

ALL
ABOARD
THE
GHOST
TRAIN!

A *Shivers* interview by Joe Mauceri

Last issue, HR Giger explained the frustrations of working on the new movie *Species*. But the greatest disappointment was still to come...

WITH GIGER'S work on the alien Sil almost complete, producer Frank Mancuso decided that using a transparent model or a puppet would make the creature's movements too stiff and that the film's climax would be better handled by computer-generated effects. Mancuso had already signed

Richard Edlund of Boss Film to oversee and shoot the special effects sequences; Edlund took on the computer work and seized the opportunity to build a CGI division for Boss.

Mancuso also chose not to use the Swiss Sil model, Nadine, and cast Elite model Natasha Henstridge. "I had to accept the choice but I was not happy" said Giger. "However, I saw her in the movie and think she is excellent."

As Giger received changes to the script he began to be concerned over similarities between *Species* and the *Alien* films. In August '94, Giger pointed out five ideas taken directly from the *Alien* movies — the chest birth, the tongue, the cocoon, the flame-thrower and Giger himself. Giger felt that if this film came too close to the *Alien* movies then bad press would undoubtedly follow. The initial poster de-

sign was an obvious copy of that for the original *Alien*. Giger played with some ideas for a poster of his own, while MGM went to great lengths to copy the Giger style. As a result, Giger received calls from friends inquiring about 'the poster he designed' which at the time he had not even seen! Giger voiced his concerns to Mancuso. "What hurts is that the movie poster looks as if I did it myself," Giger said. "If the poster design is bad, and they copy my style, people will think Giger's work is bad. It would probably have cost them less if they *had* asked me and let me to do the poster. I do not know why they did not at least take the chance."

Giger was greatly distressed about the changes in the film's climax, where Sil was to be destroyed by a flame-thrower. "Sil can not die by burning," he stated. "This ending was in *Alien 3* and *Terminator II*. I didn't want to hear that we have only one idea for ending the film, and we keep repeating it again and again.

NO FLAME THROWERS!

"As I described, Sil gets hot when she attacks, so she would be resistant to fire. On every fax I told them 'No flame throwers!' I even made a humorous drawing of a man with a flamethrower between his legs, standing over a kneeling woman and called it 'The Flamethrower F***er'. I heard that they made a t-shirt out of it! It was hopeless because I was never really able to change their minds. Since the Gulf War, almost every action picture has an ending where people are burned to death. It goes back to the nuclear age and Hiroshima. Films today have a bigger effect on young people than years ago. That's why even the most extreme painting and sculptures of our time have such little impact in relation." Concerned as ever with the finished result, Giger devised a completely new sequence for the ending of the film, but again, his suggestions were not taken up.

COCOON

On a happier note, Giger's concerns about the cocoon transformation were allayed. He loved "the transformation of little Sil, with her pustules getting all the worse and ugly worms wriggling out and building a cocoon around her. Steve Johnson was caught between two people telling him what he should do, but we all wanted as much as possible to be revealed inside the transparent ET creature. Steve, Bill Corso and Eric Fiedler, the animatronics expert, all did an excellent job, even with the difficult transparency."

One of the new additions to the screenplay was that Sil would give birth to a child. This element was not a part of Feldman's early drafts, and was an aspect that Giger strongly opposed. "Donaldson seemed to feel that Sil was not strange or sufficiently ugly by herself," remarked Giger. "The director always wanted me to make Sil ugly, and I wanted to keep her beautiful. He insisted there be a child. I didn't like the idea. In the beginning I was not happy because I saw my suggestions were not welcomed. In *Species* you now have a chestbirther, a clean birth that even the Pope will like.

