

# SPECIES, MGM, Sil, the Ghosttrain, and frustrations of H.R. Giger

By J.B. Mauceri

There are numerous people who could be held to task for the endangered film **SPECIES**. There are two activists who've fought tooth-&-nail to ensure that the film's plot be driven by innovative concepts, while trying to maintain a high standard of execution and strong artistic vision. These unsung heroes are the screenwriter Dennis Feldman and the designer of Sil, and the "Ghost Train," H.R. Giger.

There has been much disinformation pertaining to the aspects of Giger's work on the film. In early press communications by MGM/UA Giger was incorrectly referred to as an "illustrator." Another aggravating remark is when Giger is referred to as an "airbrush" artist. Giger is a sculptor, painter, and designer who happens to be best known for his airbrush work. However, to refer to him as anything less than a "fine artist" would be like referring to Michelangelo simply as a mural painter.

On January 28, 1994, Giger's American publisher received a call from Frank Mancuso, Jr. who expressed his and Roger Donaldson's interest in obtaining H.R. Giger's genius to design an alien creature to be featured in a project titled **SPECIES**. Mancuso felt if Giger came on board it would be the final push to get the film "green-lighted" by MGM. He viewed the project as a film critical to MGM's hope for a return to the status of an eminent Hollywood film production company. Mancuso made assurances to Giger that with a budget in excess of thirty-five million dollars there would be enough funding for the film to fully realize Giger's designs in the best possible light.

Giger was concerned that the production do things right before he begin spending his time, energy and resources on it. When Giger takes on a project he fully immerses himself in it, as do many great artists. His popularity as a fine artist results in an enormous amount of potential work constantly vying for Giger's attention, allowing him to be selective as to what projects he chooses. Once Giger was committed to **SPECIES** he was committed body, mind and soul. What tran-

spired as a result of Giger's agreement to work on **SPECIES** is an epic tale of one man's struggle to save an endangered species.

We started with the beginning and how Giger first heard about **SPECIES**, as well as his concerns about becoming involved with another motion picture.

"My publisher in the United States called me about a phone call from Frank Mancuso Jr., the producer, and a new film (**SPECIES**), and

filmmakers could use. Initially MGM was resistant to the idea of a transparent creature, claiming that it would be too expensive to execute. Giger was determined to prove that not only were his theories for the creature's designs possible, but cost effective. He was aided in his quest by his associates Cony De Fries and Andy Schedler, both of whom had previously worked with him on the Giger Bar, which is located in Chur, the place of his birth.

"In early 1994, we started to build a pre-production Sil in Switzerland. My designs were based on an early script they sent us. When I worked on Alien I had a plaster shop and assistants around me so I could build the big alien creature full size. This time only Andy Schedler and two assistants were working for me on developing Sil, and I was paying them out of my own pocket. I always hoped Mancuso would send us somebody with experience to help and teach us Hollywood special effects techniques. I felt it would give us a chance to accelerate the



*Sideview of Sil's head. Felt pen on paper. ©1994 H R Giger*

the possibility of my working on it. The project attracted me because I saw it as a chance to create an alien creature that would look like the women in my paintings. Hollywood always wants ugly monsters, which for me is not very interesting. I wanted it to be scary, but also to be beautiful, powerful, and a graceful female. I liked the chance to design a creature that was not just an E.T., but one based on the human form. I wanted the chance to realize a transparent creature, which before was not possible. It was this 'beauty in the beast' idea that attracted me to the movie.

"Roger Donaldson and Mancuso came to Zurich to talk with me. We seemed to be in good agreement and I decided to work on the movie. Mancuso said he would call me each evening to talk about my designs and how Dennis Feldman was refining the script."

