

ALIENS

Survival of the shiftiest—on the planet Acheron.

by JAMES VERNIERE

Perhaps the only thing more daunting than making a sequel to (or more correctly a "continuation of") an acclaimed genre film is trying to follow up an acclaimed genre film. All of which makes writer-director James Cameron a truly dauntless fellow. Cameron, whose previous feature film was the critical and popular 1984 hit, *The Terminator*, has just put the finishing touches on *Aliens*, a continuation of Ridley Scott's highly lauded popular 1979 film, *Alien*. To say that Cameron, who wrote the screenplay for *Aliens*, has a right to feel set up to take a fall would be an understatement.

Although there is a tight lid on the plot of Cameron's new film, a few tidbits have been offered. Described by the studio's production notes as "a high tension suspense/thriller," *Aliens* will once again feature Sigourney Weaver as Warrant Officer Ripley, the sole survivor of the spaceship Nostromo's encounter with a deadly, shape-shifting extraterrestrial.

Cameron has been quoted as saying that *Alien* ranks as one of his favorite films. "I like it for the same reasons most people do. I like it for its extreme stylistic approach, its treatment of character, its heightened reality. It was a science fiction explora-

tion of a kind of collective id."

Alien, for the uninitiated, is a modern classic, a science fiction/horror film hybrid that took its cue from fifties films like *The Thing* (1951) and *It! The Terror From Beyond Space* (1958) but turned out to be something completely different. Based on an original story by Dan (Dark Star, Return of the Living Dead) O'Bannon, *Alien* was on one level a nightmarish voyage to the outer reaches of xenophobia. On another level, it was a cunningly designed exercise in torture, seduction, and self-loathing that used every trick in the book—including subliminal sound, flashing lights, blaring sirens, and sado-masochistic imagery—to create what can only be called a cacophony of brain-rattling horror. The film is a hellish experience that ends appropriately in a blast of fire and brimstone.

The Terminator, on the other hand, promised to be just another psycho killer film, albeit with a science fiction twist. Instead, it turned out to be a very provocative piece of filmmaking. Part *Road Warrior*, part *Halloween*, and part 1984, *The Terminator*, which was co-written by Cameron (who also co-wrote *Rambo*), went at least one step beyond most contemporary sf films. It wedded a subtex-

tual political theme about the ruling class's ability to rewrite history to hair-raising genre film action.

But the centerpiece of the film was the Terminator himself. In the form of *Conan* star and body-building champion, Arnold Schwarzenegger, he was a time-twisted metaphor—a Nazi/Cyborg from the superindustrial future designed, programmed, and unleashed to wreak havoc in the present. If a facile connection can be made between the Terminator, Mad Max, and the masked murderer of *Halloween*, then even more telling (given the fact that Cameron also did the *First Blood* sequel) is the evolutionary link between America's favorite super-macho icons: Rocky (especially as he appears in *Rocky IV*), Rambo, and the Terminator. (Keep in mind that Schwarzenegger went on to play a Rambo-clone in *Commando*.) All single-minded fighting machines out to get what they want at whatever price, this infernal trio has captured the hearts and minds of America's hero-worshipping youth.

Frustrated by the Vietnam experience, filmmakers have rejected the "beautiful losers" of the sixties in favor of "winners in the eighties," even ugly storm troopers like the
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Upper: Alien "face huggers" hang in stasis tubes, presenting (clockwise from lower left) Gorman (William Hope), Bishop (Lance Henriksen), Burke (Paul Reiser), and Hicks (Michael Biehn) with a bizarre riddle.

Lower: Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) works with the Power Loader on the Sulaco.

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Upper: The row of capsules in the Sulaco's Hypersleep vault containing Ripley (Weaver), Burke (Reiser), and troopers of the US Colonial Marine Corps.

Lower: Having found herself trapped in Alien territory, Ripley (Weaver) struggles to escape—and rescue Newt (Carrie Henn), too.



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Terminator. It's a truly frightening comment on current American culture, especially since the sexually voracious, rampantly reproductive Alien itself is arguably the descendant of this ass-kicking, homo-erotic threesome—an outerspace Nazi.

In *The Terminator*, Cameron, with the help of co-screenwriter and producer Gale Anne Hurd, managed not only to concoct a futuristic parable, but also to tap into anti-social reserves of anger and frustration.

Can Cameron pull off another coup with *Aliens*, saddled with a set of characters and a plot he did not originate? Well, he already did just that when he turned the sequel to *First Blood* into what some have called *The Terminator Goes to Vietnam*.

What's more, Cameron admits that he's taken some liberties with Dan O'Bannon's original vision. For one, *Aliens* will not be set exclusively within the claustrophobic confines of a single spacecraft. Instead, most of the action will take place on the inhospitable planet, Acheron (the name of a river in the Hades of Greek myth), home to both a human outpost and an Alien structure containing a labyrinth of chambers and catacombs. Cameron has also added more human protagonists and Alien creatures.

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Upper Left:
Sigourney Weaver
takes time out to
play with a terrestrial
creature.

Upper Right: The US
Colonial Marine
Corps members
make a point.
Bishop (Lance
Henriksen) wields
the ice pick.

Lower: Preparations
take place in the
Sulaco's cargo hold
as the US Colonial
Marine Corps get
ready for Alien
climes on the orbit-
to-surface craft, the
Drop Ship.



"It's not *Gremlins*, it's not *Goonies*, it's not *Explorers*," says Irene Walzer, associate producer of Brooksfilm's *Solarbabies*. "It's unique."

