

# 'Reign' Alan



Illustration courtesy Helen Duggan

**The Director  
Behind 'The  
X-Files' Drags  
Dragons Into  
2084 Britain**

**by Deborah  
Baxtrom**

I was never a science fiction fan as a kid," says Rob Bowman, whose name is nearly synonymous with the genre. "And I was never a 'Star Trek' fan as a kid, but now I've directed 'Star Trek' and 'X-Files' and those are the two things on TV that people know me for."

In fact, Bowman directed a whopping 35 episodes of "The X-Files" and 13 episodes of "Star Trek: The Next Generation," and in 1998 brought "X-Files" to the big screen as his second feature. But like many filmmakers whose reputations are built on tales of the fantastic, Bowman appears more interested in storytelling than categorization.

"As it happened, those were the shows that I liked and they offered me some creative latitude," he offers. "With 'Star Trek' anything could happen each week, and with 'X-Files' every episode was a completely different animal, so I was

able to stretch. Those shows are hard to pull off. They really challenge your storytelling muscles because they can become funny and goofy and bad very easily. So I had to be strict about my approach. I really found it a challenge."

Born in Texas but reared in the media mecca of Burbank, Calif., Bowman started out in the Paramount mailroom before he segued in 1982 to directing insert shots and second-unit footage for "A-Team" producer Stephen Cannell. Making his debut as episode director with a 1985 installment of Cannell's action series "Stingray," Bowman soon became one of the busiest hourlong directors in Hollywood, helming everything from "Alien Nation" and "Quantum Leap" to "Baywatch" and "MacGyver." Bowman received three Emmy nominations for his work on "The X-Files" (he was also a producer on the series), and made his 1993 feature film debut with the teen actioner "Airborne."

His third film, "Reign of Fire," is a futuristic thriller starring Christian Bale, Matthew McConaughey and Izabella Scorupco. Set in 2084 England, the July 12 Touchstone release depicts small bands of humans struggling to survive in

a world dominated by enormous fire-breathing dragons.

It focuses on a British "fire chief" named Quinn (Bale), who is responsible for containing the firestorms precipitated by beasts he inadvertently unleashed as a boy. Quinn manages to keep a small community of survivors alive in an abandoned castle. Van Zan (McConaughey) is a cocky American who comes to England to prove he can kill the beasts and save mankind. Scorupco plays a pilot and Bale's love interest.

*In Focus* spoke to Bowman about, among other things, why he didn't covet the biggest stars for "Reign of Fire," how the film's dragons are inspired by his golden retriever, and how he hopes to top 1981's "Dragonslayer."

**"Reign of Fire" seems to be a mix of genres. How would you categorize it?**

It has an aspect of fantasy because of the dragons – it's about a world overrun by dragons, so I guess that also categorizes it as science fiction, but it really is a suspense thriller.

**Christian Bale said he agreed to make**





All "Reign of Fire" photos ©2002 Touchstone Pictures

**"Reign of Fire" because he liked your take on the material. How did your vision of the story differ from the original script?**

Originally it was a very dense, exaggerated story, too much like "Independence Day." I said, "First of all, they've already made that movie. Secondly, I don't like that version." I told him I'd rather make it more atmospheric and suspenseful, with less focus on the dragons and more on the characters and their day-to-day struggle.

**Is it their day-to-day struggle that drives the movie?**

What drives the movie are the two philosophies. Quinn is a survivalist. He doesn't think people should be tangling with dragons; they're too overwhelming. So he's dug in and is waiting for them to starve off. Van Zan's approach is: "Don't wait for them to die, go out and kill them." But there are too many. You can't kill them all at once, so his plan is to figure out a way to break their spirit by taking out their leader. Both characters make sense; each is right and wrong in his own way. As long as they're both reasonable it makes for a good argument.