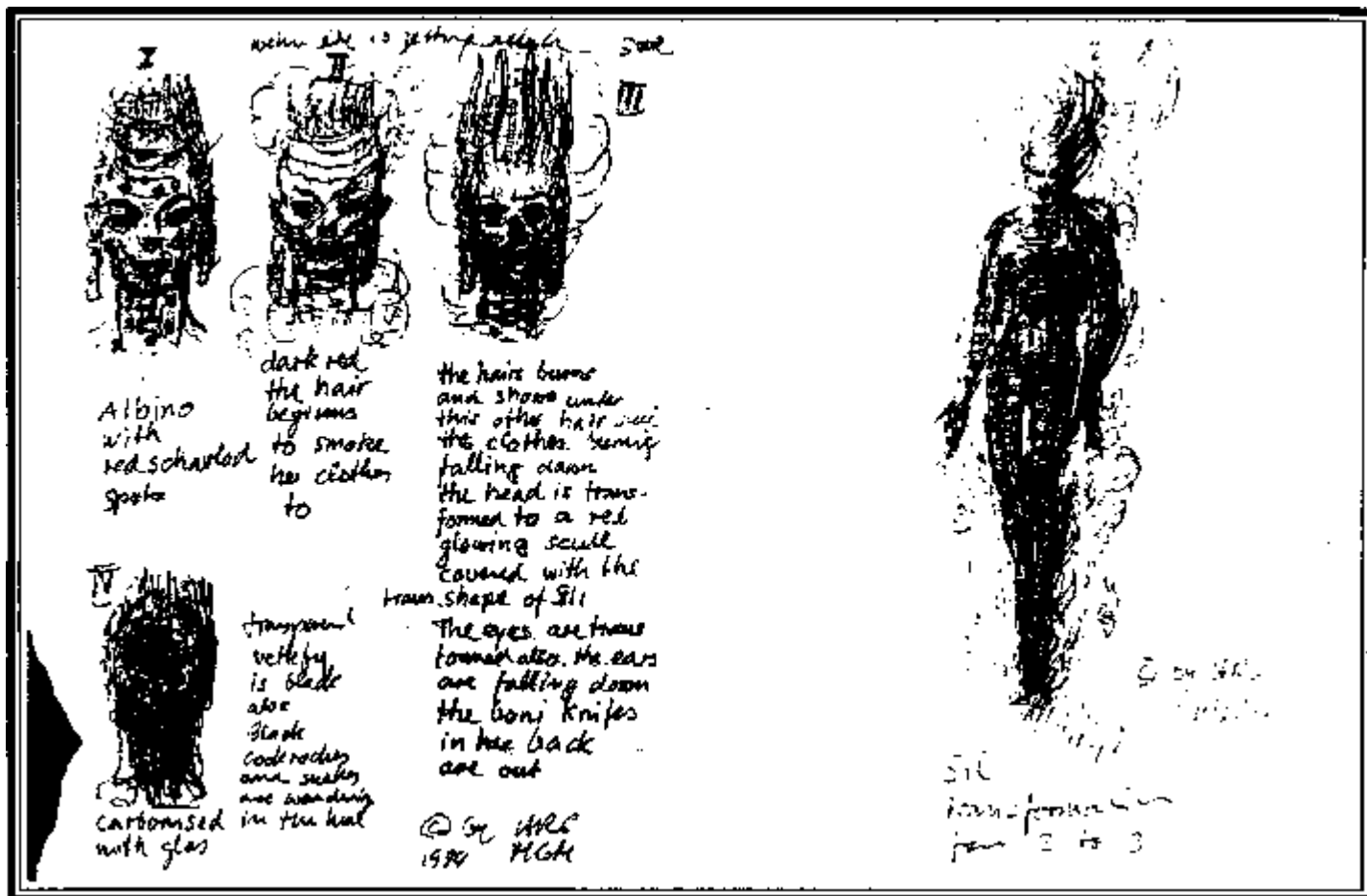
Giger began his pre-production work on the alien creature Sil in Switzerland, hoping not only to develop and execute his designs in his homeland, but also to deliver a shooting model the

fabrication and allow us to build the filming version of Sil here. But nobody came, and we had to learn everything the hard way. Our experiments were expensive, and in the end most of my money from the movie was spent this way."

The first step in the process Giger undertook was to show that his transparent theory would work. It required he work out the creature's physical nature. "I felt this mysterious half extraterrestrial woman should be powerful and very tall. Before I could work on Sil's transparency we looked to find the correct female model. First we cast a tall woman's legs and body, who's name was Nadia, and then we cast the head from a Swiss model, named Nadine."

The work on Giger's initial models did not go as smoothly as he had hoped, and he expressed this to Mancuso. Several times Mancuso suggested Giger come to Hollywood to work alongside his people. However, Giger was unable to leave Switzerland.

