

# WORLD BUILDER

WE SIT DOWN WITH THE GREAT  
**JAMES CAMERON** TO DISCUSS  
A LIFE IN SCIENCE FICTION

WORDS SIMON THOMPSON

**SINCE MAKING HIS DIRECTORIAL DEBUT THREE DECADES AGO, JAMES CAMERON HAS BEEN RESPONSIBLE FOR SOME OF THE MOST ICONIC AND INFLUENTIAL MOVIES, MOMENTS AND IMAGERY IN THE HISTORY OF SCIENCE FICTION CINEMA. HE IS A TITAN. HE'S ALSO INSANELY BUSY.**

"I was late today because I was working on two *Avatar* movies so don't try to guilt trip me about work ethic," he jokes as he approached the table for our interview in Pasadena, California. "I've already written the scripts for two more, they're finished scripts so we're making four at the same time. We're also doing the first, hopefully, the first, *Alita: Battle Angel* movie right now and I had a story conference this morning on three new *Terminator* movies.

"You can't stop me from creating new stuff because I just love it. I love it now as much as I loved it when I was in third grade doing little drawings after I had just seen Ray Harryhausen's *Mysterious Island* the previous day and I promptly started my own comic book. You take something in, it inspires you and then, if you're an artist, you have to react and you have to do something. I don't intend to stop doing that."

Held in the highest esteem by not only fans but also his peers, Cameron is aware that, just as others inspired him, he hopes to inspire others. However, he doesn't feel that's a responsibility as what happens next is up to the individual.

"In terms of responsibility, that's a very grown-up word. I think part of being a storyteller, especially in science fiction and fantasy is to stay somewhat a kid. As you become an adult you realise how there

are important resonances between these imaginative ideas that you have, the society that we are in and the opportunity that you have to say something about the world, about government, politics, religion, male and female relationships, gender and race and so on."

He adds: "Science fiction grows a conscience when you get out of your teens. I've had to go back and re-read a lot of the books that I loved as a kid to see all that stuff that was there that I probably didn't appreciate as much as the spaceships and the monsters and the scientific ideas."

Ideas are, understandably, a major key to Cameron's legacy and unlocking his continued success. He is, by his own admission, a machine that is constantly churning and honing concepts, some for a few decades.

"My dreams, that's where I get a lot of my ideas. I've got a very active dream engine, every night it's just firing off new crazy stuff and the images are all there," he explains. "I grew up in a very particular time where we were exploring space but we were under the threat of nuclear destruction and in the late Sixties, there was a war going on in Vietnam and all these upheavals. There was a pessimistic kind of apocalyptic vein running underneath everything but the optimism was there as well because we're going to the moon, exploring the ocean and the world and there seemed to be an infinite wonder in the universe. You put all that together and that's my stuff. I'm a creature of that time. I don't think I have had a new idea since then, I just keep working on the same old ones. But, by the way, the relevance never seems to go away."

Now perhaps best known for films

including the first two *Terminators*, *Aliens*, *Avatar*, *Titanic*, and *True Lies*, directing wasn't something Cameron considered as a career option. He always assumed he'd be in the audience, but one thing set a ball in motion that has been rolling ever since.

"At what point did I go from being a fan to being a director? That's an interesting question," he muses. "For anyone, I think it's the first time you pick up a camera and just start noodling around. When I was in high school, I had an assignment for Geography class and I went out and made a Super 8 film of Niagara Falls. That was the first time I picked up a camera and made a film. I put my name on it as the director and everything after that was just negotiating price.

"I don't think at that particular time I saw it as a life calling because it just seemed so impossible as a kid that I, growing up in a rural village in Canada with just 1,200 people, could go to Hollywood and actually make movies," Cameron adds.

"I hadn't made the cognitive leap yet and that didn't happen until I moved to the LA area when I was 17. I had a bunch of different jobs, all blue collar jobs, to put myself through college and at a certain point, in my late 20s, I just thought: 'I'm wasting my life. If I've got all these ideas and all these images, I've got to get them out.' I quit my job as a truck driver and I started making a film."

Even at the time, the move was something that the director wasn't quite sure about, worried that he might have already have missed the boat.

