

COMA vs. COMA

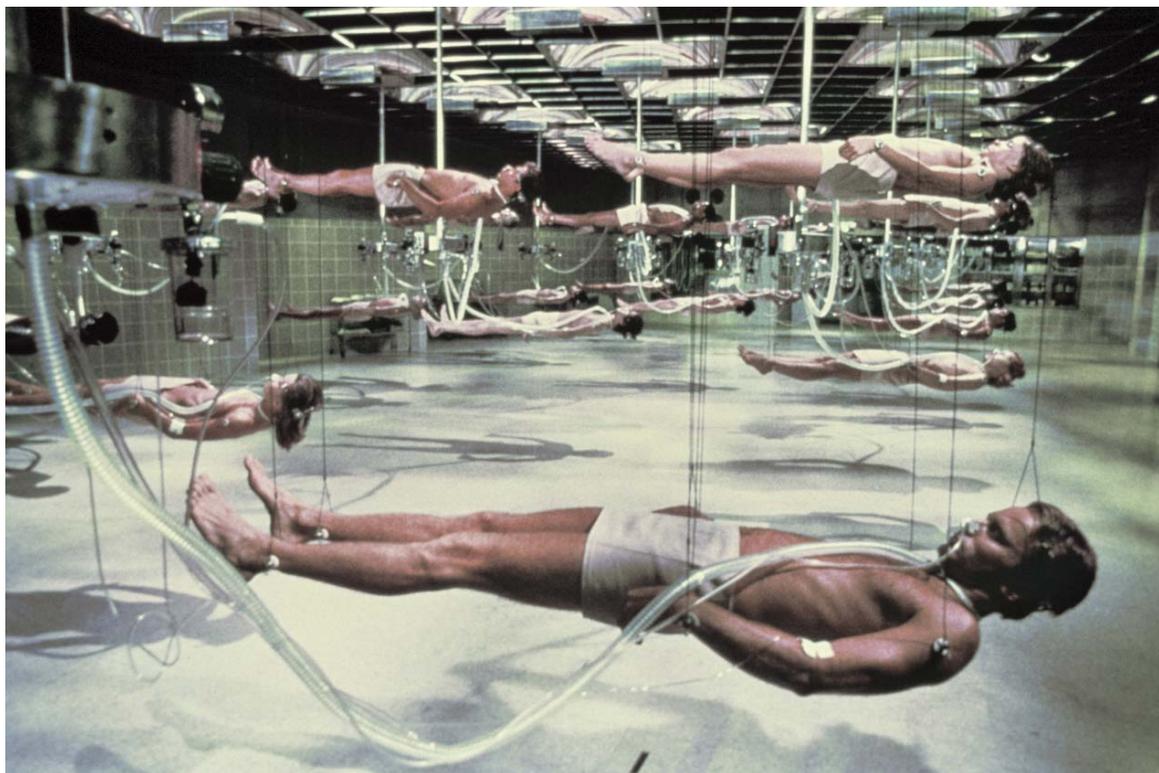
by Corey Kaplan, with Albert Brenner, Production Designers



I was a big fan of Michael Crichton's *Coma* when it first came out in 1978. Based on Robin Cook's 1977 best-selling novel of the same name, the story follows Susan Wheeler, a third-year medical resident at the fictional Boston Memorial Hospital who discovers that someone there is killing healthy young patients, creating accidents that put them into irreversible comas, in order to harvest their organs for profit. The Production Designer was Albert Brenner, and in the film program at Cal Arts we studied every frame of his work. In my opinion, his choices in this film were simple and brilliant.

I was recently asked to design a remake of the classic thriller as a two-night miniseries for A&E Television Networks. Without knowing the production company and without being allowed to take any of my crew with me, I went off to work in Georgia, comforted only by the superb script and the memories of Albert's beautiful work.

The scripts for the two projects are not identical. The 2012 *Coma* delves more deeply into technological and medical advancements; the shooting, and consequently the design, depends much more heavily on visual effects. I found myself wondering how would Albert have approached this material today. We did more this time around, because more is now possible. But is more always better? I thought it would be fun to talk to Albert and ponder the various situations that we both faced designing for this material. Albert's *Coma* and my *Coma* are thirty-four years apart, and both the business and the craft have changed a lot in that time, predominantly in the way that crews function and in the area of technology. I interviewed him in his beautiful Hollywood home, surrounded by books and antiques. He is eighty-six years old now, and I am certain he can still out-design us all.



