It says I was a journalist, it’s also mistaken about that. For a few weeks of my life while young and unemployed I contemplated journalism—never did anything about it. I did work in the oil fields on Signal Hill during summers of the latter part of my high school years, and several more years while in college. My job description was a roughneck. I was never part of a drilling rig (they are skilled workers). I was not, though I have been around drilling units a great deal; but mostly around crews that pulled the mud and casings on individual wells. My grandfather (on my father’s side) was an oil man: a wild cat driller who became an owner and operator.

As to construction, I ran an amateur pipe-scrapping machine for a summer; add to that, factory work—I was a spray painter in the John Bean factory in Lansing, Michigan. Horrible job. I can still smell the fumes.

All of this taught me one important thing that carried over to writing. If you are capable of making a living out of your talent and imagination, you are a privileged soul. As to the actual writing, you learn about reading by reading. And then you learn to make use of your own particular attributes, gifts and skills by—writing, writing, writing.

**Going professional**

**Film International** You spent time, early on in the industry, as an assistant director. I suppose what that job really is obscure—but it is! Just as you learned on *Bullitt*, for example, vastly different from the lessons learned on *Take the Money and Run*.

**Walter Hill** As an assistant director, I saw how often the process of filmmaking was political as well as creative. Again, one shouldn’t generalize, but this was true on *Bullitt*, not true on *Take the Money and Run*, which was the first time that I worked with (as a writer)/*director*/I didn’t do much but pass out the call sheets and fill out time cards.

The fact that the director is a writer, and has written the script being made, changes all attributes. Executives, actors, crew—*-to them, the director becomes the personalization of the script, and it therefore immediately becomes much less vulnerable to attack. I think I’m a particularly good writer about this, and as a writer before I was a director*. I was generally treated in the classical Hollywood tradition.

**Film International** What was the date and circumstances of your first professional sale of writing (i.e. you got paid money)? Can you date your first script sale in Hollywood? Produced or not.

**Walter Hill** Joe Wizman bought a script that I’d written, a Western, in 1969 (I think). I opcioned it for a couple of years, picked up the option once—*“Lloyd Williams and His Brother”* was the title—later changed to “Drifters.” Never got made. Got close a couple of times. Sam Peckinpah was going to do it after The Getaway, then he jumped over to MGM and Par Garden [The Getaway and *Belly of the Kid*, 1973]. I used some material from *Lloyd Williams*’s I added the script for Hard Times, so it probably worked out for the best. Except for *Joe*.

**Film International** I have to join the long line of

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**Walter Hill**

*Last Man Standing* (1994)


1969 Take the Money and Run (Woody Allen), second assistant director.


1975 *The Dweller* (Stuart Rosenberg), Co-Coscript.

Hart Times (Walter Hill), Director, coscript.

Dead Peel (William Hoyt, Gloria Katz, Actor).

1979 *The Warriors* (Walter Hill), Director, Script.

1979 *The Warriors* (Walter Hill), Director, coscript.

Aliens ( Ridley Scott). Producer.


1989 *Southern Comfort* (Walter Hill), Director, coscript.

1982 48 HRS. (Walter Hill). Director, coscript.

1984 Streets of Fire (Walter Hill). Director, coscript.


1986 Blue City (Michelle Manning). Producer, coscript.

Crosswounds (Walter Hill). Director only.

Aliens (James Cameron). Executive producer, co-script.

1987 Extreme Prejudice (Walter Hill). Director.


1988 *Studio Hustle* (Walter Hill). Director.

1990 Another 48 HRS. (Walter Hill). Director, sequels based on his character.


1995 *Wild Bill* (Walter Hill). Director, script. Tales from the Crypt Presents Demon Knight (Gilbert Adler, Errolist Directors). Executive producer.


2000 *Superman* (Walter Hill under pseudonym Thomas Lee). Director.


**Television**

people who have asked you about Pechinap, but he’s a hard subject to avoid. I love The Gateway, it seems the peak before the decline. What did Pechinap bring to that collaboration as a writer? Or was he (his impression) purely flatulently and inarticulate as a writer?

Walter Hill had been hired by Peter Bogdanovich to write The Gateway (actually co-write it with him). He had read Hickey & Bogs, and got the producers (Forester & Bonney) to sign me up. I’m actually not sure that Peter ever read Hickey & Bogs, but Polly Platt did, they were separated, but she was still a very big player in his life. I didn’t know Polly then; later we got to be friends.

Anyway, Peter and I began to write – I was in San Francisco with him while he was shooting What ‘Up Doc? (1972). The way we worked was pretty simple: I was staying in The Huntington working on pages and then bringing them to him on the set; he would then give me notes. We had maybe twenty-five pages a day and we went back to L.A., and Steve McQueen found him. Nothing to do with the pages (we hadn’t done anything – a personal thing. So I waited over. (Peter was trying to make a Hitchcock-like picture out of the material, which I wasn’t very comfortable with, but I was doing my job, man.)

