

RIDING H.R. GIGER'S NIGHTMARE TRAIN

By Ray Johnson

When H.R. Giger got the script for "Species," he was fascinated by certain scenes. One showed a nightmare with a train roaring through it. He set about making a magnificent, almost magical (if not mystery) train and what followed is a story in itself fascinating about obsession, moviemaking and art versus commerce. By the time Giger's nightmare train was done, it had cost him easily \$100,000. It was what he and his agent based in New York believed to be a masterpiece. The moviemakers, scrapping scenes with it as not advancing the plot, kept it in the movie for only seconds. In the end Giger was paid \$50,000 for it, less than it cost to make, and given rights to it. The train, meanwhile, remains in California marooned outside the movie and Giger has since stretched tracks for a new type of train through his Zurich home. They even arch over his picturesque pool.

"He did the train," Leslie Barany, his agent, said in New York recently. "Like a painting for Dune, it was never executed."

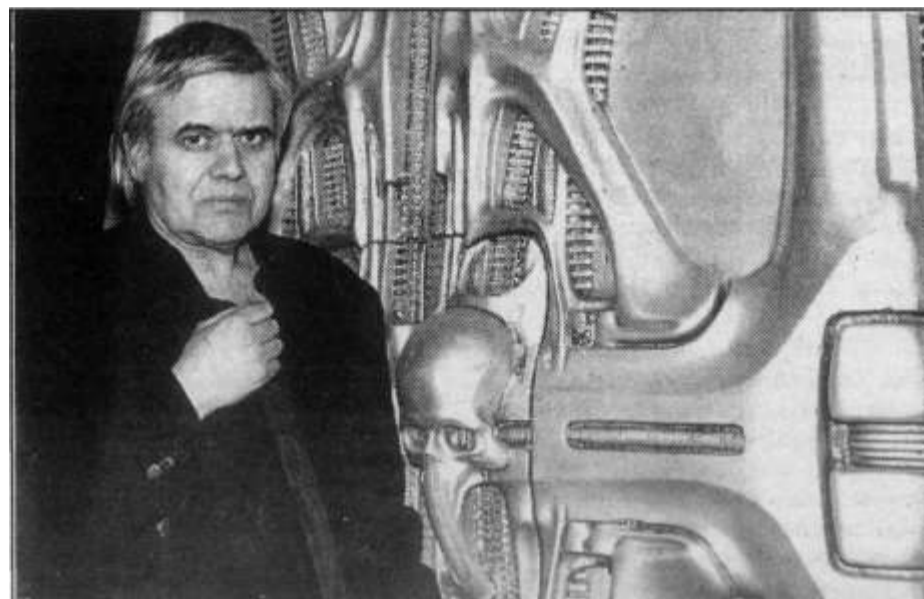
To understand H.R. (for Hans Rudi) Giger you have to follow him back in time. His work was most recently shown in New York at the Alexander Gallery and the Mary Anthony Gallery and it's familiar to many people through other sources. The artist whose airbrushed art has been on a myriad of magazine and record covers was born in 1940 in Switzerland and went to Zurich's School of Arts and Crafts. World War II probably helped form his sense of horror and some of his skeleton-like creations have possible shades of the Holocaust. By the 1960s, Giger had become the acknowledged father of biomechanics: art blending machine structure and biology. His images are like x-rays of imaginary creatures. He did record covers for Emerson, Lake and Palmer and later for Debbie Harry.

Giger's work, or rather his world, seemed to show evolutionary permutations if evolution had gone haywire. It was biology turned inside out with entrails embroidered on the flesh. Imagine Mona Lisa in a meltdown, Hieronymous Bosch on speed or a collision between Dali and Da Vinci. He created a gallery of gorgeous grotesques beamed down, as if, from Planet Giger. So it probably made sense that Hollywood would discover Giger the way music had. Ridley Scott hired him to design the creature for "Alien" as well as provide some other artwork. Giger won the Oscar for that and he suddenly became the reigning Hollywood expert on designing extraterrestrials. The black hole of space became populated with creatures he had been slowly devising for decades from the darkness of his imagination. He created extraterrestrials for "Poltergeist" and "Alien 3". Need an alien, who ya gonna call? His number was the one.

Giger had some good and some bad luck dealing with Hollywood. You might call it dreams and nightmares. He did designs for a version of "Dune" that was never done. And for "Alien 3," he found he wasn't credited at the end of the film. He was later properly credited in the video. But overall, movies let his creatures come to life. It was one step beyond sculpture. He apparently liked the original script for "Species" and when its director, Roger Donaldson, and producer, Frank Mancuso, Jr., visited him in Zurich, he was

sold on the idea. But gradually Giger felt the movie, in part through rewrites, was borrowing more and more from other movies. A struggle started. Imagine Frankenstein's monster having two parents who couldn't agree.

"Giger wrote them, saying the film is ripping off 'Alien,'" Barany says. "Taking the tongue from here, the chest from there. Flamethrowers from 'Aliens.' He wrote a list. He wanted to make the film more original."



