Chris Foss on the Nostromo

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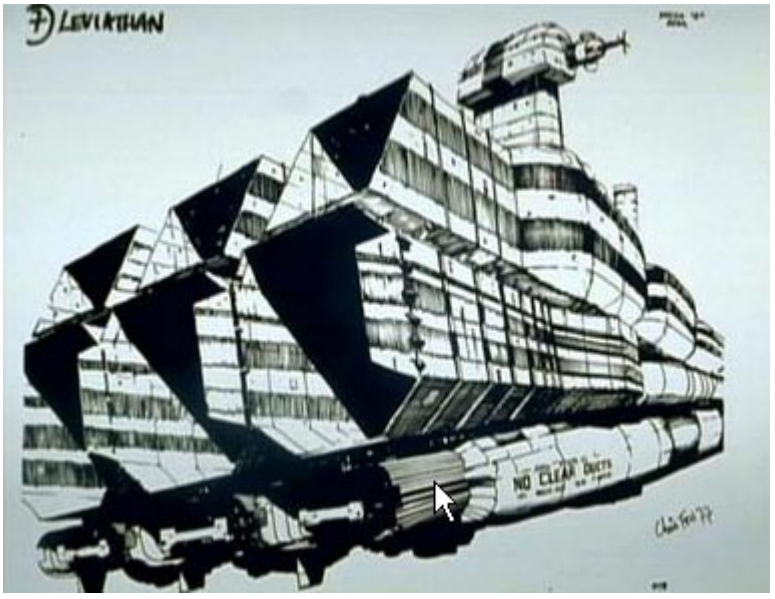


Chris Foss is a highly-respected science-fiction illustrator who has contributed to hundreds of movies, book and album covers in his long career. Most famous for illustrating The Joy Of Sex in the 1970s, Foss's involvement with Dan O'Bannon on the lost Jodorowsky Dune project in Paris led him onto the creative team at Shepperton and Hollywood for Ridley Scott's Alien in the late 1970s. As part of a series of articles and interviews about famous TV and movie spaceships, we had a chat with Chris about the design for the extraordinary Nostromo towing vessel...

Some of the 'spice'-carrying vessels that you imagined for Jodorowsky's *Dune* seem quite similar to some of the final look of the Nostromo in *Alien*...

Jodorowsky brought myself over from England for *Dune*. Shortly afterwards Dan O'Bannon went back to America and *Dune* collapsed. Dan, bless his heart, together with Ronnie Shusett, they put together this film called *They Bite* and - you probably know the history - that got finally taken up as *Alien*. Dan brought me onto the production as a hardware man, due to design the Nostromo. Dan was raring to go, but what he didn't realise was that he'd fallen foul of Hollywood politics - and also they were running through directors like you and me have hot dinners, and none of the directors were terribly interested.

[*Alien producer*] Walter Hill was very busy smashing cars up for one of his 'streets' films. He couldn't be arsed - much too busy! He walked in after months of work and just said 'Yep, roomful of spaceships' and just walked out again. So I'd produced design after design after design, and it got nearer production time, so I was hired and taken over to England to do some more designs.