I wrote a first draft in about six weeks, and then they hired Sam. He came in from England where he had been finishing up Straw Dogs (1971). I assume he would do any rewrite himself, or being in one of his moods, but we talked, got on well, and he kept me around. While I was doing changes (mainly rewrites, dialogue polishes, and probably most critically – going from period – 1949 – to contemporary) he gave me several of his old scripts to read. He had a nurse. He suggested I lift a few pages out of one of them and adapt them to the story at hand. Which I did. This was the first time I ran into the idea of directors reworking old scenes and making them fit anew. I’ve done it myself a number of times. As they say, most of us only know one story.

One of the pleasant surprises of my life was how little Sam changed my Gateway script while they were shooting. And I thought it came out to be a pretty good film – certainly well directed, well shot, and for the most part, well acted. In speaking about Sam, you need to be careful about which stage of his career you’re talking about. I think the dividing line is around Par Carret (a film I’m not wildly about, but I know others are). Obviously I’m talking about alcohol and, let’s say, various other forms of intoxicants. I’m in no position to argue, but Sam’s habits were well-documented and in the end, very self-destructive. He was alcoholic, but functional and rational up to a point – after that, he was in and out of coherence, especially artistic coherence. I’m trying to be dispassionate here – it’s difficult. I was very fond of Sam.

We weren’t terribly close, but he was a friend. He helped my career in many ways and many times encouraged me as a writer and a director. He could be a lot of fun – he had a streaked sense of humor – but he also had most of the traditional manifestations of an affluent alcoholic, and those could be very scary. In fact, excessive reliance on toddies and flunkies, talking badly about people he liked, and that liked him, and the constant paranoid search for disloyalty was absolutely Nixonian.

Pechinap was a good writer, but he only had one voice. He could just write his kind of thing: Westerns, hard guys, bitter-enders. But he wrote them quite well. He was good at structure, and good at finding the ironic moments. On dialogue, it’s a little harder to be completely generous. He was good at finding short catchphrases for characters that described their inner-workings, but I always thought he was too easy in explicit in having characters boldly state their ideas.

The contrast with John Huston I think is interesting. Huston, like the more traditional screenwriters, could write in many voices. For instance, it wasn’t unusual for me to write when working on Dr. Edithc Magic Bullet (1940), Treasure of the Sierra Madre (1948). This sounds like a criticism of Pechinap, but isn’t meant to be. I actually think you are much better off writing in narrow a voice as possible (produces highest quality work, and a more personal statement), but the other side of that coin (and Sam is illustrative of this), you probably burn out faster.

The Gateway! Do you feel you write with one voice or more?

Walter Hill I’m old-fashioned. I can write in more than one voice. The best thing I like about my best stuff is when I play to my strength. Unfortunately, in my case, those projects are much harder to get made.

Film International n.6 (1995)

Walter Hill: I didn’t know Newman at all. Still don’t. I was around at the beginning of the shooting of The Mackintosh Man (1973) – “The Freezeman Trap” in the book. We had some time on our meetings to go over rewrites – he was quite pleasant, struck me as the kind of guy that wanted to live his life as he wanted to, and have everybody love him. He may make it.

That whole thing [The Mackintosh Man] was a real problem. I’m not wild about it, but I know others are. Obviously I’m talking about alcohol and, let’s say, a workaholistic script – this is the dangerous gift of being able to write in more than one voice – but it wasn’t anything more than workaholism. Certainly no special ability. Vagaciously embarrased, I turned it in and let it go. A couple of weeks later I called Berg from San Francisco, and he immediatly answered, “Where’s the sh*t you have here? Everybody’s looking for you.” – grab the trash, blast, blast – ’I’d been driving all over the Gold Rush country and stayed a while. When I got back, I told them I take it all back to L.A. because Newman and John Huston were doing my script. And it was true. But The Big B.B. deal, and they told me to get the sh*t away and let them do the Walsh. I started again.

They flew me to London, then to Ireland to work with Huston. We didn’t go along very well with the work, he was great at lunch and dinner. He kept wanting to stick to the book, and I kept suggesting we’d better change as much as possible. (“I know all this stuff means more than a bit of self-servanting, and have the accuracy of hindsight, but, trust me, it’s true.”) Anyway, I felt I was desperating, storytelling disaster. And Huston refused to get too excited about it all. By then I had several major disasters, and he was a bit prejudiced, it was a bad time for him. He was getting sick (emphysema), having a lot of problems with his new wife (massive misunderstanding), and had a lot of money trouble. I got fired in the end. Huston ended up writing a lot of the final script (later, he was reluctant to admit this, as well he should have been), as did a couple of other writers – Gerald Hanley and someone else.

