

## INTRODUCTION

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An anthology on the cinema of John Carpenter may appear inappropriate to some, when considering the critical reaction to his more recent films. Productions have become infrequent and there is continual reference to the ‘better days’ of the films earlier in Carpenter’s career. A review for the 2001 production *Ghosts of Mars* said ‘it’s a shame that the film should be yet another clunky reminder of past greatness from a filmmaker whose decline continues apace’ (Newman 2001: 52). In interviews, Carpenter appears at times frustrated by the lack of recognition for his screen achievements and at the ways in which his films have not always reached their intended audience. There is, though, a distinct regard for many of his productions, and Carpenter is a director recognised, more than most, as possessing an ability for crafting genre films and a screen technique of terror. His career has spanned much of new American cinema, but to understand Carpenter there is a need to see him as more than just one type of filmmaker and to consider him within a manifold conceptual framework.

Horror is the genre with which Carpenter has been most associated, though *Ghosts of Mars* is a horror/science fiction hybrid, as is *The Thing* (1982). *Ghosts of Mars* is also a western, as is the Gothic horror *Vampires* (1998). *Starman* (1984) mixes science fiction with romance, and *Memoirs of an Invisible Man* (1992) is more a science fiction thriller. *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976), *Elvis* (1979) and *Big Trouble in Little China* (1986), are variously examples of the crime movie, the music

bio-pic and the martial arts action film. Carpenter's employment of genre, and his generic referencing of a director such as Howard Hawks, are such that Carpenter has become regarded as a filmmaker with closer associations to classical, as opposed to post-classical, Hollywood. As is well known, Carpenter has identified himself with the studio system of the 1940s and 1950s, where the guaranteed presence of a regular audience enabled films to be made which placed the primary emphasis on entertainment through plot- and character-driven narratives. The audience's desires and expectations were stimulated and managed through the familiarity of genre conventions, and filmmaking was conceived as something of a craft rather than anything more lofty. The role of the director was to render the technical and commercial processes involved as invisible as possible, so that the final result was a blend of the demands of the storytelling process and of the director's own style.

There is a view then that Carpenter is an anachronistic director, but such an unalloyed position is problematic. Carpenter's craft has not been just as a director; he has also been recognised for his highly effective screen music compositions, and has been a hired scriptwriter. Moreover, he is part of the group of filmmakers who emerged in the early to mid-1970s, the new wave or Hollywood renaissance of post-classical directors who were both self-taught and film-school educated. Crucially, such filmmakers were familiar with the work of their peers and of the saturated style of Hollywood's system of genre production. Working within a deregulated American movie industry, filmmakers such as Steven Spielberg, Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola and George Lucas have exploited the medium's commercial opportunities to make productions that have defined contemporary film and marked key transitions in American mainstream and art-house cinema. Others such as John Cassavettes, John Sayles and Robert Altman have been celebrated for their independence and heightened storytelling abilities. Carpenter, like Brian De Palma, is different; both being noted for their stylish re-interpretations of, and open homages to, directors of classical Hollywood (primarily Hawks and Hitchcock) as well as for their reliance on genre patterns of filmmaking. Both filmmakers have crafted astonishingly creative films, but in an age in which studios are increasingly driven towards high concept productions, there appears less of a desire for companies to accommodate the idiosyncratic nature of an independent director. Unlike filmmakers such as Sayles or Barry Levinson, who appear to move with some ease between independence and personal projects and the demands of the new Hollywood studios, Carpenter often has worked best when not under assignment.

As with De Palma, key early productions marked Carpenter as essentially a director of horror. But whereas De Palma moved beyond such films as *Carrie* (1976), *The Fury* (1978) and *Dressed to Kill* (1980) to make major action and gangster films such as *Scarface* (1983), *The Untouchables* (1987), *Carlito's Way* (1993) and *Mission Impossible* (1996), Carpenter continues to be regarded as a horror film director even though he has made as many science fiction movies, and the horror film makes up less than half his total output. Of course, Carpenter does continue to make horror films, such as *Vampires*, but it would perhaps seem that he has been enduring the legacy of his earlier productions – films such as *Halloween* (1978) and *The Thing*.