1978

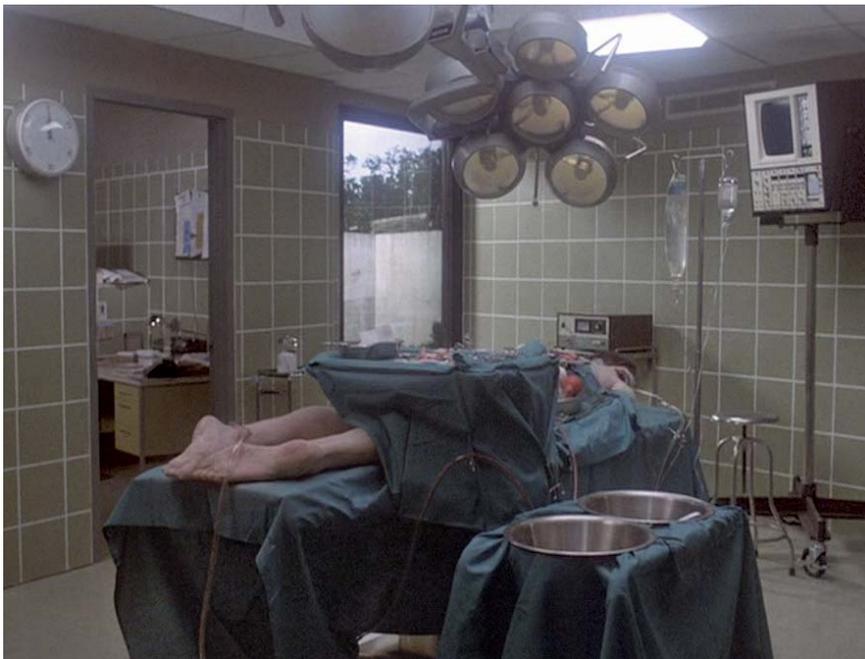
All of Albert's sets were built on stage at a time when he could not remember money being a concern. (That's a pleasant thought, isn't it.) His construction coordinator was whoever was available in the mill. His Set Designers were the people available on the Art Department floor that day. Art Department personnel worked for the studio, not for individual shows. When Albert made *Coma*, Art Departments didn't have their own Art

Department coordinators. Production coordinators, accountants and the entire production department worked to support every department, including ours.

2012

We have become increasingly segregated over the years. Have we, as an Art Department, done a disservice to ourselves, creating this independence?

Opposite page: The Biology Building at Agnes Scott College in Atlanta provides the setting for an action sequence where a killer, chasing Susan Wheeler through the Jefferson Institute, kills a couple of guards along the way. Director Mikael Salomon was a cinematographer before becoming a director and this particular shot was one of the distinct location angles that he asked Kaplan to find. She designed and built the desk to accommodate it. Left: The interior of the Jefferson Institute storage room, built on stage at MGM Studios in Culver City (now Sony Pictures Studios), is still remembered by employees who were there in the 1970s as one of the creepiest sets they have ever seen.



could not find exactly what was called for in the script, I would find a visual variation to answer the needs of the script. Perhaps films wouldn't need six location people if a Production Designer was part of the scouting from the beginning."

“Albert’s COMA and my COMA are thirty-four years apart, and both the business and the craft have changed a lot in that time...”

2012

The difference comes down to prep time and money. Albert’s four months of prep was my four weeks of prep. On this experience in Georgia, I found myself frustrated by the scouting protocols. I got into the car by myself and found a bridge for a scene where Dr. Stark (James Woods) is brutally murdered when a dump truck T-bones him on a freeway overpass, picks his car up like it were a dumpster, and sends it crashing to the street below, putting him into a coma. I was told by a producer that I should really have minded my own business. Locations are sets, too. They are my business.

Above: The operating room at the 1978 version of the Jefferson Institute, where organs were harvested for transplant, was frightening more for what was left to the viewer’s imagination. Below: The 2012 operating sequences provide a graphic depiction of the story’s serial vivisection.

