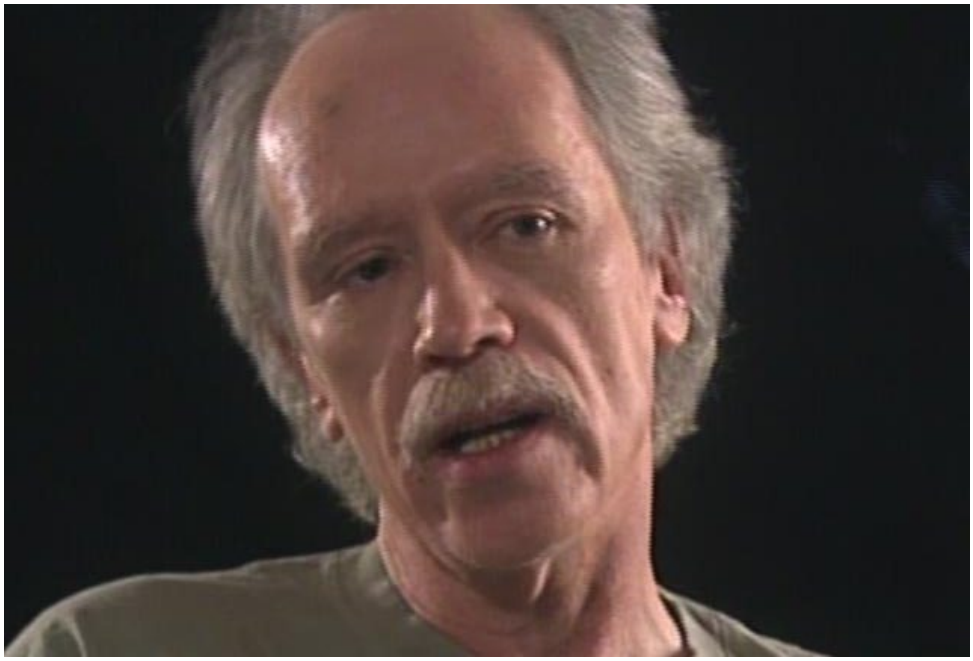
The Den of Geek interview: John Carpenter

Abandon all hope of an objective interview as Martin gets to chat with his ultimate Hollywood hero...

Martin Anderson | June 3, 2008



John Carpenter's student project for the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts won the 1970 Academy Award for Live Action Short Film. Carpenter and Dan O'Bannon would go on to win cult acclaim a few years later with their sci-fi comedy Dark Star *(which O'Bannon ultimately reworked into the hugely successful* Alien*). Further cult success followed with Carpenter's* Assault On Precinct 13 *(now remade along with various other Carpenter films). Carpenter then wrote the hit glam-slasher* The Eyes Of Laura Mars, *as well as the acclaimed TV movies* Someone's Watching Me *(where he met future collaborator and first-wife Adrienne Barbeau) and Elvis (where he met lifelong friend and colleague Kurt Russell).*

But it was the collossal success of Carpenter's seminal 'teen-slasher' Halloween (1978) *that was to make his name and set him on the road to becoming possibly Hollywood's most acclaimed genre director since Alfred Hitchcock, directing classics such as* The Thing *(1982),* Big Trouble in Little China *(1986),* Starman *(1984) and the highly influential* Escape From New York *(1981).*

Regular DoG readers might know that I am a huge Carpenter fan, so it was a great thrill to interview him at midnight in the darkened halls of Dennis Publishing…

I'm a big fan of your commentaries – I listened to all of them a few months back – and in particular those that you've done with Kurt Russell. But I'm waiting to hear you both do a commentary on *Escape From LA*…?

No-one's asked us, and no-one seems to care. That's Paramount, who are not real active in that area. At least they haven't been on my work…

I'll start the petition! *Escape From LA* was a prescient film – it kind of makes more sense now than when it came out…

[*laughs*] Yeah!

…and the same dynamic seems to apply to *They Live*. What's your reaction to getting it right, but no-one believing you at the time?