"I could not leave Switzerland because of



*The Metamorphosis of Sil. Ballpoint pen on paper. ©1994 H R Giger*

the failing health of my mother, she was eighty-nine years-old. She was very close to me. I was sure it would be her last summer. She lived in Chur, my birthplace, a long drive from my home. We talked on the phone every day and I visited her at least once a week. This was the main reason why I had to stay here to design and build Sil in Switzerland."

I asked of the fine artist if he found it artistically frustrating at times because of the disadvantages created by the distance between Zurich and Hollywood, and as a result to have other craftsman interpreting his designs.

"I have worked on "Poltergeist II" and "Alien3" from a long distance and was not satisfied when I tried to convince them how to build my designs or described to them how to fabricate from my drawings and paintings the way I wanted. I was constantly faxing Mancuso drawings and sketches of Sil. With **SPECIES** I wanted the chance to build my designs as I developed them. This is an important part of the creative process and usually works very well for me.

"When Steve Johnson was hired I also faxed him many drawings, and we talked on the phone a lot. You can't make a fully detailed design of a complicated creature without exploring many possibilities."

Due to the rigorous demands of the film's pre-production schedule, and also acknowledging the fact that the craftsmen in Switzerland

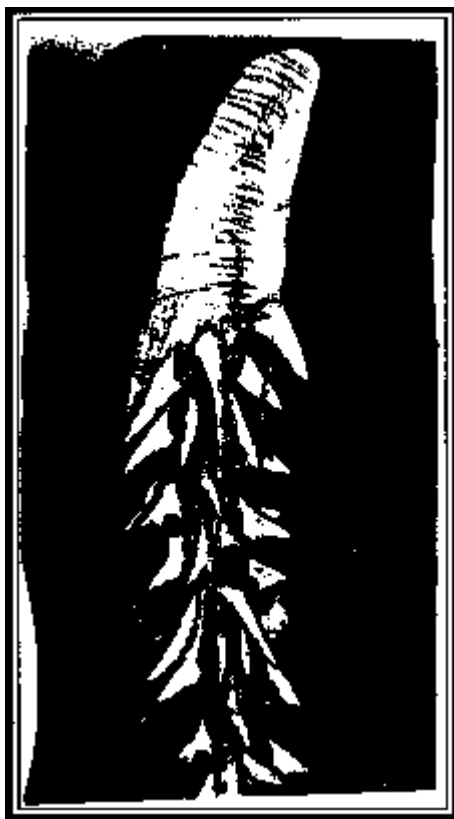
were just not as advanced in the areas of special effects, Giger called upon the help of Cliff Wallace and CFX studio, located at Pinewood Studios, in England. Accruing a considerable out-of-pocket expense, Giger sent them everything done in Zurich up to that point and contracted them to build a 1/2 scale Sil and a full-size head. Admitting to the limitations of the finished design due to the pressures of the short time frame they were given to execute the fabrication of the bust, Giger had to fix certain elements he was unhappy with, such as the hair and the width of the mouth (which had to do with his ability to insert Sil's tongue). However, the exercise did prove that the transparent concept worked, and that during the creature's transformation it would be able to have the glowing element Giger was looking for.

Giger envisioned Sil going through a three stage evolution when it came to revealing her alien self. "My original idea was that Sil's transformation from a beautiful woman into the creature take place in three distinct phases," Giger explained. "As she increases her temperature quickly she glows red hot, changing to a hotter looking orange glow. This causes her clothing and hair to burn off. Then she is completely transparent outside and black inside, like a glass body with carbon inside. Second, sharp daggers shoot out from her vertebrae. Last, we see she is transparent and her interior organs. When she

becomes pregnant you can see her baby resting in the womb between her breasts." Giger's approach to Sil's "hot" transformation was a logical out growth of the script considering that the first message sent by the aliens was the formula for an enzyme to create a limitless supply of methane. Also, Sil's resulting transparency is a truly ingenious approach to an alien creature. However, this step-by-step transformation and the glowing effect Giger designed are not in the film.