I forget who. As to the finished film, I wrote about eighty percent of the first half (I’ll be somebody else do the math), nothing after that. Somehow I ended up with sole credit on the thing – just my luck.

I had ambivalent feelings about Huston for years, and then we got together again over Revenge. This was back in L.A. in the mid-eighties. He was lonely, broke, sick, living in some crappy house up in Laurel Canyon. He had just written a script based on Jim Morrison’s story with his son, Tony. Coincidentally, I had co-written a script with David Giler several years before from the same material. And originally, Harrison had written a draft, I think for Jack Nicholson. Ray Stark used to engineer a blending of the Hill/Giler/Huston/ Hutton scripts, which I was to direct; Huston, who really should have directed it, was too embroiled at that point. Oddly enough, he seemed to like our scripts better than his own, save for the last thirty pages actually – I think he was right. I can still hear him, “You have completely fucked up everything that the script is trying to be about, and you’ve killed the whole thing.”

This time at getting ready to direct the Joyce story (The Daed, 1987) I went to the same warehouse in the Valley. He was playing the last card and knew it. They were barely last days. Anyway, we made our peace.

The other Paul Newman project was yet one more mess. Larry Turman and David Forest (David had produced The Gateway) had a deal with Fox and asked me to do a script of Ross McDonald’s, The Door列s of Eden. Paul was probably a misfit. He wasn’t used to the studio and the producers ended up feeling that way; their main criticism was McDonald’s fans didn’t respond to physical action. They had been right, but I thought going in the direction they wanted was the script was the highway to disillusion. So I made or less jumped ship to start writing Hand/Times at Columbia for Gary Gordon.

What Followed on The Daed was the usual Hollywood horseshit. Lorenzo Sempie wrote me. Tracy Kearn Yeston wrote me. And finally, we did nothing. We didn’t do a goddamn thing.

In the finished picture, there are a couple of scenes that I can say I saw or less wrote – beyond that, too much Mhad I worked on the script when I did, but I got along fine. Newman wasn’t part of the deal as the time. I think he came in after Lorenzo’s draft. As you may infer from my remarks, I wasn’t too crazy about the movie.

I’m old-fashioned. I can write in more than one voice, but I think all my best stuff is when I play to my strength. Unfortunately, in my case, those projects are much harder to get made.
On screenwriting

Film International How did you teach yourself screenwriting?

Walter Hill The usual story – read a lot of scripts, saw every possible movie. Wrote a lot at night. My big problem was finishing – I must’ve written twenty-five first acts – abandon and move on, abandon and move on. This went on about three years. Funny thing, since I was able to finish a script, I was able to make a living at it right away.

Film International I don’t mean the format so much, I mean the essence of it, as well as the kind of style you preferred. Were you influenced by specific scripts?

Walter Hill Alex Jacobs’ script of Point Blank (1967) was a revelation. He was a friend (wonderful guy, looked like a pirate, funny and crazy). This revelation came about despite a character flaw of mine. I have always had difficulty being complimentary to people whose work I admire, when face-to-face with them. This is not the norm in Hollywood, where effusiveness is generally a given. Anyway, a mutual friend told Alex how much I admired Point Blank and John Boorman. Alex then very graciously gave me a copy of the script. This was about the time he was doing The Snoop- Ups (1973).

Anyway, by now I’d been making a living as a screenwriter for maybe two or three years, and had gotten to the point where I was dissatisfied with the standard form scripts were written in – they just all seemed to be a kind of sub-literary blueprint for shooting a picture, and generally had no personal voice. Mine were tighter and terser than the average, but I was still working within the industry template and not too happy about it. Alex’s script just knocked me out (not easy to do); it was both playable and literary. Written in a whole different way than standard format (laconic, elliptical, suggestive rather than explicit, bold in the implied editorial style), I thought Alex’s script was a perfect compliment to the material, hard, tough and smart – my absolute ideals then. So much of the writing that was generally praised inside the business seemed to me soft and vacuously overstated – vacuously over-sentimental. Then and now, I haven’t changed my opinions about that. But I have changed them about the presentational style.

Anyway, I immediately resolved to try to go in that direction (that Alex had shown), and I worked out my own approach in the next few years. I tried to write in an extremely spare, almost Haku style. Both stage directions and dialogue. Some of it was a bit pretentious – but at other times I thought it worked pretty well. I now realize a lot of this was being a young guy who wanted to throw rocks at windows.

Film International What scripts did you write in that particular style?

Walter Hill Hard Times was the first, and I think maybe the best. Alex (1979) – the first draft, then when David and I rewrote it, we left it in that style. The Driver, which I think was the script that I ever wrote, and The Warriors. The clear narrative drive of the material and the splash-panel approach to the characters perfectly fit the design I was trying to make work. Of course all this depends on the nature of the material; I don’t think the style would’ve worked at all had I been writing romantic comedies.

