The Den of Geek interview: Dan O'Bannon

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Dan O'Bannon's projects are by now said to have collectively grossed over $1 billion for Hollywood. He originated and wrote the original *Alien* with Ronald Shusett, and the partnership later generated record-breaking box-office receipts via the script for Paul Voeherven's *Total Recall*.

He wrote the sci-fi vampire outing *Lifeforce* in 1985, and later adapted a second Philip K. Dick story with the cult movie *Screamers* (1995).

Fast zombies? Love them or hate them, Dan O'Bannon invented them in his 1986 directorial debut *Return Of The Living Dead*, a hit which spawned four sequels and counting. He also did all the effects on *Dark Star*, some of the effects in *Star Wars* and has acted with Albert Finney to boot…

With your background in effects for *Dark Star* and Jodorowsky's *Dune*, and even your computer graphics contribution to the original *Star Wars*, was there a time when you might actually have passed a successful career in optical effects?

Well, I almost did. I supervised all of the effects on *Dark Star* and executed many of them – that taught me a lot of technology. And there was the aborted adaptation of *Dune*, which was going to be directed by Alejandro Jodorowsky, and he hired me on to supervise all the special effects. I went over to Paris, which was quite a thrill, and I stayed there for six months. Jodorowsky had found a company that did a lot of special effects for French commercials, and he told them that I was going to be their boss. So I worked with them.

I told Jodorowsky that in order to do these effects we were going to have to storyboard. He wasn't familiar with storyboards, so I explained it to him, and he got so interested in it that he had the entire film storyboarded – every shot. That was more than I needed, but what the heck. And I was over there with a guy named Guy Delacluse, and he had a company; he was very nice and we worked together planning how we were going to do all these effects.

So the entire movie was designed, and Jodorowsky found these very good and fantastically original sci-fi artists to do design all of the sets and costumes and spaceships and everything. It was an amazing achievement. It was like being in an art museum, that room where they were hanging it, designing it all and putting it on the wall.

Then, when we were just about camera-ready, the French backers pulled out. Now I have no idea what my career would have been if they had gone ahead and made the movie. It probably would have been different, but instead I found myself back in L.A., flat broke, My car I'd given away. I had no apartment, all my belongings were in storage, and I ended up on Ronnie Shusett's sofa, and it was there that I wrote *Alien*. I knew that I wanted some of the artists that I had met on *Dune* to work on *Alien*, and in particular Giger to design the thing.

So some of my experience with *Dune* went into *Alien*. But the main reason that I wrote *Alien* at that time was that I needed money, and the only way I could think of to make any money and get off of Ronnie's sofa was by writing a spec script that the studios would like and buy. And due to certain factors of luck, it indeed happened.

Actually I got off of Ronnie Shusett's sofa a little earlier; George Lucas contacted me because he was in the closing phases of all of the post-production and special effects on *Star Wars*. He needed me to do these little targeting screens, military display things because at that time there really were no computer displays available, so they had to be faked. He knew from seeing *Dark Star* that I had faked some using conventional animation. He didn't pay me a lot of money, but he paid me enough to get off of Ronnie's sofa and get a little apartment.

Just about the time that that job ended, Fox greenlighted Alien.

Are you nervous to see the *Alien*, essentially your baby, evolve into storylines that are further and further away from the original universe you created?

Well, I'm not nervous about it anymore. I've gone through the annoyance at making these silly sequels, so I didn't really care anymore.

Did you have any more input into *AvP2: Requiem* than just your credit as having created the alien character?

No, no. You've got to understand that Walter Hill and David Giler, who have been attached to the project from the beginning, they hate my guts. Because they're scoundrels. They thought that by pulling a couple of fast ones that they could steal my screenplay credit from the original *Alien*.

This is where they rewrote the names of the characters in your original script?

Yeah. They should have had enough experience themselves to know that that wouldn't work, because they both had a couple of studio pictures already in their background, and they were both Writer's Guild members, and they had been through arbitrations. The arbitrations standards are pretty clear, and they should have realised that no minor changes were gonna get them – certainly not the sole screenplay credit, which they expected, and in fact they ended up getting no screenplay credit. I don't know – villains think as villains think; y'know – they're stupid. When they failed to get that credit they both just flipped their lids.

They'd already targeted me as a victim, meaning that I was 'not a friend'. And then when the victim ended up not being victimised, they were just furious, just beside themselves. Walter Hill spent several years telling everybody who would listen, any journalist that he'd really written *Alien* and I stole his credit, until I finally got fed up and had my lawyer shut him up for good.