In addition to Sil's knife like spines and hair with flaming tips, Giger empowered Sil with a few other "functional" defenses that he deemed "organic weapons." Looking similar to the lab monster when it is pressed up against the glass in the lab scene, Sil has snakelike weapons, that shoot from her breasts. Naturally, she would have claw like nails, and as the presence of the flames at the tips of her hair would suggest, and Giger often stressed, that she is resistant to fire.

A fifth weapon Giger envisioned, a concept he had been working in "Alien3," was Sil's unique tongue. I had the opportunity to see a cast of it first hand at his agent's (Leslie Barany) office in New York, who it turns out, had some input into the design. "Leslie is also a good friend and advisor," said Giger. "And we have long conversations every few days, during **SPECIES** almost every day, about not only business but art and things that I am working on. He cares very



*Sil's tongue made of Silicon, Baracryl, and Shark teeth. ©1994 H R Giger*

much about the quality of my work and understands well what I am trying to achieve. In such relationships, it is natural for me to get good suggestions, which is something I am always open for. He sent from New York a shark mouth full of sharp teeth after I told him my idea for Sil's tongue. I placed them into the tongue to create a frightening and surprising weapon."

In Giger's communications to the filmmakers, he not only sent detailed designs, in addition to conversations on how to implement them, he showed his understanding of the medium in the storyboards he sent along to illustrate how things can be filmed. Giger is an artist who does not try to dictate how something must be done, but shows how something can best be built and hopes that these craftsmen are in-sync with his ideas and even improve upon them.

"My original idea was for a death kiss in which Sil forces her lethal tongue down her lover's throat, and pulls it out tearing his insides out with it. It was not to smash through the skull as in the final film, exactly as it was done in Alien and Alien3."

I've noticed that during our conversation Giger often used the word "fabricator" instead of effects artists or something similar. When I asked him why he replied, "I prefer fabricating specialists and not those who want to express their own ideas using my work. If I'm developing an idea I want my designs to be followed exactly, without changes. Steve Johnson and his crew worked closely with me to realize my designs, not as it happened with Alien3, where there was no communication. It is rare to find a strongly

talented artistic collaborator that I can admire, who also understands the logic of my work, like Steve Johnson, where I feel my designs and I, are in trustworthy hands."

Giger spent the majority of August 1994, building his Sil, but he never quite completed the three dimensional Sil model that would meet with his own high standards. As a result, all of Giger's work and experiments, guidelines for Sil's construction, moved to Hollywood. Giger's models and work done by CFX were made of polyester and vacuum formed plexiglass, which truly showed the genius of Giger's vision. It convinced the producers to finally accept the transparency idea. Mancuso also contracted Tom Burman, most noted for his prosthetic work on "Planet of the Apes," to build a maquette of Sil. However, Giger was not content with the end results. "I saw the photos of Burman's small Sil. The head looked like a fish. It was not at all what I had imagined."

Mancuso also decided that the transparent quality of a puppet would make the creature's movements too stiff for many of the scenes. For the film's climax he felt it would be best handled by computer generated effects and animation. Being that Mancuso had already signed on Richard Edlund and Boss Film to oversee and shoot the special effects sequences, Edlund also took on the computer work and seized the opportunity to build a CGI division for Boss Film.

Giger had another disappointment as Mancuso choose not to use his Swiss Sil model, Nadine. Instead, Mancuso and Donaldson cast Elite model Natasha Henstridge. "In the beginning I was not so happy with their choice of a model, but since I had the opportunity to meet Natasha Henstridge, and saw her in the final movie, I think she is excellent."

As Giger received changes in the script he began to voice/fax his concerns over similarities between SPECIES and the "Alien" films. In a fax Giger sent to Mancuso in August of '94, Giger brought to their attention five ideas he felt were taken directly from the "Alien" movies. They were the chest birth, the punching tongue, the cocoon, the flamethrower and Giger himself. Giger felt that if this film came too close to the "Alien" movies that bad press would follow. He was afraid that people would think that these were his own redundant ideas. He was eager to see something he cared so strongly for be original and something he could be

proud of.

The poster concept MGM created was obviously "inspired" by the original "Alien" poster design. While Giger played with some designs for a poster, MGM chose to ignore them and produced one, badly copying Giger's style. As a result, Giger received calls from friends and colleagues inquiring about "the poster he designed." Giger sent several faxes to Mancuso to voice his concerns. "What hurts me is the movie poster looks as if I did it myself," Giger said. "If the poster design is bad, and they try to copy my style, people will think Giger's work is bad. It would probably have cost them less if they had asked and let me to do the poster."

