

# Cameron's 'Starship Troopers' straight out of Robert Heinlein

## ALIENS

A 20th Century-Fox release of a Brandywine production, 7/86. 137 mins. In Color and Dolby. Director, James Cameron. Producer, Gale Anne Hurd. Executive producers, Gordon Carroll, David Giler, & Walter Hill. Screenplay by Cameron from a story by Cameron, Giler, & Hill—based on characters created by Dan O'Bannon & Ronald Shusett.

Ripley ..... Sigourney Weaver  
 Newt ..... Carrie Henn  
 Corporal Hicks ..... Michael Biehn  
 Burke ..... Paul Reiser

(For a complete list of cast and credits, see 164/5:11)

by Douglas Borton

Few recent genre releases have been accompanied by the level of publicity surrounding ALIENS. The hurricane of hype that has swirled around the movie since its premiere has been enough, apparently, to obscure ALIENS' all-too-obvious flaws from the view of both critics and audiences.

At nearly two and a half hours ALIENS is, by any reasonable standard, too long. The action is repetitive, often confusing, unremittingly noisy and headache-provoking. Most of the really engaging characters get killed off early on, leaving us to root for Ripley and her comparatively colorless comrades. The story divides none-too-neatly into two movies; the first half is a macho combat film in the vein of OBJECTIVE, BURMA! and THE GREEN BERETS, while the second half is virtually a point-by-point replay of the original ALIEN, with the minor improvement of substituting a lost little girl for a lost cat, but with all the other familiar elements intact. There's the computerized voice ticking off seconds to the inevitable explosion, the gross-out

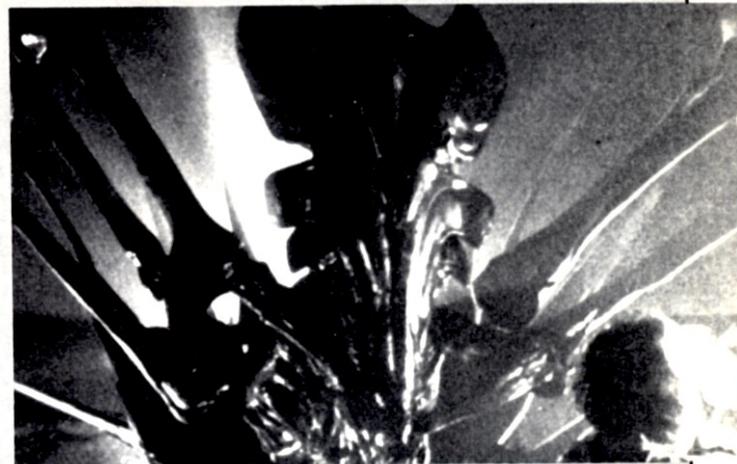
android decomposition scene, the climactic Ripley-alien clash and the out-the-airlock finale.

Perhaps most crucial, the film fails in its central challenge, namely, to convince the audience that heroine Ripley would be brave/dumb enough to face the aliens again. It's a near-impossible task, and probably should not have been attempted; there's no logical reason why Ripley had to be the centerpiece of the sequel—and plenty of good reasons why she shouldn't be. We don't *really* believe she would go back. I mean, would *you*?

This basic lapse of logic is compounded by other lapses. The Marines travel to the "Bug"-infested colony in suspended animation, presumably because their voyage is months or years long; yet once marooned on the planet, they calculate that a rescue team can reach them in a mere seventeen days. Did they travel through "hyperspace" or at faster-than-light speed? If so, then why the hibernation? If not, then how can they or anybody else reach a planet in another solar system in seventeen days? Or are the hoped-for rescuers based on a nearby planet or space station? Then why didn't *they* get sent on the mission in the first place?

When you think about it, it doesn't make much sense.

Apparently, few people *did* think about it. In the age of numbskull moviemaking—of flicks like RAMBO and TOP GUN, which combine the mindless flash of rock videos with the knee-jerk machismo of G. Gor-



The Alien Queen, the new wrinkle in James Cameron's reprise of ALIEN

## A Lesson in ALIENS Biology

In hitting upon the idea for an alien queen in ALIENS, director James Cameron had to play fast and loose with the concept of alien biology established in the original film, directed by Ridley Scott.