So no, they were not about to have me involved in any of those sequels. They're only interested in the money with those sequels, anyway. These are not artistic fellows.

Did you even see the first Alien Vs. Predator film?

Yeah, sure, I saw it.

What did you think of it?

Videogame. I did have an idea that they didn't use, and that was that the alien in his next phase turns into the predator. But they weren't interested in hearing from me…at least it would have had some continuity between the two ideas.

Where would you like to see the next Alien film head? Perhaps back to the more high-budget universe that you---

I'd like to see it stop. A horror movie's a fragile thing, and once you've gotten past the original, it isn't scary anymore. So you do a bunch of sequels to a horror movie, all they do is drain any remaining impact out of the original. All of the sequels to for instance *Invasion Of The Bodysnatchers*, same thing; they over-expose the ideas, and when you look at the original, it's not as effective as it would have been if you had just left it alone.

But money makes the world go round and Hill and Giler saw that as the best way to make more money without having to do any work. So as producers with an in at Fox, they just continue to shove those things through.

So as far as you're concerned the *Alien* franchise is pretty much played out now?

It was played out after the first one, as far as I'm concerned. Cameron, in the first one, did about the only thing you could do, which was that he changed to a different genre, from a horror movie to an action film. But once he had done that, there really was nothing left to do. And they just keep squeezing the thing till it's an empty bag. But as long as it keeps bringing in money to them, they'll keep doing it.

Gordon Carroll was the only decent one among the producers. He had a falling out with them over *Alien* and they stopped liking him too, and he passed away a couple of years ago.

Moving on to new projects, is *They Bite* perhaps a return to the vampiric theme of *Lifeforce*?

No, it's closer to *Alien* really. A few years ago I changed the title of the thing because *They Bite* sounds like *They Live* and it does suggest vampires, as you pointed out. I changed the title to *Omnivore*, but it doesn't really matter; it's not about vampires. Actually with *They Bite* I sort of plagiarised myself. You see, *They Bite* was not dissimilar to *Alien* except that it was set on Earth, at a present day archaeological dig, and instead of one monster there were dozens of things running around, bug-like things.

I wrote it back in "75, the year before I wrote *Alien*, and I passed it around the studios and it was actually well-received, but this was pre-*Star Wars*, and the studios didn't think the special effects could be done. I remember being told that special effects are a lost art. Well, I didn't believe that, because I knew that stop-motion animation would have handled the bugs nicely, especially since they were bugs. The jerky strobe effect of stop-motion wouldn't have been so apparent. So I knew they could be done but the studios didn't think they could be done. They liked it but they passed on it because of that.

So when I found myself desperately in need of a sale, I thought, well, they liked *They Bite* but they thought it was too expensive and didn't know how to do the effects…if I could write something in a similar vein where it's obvious that you can do the special effects, then maybe they'll buy it. So I said I'll set it on board a spaceship; then the only thing you have to build is the inside of a spaceship. And what's the easiest way to do a monster? Man in a rubber suit - yeah? So I thought okay, I'll have one humanoid monster. And of course it has a couple of earlier phases, but they're small and they don't move much. And so I wrote it, and yeah, it has a similar tone and feel. It's not specifically the same.

In an way it's like a precursor of *Alien*, then?

Yeah, it's a precursor of *Alien*. Those are my two main horror scripts that I've written. In subsequent years I was hired to write a couple of horror pieces but I didn't make any attempt to make them as effective as *Alien*, because frankly, when I write a script, I live it emotionally. I was fed up with being that kind of frightened and wierded out and that stuff, and I didn't feel like getting back that deep into that territory again. So when I did *Return Of The Living Dead* I made it more of a comedy than a horror movie, really. I didn't really try very hard to make *Return* scary.

Can you tell us anything about Silvaticus 3015?

Not a lot, because they haven't built the idea very far. They had an idea and they wanted to know if I could write it, and I took a look at the treatment they had and it was perfectly obvious to me that I could serve this story very well for them, partly because it's so under-developed at this point. They have a couple of main ideas and I can pretty much take it wherever I want from there. Because of my experience in the field of science-fiction, I have a large fund of material that I can draw upon to write that. It's a big, ambitious space movie with a strong environmental aspect to it – Earth has been destroyed by wanton scientific experiments; the heroes are ex-patriot humans, as it were, trying to find their way in the universe.