The seminal nature of these two films and the recognition accorded each within the pantheon of modern horror – *Halloween* as a principal slasher film and arguably the most sophisticated production within this subgenre; *The Thing* as the most strikingly original and visually explicit example of body horror – have helped to establish Carpenter as a filmmaker of invention and vision. This is part of the attraction that Carpenter's films have promised, but in noting the cultural reception for his work there needs to be a distinction made between an audience that has recognised the value of a film on its initial release and those who have become aware of it retrospectively. Here, films such as *Escape From New York* (1981), *They Live* (1988) and, most emphatically, *The Thing* were previously ignored but have gained new appreciation for the boldness of their fantasies.

Perhaps Carpenter is best viewed as a director of a generation; not just as one of the directors of the Hollywood renaissance emerging in the 1970s, but as one of a group of key filmmakers who came to be associated with the horror new wave of the late 1970s and early 1980s. From this generation, Carpenter is also perhaps most acknowledged by the audience that grew up with his films at the dawn of the video age. For such an audience Carpenter is often seen as a director of cult films. As Danny Peary writes, 'cultists believe that they are among the blessed few who have discovered something in particular films that the average moviegoer and critic have missed' (1981: xiii). For it is not just that certain Carpenter films underperformed or were dismissed on initial release, nor that their content has been viewed as remarkable, that has led to their 'discovery' and cult status. The fact that Carpenter has been overlooked as a filmmaker is a central factor. Amongst horror new wave directors Carpenter is, however, not alone in this regard.

Of those North American filmmakers most associated with the horror new wave – David Cronenberg, Tobe Hooper, John Landis, Joe Dante, George A. Romero – Carpenter is arguably the one who has persisted most successfully in making mainstream horror or fantasy and science fiction films. Since the 1980s, Romero has made few films and struggled to fund his own productions, Hooper has become a director of enervated direct-to-video horror features, whilst Dante and Landis have been lost to a mix of television productions, family fare and music videos. Cronenberg has distanced himself from mainstream filmmaking, but like Romero remains an esteemed figure within the horror genre whose work has received much critical attention. Similarly, Carpenter is regarded as a filmmaker of significant movies made within Hollywood's post-classical period but, considering the large body of films that he has made, there is a relative dearth of analytical and academic research, amounting only to a small number of books and scholarly articles.<sup>1</sup>

Since the horror new wave, the production of horror and horror/science fiction films has stuttered. Despite this, Carpenter has managed to continue working within the Hollywood system, through cleverly adapting and recombining genres. A B-movie aesthetic of sensationalistic, uninhibited and confident genre filmmaking has continually been a mark of Carpenter's productions, but this may explain why his movies have been both applauded and dismissed, and why he has received little academic attention. As Brooks Landon writes of *The Thing*, for example, 'it deserves our careful consideration rather than the careless condemnation that has

thus far marked its reception' (1992: 44). Carpenter's B-movie aesthetic remains in later productions such as *Ghosts of Mars*, a film which although poorly received is characteristic of Carpenter's approach to genre filmmaking, with its deceptive simplicity.

Carpenter as a director of genre films forms the thread that unites the first five chapters of this book. The consequences of remaining faithful to genres are taken up by Grant, Woods and Smith, who focus principally on the issue of how genre conventions shape the representation of the social in Carpenter's films. Carpenter has often cited Hawks in particular as his ideal director, an observation which Grant develops in a wide-ranging survey of Carpenter's output. Grant argues for a consistent directorial vision across his films, which, apart from the spareness and moments of pictorially narrated 'pure cinema' that the adherence to genre brings, is characterised by a particular world view. Although superficially similar to Hawks in the appearance of some recurring themes, Grant finds that these films contain significant variations from Hawks's. Most notably, they depict worlds where the utter contingency of the characters' moral choices is made plain. In contrast to Hawks's heroes, who are usually temporarily cut off from normal society, Carpenter's characters often find that normal social structures and institutions themselves are the source of corruption, and indeed can be so corrosive that group solidarity is as likely to waver as to harden when confronted by them. This, Grant argues, gives Carpenter's films a more critical outlook than Hawks's; as a result, the dominant view of him as espousing some variety of a right-wing perspective is only a partial reading, and Grant sets out the necessary corrective. That the films have led to the dominant view is not accidental, but is, rather, the outcome of the demands that genres place upon their subject matter, and if the result is a certain incoherence, Grant observes, Carpenter is hardly unique in this regard.