Set in a world without water—and shot, appropriately, in the Spanish desert—*Solarbabies* tells the story of a group of teenage skateball players and their rebellion against a totalitarian government that sounds, curiously, like the Los Angeles Water Department. In this vision by Walon Green and Douglas Metrov, he who controls water controls the world, and the Protectorate has cornered every drop.

Enter the *Solarbabies*, a skateball team that does battle with the Scorpions—and the dictatorship at large. The stars Jami Gertz (*Mischief*, *Alphabet City*), Lukas Hass (*Witness*), James Le Gros (*Violated*, *Insiders*), Peter DeLuise (*Free Ride*), Claude Brooks (*Guiding Light*, *Ryan's Hope*), Jason Patric (*Tough Love*), and Peter Kowanko (*Sylvester*) took



lessons from veteran Spanish roller hockey stars and endured one hundred-degree temperatures to create skateball—a wild mixture of hockey, lacrosse, and street gang warfare.

Solarbabies' director, Alan Johnson, a widely respected choreographer, is perhaps best known for the world's most absurd production number, "Springtime for Hitler," in Mel Brooks's *The Producers*. Before directing the Brooksfilm *To Be Or Not To Be*, Johnson worked with Brooks on *Blazing Saddles*, *Young Frankenstein*, *High Anxiety*, and *History of the World, Part I*.

Of his transition from the dance step to the cutting room, Johnson says, "It's a natural progression from choreography to direction. You do the same things, make the same decisions for a dance number as for a film. The creative urge is the same."

Even, one assumes, if the medium is solar energy.

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Cameron contends, "Calling it a continuation is hairsplitting in one sense. In another, it's positive and healthy because for many people sequel means re-make, a recapitulation of some other story, following virtually the same formulaic structure. We go into a completely different realm both stylistically and narratively. It does, however, have a similar heightened sense of moment-to-moment reality, and it has the claustrophobia. But the canvas is a bit larger. I think what audiences will remember is a sense of exhilaration at the action. I would compare it more to *The Terminator*, which is where I learned a lot about action, than to the original film. Among other things, the film will explore the idea of what heroism really is under extremely stressful circumstances. The special effects and the gadgets are entirely in the service of the story."

Gale Ann Hurd, the producer of *Aliens*, offers some insight into the film's plot when she describes *Aliens* as "very much a combat film . . . a combat film with lots of action and an unseen enemy."

All this may lead one to suspect that Cameron is once again exploring the damage Vietnam inflicted on the American psyche, using Acheron with its honeycomb of Alien-infested tunnels as a science fiction stand-in for Southeast Asia. But Cameron insists, "My writing on *Rambo* did not explore any political or sociological issues. I was primarily concerned with character. The bias in that film is Stallone's. *Aliens* is more reflective of my writing. Its primary concern is character and behavior, especially under extreme conditions. I may have described the plot once as having Vietnam-like situations, and I think that might be there. But I'm a Canadian, and my experience of Vietnam was watching the six o'clock news and having a few draft-dodger acquaintances. I am, however, fascinated by the idea of a highly technological war being fought against a relatively primitive people who win. There is a bit of that. *The Forever War* (by Joe Haldeman) is one of a number of novels and short stories that present soldiers in outer space. But it's never really been done in the movies. The imperial storm troopers in the *Star Wars* films don't really qualify. In fact,

Grunts in Space is how I first pitched my script to the studio."

Cameron also makes some neat distinctions between the Terminator and the Alien: "I saw the Terminator, as an entity, as a sort of death figure, a personification of the implacability of death. The Alien I see a little differently, as a mindless, chaotic life urge that's out of control. The two are similar, but they're also different. The Terminator was cold. He had a kind of razor-blade mind. We couldn't relate to him. Whereas the Alien we can relate to because he's basically trying to survive. He's the purest expression of the will to survive. I think we have to dig down to dredge up any sympathy because the Alien has no real consciousness. But it's there."

And even with the success of the original and the overlapping of some of the first film's production team, he was not particularly pressured to retain the previous film's structure or style. "So many years have intervened, longer than what one would consider viable for a sequel, and so many other films have copycatted *Alien* in one way or another, that it was a lot easier for me to sell the idea that *Aliens* should be completely new, both stylistically and in terms of content."

Walter Hill will return as an executive producer. *Alien* veteran, Ron Cobb, is also back again in his capacity as a conceptual artist, together with Syd Mead (perhaps best known for his contribution to Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*), and production designer, Peter (Octopussy, *A View to a Kill*) Lamont. But this time around the special make-up effects—an integral part of the impact of the original film—will be handled by Stan (*The Thing*, *Starman*) Winston, who worked with Cameron on *The Terminator*.

As most genre film buffs know, the innovative and frighteningly effective appearance of the creature in *Alien* was based on designs by Swiss surrealist artist, H. R. Giger, whose biomechanical style is nothing if not unique. And his influence is still felt.

"The ghost of Giger is with us," says Cameron good-naturedly.

As anyone who reads these film previews understands, it's almost impossible to say how a film—sight unseen—will turn out. But in light of James Cameron's previous work and his own words about his new film, I'll place my bets on *Aliens*. Cynics may argue, as they almost always do in the case of a sequel (or whatever you call it), that once was enough. But I have a sneaking suspicion that we're in for some wonderful and nasty surprises. Chestbursters, anyone?