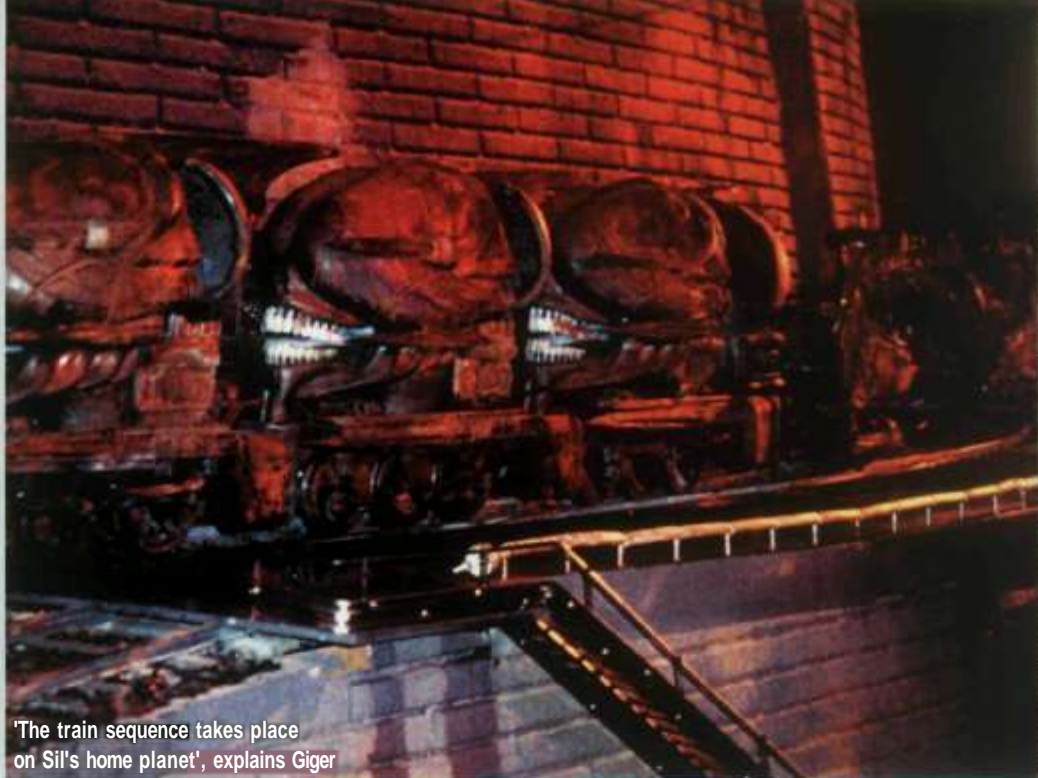
"I did think about designing the lab monster," continued Giger, "and decided not to. It was too much a simple monster. At the time they asked me I was working hard on Sil. From what I saw Steve Johnson did excellent work. I knew it would turn out well."

TRAIN OF EVENTS

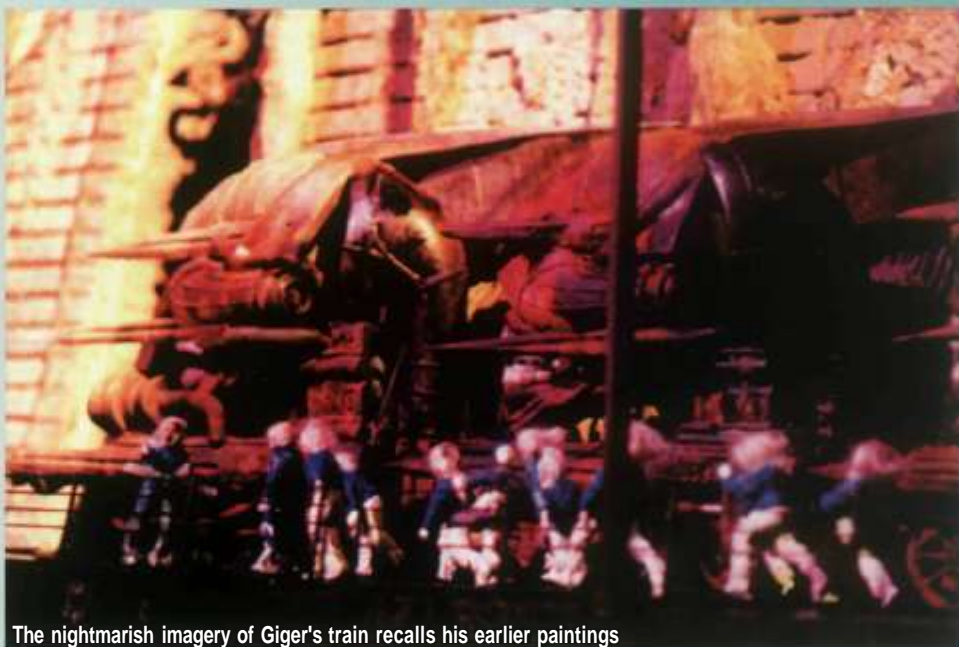
However, Giger's greatest challenge and biggest disappointment came with the building of the Ghost Train. Since his childhood, Giger has been obsessed with trains. In 1976, when Alejandro Jodorowsky was trying to gather support for his version of Frank Herbert's *Dune*, Giger painted a series of designs of the Harkonnen castle, the detailed head of which bears more than a passing resemblance to the Ghost Train. "I also worked on my train ideas for three quarters of a year with Ridley Scott on a project called *The Train*," revealed Giger. "I worked out a tunnel design which formed a pentagram beneath Switzerland."