If Carpenter's films are thus beset by certain structural tensions, readings of them which look for a unified narrative are unlikely to succeed. The next two chapters each follow through a different motif which recurs in a number of the films. They highlight through close textual analysis the surprising complexity to which each motif gives rise as the films are obliged to deal with such tensions, this complexity itself being an index of the cultural and political forces which shape popular film. Woods focuses on the depiction of secular authorities, which, as already noted, appear in many of Carpenter's films and are almost invariably shown to be suspect in some way. Since Carpenter consistently portrays the individual as the locus of moral superiority, in an examination of *They Live*, *Memoirs of an Invisible Man* and *Village of the Damned* (1995), attention is focused upon the way the protagonists are distinguished from the authorities against which they are pitched. In each case the developmental logic of the narrative is traced to show that, despite apparently well-established moral distinctions between the opposed parties, at key junctures the protagonist takes on characteristics which supposedly define the opponent, or, to state it otherwise, the cause for which they are fighting becomes unclear. Woods argues that this comes about once again not by chance but because the universalising underpinnings of the individualism to which Carpenter has recourse are unable to maintain the critical stance which the films promise.

Smith examines another notable motif, that of the siege (also found in Hawks), which forms a unifying thread between four early films, *Assault on Precinct 13*, *Halloween*, *The Fog* (1979) and *The Thing*. The aim is to interrogate the critical consensus, mentioned above, that Carpenter belongs to the 'reactionary' wing of horror directors, according to Robin Wood's influential definition of the term. While this view is conceded in some cases to be broadly justified, Smith undertakes a detailed analysis of the first of the quartet to demonstrate that it does not so easily fit into this category. Rather, he argues, the conventional criterion that has been used as the measure of a film's socio-political outlook, namely its representation of the 'other' whom the protagonists face, is particularly inadequate in this case. Smith amasses apparently incidental details of plot and setting, and shows how, working against the film's overarching generic imperatives, they resonate in a remarkably insistent and coherent manner with contemporary social anxieties, in ways which problematise the founding assumptions of the dominant consensus.

While the identification of a personal vision in Carpenter's films turns out to be more complex than at first seems the case, other aspects of his work as a genre-based director are more easily illustrated. While a desire for overall control links all directors who aspire to authorial status, Carpenter goes further than most in his participation in the more specialised aspects of film production. Perhaps rarest among these is his consistent appearance on the credits as composer or co-composer of the music for his films. Burnand and Mera show how Carpenter's distinctive style initially (and perhaps inevitably) draws on the science fiction films of the 1950s, and they go on to give detailed analyses of how music functions in some of his most famous films, including *Assault on Precinct 13*, *Halloween*, *Escape From New York* and *Escape From L.A.* (1996). The music is shown not to be particularly sophisticated, though it does develop over time, but is above all effective and in keeping with Carpenter's film style, in which lean presentation aimed at the manipulation of the audience's emotions is the prime concern. In particular, Burnand and Mera point to Carpenter's early and continuing experimentation with the borderline between music and sound effect, a subject which has only recently received more widespread attention from film music practitioners. Carpenter's ability to manipulate the audience is also foregrounded in Hall's account of another facet of the director's style: his attachment to the widescreen format. Hall charts the variety of responses which CinemaScope provoked on its arrival in Hollywood in 1953, not the least significant of which in the present context was its rejection by Hawks. Hall thus goes on to identify another dimension of Carpenter's style, namely a tendency to formalism (against Hawks's self-effacing narrative-driven style) which allies him more with a Hitchcockian approach to filmmaking. Hall shows this sensibility at work in a detailed account of the techniques Carpenter develops in *Halloween* to exploit the manipulative potential of the full widescreen ratio (a format which even Hitchcock avoided), and he pinpoints how the tension between the very different methods of his forbears proved to be productive for Carpenter, and one which well equipped him for his position on the margins of the new Hollywood.