Giger was greatly distressed about the film's climax, where Sil was to be destroyed by a flamethrower. He wanted their use in the script and film eliminated altogether. In his concept for Sil, she was invincible to fire, and in fact, generated heat. "I told them that Sil can not die by burning, that this ending was in Alien3 and Terminator II. I didn't want to hear that this idea was the only one for a good movie ending, and we keep repeating it again and again."

"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. I called it The Flamethrower Fucker. I heard that, as a joke, they made a t-shirt out of it. It was hopeless. I was never able to



*The Kiss. ©1994 H R Giger*

really change their minds."

Giger even had the audacity to actually develop and write a new ending for the film simply because he wanted it to be original. A spectacular ending, perfect also to Donaldson's visual style, Giger's input was again ignored.

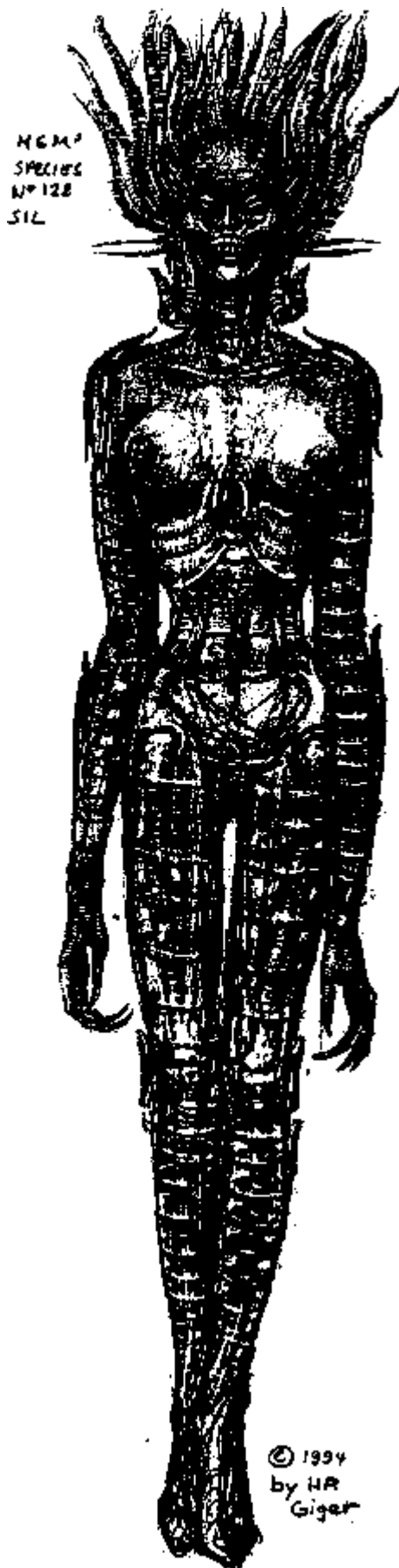
Giger also voiced concerns about the execution of the cocoon and worm sequence of Sil's transformation from a child to the seductive adult woman. "I tried to explain there should be many small worms screwing out, and made drawings like that, and sent them worms I cast." When he viewed the work done by Steve Johnson he was content with the end result even though it was not exactly as he imagined it. "Steve Johnson did the birth of Sil from the cocoon," reflected Giger, "the transformation of little Sil, with small worms screwing out of her face and then forming a cocoon around her, but not the way I designed it. The worms are too fat and become too quickly bad animation."

One of the new additions to the developing screenplay was that Sil would give birth to a child as part of the film's climax. It was an element that was never a part of Feldman's early drafts, and an aspect of the tale that Giger was strongly against. "I think the reason for the child was that Roger Donaldson didn't feel that Sil was ugly enough for a monster. I always wanted to make her also beautiful. I think that's why he wanted this child monster. I didn't like the idea and so I was not interested in designing him. To add a second monster for a few moments was unnecessary."

Another of the film's creatures Giger left in the competent hands of Steve Johnson was the creature/monster that appears in the lab sequence. "I did think about designing the lab monster," said Giger, "and decided not to. It was too much a simple monster. At the time they asked me I was working hard on Sil."