Film International You appear to have a knowledge and appreciation of certain screen writers of the past. Are you conscious of the influence of particular old-time screen writers?

Walter Hill I did some homework. You once it to the craft. Budden Chase, Lamar Trotti, Ben Hecht (probably the classic example of the multi-voice screenwriter). Preston Sturges, [Robert] Riskin, and of course Hawks – who was a writer/director, though he’s usually not billed that way. I don’t pretend to be a scholar about the history and evolution of screenwriting, and I think you have to approach it as a craft rather than an art. But it’s the old story; if the craft gets good enough it is an art.

Film International In general, how much do you need a co-writer, either for balance, feedback, or just company?

Walter Hill As they age, writers tend to specialize given their particular comfort zones, but I’m still trying to be flexible. I’m happy to sit down and write an original, an original on spec or after a pitch (one of the first rules I learned but have broken many times – never write for free, and never use your own money to buy a project), or adapt from a source. I like co-writers for all the reasons you’ve mentioned, but I’ve discovered there’re very few people I can work with. It’s just such a delicate thing; you have to be on the same wavelength, not that you won’t have some trusting discussions – you should really like each other, otherwise the process is so intimate that you will probably end up trying to choke your partner. Co-writing is great for two basic reasons: you’ve got an equal to test your ideas against, and vice versa; the other reason being you have someone you can have some laughs with. I can’t write with someone unless it’s fun; as you know, writing alone can be very grim.

In the past, I’ve only written with (as opposed to have worked with) three guys – David Giler, Larry Gross, Luke Halls. With David, we usually ended up working in hotels with plenty of time for TV, sports and long dinners where alcohol was served. Lately he and I have worked at his place up in the hills – that’s where we did Undisputed (2002). Lately he and I have worked at his place up in the hills – that’s where we did Undisputed (2002).

The Warriors: poster art

Hard Times
Pep (S特别是 Martin), Charley (Charles Bronson), and Spencer “Spade” Weed (James Coburn) prepares for an illegal fight in the streets of the Depression.

Driver
The Detective (Bruce Dern) harasses The Driver (Ryan O’Neal).
Larry had a project set in San Pedro about street-fighting for money. He had developed a script from a newspaper article — it was contemporary and pretty rough stuff — very AIP. I thought maybe if you did it more like a Western with a kind of mythopoeic hero, it might take the edge off — give it a chance to come up-market. Larry went with that, so we made it period — set it in New Orleans. Larry had spent a lot of time there; he went to law school at Tulane. He knew a lot about the city, and I thought I knew a lot about everything. (laughs) Anyway, I guess I took a deep breath — a subject matter I loved, a producer I respected, a deal that said I could direct — here was my chance, no excuses allowed. I wrote a draft, then rewrote it four or five times before I finally got it. But I did get it, and I knew it. I knew it was going to get an actor, and get made.

**Film International**
How much of a struggle was it to get your first directing job?**

**Walter Hill**
I met Larry Gordon in the spring of 1973 — he was running AIP then, and he told me he’d give me a shot at directing if I’d write a script for him. We had to find a subject, obviously — something that appealed to both of us — then he moved over to Columbia. Larry was going to have his own unit that specialized in low-budget action films.

Larry is one of the great characters; from Mississippi, obstreperous, high-decibel, tough businessman, real smart, and can make you laugh for hours. The first thing he told me was that he didn’t figure he was taking much of a chance on me as a director: I couldn’t be any worse than the ones he’d been working with at AIP, and at least he’d have a shot at getting a good script. I was in that bullshit “hust-writer” phase coming off The Gayway, so we made a deal write for scale, direct for scale, and they couldn’t make the picture without me. So it was a good bargain for everybody; they got me cheap, and I got a shot at directing. The truth is, I wouldn’t have paid them for the chance.

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**Film International**
How much of a struggle was it to hold on to the job and do it properly?**

**Walter Hill**
I shot it in thirty-eight days. It seemed like about a year and a half. I got along pretty well with [Charlie] Bronson, not so well with [James] Coburn, loved Strother Martin. I had written a rather exotic character; Strother asked me if he could just play it like Tennessee Williams. I said, ‘Great, and that took care of it. Strother could very well be Tennessee Williams, or it could be a special edition of Whitman when we finished. I was sorry we never got to work together again. The company had been kicked up by a vicious criminal who strapped dynamite to her head and announced to the world there were forty-eight hours to pay the ransom or KABOOM. Solving this dilemma was obviously a job for the meekest cop in New Orleans, who goes to the worst prison in the state and figures out the most vicious criminal in the history of the state, a Cajun, for his special knowledge about the weird ways of the kidnapper. The cop and the con don’t get along very well, but they end up teaming up to track down the defendant. Very hard justice. As you can see, in some ways things changed a bit. In some ways they didn’t. I guess this is a good example of my juvenile sense of heroics, because even though I’m poking a little fun here, I loved the basic notion of the story. Right from the first.

