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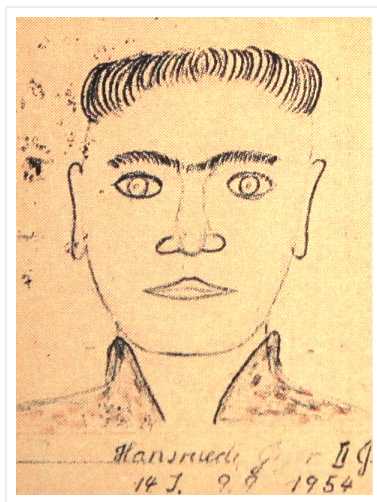
## Giger Flashback

by **Joe Fordham**

Posted on **May 17, 2014** by **Joe Fordham**

Seeing the news, last Tuesday morning, that [H.R. Giger](#) died triggered a flashback.

Back in 1995, I was coordinator for a creature effects studio in a nondescript corner of Sun Valley, when the phone rang. A whispering voice, reminiscent of Peter Lorre, asked to speak with my boss, Steve Johnson. “Who may I ask is calling?” I asked. “It is Gee-ger from Switzerland,” the voice replied.



— H.R. Giger self-portrait, 1954 ©  
Benedikt Taschen Verlag GmbH.

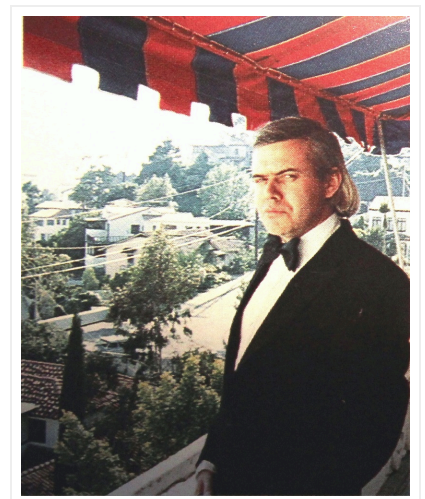
Steve was in the back of the studio, working with the artists at XFX, Inc., his creature effects studio. We had quite a few projects on the boil, including one of our biggest, an assignment for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Roger Donaldson directing, with visual effects supervised by Richard Edlund – my boss’s former boss from his days running the creature effects shop at Boss Film.

Up until recently, we’d been providing creatures and makeup effects for TV, commercials and some schlocky features. *Species* was not exactly high-brow – it was about a sex-crazed monster, hatched from alien DNA, who transforms into the gorgeous 19-year-old Natasha Henstridge – but it had a big-time cast of Ben Kingsley, Forest Whitaker, Michael Madsen and Marg Helgenberger, and it was to be a huge summertime theatrical release.

More to the point, the producers had scored a major coup by securing Hans Reudi Giger – the Swiss surrealist who had won an Oscar for his design and execution of the ‘big chap’ and other alien forms in Ridley Scott’s *Alien* — to design the creature, and every artist in the studio reacted when they heard my announcement over the speaker system in the workshop: “Steve Johnson, H.R. Giger is calling from Switzerland on Line One.” A huge chorus of ‘Oooh’ rose up from the crew. Steve scurried to his office

with a look of nervous concentration, and closed the door. Probably 45 minutes later, the door opened, emitting clouds of cigarette smoke and Steve reemerged looking drawn and shell-shocked.

This was not Steve’s first time working with Giger. More than ten years previously, M-G-M had commissioned Hans Reudi to provide designs for the Great Beast in *Poltergeist II: The Other Side*, which Steve oversaw at Boss Film. It has been widely reported this was not a happy experience for anyone. The sequel to Steven Spielberg’s 1982 haunted house thrill ride, *Poltergeist*, had capitalized on Giger’s name but, unlike *Alien*, logistics prevented Giger’s hands-on involvement and, when the film appeared, Giger was very critical of the results. It was a similar story on the *Alien* sequels. Giger had not been invited to participate in *Aliens*, where director James Cameron and creature effects designer Stan Winston created



— H.R. Giger in Hollywood, April 1980 ©  
Benedikt Taschen Verlag GmbH.

their own creatures, crediting Giger with the original alien design. But on *Alien³*, Giger had provided designs for director David Fincher and the creature effects crew at Amalgamated Dynamics, and the experience turned sour. Giger blasted the film.

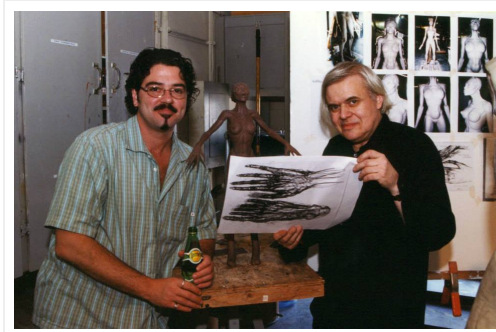


— H.R. Giger and Steve Johnson, Sun Valley, 1997.  
Photo © Matt Ullman.