Giger's greatest challenge and biggest disappointment with the filmmakers 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 to direct his version of Frank Herbert's "Dune," Giger painted a series of designs of the Harkonnen castle, the detailed head of which, seen in work #293, "Dune V," bears more than a passing resemblance to what now has become a Ghost Train in **SPECIES**. "I also worked on a train idea for Ridley Scott, for a film he wanted to do called The Train," revealed Giger. "Unfortunately, it did not finally happen. I also worked on train ideas for the S.T.T., my concept for a Swiss Transit Tunnel, in the shape of a pentagram, under Switzerland."

In one of the drafts of **SPECIES** sent to Giger was a nightmare young Sil has while escaping on a train. It was the germ of an idea that ignited the imagination of Giger. He began to script and storyboard an entirely new nightmare sequence, that could be shot in one take. Giger's scene had the Ghost Train rumbling into the station, equally nightmarish, like a caterpillar. Each section of the train would move inde-



Sil. © 1994 HR Giger  
"The Important Magazine"

pendently of the other, and be connected by accordion like bellows. Reaching the station, vacuum cleaner arms would come down off the skull and begin sucking up young versions of Sil as they try to flee. The sound of the train changes into the sound 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 hanging contraceptive babies, a theme of earlier Giger paintings.

"This scene was my idea completely," discussed Giger. "The script had nothing about a Ghost Train. I tried to bring the dream fully into the film, but only the basic idea of my train was preserved in the movie."

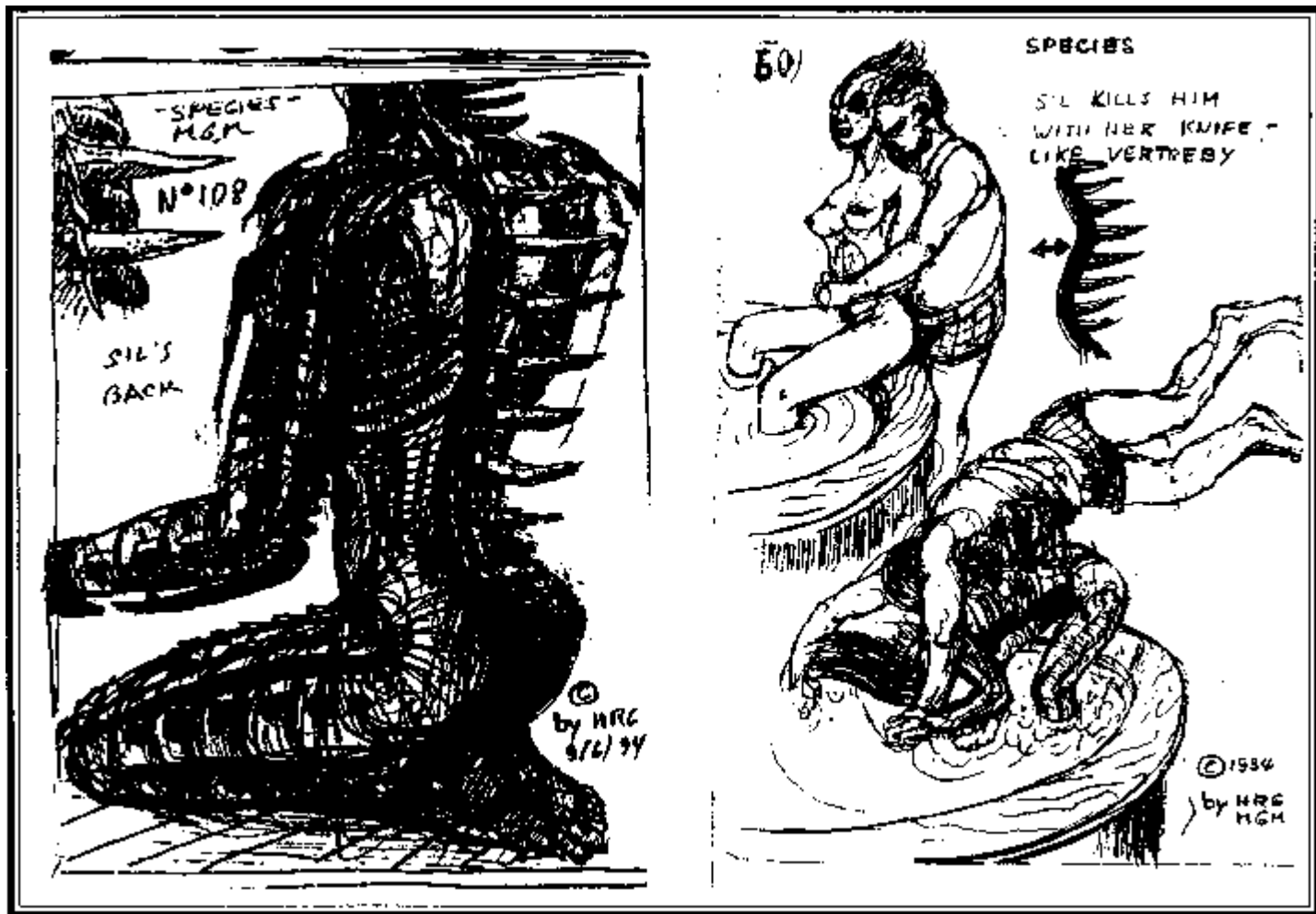
Giger faxed Mancuso text and storyboards for the unbudgeted, unscripted sequence. Mancuso was interested in the idea, but would have to sell it to MGM. He advised Giger to proceed with caution. Giger began production on the train out of his own pocket, after seeing that his sequence had been incorporated into the script.