If you ask me why it isn't further developed, it's because they haven't paid me any money yet. I start work when I get a cheque. I've been down that path before, of doing the writing before I'm paid, and you end up not getting paid is what happens. If I'm gonna write without being paid it's going to be something on spec that I own. I no longer write for free on somebody else's idea.

There's a huge debate about whether zombies should be running or lumbering, and you started it really…?

Yeah.

Was it a comedic device, the idea that they'd move quickly?

No, it was basically trying to get away from George Romero, and I was trying to avoid the cliché. As a matter of fact, the exec producers, John Daley and his partner, they came to dailies and when they saw the first footage of the zombies running, they just hit the roof and yelled and screamed. They said I didn't know what I was doing, and didn't I know that zombies lumbered slowly? It wasn't until they saw the film cut together that they got the point and saw what I was doing.

I noticed recently, I was watching TV and there's some young director who has done a zombie movie very recently…

Zack Snyder?

I don't know, but I know that he was congratulating himself on inventing the idea of swiftly-moving zombies. And I thought, hmmm, I guess he's never seen *Return Of The Living Dead*. Apparently we both invented it.

Given your intense involvement in the making of Alien, as detailed in the documentary on the quadrilogy, I wonder if as a director you find it hard to delegate?

I did on *Return*. I came from USC, and when I was studying there the auteur theory was the big thing – the director has to do it all. And I believed them, and in fact I taught myself how to do every job on a movie. So when my turn came on *Return*, I indeed micro-managed everybody, as a result of which they all hated my guts, and it was a very unpleasant experience.

So the next time I directed, five years later up in Canada…a picture that unfortunately was destroyed; I've had to disavow it because the producers cut together another movie out of my out-takes. And they weren't even good editors. My movie is lost.

But I did approach it from a completely opposite standpoint. I delegated everything, and I just stood back and operated as sort of quality control. I just watched, and as long as they were doing stuff that looked good, I didn't interfere. Only one out of ten times they'd do something that was obviously a creative error and I'd step in and say 'let's do it different', and then I'd back off again.

If you've got good people…it's very exhausting to tell everybody what to do, and I preferred Hitchcock's approach, where he would go and sleep in his trailer when they were shooting. Rod Taylor told that story. He was really looking forward to working with the great Hitchcock and when he started shooting, Hitchcock was nowhere in sight; it was the first A.D. doing the directing. Rod Taylor finally asked 'Where's Hitchcock', and they said 'Well, he's sleeping in his trailer'. I thought that if it's good enough for Hitchcock, it's good enough for me.

So you compromise between the auteur and delegating methods of directing now?

I don't see it as a compromise, because I had to figure out a way to do it that I would still get the result that I wanted, and I did find a way, and therefore it's not a compromise. It would be a compromise if the quality or character or style of the film deteriorated, but I made sure that didn't happen. So it's just a different way of working that makes everyone happier. If you have lousy people then you're stuck, you have to intervene, but if you have good people…

With the experimental deployment of war robots in Iraq, is the time right for *Screamers 2*?

Well, that's a Phil Dick story and at the time that I adapted *We Can Remember It For You Wholesale* and *Second Variety* [the short story on which Screamers is based], the movie rights to Phil Dick's stories were ridiculously cheap. Ronnie Shusett I think picked up the option for *Wholesale* for two thousand dollars. But after *Blade Runner*, all of a sudden the Dick estate just ran up his price right through the ceiling. So I have no idea how one would even get the rights to a Phil Dick story anymore.

Plus, I don't particularly like doing sequels. Especially of my own material. If a movie's been done, it's been done. I wasn't that thrilled about doing *Return* since it was in a sense a sequel...well, legally it was a sequel to George Romero. It had a complex legal history and when I was asked to come in as director, they said I had to make this as different from Romero as I could possibly figure out how to do.

Because otherwise, what am I doing? I could have made it a little slicker, but the basic impact of the movie was there, and I just can't see any reason for that, and in general I don't like sequels. I think the first two or three James Bond movies as sequels were good, but even they just fairly soon fell into a repetitive pattern. It's just boring to do what's been done.

There must be enormous pressure for you to repeat yourself even though you're on record as saying that you are averse to doing that.

The main thing that happened to me was that I got funnelled into sci-fi and horror. My palette is actually broader than that, and I've written a number of scripts that didn't get made…

I was going to ask if you had written projects that were outside your usual genres…?