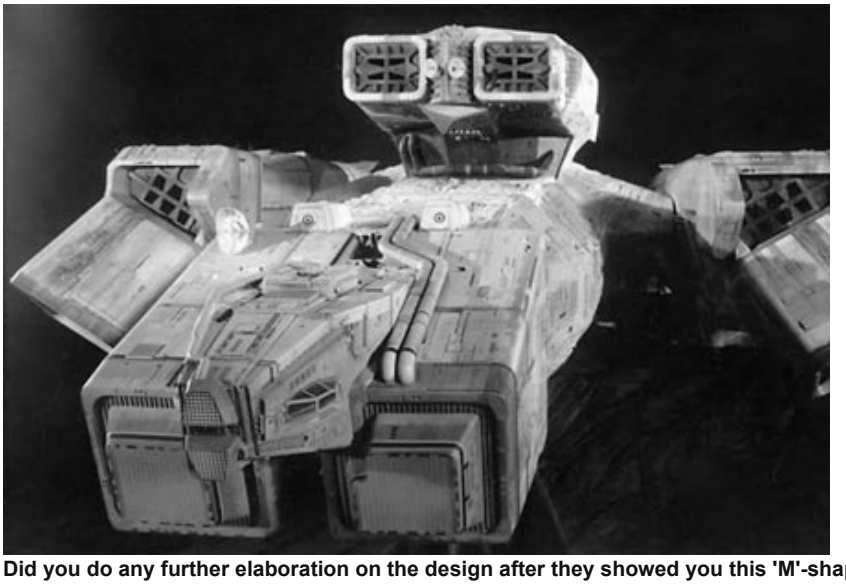


Finally what happened was that the bloke who had to make the [*Nostromo*] model completely lost his rag, scooped up a load of paper...they had a room full of smashed-up bits of helicopter and all-sorts, and he just bodged something together. So the actual spaceship in the film hadn't anything to do with all the days, weeks, *months* of work that we'd all done. It's as simple as that.

So the Nostromo's kind of 'M'-shape was just taken from an aircraft part...?

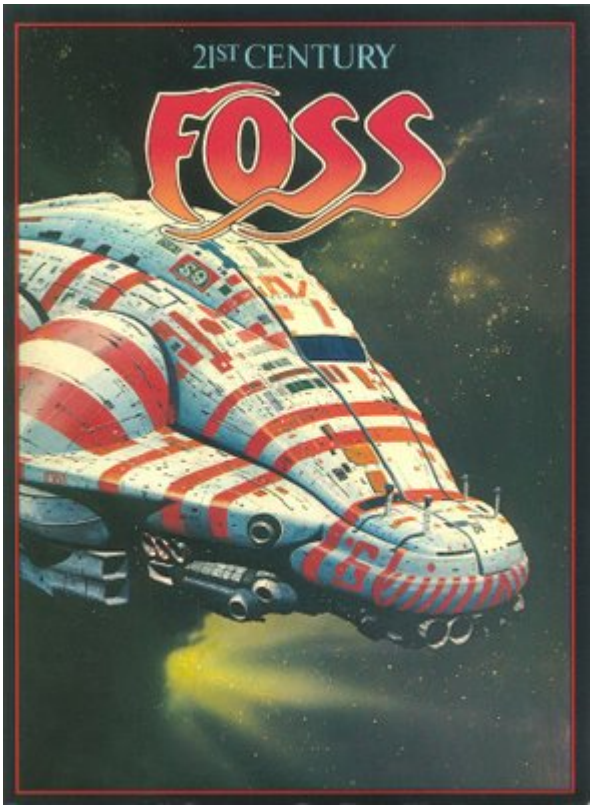
That's it. Because I've worked on so many other films where the shots are so important and so on, but on this particular one...

Ridley Scott noticed that the Who were down there making a film, and he was fascinated by all the bits and pieces that were going on with that. The Who, of course, had discovered lasers, and that's why you've got all these smoke-effects and swirl-effects, and [*Scott*] just couldn't be arsed about the spaceship and all that crap. So the poor sod who had to build it said 'Right, fuck that', got himself a whole load of paper, and bodged something together from the bits and pieces of a wrecked helicopter.



Did you do any further elaboration on the design after they showed you this 'M'-shaped construction that they cobbled together?

No, I was happily beavering away on my designs, and Dan, of course, was practically standing over me - he's probably talked about it!...urging this that and the other, and it all came to nought. [*laughs*] Many of the designs that I did were actually produced in other films and in other books. So the cover of *21st Century Foss* started as a spaceship on *Dune*, and then ended up as a putative Nostromo design at Dan's behest. They decided they didn't want it. Then, in the end, I used it in another book and it made the cover of *21st-century Foss*.



It was complete chaos [*at Pinewood*]. There was Giger making these excruciating bits of gungy alien out of rotting offal. They'd been down to a butcher's shop and literally bought up - as film people do - a hundred-weight of offal. There was a heat-wave, and the stench was humongous! The other people were trying to do what they were doing and here was Giger up to his armpits in bits of stinking, rotting flesh that's falling to bits.

Almost a year after I was flown to Los Angeles to work for Fox - and they bitched about the cost of art materials - we were moved to England, and even the office cleaner was being flown over on Concorde. [*Ridley Scott*] never really connected with the hardware side. And no-one really connected with Dan. I'm sure he's talked a lot about how he was kept at arm's length a lot of the time...? Here was the bloke who had the original creative idea!

The 'chest-burster' was based on an episode of food-poisoning, though I'm sure Dan's told you the story.