The first model didn't look right because the skulls were too small. Then Cony de Fries suggested Giger try replacing the idea of real skulls 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. Atelier Kasper Wolfensberger Egmatengen motorized the train, hooked up the lights and vacuum cleaners and wired the radio remote control. Giger worked on the station design with Atelier Steel and Dreams, and Tanya Wolfensberger worked with him in dressing it. From the train to the minor details of the station, Giger's emphasis on design was for functionality. Overall, Giger was happy with the execution of his designs. There were a few minor technical bugs, but Giger was confident that the experts at Boss Film would easily be able to correct them, and he provided them with the details on how to do it.

Without a contract, there was no agreement as to how much Giger would be paid for his labor of love, or how much he would be compensated for the finished work. Regardless, he forged ahead and constructed his vision without a finalized contract. "I knew in my mind that if the train was not finished by a certain time, it would be left out of the film," he said.

During the train's construction Giger fully documented the work on video, clearly showing the painstaking labors it took to bring it to life. Thanks to Les Barany in New York, I was able to view these tapes and gained a new admiration for Giger's fine detailed craftsmanship and his understanding of the needs of the medium. "With only the help of the companies here in Zurich we built a terrific Ghost Train, proving that the Swiss can make things other than just Swatches. It may have cost me a lot of my own money, but I still have the copyrights to the train even after the film."

Initially Mancuso had rejected the train



(Top left) Sil's back. Felt pen on paper. (Top right) H R Giger original idea for the hot tub kill. ©1994 H R Giger

sequence because the production team said it would cost around \$600,000 to do via computer graphics. Giger proved to Mancuso that he could actually build the train for less. Mancuso told him to keep the budget under \$100,000. Giger spent about \$80,000 to build his twenty-foot working model. Giger's quote to Mancuso did not include any compensation for his time, which he hoped would come after he showed them that he could make it work without the use of CGI. Giger spent an additional twenty thousand to build the station, which brought the sequence in at the figure Mancuso gave him.

"The Ghost Train and the station were delivered to Boss Film on Friday the 13th," Giger remembered. "The crew unpacking it was fascinated by it. Edlund was also excited. Everyone was certain the train would be in the film, and everyone thought it looked great."

With the train at Boss Film, Mancuso informed Giger that the total amount available left in the budget, to pay for the train was fifty thousand dollars. At first Giger was advised against letting MGM/UA use the train. But he thought it might never be seen at all if he did not let them use it as they wanted, which at this point he felt was more important.

Giger provided Edlund with additional instructions on how to correct the remaining minor

technical problems with the train. Shortly, thereafter, Giger received Edlund's test footage and was shocked to see that no further work had been done on the train, nor had the station been utilized in the test. Communications between Giger and the Hollywood "machine" began to deteriorate further from this point on, and was a foreshadowing of other problems yet to unfold.