Questions of the relationship between director and audience are taken up in very different ways in the next two chapters. They emerge in Mulvey-Roberts's dis-

cussion of the substantial number of Gothic themes and sensibility shared by many of Carpenter's films. In particular, Mulvey-Roberts highlights the depiction of the monstrous, especially as it figures in *Prince of Darkness* (1987), *The Thing* and *In the Mouth of Madness* (1995), as a threat to stable identity in the way that it plays on fears of the relationship between self and body. Indeed, this monstrosity threatens to dissolve the boundaries of the body, and analogously, the author argues, Carpenter's work stages the blurring of the boundaries between fantasy and reality, between the audience and the fiction, in a way which is fully in keeping with the Gothic fascination with feelings of terror and paranoia the genre was intended to provoke. The relationship between filmmaker and audience is approached from the opposite perspective by Conrich, who uses contemporary material to reconstruct the ways in which fans of horror films related to Carpenter's output in, primarily, the period 1978–82, during which time *Halloween*, *The Fog*, *Escape From New York* and *The Thing* appeared, and the American horror new wave was in ascendancy. Drawing largely upon the American fanzine *Fangoria*, Conrich establishes the esteem in which Carpenter was held, with the fans clearly being able to move beyond the immediate critical dismissals of the time and to respond to the new aesthetic which these directors were striving to create. He also shows how the characters from the films were given life beyond the screen by the creative efforts of the fans themselves. This rather different blurring of the boundaries between fiction and reality is demonstrated to be thriving in fan gatherings and in the medium of the Internet over twenty years after the films were released, an indication of their enduring status amongst a segment of the population.

Three chapters examining the treatment of gender in Carpenter's films follow. Writing from different perspectives on the collaborations between Carpenter and Kurt Russell, Shail and Williams agree that Russell's performances are the result of close interplay between actor and director, and indeed show a good deal of self-awareness in their parodies of traditional versions of masculine heroism. The authors diverge, however, over the consequences which they hold to follow from this. Focusing principally on the *Escape* films, Shail argues that while Snake Plissken's particular brand of anti-heroism is a result of the rather different political outlook of Carpenter and Russell, the ambivalence he thus embodies provides an outlet for the domestic audience's similarly conflicted feelings regarding ideals of masculinity in their contemporary socio-political context. Shail also finds significant differences between the treatment of Plissken in the two films, in a shift which parallels wider reconfigurations both of notions of masculinity and of postmodern cinematic practice more generally. In an argument which provides an alternative view of the sort of individualistic solutions typical of Carpenter discussed earlier by Woods, Shail suggests the overall result is a sort of compound and distanced depiction of rebelliousness which, sensitive to its times, reworks long-standing American notions of masculinity. For Williams, in contrast, the work of Carpenter and Russell produces representations of masculinity which, whilst satirical of older models, are only superficially critical. Though Plissken or Jack Burton (in *Big Trouble in Little China*) may parody Clint Eastwood's or John Wayne's portrayals of masculinity, their anti-authoritarianism is combined with a demonised portrayal

of the alternatives, and the result is unacceptable nihilism. However, Williams also observes that there are exceptions to this pattern. He finds the fleeting outlines of an alternative masculinity towards the conclusion of *Escape From L.A.*, but his most sustained example is that of the pair's first collaboration, *Elvis*. Williams argues that, in a parallel with *Citizen Kane* (1941), Carpenter produces a film genuinely subversive of contemporary norms of masculinity, with a subtle and powerful depiction of a riven and vulnerable Elvis who, after a difficult childhood, flees his emotions and finally takes refuge in self-annihilating spectacle and excess.