Roger Spottiswoode wrote one of the early drafts, while he was living at my house off University. Roger was the editor on the film; he wanted to direct, and Larry and I encouraged him to write his way into the job. Bill Kirby wrote a draft, as did a couple of other guys — the project moved from Columbia to Paramount. Then Tracy Kidman Wynn wrote a draft, and I thought it was pretty good. Then I wrote a quick draft that took it in another direction. That was meant to be for Eastwood. Larry got him involved in the story, but I thought he should be the convict. As I was leaving to do The Long Riders, I gave it to the studio to do; I thought the studio would flip the roles, and I’d rewrite with the idea that Eastwood be teamed up with Richard Pryor. But Eastwood didn’t want to play a cop — that would bump his Dirty Harry series over at Warner’s. He was right about that. Then he decided to do a role that Eastwood had become famous for: Alcatraz. Escaped from Alcatraz, 1979. And that pretty much put paid to the idea that he would play our convic t partner. Alcatraz turned out to be a good role for Eastwood, but it didn’t do as well as I thought it would. The big fish had slipped through the net. Another couple of years went by, nothing much seemed to happen; then out of the blue, Larry called me and asked if I’d do **Streets of Fire** Big picture: Raven Shadow (William Dafoux). **Embedded:** Walter Hill directing a scene.
Those Who Also Serve would try to implement them with specific ideas. So the notes you were getting represented a committee trying to assure their box office. Classic studio procedure.

Film International: What did you do with the notes?

Walter Hill: I usually read them and tossed them; then after a while, I didn’t read them and tossed them — finally, I just started sending them over to Joel [Silver], unred, and told him to tell me if there was anything you could do in them. He had my specialty read them, and she told Joel what she thought.

Film International: I assume she wasn’t a trained story analyst.

Walter Hill: Shit no, she wasn’t. Anyway, Eisner was frantic that I wouldn’t let the movie get funny — which was bullshit. But you know the drill; they only think ‘funny’ is what’s on the page.

Film International: How much of Eddie’s dialogue was improvised?

Walter Hill: Not a lot. Occasionally he came up with something really good, which I was smart enough to go with. I mean, he is a very funny guy when he wants to be. But let’s not get into the idea that William Powell and Myrna Loy really talked that way. They didn’t.

Film International: You were in the redneck bar, who wrote the line — “I’m your worst nightmare — a fag with a badge”?

Walter Hill: That scene was done out of sequence, pretty much at the end of shooting. Eddie started a few weeks after principal photography began (he was finishing up his commitment to Saturday Night Live). Eddie and I were rewriting Eddie in the very last day of shooting. The more we learned, the better he got. Of course, it’s obvious that he was a gold mine of talent. I guess we did something right — Eddie played basically the same character for the next ten years.

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“A perfect organism. Its structural integrity matched only by its hostility. I admire its purity. An organism unclouded with remorse, conscience, or delusions of morality ...”

Wyland-Yatani Company, the conspiracy theory unconnected to the Wyland-Yatani Company, the possibility of using the Alien as a biological weapon, Ash as a duel, the idea of class lines based on different perceptions – what we called “twisters in space” (this became an instant cliché; you couldn’t make a sci-fi movie after this without having the usual suspect: most significant difference in the two scripts was setting the mood, the environment, and what became the stance of the film. That said, we thought our script had a rough contemporary quality to the characters that broke it out of the usual genre mold – the “kiss my red ass” and “kill the motherfucker” kind of dialogue that historically you didn’t find in Science Fiction movies. Remember we were at the same studio that had made Star Wars (1977). The no-nonsense at the time was that we were the Rolling Stones to their Beatles.

Film International: Did you like the joke?

Walter Hill: Shoot me as the Antichrist, but I never much liked the Beatles. Film International: The film is sometimes criticized for having weakly defined characters.

Walter Hill: That’s bullshit. You clearly know who each of them are, and what their attitudes reflect – and they have immediate. And of course, our best character was the Alien.

Film International: Can you elaborate?

Walter Hill: David and I joked about calling him/her Nietzsche, you know, Beyond Good and Evil. Suddenly, this was one of the things in making the thing fly – we articulated that notion in a way that generated the crowd.

Film International: I love the Ash death speech. “A perfect organism. Its structural perfection matched only by its hostility. I admire its purity. An organism unclouded with remorse, conscience, or delusions of morality…”

Walter Hill: Ian Holm. Wonderful actor. I remember I met with Tommy Lee Jones in New York; we were interested in him playing Dallas – he told me he had read the script twice, and the only character that really grabbed him was the monster, and that he’d sign up tomorrow if he could play it.