Well, I wanted to find out if it was really so damn hard to write a character study as everybody seemed to think. In those days at least the critics such as Siskel and Ebert, they didn't want to hear about anything other than a serious, realistic character study. If it wasn't that. It was scheisse. And I kept getting more and more irritated because it seemed to me…of course, there are outstanding character studies like *Death Of A Salesman*, but character studies in general…I couldn't see what was so hard about them. All you have to do is describe the daily life of ordinary people… dreary, boring…and just kind of pat it into a three-act structure.

So I finally got fed up and said to Don Giaco, we ought to write a character study – just to do it. And we did. It was called *Tulp*, named after the main character. It was about the mid-life crisis of a man who owns the biggest car dealership in a small town. So we wrote it and there was some interest in it, and it almost got made, and I'm still of the opinion that it's much harder to do fantasy because you have to be inventive; you have to think of things that are novel and unusual, and that people haven't done before. The other way all you have to do is describe normal real life. Which is...big deal. So? But that's probably my blind spot.

What were the problems that you and Ronald Shusett faced in matching Philip K. Dick and extending the fairly short *We Can Remember It For You Wholesale* into *Total Recall*?

Ronnie really didn't know what to do with it, and he wasn't really comfortable with me writing the whole thing, because…well, call him and ask him yourself. He'll tell you the deal – the only thing that's important to him is his name above the title. He brought this over to me and said 'Do you think this could be a full-length screenplay?'. I know that story well and I said sure I do. I sat down and immediately batted out the first thirty pages and handed it to him.

On the basis of that he said write some more, and I did. I said this is good for a first act, but for a movie you've got to come up with two more acts. It seemed obvious to me that the guy has to go to Mars now, because the whole thing is his obsession with being a James Bond on Mars. I said that I thought the rest of the movie should be a cross between Casablanca and a James Bond movie. He said 'I don't agree at all, I think it should be a western on Mars'. Y'know, Pancho Villa on Mars. I said that was a terrible idea, and I wasn't going to write it.

So he went off and found some other schlemozzle to write it as a western on Mars. So after some months he comes back to me saying that he wrote it but that nobody likes it, and he was willing to try my approach. So I wrote another act and got him to Mars, and I continued with that light-hearted…imagine the best of the Bond movies, *Goldfinger* or something, I continued in that tone.

I figured out what the third act should be, and at that point Ronnie yanked it away from me again and ran off and again got some other guy to write a third act, and everybody hated it. So he came back again and I sat down and wrote the third act at his request. Ronnie took it away and years passed while he ran around town doing deal-making. He finally got the picture financed, and the others now involved completely rewrote the third act into what I consider incoherence. So the first two acts are more or less Phil Dick and me, and the last act is Ronnie Shusett.

As I watch the movie, everything it's been building up to in the last twenty minutes or more just crumbles into chaos.

Why do you think Philip K. Dick's work has broken into the mainstream where that of so many other sci-fi authors has failed?

Oh I don't know how many of them have failed…it used to be that science-fiction was a rarity. There were only a few sci-fi pictures made and a few horror movies...the mainstream was westerns, cop movies, stuff like that. And what happened was *Star Wars*, and the rise of a new generation of film-makers. They couldn't sell westerns anymore, nobody would go to them. Don't you remember how everything was a western?

Yes I do.

And it just stopped at some point around 1970 or thereabouts. All of a sudden the westerns just petered out and they had to have something to replace it and the zeitgeist had changed.

There was a great deal of period drama and the occasional exceptional western like *The Outlaw Josey Wales*…

Yeah, there was still the occasional western, when it was an especially good project. *Star Wars*, though…it was a shock to the industry, because nobody had believed in the project and they were certain it was going to flop. And when it became so wildly popular, everybody over about thirty-five, they just had a haemorrhage. So everybody started making science fiction movies and the rest is history.

Myself, I got into sci-fi going to all the movies and reading all the books when I was a kid, and during my college years I let that kind of fall by the wayside. I was interested in experiencing a 'real life' and I'd really read everything there was, and kind of used up science-fiction in my childhood. So now I wanted to see some other parts of the world and study some other stuff. Once I was at USC I just kind of dribbled back into it, in terms of fiction, because I knew it like the back of my hand.

Dark Star was the thing that kind of drew me back into sci-fi. Then the first of my projects which was a big one and was a real studio picture and did well was *Alien*, and that pretty much set me up as the sci-fi horror man.