It's the story of my life! [*laughs*] A lot of my career has been like that. I've made a couple of films that later on, upon reflection, you say 'My God'…I just wrote those things on instinct, so it's not anything I planned out. It's just my view of the world.

It's the same on *The Thing*, which, three years after release, would have been a trenchant social commentary…

But that's what happens in the movie business – you have to know what's going on when you make a film. I've always been a little bit out of touch with the immediate sense of the audience, I really have. So that's my fault.

Also, no love for *Village Of The Damned*? I'd love a commentary on that?

Well, if anyone asks me, I'll do it.

One of your most enjoyable commentaries was with Roddy Piper on *They Live*, and it occurred to me that you'd cast him against type, which you did with Kurt Russell early on. Do you sometimes think 'This role needs this actor', but then in later films you want to go back to surprising the audience with off-beat casting…?

Sure, that's always fun to do, but sometimes you want to hit it right on the head in terms of casting. But sometimes it's fun to go against what the expectations are. Also, if you've got an actor who wants to play something he hasn't played before, that's extremely exciting. It was with Woods; it was with Kurt also. It was 'Oh God, I really want to play this, because I'm always cast in…' 'X', you know.

Woods said to me, one day on the set 'I want to go up to the door first', as opposed to behind everybody else, so that was…interesting.

Hollywood seems to be remaking so many of these auteur horror films, including many of yours, driven by demographics and brand-familiarity, like the way *Halloween* is ubiquitous in other movies. But it was actually faith in the director that got them made in the first place. How can Hollywood get out of that loop again?

The business has gone down a path, and it's changed since the old days, but in a way it hasn't. It's a little of both; it's always chasing after money. The truth is the old clichés: 'You're only as good as your last film'…all the things that you've heard before are still true.

But nowadays it's harder just for media in general, because of the glut – it's harder to advertise a movie. Movies aren't that special anymore. They're appearing every week, we read about them and know about them on the internet. We know everything. We're smarter than the movie.

Is it harder to get a movie made now?

It depends. I haven't tried actively in a long time. I have a couple of things cooking, but it's an interesting process. It's very different now.

Are your new ideas genre-pieces?

Some are, some aren't. It all depends. I have one that isn't and one that is…one's more of a straight thriller.

What about your life-long dream of making a western?

I kind of stopped believing in that. You can't get a western made now. I had a western come along that I liked, but they wanted to turn it into a science-fiction movie! [*laughs*] They don't believe that they can sell a western.

If you had got to make westerns early on, would you have made the other genre films that you did, seeing as you admit that all your films are pretty much westerns?

Maybe…but I don't think that there are any stars to play in westerns anymore. We had two of the biggest with John Wayne and Clint Eastwood. They carried the movies and were very powerful presences, and the actors aren't there, and the interest just isn't there.

I was hoping when *Unforgiven* led up to *Dances With Wolves*, that we might have seen the John Carpenter western in that period…?

No, no…it hit big, but that was a long time ago, man.

They're remaking *In The Mouth Of Madness* now —

They are?

Yeah, there was an announcement yesterday.

Jeez, I didn't hear that. That's so bizarre! [*laughs*]

Don't you think that's a bit recent a film to be in need of a remake? I think it was 1995…

Ninety-four, I think. Well, God bless 'em – bless their hearts! They could do more with it now, probably, maybe have a bigger budget, I don't know…good for them.

There are so many of your films being remade now – what's caused the interest?

I have no idea. I just smile [*laughs*]…it's nice! But they're remaking *Prom Night*, so how cool can it be, you know? [*laughs*]

I love *Vampires*, and it's maybe your most 'western' movie, in that you had the landscape to play with as well…

Yeah, it was a lot of fun. It's a beautiful place, New Mexico. I love shooting there. They have great strip clubs there [*laughs*].

And it's a great wide-screen movie too. This period is about the first time that people have ever had TVs wide enough to see your entire film-frame…

Yeah!

Didn't the horrors of pan-and-scan ever tempt you to abandon the 2.4.1 ratio?