"I was kind of late to the party because the Steven Spielbergs of the world are usually in the saddle and making their first feature in their early 20s. I was 30 when we did ➤





Cameron talks to the greats in his new show.

➤ *The Terminator*. On one hand I wish I had done that earlier but on the other hand, I think whatever path it was, it worked out. I needed to just experience day-to-day life as a blue-collar guy, train my ear to the sound of dialogue and I think my writing is more realistic as a result of that."

Looking back, Cameron believes that having not found his own voice, his career may have been very different, a lesson he hopes others will learn from: "I think there is a mistake of coming straight out of film school when you have experienced nothing but film because anything that you have to say is going to be a reference to a film that somebody else has made," he explains. "I do think there's something to be said for going out and living life and having some experience of it first before you start to comment on it."

Making *The Terminator* was certainly an experience in itself; the steepest of learning curves for the director.

"It was pretty much a shoestring production. I remember there was a shot that I needed of the *Terminator* standing outside a door and just opening it but I didn't have Arnold, I didn't have a set and even the camera was due to go back to the rental house. Before I took that back myself

I needed a shot where I had to have the Terminator's foot in it. I didn't even have black boots to match so I put black tape on my office PA's Penny Loafer shoes, I took the filter out that turned sunlight blue so it looked like night, I focussed in on the tip of his shoe and just opened the sliding door to my office. That shot is in the actual, finished movie."

He adds: "*The Terminator* was made for about \$5 million which, even in 1984, was not a lot of money. We had to shoot kind of guerrilla-style, we used the available light, I would go out with the Director of Photography with a light meter and we would drive around town until we found the brightest streetlights and we would shoot on those streets. We had to because we couldn't afford lights."

Although it was a struggle, Cameron doesn't regret the challenges he has faced over the years. As an innovator who has created technology specifically for the purpose of bringing his visions to life, he realises that there are pros and cons at both ends of the creative spectrum.

Cameron explains: "At the shoestring end, you do what you have to do. When you're making a big film like *Avatar* I can't do those kinds of cheats because the character shots

are all done through CG. I'm still on the edge and thinking out-of-the-box every day, it's just the scale of the problem goes up."

When asked about how he looks back on those early days, he's certainly appreciative of what it taught him, saying: "Do I miss that? No, I don't and that's because the particular images that I have in my head now require a different train set. One thing that people say that I do agree on is that it can be very easy to slip down that rabbit hole and do something that's just pure visual cinema and forget about the heart."

"The audience's way to any story is through the human heart and human condition and you can point to a movie in almost any year that fails because it forgets that and doesn't connect."

A new documentary series, *James Cameron's Story Of Science Fiction*, part of the new AMC Visionaries strand, explores the evolution of sci-fi from its origins as a small genre with a cult following to the blockbuster pop-cultural phenomenon we know today.

"It was presented to me in a very, very early, very nascent form and I thought: 'Well, if not if not now then when?' I've been a fan of science fiction since I could read and started watching television and I've been a ➤



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### FAMILIAR FACES

Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sigourney Weaver, Michael Biehn, Lance Henriksen, the late Bill Paxton... There's always one or two of Cameron's old favourites dotted around.







A practitioner of science fiction filmmaking since 1984 when I made *The Terminator*, so I thought: 'Why not give something back?'"

He enthuses: "That's basically what I said to George Lucas and Steven Spielberg, I called them up and I said: 'Guys, we do this for a living, it's influenced us and we've influenced it. We've been an influence on a lot of people. Let's give something back; let's talk about what excites us about it and what our process is and what our roots were that inspired us. Let's trace it back through where all these ideas originated,' and so we have."

Being the creative sponge that he is, Cameron relished the opportunity to review the genre, including his own work, not just through his own eyes but through the eye of others, his friends and his peers.

However, along with that came the need to revisit some occasionally harsh realities: "Pretty much anything you admire from back in those early days was done on a low budget because science fiction was the red-headed stepchild of movies," he relents. "It was a trial of style over budget. Looking back at those films, I remembered how they inspired me to start trying to do more with less."