Oscar-winner H.R. Giger designed more for "Species" than made the movie. Here's a glimpse into Giger's world and a story of obsession, art and a \$100,000 nightmare train.

In his office, surrounded by a small museum of articles and art, Barany talks about how Giger saw the latest creature. Giger, for instance, said the punching tongue they were in favor of was ripped right out of the maw of 'Alien.' He had a different idea, a creature that would kill with a kiss instead of a battering ram of a tongue. A barbed, snake-like tongue (based on an idea designed for and rejected by 'Alien 3') would shoot out of the mouth.

"Here it made sense," Barany says, taking out a cast of the model of the tongue. "Here's a beautiful girl. Her whole activity is finding someone to seduce."

Distance made cooperation even tougher.

Imagine Mona Lisa in a meltdown, Hieronymous Bosch on speed or a collision between Dali and Da Vinci. He created a gallery of gorgeous grotesques beamed down as if from Planet Giger.

Giger didn't want to go to Hollywood, because his mother was ill. He wanted to be there if she died and she did die in November before the film was done. So the fights were largely conducted via fax.

"He wanted to be there when she died. And he was," Barany says. "He knew if he left for Hollywood, she might die and he wouldn't be there."

By the time the issue of the train (men-

tioned in the contract) came around, there was enough tension to thread across a transatlantic telephone wire and have some left over. The contract with MGM hiring Giger for the movie talked about the "nightmare train." Price, it said, would be negotiated "in good faith." When Giger described his nightmare train, he was told it wasn't in the budget. It would cost \$600,000 to generate via computers. Giger said he could do it cheaper by creating it for



was ready to begin its maiden voyage to Hollywood.

Simply shipping the train to California cost \$15,000. The moviemakers, though, decided to cut down the train's voyage. Instead, they went with a scene showing the character pursued by this train briefly. Giger's storyboards, and the station, went unused and the train became a blip on the screen.

"They ditched that whole scene," Barany says, frustrated at the lack of control the artist had over his creation. "They built a straight track and filmed the train on that track."

Giger, meanwhile, was continuing to clash with the moviemakers over the alien. His vision was treated as tunnel vision or peripheral at best, while he felt he was trying to give the film a more original stamp. In a hottub scene, for instance, the alien attacks a man. He had a vision of what would happen. The man comes up behind her and she gets angry at him in his version. Knife-like vertebrae spring out of her back.

"They wanted the front," Barany says. "He said biologically it doesn't fit."

The final scene bore little if any resemblance to Giger's vision for it. All in all, the movie "Species" does show aspects of Giger's vision, but it's basically the vision of the director and producer. Of course, it could never be anything else. But Barany says he believes that Giger's ideas were just not used as much as they should have been.

"The next time Giger does a film he wants

He was told to keep it under \$100,000: It seemed the train had safely reached the first destination.

control over his own work," Barany says.

An irony is that Giger's creations appear more in marketing than in the movie. ("We could've said pick a creature, any creature," Barany says. "They really just want the name.") There are even "Species" trading cards. Ads use Giger's name. And while Giger was paid well for creating his alien (over \$200,000), he actually lost money on the train. Special stipulations, however, were put in the contract.

"He retained the rights to the train," Barany says. "He retains the right to use this train. For another film. And we retain the merchandising rights."

If his nightmare train was basically derailed in the movie, Giger is busy creating a new train. He has since designed tracks that run through his Zurich house. In a way, creating these trains of thought is an odd obsession. In a way it makes perfect sense that the creator of biomechanics, biology based on technology, should turn to a new way of wedding aesthetics and technology. Either way, the artist is busy at work creating a vehicle whose final destination is a mystery to most people and probably even to himself. ■

PHOTO: SUSAN HOSTETTLER

real rather than simply via computer. He was asked to design a small model. Giger, though, chose to build it bigger. He would send faxes that wouldn't give the producers a sense of scale.

"The whole idea of a trains has fascinated him," Barany, who fought to get Giger's ideas even more widely used, says. "As a kid there were tunnels. He pulled kids through them. And friends jumped up. It was like an amusement park."

Soon enough, the filmmakers found out the train was 20 feet long and one and a half feet tall. It was motorized complete with a massive skull in front. Giger was designing a station as the perfectly paired place for the nightmare train to stop. The scene could be shot with a simple blue screen. A vacuum-cleaner-like creation would suck up figures. The producers gave Giger the go-ahead to build his train. He was told to keep it under \$100,000: It seemed the train had safely reached the first destination.

Giger worked with five companies to build tracks, engines and the station which together he saw as a masterpiece. The result was a train ready to roll with powerful engines. He even built a 30-foot train station complete with bricks, lamps and plants on the walls. Metal doors were covered over.

"It's those kinds of details that make it real," Barany says. "You could sit on it. And it will pull you. It's that strong."

The artist had spent about eight months working on the train, shelving other projects such as a book based on his work called "H.R. Giger Under Your Skin." But now the train