**Was this central character conflict present in the original script or was it part of your development?**

It was already there, but I worked a great deal on each character's traits. Quinn was originally very passive, kind of a spineless wimp. Van Zan was a huge braggart, always exaggerating the point. So I toned him down and made Quinn very strict and just as much a man as Van Zan. I didn't want Van Zan to be all about grandstanding because I thought it hurt the chances of making the movie realistic. Each character is more likable and reasonable now, and the audience can say "I understand his point of view. He makes sense."

**In terms of casting, what were you looking for in your actors?**

I wanted Quinn to be intelligent, soulful and hardy. Van Zan is an insane character but I wanted somebody who could balance that. Matthew, born in Texas, a good ole' boy – you know that no matter what his mission is there's still a warm heart in there. Now he's a very mean, focused character, Van Zan is. His mindset is that he's not intimidated by the dragons. He's the dragon's worst enemy – or the dragon's dragon. So it seemed the right balance to have a guy

with Matthew's down home sensibilities to play against Christian's strictness.

**The roles they play are unusual for both of them.**

Yeah, and you wouldn't recognize either one of them. [McConaughey's head is shaved and Bale sports a full beard.]

**Did you always have them in mind?**

I had those guys in mind very early on, but at that point in the movie, knowing the cost of the movie, of course everybody wanted to put big stars in the film. But I thought, "Look, the movie is the star. I don't want a name actor to take over the movie." If we'd have gotten a huge star then it would have just been that actor in this movie, as opposed to a story with characters. That's certainly no slight to the stars. They've gotten where they are because they're good. In the end I just went for the actors that I liked. I thought if one of them happened to be a superstar, fine, as long as Anthony Hopkins or whoever can be a chameleon and doesn't step in front of the story.

**How important is the look of the dragons to the film?**

Critical. I spent months and months and months designing them, figuring out their flight dynamics. The look of the dragons is critical because if I'm saying that I'm taking a realistic approach to a fantastic idea then the dragons have to look as real as anything else in the scene. The audience knows they're synthetic and that they don't really exist, but they're hoping that I'm going to help them buy into the idea. So everything that I could do to make them realistic I needed to do. And I think we did it.

**So can we expect to see something new in cinematic dragons?**

You've never seen anything like it. The last bar was set by "Dragonslayer," which had a really great looking dragon, but it was a puppet and [when using a puppet] you're limited by the limitations of puppets. In "Reign of Fire" we have full-scale live action. I can do anything I can think of with these dragons. I can even change their flight patterns. When a scene is shot with a puppet, it's shot. To change it you've got to re-shoot it. In our case I can say "I want the heads to do this" and we can do it.

**Does that help make the dragons more frightening on-screen?**

Yes. These dragons are some very, very nasty, tenacious opponents. They love to fight. Their tails are wagging all over the place because they're so keen on conflict. I think I got the idea for the wagging tails from my dog. When I come home my golden retriever just goes nuts and I thought, since the dragons can't smile or laugh, it would be really cool if when a dragon is trying to kill ya, he's having a good time! So their tails are wagging all over the place. It's a way to get a little personality into them. It's like they're saying, "I'm way in the zone. You're way out of your league and I'm perfectly comfortable."

**Was it difficult for the actors to play against CGI dragons?**

It was tough in the beginning. A lot of it had to do with showing them illustrations and animatronics of the dragons, and the rest had to do with them trusting me. After a while I'd show them sequences, or I'd show them dragon animatronics cut into an existing scene, and they'd say, "Oh, I get it. OK, this is going to be cool."

**You've worked with special effects and CGI before. How did this experience differ?**

The level of complication skyrocketed through the roof. When you're creating a digital animal you create everything. You create how it flies and how heavy it is and how fast it goes and how wide it'll turn at 150 miles an hour and how fast it will stop. None of this stuff is like training a pet, where it already has a lot of inherent capabilities. Digital dragons have no inherent capabilities; you have to make it all. The attention to detail that's required is extraordinary, but that, in the end, is what will make them special.