NIGHTMARES

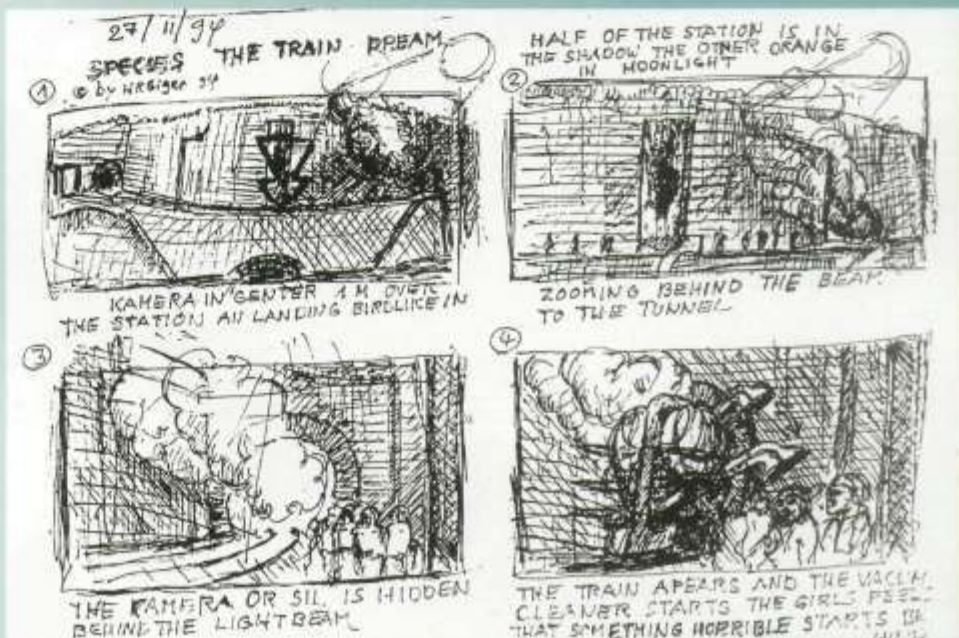
In one of the drafts of *Species* sent to Giger, the young Sil suffers a nightmare while riding on a train. Giger's imagination was ignited! He began to script and storyboard an entirely new nightmare sequence, that could be shot in one take. The scene had a train of skull-like carriages rumbling into an equally nightmarish station like a caterpillar. Each section of the train would move independently of the other, and be connected by accordion-like bellows. Reaching the station, vacuum cleaner arms would come down from the skulls and begin sucking up the young versions of Sil as they try to flee. The sound of the train changes into that of grinding machinery as the train moves through the station, and we see at the rear a bony ribcage in which there are various life-forms, and babies hanging in contraceptives, which are supposed to be Sil.



'The train sequence takes place on Sil's home planet', explains Giger



The nightmarish imagery of Giger's train recalls his earlier paintings





'the dream lost its spectacular quality' says Giger of the finished cut of his Ghost Train sequence



These surreal images reflect themes of some earlier Giger paintings.

"My sequence had deadly locomotives reaching out with powerful vacuums, sucking and roaring after little Sils, which were all clones," Giger explained. "The sequence took place on Sil's home planet. I tried to bring the nightmare fully into the film."

Giger faxed Mancuso the text and storyboards for the unbudgeted, unscripted sequence. Mancuso said he was interested in the idea, but would have to sell it to MGM. He advised Giger to proceed with caution. Giger began production on the train out of his own pocket.