No...? That's not mentioned in the *Alien* quadrilogy documentaries either.

Oh, well I'll tell you: long before he came to Paris [*for Jodorowsky's Dune*], [*O'Bannon*] ate some fast food and woke up in the night in incredible pain and actually had to be taken to hospital; and imagined that there was a 'beast' inside him. And that was exactly where that thing came from.

So far the credit has gone to Ron Shusett, at least as far as the quadrilogy documentaries are concerned.

Absolutely not. Dan, of course, came to Paris as a rather bolshy ex-film student, and it was a collision of cultures - the equivalent of an absolute geek going to Vietnam. He and Paris collided big-time. He couldn't stand the 'fucking food' and found an all-American restaurant, and took me up there with great pride. And that was the first McDonald's.

Returning to the Nostromo, I'm amazed at what you say about how it came to pass, given that it looks so 'Foss'. Did you have any kind of chance to work on it after the design had been set, in terms of refinement and so on...?

Absolutely not. They normally get rid of the designer, a bit like the script-writer! When they actually go into production, we're the last people they want to see hanging around. Ridley had his own very firm ideas about what he physically wanted to do, and he almost studiously ignored everything that had gone before.

However the Nostromo was finally decided on, your style - and concept art - has clearly influenced it. Do you still feel a sense of propriety about the ship?

A little bit, I suppose, yes.

Did you have much interaction with Ridley Scott on *Alien*?

Well, at one point they suddenly realised that they didn't know what the hell the Nostromo was *towing*, so I just did this very elaborate planet/refinery - which is featured in *21st Century Foss*, and I remember that Ridley suggested that it might be too 'interesting'! And that we probably couldn't do it. He said 'If you build that, everyone will want to know what's going on in there!'. So he scrapped it immediately!

...I just have these memories of feeling a bit miffed that things weren't put together so much better. And poor old Dan O'Bannon, the bloke whose *concept* it was, just got absolutely shafted. He was almost like patted on the head; 'Yeah Dan, yeah Dan, that's cool'.

The quadrilogy documentary gives the impression that Dan O'Bannon had quite a hand in the supervision of the art department on *Alien*.

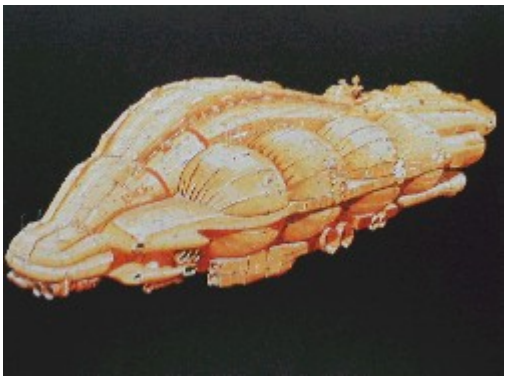
Really? Well, I kind of got the impression that Ridley was quietly going his own way, trying to get on with it and get it done, a bit like just another job. I've just got dim memories of Ridley being like that and really just ignoring months of input.

It's amazing how few of the great sci-fi vehicles and spaceships you've designed have made it onto screen...

Well, you know the big spaceship I designed with the bulbous balls and things...?

Yes.

That did make it into model form, and there's a huge model of it - whether it's been cut up or not, I don't know. Believe it or not, it's from a Malibu advert. You had a spaceship building and pulling this planet, which, of course, was in the shape of a Malibu bottle. So they lovingly built my Nostromo for this ad. This was at the end of the seventies, early eighties, and for a long time it was in the foyer of a company called Gray Advertising.



Can you tell us about your design work on other movies?

Well, I worked on *Superman* and also on *Flash Gordon*, for instance...? For *Flash Gordon*, Dino De Laurentis brought me in. You know that little scooter that Flash rides? They didn't like the scooter that they got. Laurentis called me in and said 'Eyyy Chris! We know you do something fantastico!'. I'll never forget it. I only ever saw him the once. He took me down into the production department where all the models were and said 'Thees is shit, it's-a terrible, Chris, he's a-gonna do something *fantastico*!'. [*laughs*] Can you imagine the creative people looking at me? So I did completely re-design Flash Gordon's sky-bike, and they rebuilt it exactly as I designed it; one of the rare occasions something like that was done.

Check out Chris's official site at www.chrisfossart.com