**The trailers and ads haven't revealed the faces of the dragons. Are you keeping their look a secret, a la "Jurassic Park"?**

A little bit. The problem with "Jurassic Park" is you can go to a museum and see a dinosaur. These dragons are my design and they don't exist anywhere else. They're not completely different than anything you've ever seen physiologically, but they are my version of a winged serpent that blows fire. It's taken me a year in post production to get the dragons done. I've never done that before.

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## Reign of Fire

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**Speaking of creating unique visual worlds, how much of the distinct look and feel of "The X-Files" are you responsible for?**

Well, I didn't invent it. I took ["X-Files" creator] Chris [Carter]'s lead. He just said "dark and creepy," but specifically how to do that, and what my opinion of that was, is what I think I helped define on the show. So I would say ultimately, certainly by the end of the second season and into the third and fourth seasons, a lot of it was me. But again, I didn't walk in and say "It's too bright. I'm going to make it dark." Chris said "dark and creepy."

**Since you were so close to the TV show, how difficult was it for you to take the "The X-Files" from small to large screen?**

Actually it wasn't hard at all because I always thought that it was a big screen idea, that we were just shooting it on the wrong format. So when we finally got it on the big screen I was very confident that the ideas that were in the series were big enough to hold up on a big screen. It just felt due, actually. When we finally did it I felt like, "I've been waiting for this for three years."

**When you were preparing for the film did you do anything differently from your series prep work?**

I did watch "Lawrence of Arabia" at least twice a month when I was prepping and shooting the "The X-Files" movie, to make sure that I was thinking as big as I could and about how to stage and compose for the big screen, what lenses were appropriate and all that sort of thing. But when I was shooting the series I used to tape off my monitor top and bottom, so I was always shooting wide screen for the TV show even though it wasn't aired that way. I was always practicing my composition for the large format.

**How important is character versus visuals in your films?**

Simply, movies are only about one thing and that's people. It's a visual medium so it's going to be visual, and it's better to show it than to say it. It's also important for directors to find visual metaphors to express ideas, and sets and lighting and wardrobe can express themes in the movie, but you've got to have characters first. Nothing else matters if you don't have people.

**What films or filmmakers have most influenced you?**

Victor Fleming, who directed "Gone with the Wind" and "The Wizard of

Oz." Also, Ford and Huston. In my teenage years, Spielberg. Some of the Scorsese stuff. Coppola. William Wyler. Billy Wilder.

**It's been said that you like to keep your cast and crew comfortable on the set. Does a pleasant atmosphere make for a better film?**

It's not so much about being comfortable, but I think people need to know that they're doing something they're going to be proud of and I'm in charge of that. One, they need to see that I know what I'm doing and I know what I want – and what I want is what's best for the movie. And two, I live on movie sets. I'm either on a movie set or editing and I like my environment to be healthy and creative. That doesn't mean there aren't days when I don't straighten somebody out who needs it. It's just the environment that I like to live in, and I find I get better performances. I get more out of my crew because they enjoy being there and I think they know that I respect them and appreciate their extra efforts. So it seems like when the set is happier then the movie's better. Seems like a good formula to me.

**How did you get your first directing job?**

I was in the mailroom at Paramount. I said I wanted to be a director and was told "You should start shooting inserts

and work your way up." So I was going to film school at night, and in the daytime I was xeroxing scripts. Eventually Steven [Cannell] said, "Go down and shoot me a newspaper headline. Go down and shoot me an insert of a key going into the ignition." I just worked my way up from the bottom.

**What film school did you go to?**

All of them. UCLA, USC, Glendale JC, AFI. It was all weekend and night school. I took the chance that if I was working for the studio, once I was in the door I would figure out a way to get to where I wanted to go. The problem with film school is that you can get a masters degree in filmmaking and you still have to get a job in the mailroom. So I figured I'd just do both at the same time. I'd go to school at night and be in the faces of the producers in the day. I'd keep them up to date on what I was doing, without annoying them, and say "Hey, I'm not asking for much. Just let me do the inserts."