The thing about television is that there's nothing you can do about how it's broadcast, because they're going to edit it. What they're doing is altering the work. They're altering it by editing it, by panning and scanning…so I just don't have anything to do with it. I just let them do it. I'm not going to fight for anything because in the end, they're not going to show the original vision.

A lot of directors consider the after-market in the framing, but that's something I think that you never chose to do…?

No, I just compose for the moment with Panavision. I don't worry about that. A lot of things, you have to give up worrying about, or you'll just blow up. Can't worry about the after-market. A lot of people do, and sometimes it's in your contract that you have to cover any real bad language so that it can be shown. Some people dub it and some people shoot it, and if you're contractually obliged…but I don't worry about it.

The aesthetics are made for the movie screen, and they're made for your home-viewing, if you get a letter-boxed version. But people a lot of times don't like letterboxed versions. The majority think that they're getting cheated out of the full picture [*laughs*]. Just unbelievable! But that's okay…

We just spoke to Dean Cundey and he says that more care was taken with shot composition in the pre-CGI days, when there was little or no chance to fix it later. If that's true, have you kept that good habit in these post-CGI days?

[*laughs*] I haven't really worked that much with computer graphics. I've worked a *little* bit with 'em, and they're a great tool, but they're still just a tool. They're a great matting tool, now…things can look pretty good. It's really excellent, and you can do a lot of nice things with it. Dean would know more about that than I would.

Does it ruin the verisimilitude of the film, for you, to know that there was nothing actually there?

But that goes back to the history of movies – there was nothing there on *King Kong*. There was nothing there on the Ray Harryhausen films. And on a lot of my movies – there was nothing there in *The Thing*! They looked at nothing. We didn't have the effects, so they looked at the wall. That's just part of movies; that didn't bother me.

I remember watching *Constantine* and here's what-his-name in *hell*…you know, it's gonna be fake, whether it's a set, or computer animation, or whatever it is. The guy's not really gonna go to hell, so I accept all that.

Would you like to really get your hands on that kind of technology, with a big budget?

It isn't an end in itself – it's a tool. If the story's great, I'd work on it.

This is kind of the year of killing kids in horror movies…

[*laughs*] Is it? I didn't know that.

Yeah, with *AVP2*, *Mother Of Tears*, *Funny Games*, amongst others; Dario Argento said to us recently that all taboos are fair game now..

Ah! If he says it, it must be true…

…so the line has moved on a lot since the controversy in *Assault On Precinct 13*. Is there a point where we should maybe leave the taboos intact?

Well, you have to decide that for yourself. I know that child-on-child violence is something I'm not interested in at all. I'm interested in a lot of things, but I'm not interested in the abuse of children.

I did kill that kid in [*Assault On Precinct 13*]. It was strong, probably real strong. I wasn't really connected with it at the time, because I didn't have kids. I don't know if I'd do that again.

She was a bit of a caricature of a sweet kid though…

Ah, little Kim Richards, she was a sweetie.

Films like *Funny Games* have a strong streak of sadism in them, with psychological as well as physical torture. For me, it's one of quite a few 'blow your brains out' movies of the last eighteen months [*Carpenter laughs*]. Are we trying to rationalise and digest events in the middle-east?

Yeah, that's partially it. All the torture movies…well, you know where *that* came from. That's not a mystery – look at the Abu Ghraib photos. 'Oh yeah? Well we'll get even with *you*'…Of course, it's a big deal, it's a part of our government now, torture. Please! So if they're gonna do it, we can show it. It just became that. The war is grim; all war is grim.

So there's this trend in Hollywood right now of either escapism or this oblique tackling of the zeitgeist…do you think the films are being made that need to be made? Like a remake of *They Live*…?

[*laughs*] Well, I don't know about that. They're probably not going to do that; no-one wants to hear that. I turn sixty this year, so I'm a little smarter than I was – not faster, but smarter [*laughs*]. People don't want to go to the movie theatres and have their beliefs pissed on. They want to go and have a good time – that's truly what everyone has gone for. That what's I went for when I was a kid, to have a good time.

But you were making movies in the 70s, the era of gritty movies that shot the truth back at you..