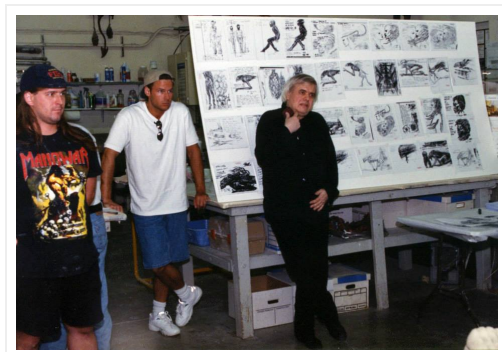
Since *Poltergeist II*, Giger's only film involvement had been a German horror comedy, *Killer Condom*, about a prophylactic with teeth. *Species* was a return to the big time, and Giger threw himself into the project with passion. Almost daily, he'd call and share his art with us. Pre-Internet, all communication was via phone and fax, so I fed Giger's notes to Steve while coordinating studio traffic. *Species* required a large crew, with makeup effects of alien transformations of Sil, the predatory alien who grew from embryonic form into makeup effects on a preteen Michelle Williams. And then, there was the adult Sil, a translucent animatronic succubus with serpentine dreadlocks and explosive breast tentacles. We also made her chrysalis, foam latex stunt suits, and gory eviscerations for Sil's victims. With all of that going on, it was up to me to field Giger's calls. "Take a message, can't you?" Steve would say. "I'm in a meeting."

Reams of material poured in from Switzerland, page after page of Giger's da-Vinci-esque sketches with annotations in German and English. Soaking up all that bizarre

imagery gave me vivid and disturbing nightmares. And the phone calls kept coming: "I'm sorry, Mr. Giger, Steve is in a meeting." "Oh, he is always in a meeting!" "I know; can I take a message...?" Local time in Zurich was nine hours ahead of Los Angeles, but Hans Reudi was a night owl. Rumor had it he never left his house in daylight. Giger told me he adjusted his sleep pattern to work with us, to be free of distractions, living in his imagination. As we became acquainted, he started to ask my opinion. "Well, I don't know, Mr. Giger," I'd say, "I'll convey all this to Steve." I transcribed his ideas into memos, and to my amazement, if I made a comment, the fax machine would buzz again and whatever I had said to him emerged in further illustrations.



— Steve Johnson and H.R. Giger, Sun Valley, 1997.  
Photo © Matt Ullman.



— XFX artists Dan Rebert and Joel Harlow with H.R. Giger, Sun Valley, 1997. Photo © Matt Ullman.

At the end of the project, Steve

commissioned a special display of Sil, full torso, her back arched, her mouth open as she received one of her breast tentacles into her own throat. With Steve art directing, a photographer fogged up the studio and backlit the puppet with pinkish light. Giger adored it. He called it 'Rose Sil' and put it on the front cover of his *Species Design* book released as a movie tie-in by Morpheus International. To thank us for our work, Giger sent a giant box filled with bars of Swiss chocolate for all the crew. Included in the box were copies of Taschen's *Giger biography*, and I got a copy with my name misspelled but personally inscribed in silver ink.

Fast-forward to Father's Day, three years later. It was a Sunday but Steve had given his crew the option of coming in to meet Giger, who M-G-M had flown in to see what we'd been building on *Species II*. The lovely Natasha Henstridge returned, this time directed by Peter Medak. Michael Madsen and Marg Helgenberger were once more chasing aliens, which

this time included a horny astronaut named Patrick (Justin Lazard) who became infected with alien DNA and subsequently transformed into a huge, tentacle-sprouting quadruped. Giger's renderings of the Patrick Monster resembled a giant, squatting Sphinx, with elongated limbs. We built a puppet suspended on an overhead pulley system with creature performer Vincent Hammond inside. Giger viewed the creations with his partner and entourage, but what we were trying to do was impossible. The elegance of the designs did not translate to a giant puppet, which looked ungainly, and Giger left unhappy.

16 years later, my ex-XFX boss reflected on the experience of his three films with Hans Reudi. "All Giger wanted to do with us on *Species* is he wanted to be heard," Steve Johnson recalled. "That's it. Because nobody would listen to him unless he sculpted, painted, or created his own art with mannequins and bones. When we came into the picture, I wanted to at least try to trick him into thinking I was listening to him. After a while, I wouldn't take his calls, because he drove me nuts, but I would take his midnight calls. And that's all he ever wanted. He just wanted to be heard. That is all an artist wants. If you are a writer, you want your words to be heard. If you are a painter, you want

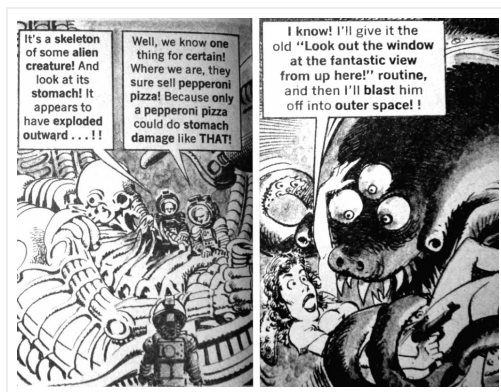


— Creature performer Vincent Hammond inside the work-in-progress Patrick Monster, with coordinator Joe Fordham at XFX 1997. Photo © Matt



your brush strokes to be seen. We tried our best on *Species*. I think we somewhat succeeded. In *Species II* we somewhat failed."