**Your first full directing job was an episode of "Stingray."**

Yeah, but by that point I'd shot hundreds of hours of second unit and inserts. I'd say in two-and-a-half years I probably worked on about 400 TV

shows, shooting inserts and editing, sitting in when they re-cut the show, just learning about storytelling and editing. Both of those things were incredibly desirable when I actually got my own job.

**Your first feature in 1993, "Airborne," didn't do as well as you'd might have hoped. Why do you think that was?**

It was a little Disney-kinda-esque film. Again, it was me trying to figure out how to get into the movie business. I'd say the movie is far better than the script was. It was a great learning experience. I probably learned more on "Airborne" than in the previous few years of television directing combined, about lighting, composition, story, what works on the big screen, what doesn't work. It didn't do that well in the theaters because they didn't market it. I have a feeling the reason they didn't market it was because they were concerned about the [downhill rollerblade] race at the end. Being an unprotected race it was sort of irresponsible. I hold no guilt or regret about it because I told them not to do it. I said, "This shot should be on blocked-off, abandoned roads." It wasn't me – I won't say who it was but it wasn't me – who said, "No, it's going to be on unprotected roads because that's excit-

ing." I thought it should be exciting but I was also thinking "What if some kid copies it?" So I think they pulled back on the marketing because of that.

**Is there anything you would do differently on any of your films if you could?**

I try to work as hard as I can and plan as hard as I can. If I'd have been a bigger bully on "Airborne" it would have been a better movie – if I would have said the racing is going to be protected and they're going to wear their hockey uniforms so the audience knows who the heck is who. I think you need to know when to protect a movie and when to agree to let other people's ideas affect the movie. The one thing I've gotten better at is carrying a sledgehammer around so if somebody comes up with an idea that I think is going to hurt the movie I don't let them do it.

**Would you like to write and direct your own original script?**

You kind of do anyway; that's part of the director's job. But I haven't written an original for myself yet. I've just been too busy. I wrote a few of them a long, long time ago, but these days I barely have time to hang out with my girlfriend let alone write a script.

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## What happened to "Generation Ship" and "I Am Legend"?

"I Am Legend" [a vampire film based on the novel by Richard Matheson] was too expensive. They decided not to make it. "Generation Ship" is still in the oven. It's not dead. ("Generation Ship" is based on the novel "Phoenix without Ashes," by Harlan Ellison, about the remnants of humanity traveling on a spaceship looking for a new home world.)

## Are there any more "X-Files" films in the works?

I think so. I only know what you know, which is whatever we've read. Chris [Carter] hasn't called me, nor has he invited me to direct it. If he does and I'm available I would love to do it, and if he doesn't then I can't wait to see it, no hard feelings.

## What is your goal as a director –

## how would you like to be remembered?

I love movies and I want to enjoy myself and enjoy challenging myself each time out. I want to make each job a new learning experience, because you learn so much each time, and not to repeat myself. People want us [filmmakers] to use the available technology and

hardware to put a good story up on the screen, and they want it to be timeless and memorable. I'd like to be remembered as a director who told stories about people that were entertaining, and who took audiences on journeys where they got to see things in the theater that they wouldn't get to see anywhere else. 🌐

## INTERNATIONAL DATELINE

### World Cup

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According to *Screen Daily*, a spokesperson for Warner Village said the circuit was exploring the possibility of showing some of the matches. 🌐

### European Fare Up 5% in 2001 Europa Adds 171 Screens to Network

BERLIN — Europa Cinemas, the MEDIA Programme's initiative to support exhibitors that screen European films, announced on May 16 the addition to its

fold of 171 screens in 28 European cities – broadening its network to 896 screens at 356 sites in 201 cities across 17 countries.

Europa provides maximum grants of 30,000 Euros a year to exhibitors that give over 50 percent of their screening slots to European films. In 2001, Europa reported that 61 percent of screens in its network were showing European fare, up from 56 percent in 2000.

The MEDIA Programme supports cinema networks that are involved in the circulation of European films and provide support for programming and promotion of European films in Europe. 🌐

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