Film International: It sounds like you and David Giler had a good time writing the script.

Walter Hill: Too much probably. And to tell the truth, we were kind of left-handing the whole thing. I don’t mean we thought we were above the material; that’s the worst sin, and you send yourself to the other side of the circle of hell. But, we were busy on a lot of other projects and, again, neither of us felt so-if was our natural métier. Although I had been a science fiction reader when I was a kid, David not at all. Oddly enough, in the long run, I think that distance helped the script – the terror we had of standing somewhere outside the genre helped get it off center and made it different in tone. And it gave us a kind of courage to be incorrect. I mean when it’s two a.m. and you’re writing about a monster with acid for blood, some irrevocable is called for; we were always taking an implausible situation and trying to make it sound real, and most of the time we pulled it off. I think. I guess what I’m trying to say is that we may have left-handed the script, but we did work very hard; the Ash death speech we probably wrote twenty times before we got it right. Anyway, David went off to Hong Kong, and I sat down and did the spec rewrite of the O’Bannon/ Shuster script. It took maybe a week. After the holidays, David got back, and then he and I rewrite it several times. We gave it to the studio, and they got on board. Gareth Wigan was the executive on the picture; he’s one of the very few executives I’ve ever worked with who’s actually very good with script. David and I then did what seemed like an endless series of polish. The last couple we did in New York in my room at the Navaro (now the Ritz Carlton), while I was prepping The Terminator.

Film International: In the end, you two weren’t credited.

Walter Hill: Correct. The [Writers] Guild decided we didn’t deserve any writing credit for our efforts.

Film International: It sounds like you’re still unapologetic about this.

Walter Hill: It’s a long time ago, and there are a lot more important things in the world; however, I certainly believe it was an injustice in the sense that it doesn’t reflect the truth. Partially as a result of all that, after the first Alien, I have to admit I never felt as involved or committed to those that followed, though obviously I was quite happy at their success.

Film International: Is it true you’re used Fox over the profits?

Walter Hill: Yes. Twice. Both times settled in our favor.

Film International: Any backlash to that?

Walter Hill: I’ve been told that David and I are currently blacklisted at Fox. So be it.

Film International: Why was Alien so successful?

Walter Hill: First, but not necessarily foremost, it was a good script – suggestive of deeper issues, deeper terrors, nightmares. It’s not quite a Sci-Fi movie, not quite an action movie, not quite a horror movie, but some kind of odd synthesis that came together via a good, solid, old-fashioned story move. The objective problem in the first half becomes subjective in the second half by getting into Ripley’s head and experiencing the terror through her eyes (the final death was very tight, only about eighty pages, lean and mean). But whereas the quality of the scripts, films have to be realized. And in this case, it just all worked. [Director] Ridley Scott did a wonderful job, the best film he’s done, I think. Sigourney Weaver was iconographically perfectly cast, and had the chops to pull it off. She was a very young woman then; unexperienced, but it made the movie so much better that she wasn’t a known actress. Necessity to say, that was a tough one for the studio to swallow. I mean, we were insisting on a female lead in a Sci-Fi action film, and then on top of that, insisting on an unknown female lead. With a director whose previous film had a worldwide gross of 25,000,000. I think, less than half a million dollars. That’s why maybe the ultimate good guy was Laddie – he said yes.

The conventional wisdom in Hollywood is that war films are commercial, and cold ones are not. As usual, the conventional wisdom isn’t true, and this is only true by the gut reaction with Alien. It’s a very cold film. Hospital cold. I’m here to die-on-this-infernal-mom-and-nobody-gives-a-shit-cold. But at the same time, that’s only a half-truth, it’s also fun – a good example of the old show biz rouer.

Film International: What about Alien (1986)?

Walter Hill: This was a few years later. David and I sat down and had a discussion about what the sequel should be. We figured the next one should be a straight action thriller – the military takes over – a patred movie. David wrote it down on a couple of pages. Jim Cameron wrote a treatment. David and I reviewed it a lot (this must be about fall of ’83); we gave it to the studio and they said, “Go to script.” Jim went off and directed [The Terminator (1984)], then came back and wrote the first draft. I never changed much.

Film International: Did you like the film?

Walter Hill: Obviously I have a great talent for connecting with big audiences. I thought he shot the shit out of it. Tremendous physically. I wasn’t too crazy about the stuff with the kid.

Film International: What about Alien?