**More next issue!**



(Above) The Ghosttrain second car.



Ghosttrain. ©1994 H R Giger  
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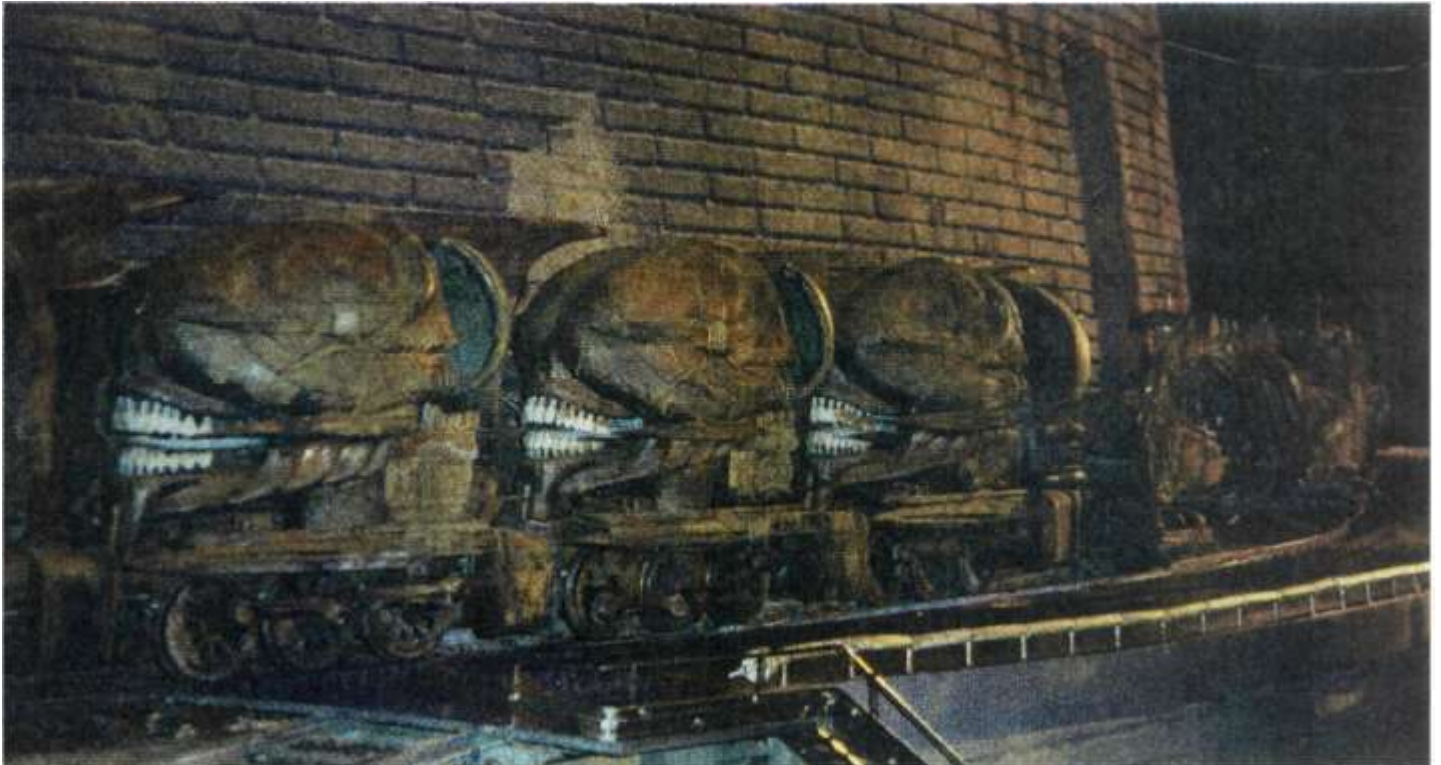




*Swiss model Nadine was used for preproduction design of Sil prior to casting of Natasha Henstridge.  
Photo: Sascha Serfoezoe. ©1994 Atelier/Giger*



*Frontview of H R Giger Ghosttrain built in Switzerland.  
Photo: Sascha Serfoezoe. ©1994 Atelier/Giger*



*Ghosttrain with station. Photo: Sascha Serfoezoe. ©1994 Atelier/Giger  
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