We pushed. The seventies pushed a bit. But then some of them didn't; one of my favourite movies of the seventies was *The Towering Inferno*, which was great fun. Steve McQueen was this ridiculously impossible hero…he did everything. He did the helicopter, he did this, he saved that, he went over and blew up the tanks. It was impossible, it was fun…and that's just as valid as the kind of auteur-ish –if you want to call it that – movies.

But the word 'auteur' has just been fucked over, it's been skull-fucked for all these reasons. It doesn't really mean what people think. Some of the best directors were ones that worked effortlessly in the Hollywood system. Effortlessly. I would say that Spielberg is an auteur. If you look at his work, you can see his point-of-view. There's a man behind this, and that's not anonymous.

This 'j-horror' idea of undeserved misfortune is fairly new to American horror. Whereas in *Halloween* and its imitators, you get punished for having sex, now that notion of deserved punishment has kind of gone…

Think of the men up there in the arctic in *The Thing* – they didn't deserve it. And the people in *War Of The Worlds*, and in the remake, they didn't deserve to be attacked. We didn't do anything to them!

I'm talking more of slasher films.

I don't know…a lot of Japanese horror films are based on their ghost-stories and their culture, and what they're called…a 'grudge', that lives in your house. Well, it's a kind of a ghost; it's just a cultural ghost-story. But I don't know if it's 'deserved'. We're *all* born innocent and we don't deserve any of this shit [*laughs*]! And who's going to answer for this later?

***Mouth Of Madness* and *Cigarette Burns* both suggest you like to play with the popular idea of people being adversely affected by the media [*Carpenter laughs*]. Similar thing with *They Live*. Sometimes it seems like you're just having fun with your critics, and sometimes that you mean it…?** Maybe so. A hundred years ago, it wasn't like this, obviously. We've made a lot of advancements, particularly in medicine, in terms of technology; it's unbelievable what we've done. But there are negative sides to it, and that's always been a part of science-fiction and fantasy and horror, I suppose.

The idea of transmitting something through popular culture…I don't know, I don't take it all that seriously. I'm attracted to that theme, put it that way. I love the idea that there's a movie that exists and if you watch it, you go insane [*laughs*]. It's just really funny. I love the idea that there's a book that will turn you into something else, it's really great stuff. Just great imaginative writing.

Speaking of *Mouth Of Madness*, why is it that H.P. Lovecraft movies don't get made – or get no budget – even though there's constant interest?

That's a real good question – I don't know. I tried to pitch an NBC mini-series, *The Colour Out Of Space*, and they didn't really care. They'd read it and say 'What is this shit?'. They don't get it. They don't dig it.

Seems they're not going to the right focus groups – Lovecraft is right where their target audience is.

You're telling me. Believe me, I'm hip.

You came out talking for the videogame F.E.A.R –

Uh-huh. I'm probably going to do another F.E.A.R. too. They're having a sequel that looks pretty good.

Did you play the Xbox game of *The Thing*?

I played parts of it. I was actually a character in it. The doctor, later on. They killed me off though, so fuck 'em. I wasn't the hero.

Is this the future of horror – where you sacrifice narrative control for interactivity?

I don't know, because I never see the trends coming. I'm a gamer myself, and I love playing games. I don't know if anything ever *scares* me in a game. I get startled, though. I get startled in a first-person shooter, you get startled because there's an idiot round the corner with a gun. Something that creeps you under the skin? Games are different. They're all very cartoon-ish, but that's what's great about them.

Are you currently involved in videogame development?

Well, as I say, I'm probably going to pimp the sequel to F.E.A.R., if we can come to an agreement on it. It looks just great, like a great first-person shooter…it looks *hard*. But we'll see. Hey, I'm open to anything! No-one ever asks me to do anything.

I don't believe it.

That's true.

Dan O'Bannon said to us, maybe joking a bit, that he'd love to give up writing for acting because it's so much easier. Is it a good catharsis for you? You were very good in *Body Bags*…

Thank you [*laughs*]! I'm not a very good actor. Behind the make-up, I can do anything. I just discovered my character with that silly make-up on. O'Bannon's actually a very good actor. He should pursue it, he could really be good.