Walter Hill: Another complete fucking mess. The studio wanted to crank another one out. There were a number of fake starts. David and I were a bit sick of it, and wanted to end the whole thing. But we wanted to do it with some class and thematic cohesion. We thought that killing Ripley – or to be more precise, having her sacrifice herself while riding the universe of the alien – would be a bold move and round out the trilogy. That was our only stipulation; beyond that we tried to stay out of it as writers. As usual, David and I were busy on other films. There were a number of writers and directors, then David Fincher was hired. There was a start date, the script was announced to be a mess (it was – it had been run through about five writers up to then; sets were being built, actors being hired – the usual circus of expensive incompetence. The studio and Sigourney asked us to put our own firm in, so David and I went to London and started writing. Fifteen years later, and we’re still in hotel rooms rewriting Alien. We felt we were working in handicaps – writing to sets that were already built, plot moves that had been committed to that we didn’t agree with. Then there were differences of opinion with Fincher, Sigourney, and the studio. We did our best and went home.

Film International: On this one, you and David Giler got credit.

Walter Hill: Oh the blame. I think a lot of the ideas in the third one are actually the most interesting in the series, but the whole thing didn’t quite come off. And certainly of some that is our fault. Speaking of which, here’s an interesting thing about Sigourney Weaver: the studio wanted her as the lead. But David and I did the last one with her. The studio wanted someone who was more established. We said she was too young. They had another female – she was established. She worked. But the more you think about the first Alien, it’s an interesting thing – there’s no one in the world who can play Ripley. That was the ROI. She was the best we could find. You look at Sigourney today; she’s glorious. She was 35 at the time, and no one could find someone who could play her again.

Film International: What about the fourth, Alien: The Resurrection (1997)?

Walter Hill: We had nothing to do with that one. Didn’t even think it was a good idea for starters – we thought we had ended the series. And our relationship with the studio had deteriorated even more, probably due to the lawsuits. People don’t usually love you when you sue your own. Our real function was telling the studio that the script they developed without our input wasn’t any good and it wouldn’t work. We then suffered the traditional fate...
of the messenger. Personally, I think it's a lousy movie. And they just wasted Winona Ryder. That's insurmountable.

Purity in genre filmmaking

Film International

Let's return to your masculine/physical heroes for a moment. Are there ways in which this strength has also become a straitjacket? I'm thinking of violence and car chases, for example – which, dating back to Pulp Fiction and The Getaway, were an evolutionary innovation in the American cinema, but nowadays, in other words, these ideas too often become a simplistic cliché. I can see producers coming to you expressly for that, and urging more and more violence and mayhem upon you, in terms of both script and filming. The stars too begin to fall into a mold and then demand such things. Yes, no?

Walter Hill Yes. But since you've asked a complicating question, allow me to be a bit circular. I love comedies, musicals, and thrillers like everybody else, but I confess to believing action pictures are what movies are most essentially all about. It's the work they do best and uniquely best. I don't mean action movies are better; in fact, most of them are actually a lot worse than the norm. But the few that really work are sublime. Films like Colosseum Territory (1949), White Heat (1949), Ride the High Country, The Seven Samurai (1954), Scarecrow (1962), Hoot (1995), Dirty Harry (1973), Attack! (1956), The Good, the Bad, the Ugly (1966), or a hundred others I can name. The real power of movies lies in their connection to our unconscious or semi-conscious dream life, and action movies are about heroism and death. Will he live or will he die is the ultimate drama, isn't it?

Purity is important. Because it's the essence of what the creative person is most trying to achieve – the ideal. This is where I think screenplays and movies cause terrible frustration, the dramatic form itself is so messy. So much of what we are trying to do is simply to put things in proper order. And this ordering of things is complicated, it's absolutely not simple. Now, if you're going to do action film, a certain amount of repetition, which certainly is a kind of straitjacket, is inevitable. You are going to have to deal with gunfights and chases. And usually there are certain other limitations that are a given.

If you're doing Dirty Harry, Eastwood is not going to be shot dead at the end, right? So it becomes a kind of game. The audience knows what the conclusion will be, but you still have to entertain them. So you are always walking on the edge of a precipice – trying to juggle the genre expectations, which can slip into clichés, and in many cases are clichés – and your personal need to dance with the idea of taking the familiar and getting a little off-center, getting it to play – putting your fingerprints on it. We have our stars of skill, and we want to continue to explore them, because we feel there's probably something left to say – she needs to, this time, get it right. Lukas Heller always told me that [Robert Aldrich] used to say that the manipulation of idiots (the studio) was part of the job. But you manipulate them to get the opportunity to chase a kind of limited perfection.

The main thing is to use whatever means are at hand to tell stories that mean something to you on a personal level. And often, again especially in the action field, what is personally interesting to you may be invisible to others. In the end, of course, when reviewing the result, the person you have

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outsmartrd is very often yourself.