You acted in Dark Star and have acted a few times since. Is that a useful form of expression for you?

Yeah, I wish I could do that for a living now, it's so much easier than writing. I'd always acted from childhood on, and I was always in theatrical productions at school and then college. It was an obvious thing to do in *Dark Star*. Since we weren't paying anybody, the other actors were unreliable in terms of showing up. And I was there and so I acted in the thing.

One of the things I discovered about acting first on the stage, and then on film in *Dark Star*, was that after I had completed a show or – in that case – a movie, I would get depressed. It would be a drop in spirits, a sense of anticlimax and I would feel emotionally drained after a project. So I thought, let me get into something else where I'm not in front of the camera, y'know – 'writing and directing, that should be easier!' [*laughs*].

Sometimes I wish I'd stayed in acting. Last acting I did, it was a tiny little movie, but Nick Castle directed, a movie about a little boy from heaven who doesn't want to be born onto the earth…

Delivering Milo…?

Yeah, that was the one. Albert Finney was the star, and I got to play my own little scene opposite Albert Finney, and this has been one of the thrills of my life. I was scared to death and it's very humble – I'm certainly not on his level as an actor, but it was a tremendous thrill just to find myself playing a scene with such an intimidatingly good actor. I played a geeky hotel clerk and it says in the script that he was thin, so I had to figure out a way to look thin [*laughs*].

Does the new breed of very grisly films go any way to redressing the lack of tension you have often lamented in contemporary horror films?

I've never liked sadistic horror films that lingered on the mutilation. There has to be a touch of that in any serious horror film, to let the audience know that you can do it if you want to, but the real tension in a good horror film is the suspense – waiting for the horrible thing to happen.

Also I tend to start stories the way that Hitchcock did, which is to start slow and build slowly up to the point of tension. If you look at the first five minutes of many of Hitchcock's films, there's nothing going on. *North By Northwest*, you've just got some ad agency guy riding around in a taxi and having a business lunch, and it begins to build from there.

Taking *Alien* as an example, the build starts at a very low point and very slowly you begin to build up the tension because of this that and the other thing…so I build slowly and then slam them with something particularly shocking. You can't carry on forever without hitting them in the face with something. You do that just to let them know that you can do it and that you will do it and that the audience is really in for it now.

But after that, all the tension in the movie occurs just with people walking through hallways and talking in low voices…you grind the audience down waiting for the next thing, and just before they start to get bored again, you hit them again.

To simply shovel on the entrails…I was always aware of that genre; those pictures were always around. There was a lousy, crummy little film called *Horrors Of The Black Museum*, whose high point was a pair of binoculars that shoved needles into someone's eyes. I saw that as a kid and I just found it sort of disturbing in the wrong way, just disgusting and unpleasant.

You can divide horror movies into two general categories: sadistic or masochistic. In the sadistic films they invite you to enjoy the mutilation and to empathise with the monster. In the masochistic film you are invited to empathise with the victim, and to not like mutilation. Well, I make masochistic horror films.

There was a Marxist film critic in Canada who wrote a fascinating essay comparing *Alien* to *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. For him, *Chainsaw Massacre* was progressive because it upheld the overthrow of existing conventions, whereas *Alien* was conservative and retro because it wanted to preserve the existing state of affairs. That was the first time I found out I was a conservative, by the way.

Did O'Bannon's Rules Of Writing ever make it to press?

It did not. It's just sitting over on a corner of my desk, gathering dust. Over the years I've read a couple of necronomicons published. I bought and read them and I was very disappointed, and I finally got annoyed. At the very least if you're going to write a necronimicon, it should be scary…I just started compiling notes, and by the time it was done I realised I had a book. It's not a long book, but it shouldn't be long. It's certainly dense. I don't know if you've ever read *Jekyll and Hyde*…?

Yes, I have.

When you read it, you feel you've read a novel, but if you go back and count the pages, you realise there's only forty pages. My necronomicon is like that; it's very dense but it's not hundreds of pages long, at which point it would become dull. So it's almost done, but I've had various things in my life getting in the way of completing it.

So this is something we can look forward to in the near future, maybe?

Absolutely. It should have been done a year ago, but family problems intervened, so huge that I just didn't have the time to write anymore. Things are starting to smooth out now again at last, so if I do anything at all next, it's going to be to finish that and get it out. So much of it is finished, it'd just be a crime not to finish it.