Friend of the artist Cony de Fries suggested Giger replace the skulls on the train with a biomechanoid head sculpture he had done some twenty years earlier. Cony and Giger's work on the first

locomotive section was completed by Andy Schedler of Atelier Format. The wheels and motors for the train Giger found at the company Ball und Sohn. Kasper Wolfensberger motorized the train, hooked up the lights and vacuum cleaners and wired the radio remote control. Giger worked with Atelier Steel and Dreams on the station design, and Tanya Wolfensberger helped him in dressing it.

Without a contract, there was no guarantee that Giger would actually be paid for his labour of love, or even that he would be compensated at all for the finished work. Regardless, he had constructed the train from his own pocket and spent additional money on crating it off to Hollywood. "I knew in my mind that if the train was not built by a certain time, it would be left sitting 'at the station'," he said.

During the train's construction Giger fully documented its building on video. "With only the help of the companies here in Zurich we built a terrific Ghost Train," he said, "proving that the Swiss can make things other than Swatches!"

FRIDAY THE THIRTEENTH

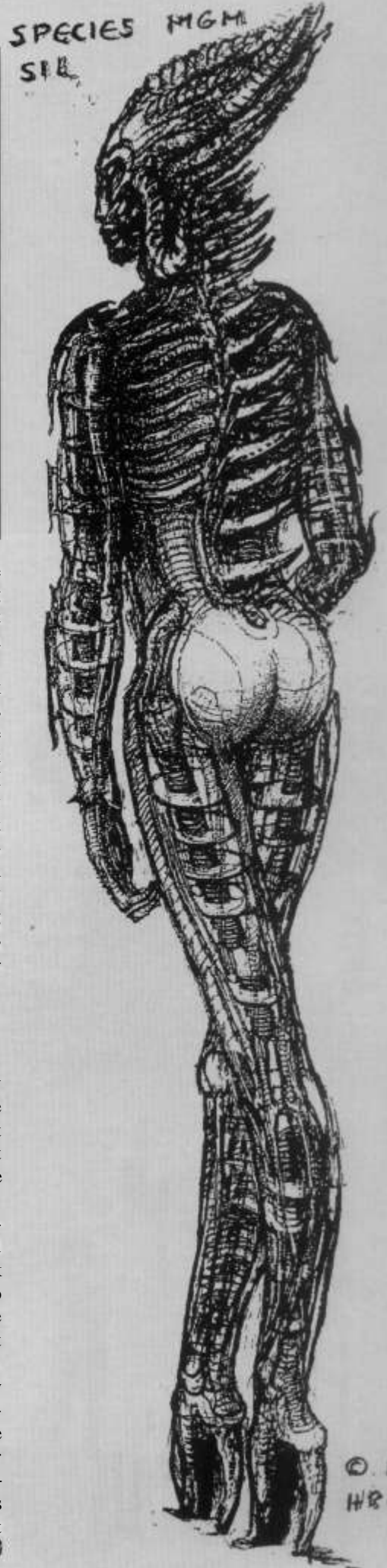
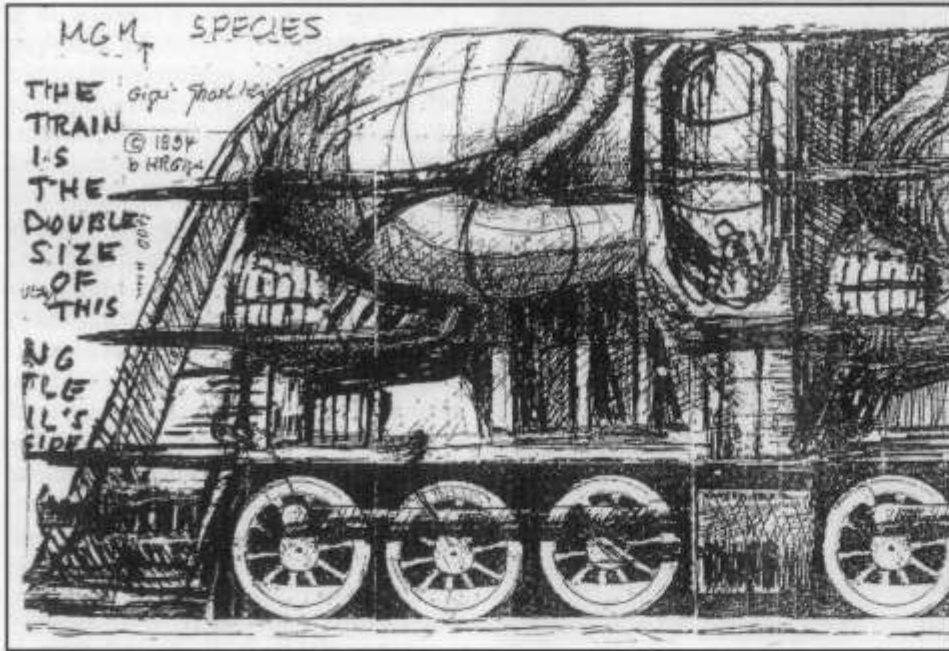
"The train and the station were delivered to Edlund appropriately on Friday the 13th," Giger remembered. "The crew unpacking it was fascinated, and Edlund was excited. Steve Johnson told me that Mancuso wanted to film the train. Steve said he could not see them *not* using it because it looked so wonderful. I waited almost a week before Mancuso called me. I think he was hesitant to get excited about the train because it might cost him more money."

