get Giger that anything he did was fine by me.

When I started thinking back I said, "You know, it's amazing. Damn it, it's even similar to the one I'd been thinking of." There's a head distortion on the creature and the one I wanted distorted the head toward the front. The one that Ridley picked distorted the head out toward the back, they're in the same family.

FF: I'm told that Giger built the monster himself.

O'BANNON: He sure did! He had expert help because there's some crafts involved that I don't think that Giger had done, like casting it in rubber materials. But he's quite a craftsman, actually.

It was an amazing sight. Giger fixes himself up to look like Dracula, he wears black leather, has black hair, black eyes, and pale complexion, he never takes off his coat, his black leather jacket, and he had them set him up, built him a little sculpting studio in the corner of one of the sound stages with a padlock on it where he could work.

He wanted clay, and basic sculpting materials and he also wanted bones. As many bones as they could lay their hands on. They ended up buying all this stuff, veterinary supplies, medical supplies, and the little sculpting studio turned into a boneyard. They got him a rhinoceros skull, three of the most perfect human skulls I've ever seen in my life. They were beauties, they must have borrowed them off a living person to get them that perfect, every tooth was intact, not a filling. I think they cost



Above, Harry Dean Stanton prepares a surprise for the alien as Tom Skerritt and Veronica Cartwright look on.

something like \$700 each, they were so primo.

He had snake skeletons in perfect preservation, they looked like lace. And junk too, just old smelly bones out of a slaughterhouse and he started sculpting.

The first thing Ridley did is he had contortionists come in. He wanted to see contortionists tie themselves in every possible knot and walk around and see if they could build a costume around a contortionist. He had two contortionists tie themselves together and walk around. And he had three contortionists tie themselves together and walk around. He finally concluded that it was just too awkward.

Finally he bought this big expensive picture book on some part of Africa, it was photographs of some remaining native tribe that still has a somewhat primitive lifestyle. There were all these really striking color photographs and this particular tribe has a very striking appearance. They're all very tall and very black and there were some very, very impressive photographs of these tall, then powerful-looking men with very supple, gleaming muscles. They're very graceful, sort of sensual, and at the same time powerful and very handsome, but almost ethereal, almost not human—very striking.

That image burned itself into Ridley's brain, he liked that power of unearthliness and grace and strength. He

At first Ridley had contortionists tie themselves into every conceivable kind of knot as a possible shape for the alien monster.

wanted Giger to see if he could do something around that kind of a shape of person.

Then they found their actor who is this seven-foot-African.

FF: So the monster was actually designed for one person rather than with a visual image of a particular type of human in mind?

O'BANNON: No, more along these pictures out of this book more of this Nubian black racial type.

The thing we liked so much was the grace of these black people. Giger then came in and Giger has a feel for grace, but a different kind of grace. Giger loved grotesquery. So Giger started building up around this graceful figure, his pipes and tubes and running, rotting sores and joints and pustules and strange shapes and building it up and came up with something most bizarre.

The plaster shop took a cast of the actor, full body cast and mounted it

standing up on its toes on a wooden base and Giger put it into his studio and he began to build up on it with clay and bones, an air conditioning duct, screws, and human skulls—the face of the thing is a real human skull. He took one of the human skulls and jammed it right on the front, riveted it in place, and then started modifying it.

It was such a beautiful human skull, you know, it had been a real person, not like one of those plastic model kits—and he takes out his hack saw and he saws the jawbone off and extends the jawbone, like six inches, puts an extension in it, and creates this distorted jawbone! Then he starts attaching other fixtures to it and building a new extension on the back of it. He's doing this to a real human skull!

When he finally got all done they took a cast of it, it was a craftsman who actually cast the rubber costume of Giger's sculpture. When they were finished casting in rubber he used his airbrush and painted the costume the same way he paints his paintings.

FF: Sounds hairy.

O'BANNON: It's terrific. I've really got my fingers crossed. I truly believe that that monster in *Alien* is absolutely unique looking. I think that it is two strides beyond any monster costume in any movie ever before. And some of them are goodies, like the *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, or *This Island Earth*, the bug with the exposed brain,

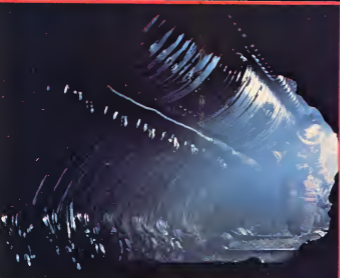


Photos top, bewildered crewmembers Tom Skerrit, Sigourney Weaver and Ian Holm discuss their circumstances after having been awakened prematurely from "hyper-sleep" by an unidentified S.O.S. Bottom, Harry Dean Stanton chases Jones the Cat through the lower decks of the *Nostromo*.





Photos, this page: top left, a space-suited crewmember of the *Nostromo* landing party waits in the lift hallway. Below, Capt. Dallas enters the strangely organic access corridor of the alien derelict spacecraft. Top center, the landing party inspects the amazing machinery surrounding the alien "gunner."



some of those were terrific. I really think this is a step beyond. I don't think anybody's seen anything like this.

FF: Was the original grace of the actor maintained? That image?

O'BANNON: Well, oh, that image, yes.

FF: It wasn't too clouded by Giger's...

O'BANNON: No, no. Definitely, Giger has a very very graceful line too. No, definitely that thing was very supple looking. Unfortunately the real grace was lost, because the suit proved to be very awkward to move in. Ridley was forced to stage around the physical awkwardness of it. The actor wasn't able to make many moves in a graceful manner. So he had to stage around it. But the visual appearance of power and grace was retained, quite different, quite striking.

FF: Ron said that during some of the dailies, especially during some of the bloody sequences, people who had been working on the film were dumbfounded.

O'BANNON: It didn't bother me (laughs).

FF: What I'm getting at is, from a technical interest I hear it's pretty bloody and gory and... when you see a set and all the technicians are in coveralls and the cameras are covered in plastic... there has to be something going on.

O'BANNON: That was great. The day that they shot that I reserved myself a box seat. I went to the set very early in the morning and I looked around where they had the cameras placed, and I



picked the best possible spot for myself where I'd be out of the way and I sat there and didn't move.

There was a pretty big audience for that shooting, a lot of the people involved in the film came and looked on that day and just basically stayed and waited. A lot of people were interested.

Fox had been giving Ridley a lot of hassle because he gotten a slow start, the first couple of weeks of shooting were slow, they were jumping all over. The reason they were slow was because they had allowed inadequate time to design and build the sets, and on the first day of shooting no single set was fully completed so Ridley had to shoot around the sets for a couple of weeks. And they still jumped all over him, they said he was too slow.

So fairly early in the shooting they got to that scene, a very bloody scene, I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't actually give the point away in the interview, you know, allude to it without letting them know what's going to happen. You know what scene we're talking about?

FF: It hasn't been described

O'BANNON: Good. Okay, I thought you knew about it. Well I'm going to stay vague 'cause I want to allude to it but I don't want anybody to know exactly what it is until they see it

FF: Sure

O'BANNON: For obvious reasons, I want the audience to get it straight in the face without any preparation. And

(Continued on Page 29)

Photos, this page: Yaghet Kotto, laser rifle in hand, searches the lower corridors of the Nookromo's engineering section for the alien. Bottom right, space-suited members of the landing party traverse the rugged terrain of the mystery planetoid which has lured them with its mysterious S.O.S.