The life cycle of the ALIEN as envisioned originally by screenwriter Dan O'Bannon is as follows: 1) Victim finds pod containing face-hugger; 2) Face-hugger senses potential host, springs out and attaches; 3) Via a tube inserted in the victim's throat, the face-hugger deposits an embryo which grows into a chest-burster; 4) Chest-burster emerges and grows into adult

alien; 5) Adult alien cocoons victims, depositing an alien larva; 6) Larva slowly eats its host alive, growing into a pod containing a face-hugger, and the cycle begins anew.

Stages 5 and 6 are only hinted at in ALIEN, making it easy for Cameron to insert a pod (or egg) laying Queen into the process, omitting the larval stage altogether. Instead of depositing the larval stage with cocooned victims, Cameron has the adult alien place an egg containing a face-hugger next to the cocooned victims. Cameron's biology may not be as elegant, but it serves the plot. □

Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) and starship troopers Michael Biehn (l) and Ricco Ross in ALIENS, a story of interstellar combat spiced with the flavor of vintage Heinlein.



don Liddy, strobe lights with rocket launchers, MTV with M-16s—ALIENS fits right in. But the people who gave us THE TERMINATOR, an intelligently crafted film that did not sacrifice story content to thrills, could have been expected to do better here.

The critics—swept up in a spiraling twister of media hype and carried off to Oz, where the Wizard remained safely hidden behind the curtains—fell all over themselves in overly intellectual apologies for what is, at best, a scary, silly little movie. ALIENS has been hailed as everything from the definitive feminist statement to a bold expose of the evils of "corporate greed." And the notion of "grunts in space," the interstellar infantry to the rescue, has been touted as a clever and original blending of science-fiction and combat genres.

Clever? Sure. Original? Well... maybe. But before we decide too

quickly about that, here's a little food for thought.

"I always get the shakes before a drop," says the narrator of Robert A. Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*, one of science-fiction literature's most widely read classics, which contains some remarkable similarities to ALIENS. The narrator is a trooper in—yes—an interstellar infantry. A "drop" is—hmm—a platoon's harrowing free-fall from orbiting mothership to planetary surface.

And the enemy? Why, it's a race of large insect-like aliens which the troopers dub "Bugs." (Combat is a "bug-hunt.") These loathesome creatures, which number in the hundreds, infest networks of underground tunnels, at the lowest level of which are found "the queens... obscene monsters larger than a horse and utterly immobile."

Man-to-Bug combat is made  
 continued on page 58

## ALIENS

continued from page 41

possible by the troopers' "powered armor" or "powered suits." "Suited up, you look like a big steel gorilla, armed with gorilla-sized weapons," says the narrator, describing the contraption. "Two thousand pounds of it, maybe, in full kit . . . The suit has feedback which causes it to match *any* motion you make, exactly but with great force."

Now, it should be noted that in Heinlein's novel, the "drop" is made with each trooper in an individual capsule while in ALIENS, the free-fall drop is made via a large space-plane. Heinlein's Army troopers are engaged in a galaxy-wide war "The Bug War" while ALIEN 'S' Marines are on an isolated mission. Heinlein's powered armor is standard battle gear; ALIEN 'S' Power Loader, donned by Ripley to dispatch the Queen, is intended for cargo loading. And the storyline of ALIENS in no way reflects that of Heinlein's book, which is written as the narrator's memoirs.

Of course, coincidences *do* happen, in fact, they happen all the time. Writer David Gerrold has recounted how his first STAR TREK script, "The Trouble With Tribbles," was found to contain astonishing and wholly unintentional parallels to another Robert Heinlein work, *The Rolling Stones*. Heinlein, informed of the situation, graciously permitted STAR TREK to go ahead with the episode. Ideas are cheap, he reportedly said; it's what you do with them that counts.

He's probably right. Ultimately, what is disturbing about ALIEN 'S' is not any similarities that may or may not exist between the movie and its predecessor or other works. What's disturbing is how little the talented people behind the movie did with those ideas—and how much has been made of so little. □