Film International

It seems to me that when you have directed “only” and especially produced “only,” that often you are doing so partly in order to stay outside the mold, doing without comic strips or other stuff (horror, etc.) that otherwise might not come your way. Is that a fair generalization?

Walter Hill Yes. Absolutely. And with mixed results.

Film International

You seem to have made a point of directing or producing without writing the scripts, for quite a few films after the mid-1980s. Is that purely happenstance? Or is it a decided career choice?

Walter Hill Neither. I think in every instance, for better or worse, I did a lot of work on the screenplay but decided not to put in for credit. In some cases I felt I didn't deserve it; in others I thought I would hurt the chances of the writers I was working with in getting credit. As discussed before, I'm not a great admirer of the arbitration process. I've never directed a script I didn't control, with the exceptions of the Supernova mix and the Deadwood pilot for H.B.O.

If you're willing to make films without really controlling the storytelling elements, then you can probably work a lot more. But unless you're broke, why bother?

Changes

Film International

How does your script format differ, from when you started out? Do you write less dialogue, less description nowadays – or what?

Walter Hill My scripts have always been a bit terse, both in stage directions and dialogue. I think I've loosened up in the dialogue department, but I still try to keep the descriptions fairly minimal, and in some cases, purposefully minimalistic. I still punctuate to effect, rather than to the proper rules of grammar. I occasionally use onomatopoeia now, a luxury I would certainly never have allowed myself when I was younger. My favorite description of the dilemma of screenwriting comes from David Giler. “Your work is only read by the people who will destroy it.”

Johnny Handsome

Film International

What is the actual writing process, for you?

Walter Hill When I'm working alone, the old hard way. Longhand. Fountain pen. Legal pads. Thesaurus at my side. This last term, I'm not unshamed to say, is quite helpful – when you write screenplays you don't have a lot of room, and the stage directions can become enormously repetitive if you don't work at fresh descriptions. Try to show the reader a new way to see it. Unless, of course, you are using repetition as a rhythm device in creating mood – which I guess is a perfect illustration of one of the things I like about screenwriting, whatever it is true, the opposite can also be true. Both at the technical level and at a much larger one – I think it's best approached as an enigmatic way to make a living.

Film International

When you look around the room at a Writers Guild function nowadays, how many people do you recognize, still working at the craft, from your own first days as a screenwriter? What has been the secret of longevity in the field? Luck, tenacity, talent?

Walter Hill I'm under the impression that very few people that started writing about the time I did (late 1960s) are still at it, but I could be wrong. One loses contact – that's the nature of the work. But it's foolish to think there aren't a lot of casu- alties along the way. As to what makes for career longevity – this is difficult; your categories of luck, talent and tenacity are certainly factors – to last at a significant level, relatively without compromise, seems to be the hardest trick to pull off. All this hogs for definitions, however; and my notions of who is compromised and who isn't probably differ radically from others.

Obviously sustaining a career is primarily due to being associated with either commercial success, or widely held notions of having done quality work. But quite often the first is a matter of luck, and the second a mistake in judgment that gets repeated often enough to have a life of its own.

Are the current producers, or studio executives, worse off than ever, in terms of script standards?

Walter Hill Not kid ourselves; it's always been a whorehouse. But I think it was a more elegant one in the past, and certainly there was a much greater attempt to tell adult stories. I have confessed my juvenile sensibility, but now what's on demand isn't juvenile, it's more childish. As you know, producers (studios) come in all shapes and sizes. In general I'd say that now they put much more emphasis on concept, much less emphasis, and have less confidence in the craft of storytelling.

I don't want to fall into the trap of the old fiddler who complains that everything was better in the past. I don't believe that. But I do think something, reasonably adult is more difficult to get through the studio system than before (not that it was ever easy). There are a lot of reasons for this, but the greatest of them go beyond Hollywood – essentially, the changing nature of a mass audience, domestic and foreign. I should add I'm the kind of person that believes if you had a system built on abrasion and great goodwill, with the sole aim of making a positive contribution to popular culture – even then, ninety percent of what got made would be shit. A lot of attempts at good work got done in the independents, but they generally lack scale. And scale is one of the glories of film. Currently what's most getting lost is the personality within films. We need Red River (1948). Hawks and Bonfire Class. A wonderful old screenwriter told me this recently. “It's a paradoxical truth; Hollywood's worse than ever, but it was always bad.”

But I can't quit on that note. It's only half true. In my case, the other half being that, for nearly forty years now, it's been a voyage where I've been lucky enough to work with an enormous amount of talented people. And got paid for it. No complaints.

Notes

1 The Hillboy fields worked with director Lindsay Sullivan, embarking mainly Los Angeles.


4 The screenplay was written by Cameron Crowe and directed by Cameron Crowe.

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Trappeas: King James (Tracey Marrow aka Ice- T), Savon (O'Shea Jackson aka Ice Cube)