1978

One area of production that Albert found alarmingly different is the location department. “It is fascinating to me that there could be six people in a location department.” He was incredulous as he told me, “Location people come to you now with pictures from location companies.” He remembers the days of getting into a car with a location manager and adventuring together. “If I

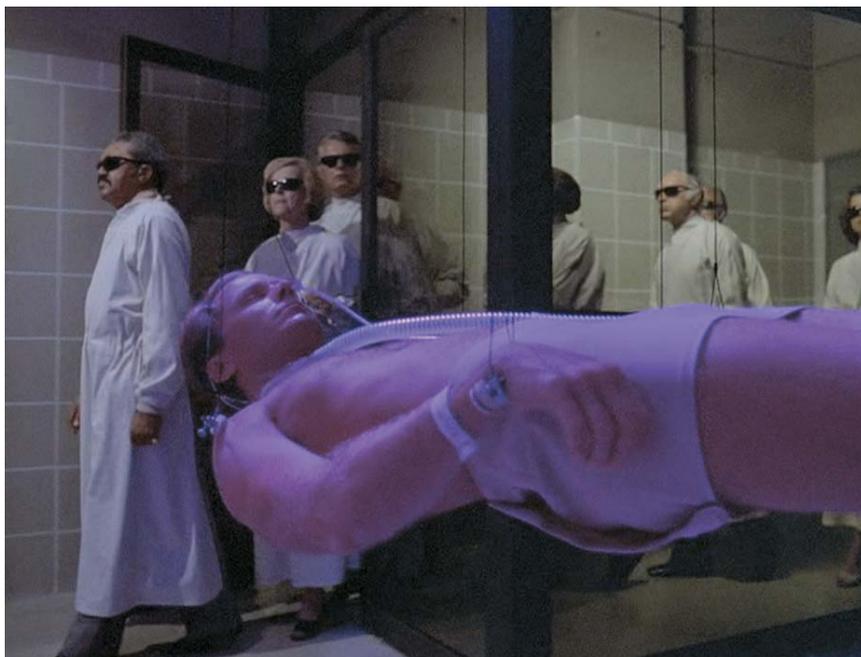
© Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM)

© A&E Television Networks



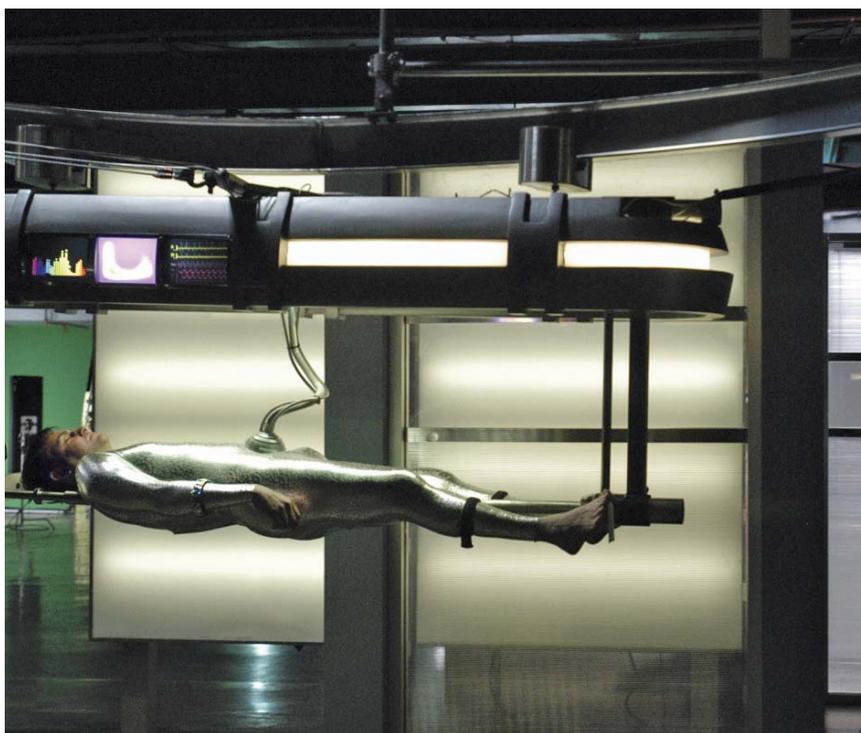
1978

Albert flew out to Boston to scout the surrounding areas and do research. "We were trying to use Massachusetts General for the exterior of the hospital, but they were very upset with us because they didn't want it known that it was even possible to do any of that story. I sneaked into the hospital with a friend for reference material. I put on a gown and everything. I had a camera hidden under my coat and went around taking pictures, because they didn't want us in there at all." Albert found an amazing Jefferson Institute location, the mysterious facility where the comatose patients are stored, hanging on wires, until their organs have been removed. "I was looking for locations outside of Boston, and I drove past a grim-looking building and said, 'That's the one we have to use!' It is a Xerox Company building, and that's the one we actually used for the exterior." It had a 1960s' Jean-Luc Godard *Alphaville* look to it.