Ullman. Inset: conceptual art  
© H.R. Giger.

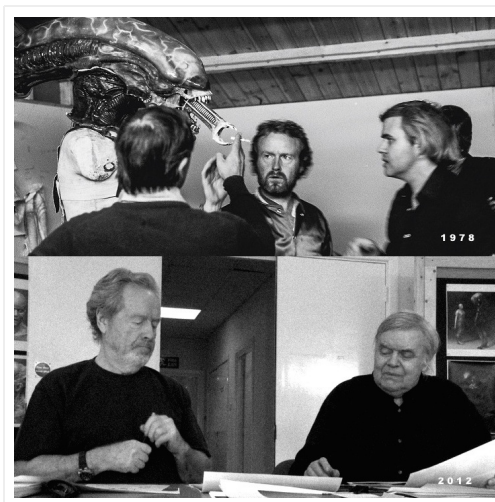


— ALIEN interpreted by Mad Magazine, March 1980, art by Mort Drucker © E.C. Publications.

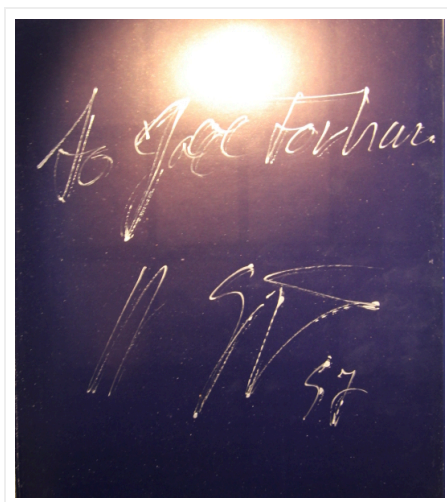
In *Alien*, Scott instinctively understood that the allure of Giger's art was that the images appeared to have formed out of the subconscious. He wreathed Giger's creations in smoke, splashed them with sweat and flashed them with strobe lights. They were grotesque, but had an elegance and beauty that tapped into a fear of the unknown and a fascination with strange mechanisms of the human body. Giger was a consummate artist, a strongly principled man, and a true surrealist, but he was always sweet to me and, despite his many imitators, there will never be another like him.

In the last decades of his life, Giger distanced himself from Hollywood, although versions of his creatures continued to appear in further sequels, spin-offs and Pepsi commercials. During production of *Prometheus*, rumors emerged that Giger was back working with Ridley Scott on the *Alien* origin story. Fox would not confirm this, and so it remained undocumented in the *Cinefex* story, but pictures eventually appeared of Scott and Giger seated at a table sifting through designs. It was heartening to see that Scott still valued Giger's input, often referring to Hans Reudi as providing the DNA for the imagery of his film.

Perhaps it was this very personal imprint that infused Giger's art as such a potent force on the few people that he trusted as collaborators. "Lots of people have died around me recently," Steve Johnson confessed. "My mother died. My uncle died. I understand it's all part of the *Lion King* Circle of Life. But when Giger died, it bugged the shit out of me. I am still not sure why. I made a complete fool of myself on social media, online, because it crept up to me in a strange way that I never would have expected. I guess it took me back to when *Alien* came out, I sat in that movie theatre on a sultry summer afternoon, and I saw something that I could never, ever imagine on my own. It took me to another country."



— Top: Carlo Rambaldi, Ridley Scott and H.R. Giger, 1978. Bottom: Ridley Scott and H.R. Giger, 2012. Images © 20th Century Fox.



— Inscription by H.R. Giger, 1997.

## 5 THOUGHTS ON "GIGER FLASHBACK"



Horace Austin

on [May 18, 2014 at 2:07 am](#) said:

Fantastic, Joe. Thanks for sharing your recollections of working with Giger.



Joe Fordham

on [May 18, 2014 at 10:02 am](#) said:

My pleasure. Thanks for reading, Horace.



Eric Tan

on [May 18, 2014 at 4:45 pm](#) said:

Thanks for writing this, Mr Fordham. Interesting and moving. You are lucky to have worked and met this (in)famous nightmare fuel artist. He will be missed.



Joe Fordham

on [May 18, 2014 at 8:16 pm](#) said:

He is. Thanks, Eric.

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