Initially Mancuso had rejected the train sequence because the production team said it would cost around \$600,000 to do via computer graphics. Giger *proved* his idea worked, and for much less. Initially, Mancuso told him to keep the budget under \$100,000. Giger spent about \$80,000 to build his twenty-foot model, and took a loan for an additional twenty thousand to build the station, which brought the sequence in at the figure Mancuso gave him.

The train was shot by Boss Film without the vacuum cleaner effect or the station, and Giger's storyboarded thirty second sequence was reduced to eight seconds. Mancuso finally informed Giger that the amount available for the use of the train in the film was only fifty thousand dollars. Giger was advised not to let them use the train, but he felt it might never be seen at all if he didn't let them



'We built a terrific Ghost train in Zurich' says Giger, 'proving the Swiss can make things other than Swatches'



use it as they wanted. Finally, he bore the loss of fifty thousand dollars. As a compensation, Giger *was* able to hold on to all merchandising rights to the train. The studio only owns the two dimensional rights, and it can only be used as it was used in the eight second clip. Even the Dark Horse comics adaptation cannot refer to anything other than the eight-seconds. Unusually, Giger also has the rights to use the train in another film.

SPECTACULAR

"I was disappointed that the dream lost its spectacular quality," reflected Giger. "It went from a highlight to an almost silly speck. In order to have one's own ideas fully integrated into a film in the manner one wishes, one must be at least a director, and at best the producer. The sequence is eight seconds, and of course, the money people see no good reason to pay so much for such a small amount of screen time. High points in films can often cost millions and I started the construction because I felt for a quarter of such a sum I could do this powerful sequence sufficiently well."

On seeing the finished film, Giger suggested that if the film was held back for another month, they could make some improvements, especially with the use of Steve Johnson's puppets. A large portion of this work had been removed, but Giger felt that Johnson was the first effects artist to properly realize his designs. Giger has since commissioned Johnson to build a full size Sil, and hopes to work with him in the future.

"We have no special effects artists for the film industry in Switzerland, or a high degree of experience. One must be a dedi-

cated fanatic, and I seem to be about the only one of his kind here who is working in the Hollywood film industry. That makes me quite critical, and sometimes a bit sour.

"As long as Hollywood wants to work with me I am prepared to generate ideas that only American special effects people can do. Perhaps I try too much and put too much stress upon myself. At least I try to extend myself to the limits of my abilities. I have my own goals to meet when it comes to my creativity. Most important is that I fully realize and design what I imagine. The issue of money only comes after, which is different from big film companies. For me, the money is only important in order to do better quality in my work.

WHY ME?

"Sometimes I ask myself why they used me on this film instead of someone else, because there are so many excellent film designers. I become so excited about a project that I lose my ability to make good business decisions.

"I learned a lot about building the special effects on this film the hard way, and I paid twice the normal price for the work we did. I learned *how* things can go wrong. Cony and Andy contributed some very good suggestions which I would not have got if I had given it to fabricators.

"What is important is the final quality of my work and how it is presented. Nobody ever asks, after the years have passed, how much I got paid or whether I actually paid half of the costs for a particular sequence. The only thing that is important to me is that Fox or MGM got the best possible result for the movie." 