2012

I tried to find an exterior in Georgia equally as interesting. Director Mikael Salomon and I loved the old world evil empire feel of the 1978 *Coma* hospital, but this 2012 Jefferson Institute will need the help of visual effects. We found, I think, dark school and hospital interior environments that are equally as interesting. The hospital itself is full of evil administrators, arch villains played by James Woods, Richard Dreyfuss and Geena Davis.



1978

Albert's contemporary, Victor Kemper, was the cameraman. They had worked together in the past, and they are still friends to this day. The lighting design was developed very carefully between Albert and Victor. I asked if Victor did a camera test. Albert laughed. "Victor doesn't do camera tests!"

2012

One the other hand, cinematographer Ben Notts might have loved to do a camera test if his crew weren't still picking up the camera equipment the day before principal photography. Everything is last minute, squeeze every penny, but I never saw this stop Ben from doing a great job, with a good attitude. And now we have the ability to adjust images on the set with the digital imaging technician.

1978

His bodies were very carefully hung. "We had ten real bodies on slings," Albert said, "and the rest of them were dummies that hung in the room we had built. We had tables that were operated with

truck jacks. We would lay the person on the table and jack them up to the height of the slings that were then put on their wrists, legs, and under their buttocks. When they said, 'Roll it,' ten guys would press the buttons, and the hydraulic jacks would go down. They'd rush off with the tables and start filming, because you could only stay up there in that position for a minute or two. When they yelled, 'Cut,' out came this army of tables. They got underneath the people, jacked them up again so they could rest until they were ready to make the next shot."

Top: The comatose extras in 1978 were suspended by wires, and had to work to remain still. One extra called it a great weight-loss exercise. Center: The 2012 extras floated on fiberglass body pans, and were made to look as if they were hung on steel spit rods placed through their bodies.



was for basic organ dissection. The body would be mechanically loaded into a virtual bed when the family came to visit. (The institute made sure to bring the body to the same room so the family would feel a sense of familiarity and comfort.) The story also featured fetus production. This was where comatose women were used to grow human embryos for harvest. And then there was the room for handling unused human remains. We called this the offal room.

1978

Tricks of the camera are always a favorite in horror movies. My friend, Production Designer John Muto who teaches at AFI, cites the great use of forced perspective in the *Coma* hospital air shaft that Geneviève Bujold climbs down. Victor Kemper added lights that he made smaller and dimmer as the tunnel got further away.

“Perhaps films wouldn’t need six location people if a Production Designer was part of the scouting from the beginning.”

Above: The Xerox Corporation headquarters in Lexington, MA, stood in for the Jefferson Institute in 1978. Below: Kaplan says of her 2012 location choices, “With all the COMA locations I was looking for circles, a motif of digging deeper into the earth or climbing above. Either direction you go, answers are found.”

2012

The rumor at CalArts while I was a student there was that the *hanging bodies* set was shot in our main Gallery, and the rest of the school was used for the hospital. It was all just rumor! The hanging-body actors in the new film were able to get into the contraptions on their own, and could hang out for hours. After the actors and stand-in bodies had been cast, a body plate was made for each. A protective silver skin was put over the plate and tied the body to the human skewer from which they were suspended, looking as though the rods pierced through their skin. The process of hanging the bodies, and then having them move like they were on an assembly line was tedious and the most difficult part of what we did on this show. These bodies were transported to Level One for general maintenance, and Level Two

2012

I wanted to match their cleverness in a different way. We found a two-hundred-foot tunnel in a reclamation plant. The pipes were there. All we had to add were the gas lines and a ladder that could be used as a dolly track. The actress crawled on her hands and knees, but it looked like she was climbing down the airshaft. John Muto reminded





me that this is how Batman and Robin made it look as if they were crawling up and down the sides of buildings.

1978

Albert on collaboration: "It's the director's film, and the first thing you do after reading the script is to discuss it with the director—find out the visual concept of the film he's trying to make. If you can either enhance that or come up with another suggestion or a different outlook for him, then you suggest those things. He may take them or he may

reject them, but I can't simply read the script and do what it says: 'This is a bedroom? Two walls is a bore. I can't do that. I have to make it interesting for me as well as doing what the script says.'"

2012

Much to the fear of the production department, Mikael Salomon was very playful and supportive of my efforts. We took any opportunity that we could find to make the show look like a big-budget feature. **ADG**

Above, left: The air shaft for the 1978 film, and (right) that for its 2012 successor were strikingly similar, although the latter was actually a horizontal tunnel, shot to look as if it were vertical. Below: Illustrator Leon Harris drew this memorable watercolor production sketch. A copy of it hangs in the Guild's offices in Studio City.