One of the key aspects of the failure of masculinity in *Elvis* is the protagonist's inability to come to terms with his relationship with his mother. The complex, often critically overlooked interrelations in Carpenter's films between mothers and sons, both literal and metaphorical, form the basis of Young's chapter. She suggests that the pessimistic portrayal of social institutions in Carpenter's films is one of the recurring sources of the pleasure they offer the audience, exposing as they do their ineffectualness or hypocrisy. But where Williams finds that the films offer no alternative, Young argues that they often look to a mother-figure to deliver the protagonists from a failure of homosociality. The portrayal of this mother-figure is, however, deeply ambivalent. Discussing a wide range of films, Young shows how it moves from straightforward depictions of a mother saving her son (in, for example, *Village of the Damned*) or humankind (in *Starman*), to versions of the psychoanalytically-inspired notion of the 'monstrous feminine' in films such as *Christine* (1983) and *Prince of Darkness*, where the mother combines extremes of attraction and repulsion. While there may thus be some sense of subversiveness in the representation of the paternal Law across these films, Young concludes, it is nonetheless a limited one, underpinned by a naturalised understanding of gender and a nostalgia for the regenerative mother.

Films in which the monstrous feminine appears also figure non-coincidentally in Powell's account of Carpenter's horror/science fiction. In discussions of *In the Mouth of Madness*, *Prince of Darkness* and *Christine*, she demonstrates how these films re-work the theme of the occult, which in turn is part of European folkloric tradition. Such adaptation is shown in some detail to share a number of traits with the work of H. P. Lovecraft, from a sense of metaphysics, to narrative elements, to the creation of atmosphere, though of course utilising techniques which are appropriate to Carpenter's medium. Sutter Cane's novels in *In the Mouth of Madness*, for example, function much as Lovecraft's *Necronomicon*, a grimoire which summons an ancient evil that threatens madness and the destruction of humanity. Carpenter is most faithful to Lovecraft, Powell suggests, in his consistent portrayal of the helplessness of the protagonists in the face of these horrors.

The final critical contribution, before the interview with the director, draws together several of the elements noted above. Some authors have highlighted Carpenter's attachment to genre, others the degree of self-reflexivity to be found in his work. Some films have been argued to be critical of mass culture while as a whole Carpenter's output is at least in some senses an unapologetic part of it. Guins and Cruz argue that while Carpenter is obviously a seminal figure in modern horror, it is possible to identify in his work in the 1990s an ongoing engagement

with questions of the nature of genre and reflexivity, and, moreover, an implicit critical commentary on the mainstream development of the horror genre during the decade. Focusing on *Body Bags* (1993), *In the Mouth of Madness* and *Vampires*, they identify a movement from a playful acceptance that horror will plunder its own conventions (a point also made by Mulvey-Roberts in relation to the Gothic) to a more qualified perspective. If repetition is (self-reflexively) seen to be a source of oppressiveness in *In the Mouth of Madness*, as Guins and Cruz show, by the time of *Vampires* Carpenter has developed his response: *Vampires* acknowledges the inevitability of repetition, but embraces it in a creative way which distances it both from the postmodern horror film and from the dismissal of mass culture articulated by the likes of Horkheimer and Adorno.

This necessarily brief sketch of the approaches the contributors have taken to the films has highlighted some points of agreement and some differences between them, while others have been left implicit. Further examples of both are to be found in the text as a whole, and this is of course as it should be in the assessment of a creative and prolific director whose career began in the mid-1970s and who has worked both within and outside the major studios. If, as the editors hope, this book gives the reader cause to re-examine his or her understanding of Carpenter's work, it will have served its purpose.

### Notes

- 1 See, for instance, Williams (1979), Neale (1981), Telotte (1982), Prince (1988), Cumbow (1990), Loderhose (1990), Dietrich (1991), Billson (1997), Lagier & Thoret (1998) and Muir (2000).

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