The *Escape From New York* head in *Cloverfield*: I think – and I'm not alone in this – that it's too small.

[*laughs*] You mean the Statue of Liberty, right? I don't know, it looks…have you seen the statue?

I haven't but I've been told that a hundred people can stand in the head, and I don't believe a hundred people could stand in the *Cloverfield* head.

I watched it, and I enjoyed the movie a lot, but I don't know…it [*the head*]looked a little fake.

Was it a kick to finally see the head that you weren't able to put in *Escape From New York*, even though it was on the posters…?

Here's the thing – before the poster ever existed, we shot the Statue of Liberty, because it's part of the police base out there. So it was in the movie. That was put in the poster by the artist that did it, and I didn't have anything to do with it. Someone thought it would be an interesting idea – I don't know why – that something waaaay out over the water would be in the middle of the street. It didn't make any fucking sense, but it sold the film.

So I wasn't thinking of that necessarily as much as I was thinking 'Boy, whatever knocked that head…' We were out there at night shooting the statue of liberty, and the sun came up on us – the crew – so we kind of trudged back across the water. It is *forever* to the city [*laughs*]! Forever! So I don't know about that, it's like throwing something from Heathrow over to London Bridge. So you go 'Wait a minute now…'. But I accepted it.

Can you tell us anything about the style and feel of the new *Escape From New York*?

The script is very similar to the original. It's updated – but New Line went tankeroonie, and I don't know if it will be made now.

Would CGI be central to it?

Yes…the codeword with Hollywood and with all producers – every time you go in, you hear this – they all say the word 'CGI'. They have no idea what it means, or the application. But they also want a bleach-bypass on everything, green or green-blue and so on…

You've briefly touched upon the practical differences between an independent and studio movie in the extras on *The Thing* – can you tell us any more about making a movie with full studio backing?

[*Universal*] were very supportive, and the only time we ever had any disagreement was at the very end, with the cut, so I previewed it a couple of different ways for them. It didn't matter. People's reaction to it was exactly the same.

So we played it out my way, much to the anger of Sid Sheinberg – he didn't like it. He has a version, which has been shown on television, which he put together, and which is stunning. It adds a narration. It's just stunningly bad. It's unbelievable. I stumbled on it and started watching it and I thought 'Oh my God, look at this…'. But I guess they can do it.

But anyway, Universal were very kind to me.

Have you ever had more money than you needed to make a film?

No [*laughs*]. I don't think anybody has. People say, 'here's a $175 million' movie – it's ridiculous. What size of project are you doing? You can't do that big stuff for nothing. I don't think any director ever gets more money than he wants.

You've produced some of the most distinctive film scores outside of Ennio Morricone; Portishead and other groups cite you as an influence – is that a source of satisfaction to you? Every bit of praise is very gratifying. I enjoy doing the music. I think in the last few years that the entire process of film-making, shooting the movie and then cutting it and then going and putting the score to it, is just exhausting. Oy! I got sick of it [*laughs*]. There's one 'making of' where it shows me on the set, directing, and then it shows me mixing the music, and I just look like I'm absolutely trashed. It's so much; I don't know if I'll do that again. I've done it for thirty years and I don't know if I want to do it anymore…

So if somebody gave you the green-light right now, you'd think twice about the commitment and the expenditure of energy and time…?

I'm old man! Come on, here…after a while, you say 'What am I doing this for?'.

But we're waiting, John.

Well, big fucking deal [*laughs*]! Maybe I would, I don't know…

Do you find the pace of TV less of a grind than the film-making schedule?

No, it's still a breakneck pace.

You're presenting a season of your movies on the sci-fi channel soon – is reviewing your body of work in that way a nostalgic experience?

A little bit, yeah. I staggered through my career and came out the other end, alive. I made some films that meant something to me. In my opinion, they weren't all great, and they weren't all successful, but they sure were 'me'. And this is what I was going through or thinking or feeling as a director at the time, and I'm very proud of them. A lot of great directors just never had the chance to have their work appreciated and celebrated and watched, all these years after they were made. So, man, what do you want out of life? It's great!