"If you look at George Lucas' first film, *THX-1138*, it was very stylish on a very low budget. There was a movie called *A Boy And His Dog* starring Don Johnson where they suggested an entire world buried by ash and whatever by cutting off the top few feet off a bunch of telephone poles and putting them in a row out in the ground. You could really believe there was a whole city underneath there and it forced people, including me, to be innovative."

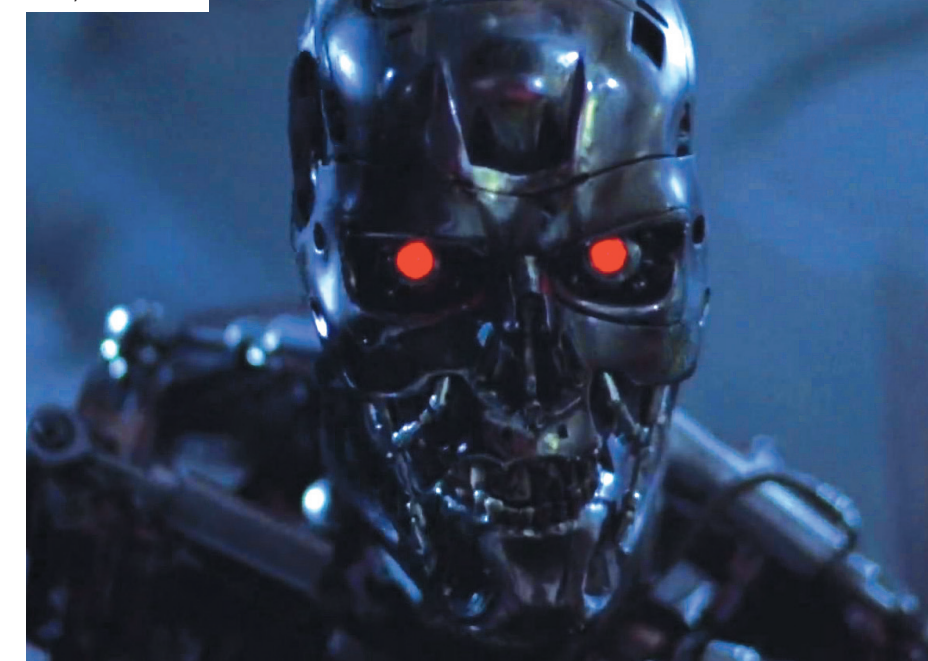
Being forced to be innovative is something that Cameron has completely embraced, and continues to embrace, throughout his entire career but there's one thing he will never embrace, complacency.

He explains: "Science fiction has never been complacent. The thing I love about it is it's always been ready to look a very threatening future square in the eye and bring it forward on a cautionary basis."

"Right now, on one hand, you have the *Star Wars* escapist fantasy adventure epic neo-myth and then, on the other hand, you've got *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Black Mirror* that are warning us about the dangers of technology and changes in society. There are 20-30% of people in this country, right now, that actually believe what they see on Fox News. I'm sorry if I'm offending anybody but I kind of don't give a shit anymore."

He continues: "We've had this illusion of progress and we've tended to grow up in a time where we all bought into this idea that progress was unidirectional or things were just always going to keep getting better. I think we see now that it's fragile and it doesn't necessarily just always continue to get better."

The Terminator was an instantly iconic creation.



Arnie will be back as the T-800 next year.



The future and his fear and hope of what it could hold is something Cameron has embraced across his catalogue of films. It's been something that was at the front of his mind when he made *The Terminator* and it's still there today.

"You can have tolerance that gives way to intolerance and you can have science that gives way to science-bashing and science-suppression. It is happening right now at a rate that hasn't happened since the Pope threw Galileo in prison," he concludes. "History doesn't sell another galaxy or an interesting future but science fiction can."

"I have a desire to say something. Where does that come from? I saw Ray Bradbury speak once and he called it 'the sublime ego'. There's this certain egotism to this idea that I've got something to say. I might not have something to say but once that's started I've got to go with it, got to draw from that, got to express it and I've got to do something in response to it. You can't stop us and it ain't gonna stop." ✍

*James Cameron's Story Of Science Fiction* begins on Tuesday 19 June at 9pm on AMC UK.