John Carpenter
The director who came in from the fog
DARK STAR

1) Carpenter with 2nd unit cameraman Cliff Femman, directing DARK STAR in 1972 at the age of 24. 2) The Dark Star, about to bomb an unstable planet; ship model by Greg Jain. 3) Andrei Pahich as Talby, the spaced-out recluse who mans the ship's observation bubble. 4) Carpenter films the comic elevator shaft sequence with cameraman Doug Knapp (left). The upside-down camera films Dan O'Bannon as Flintock, lying on his stomach. 5) Jim Danforth's glass shot of the Veli Nebula. 6) The ship's leap into hyperspace, a form of streak photography predating a similar effect in STAR WARS by four years. 7) The ship's alien mascot, a beachball with claws.

John Carpenter reminisces about directing science fiction on a shoestring, see page 5.
Riding High On Horror

Interview by Jordan R. Fox

Watching the artistic and critical progress of John Carpenter during the last decade has been a gratifying experience. Moving surely from student films to low-budget independent productions to his current status as one of the hottest young directors in town, Carpenter has retained his love for movies and an objective view towards his profession, somewhat uncommon traits among the rarefied heights of today's "superstar" filmmakers.

Carpenter draws freely from the technique of his film idols—Hawks, Ford, Welles and Hitchcock—but he has emerged as a major stylist in his own right, with a strong commitment to cinemagique. His place as one of Hollywood's top directors was assured soon after the release of HALLOWEEN, which has amassed a world-wide gross in excess of $40 million on a negative cost of $320,000, thereby making it the highest proportional return on a feature investment in film history. The film's distributor, Compass International, recently concluded a second successful re-release, and plans to reissue the film each year at Halloween. Carpenter's earlier films have also benefitted, landing new distribution deals.

If there is one thing that makes the Hollywood powers-that-be sit up and take notice, it is the jingle of incoming boxoffice receipts and HALLOWEEN opened many important doors for Carpenter and producer/co-author Debra Hill. But industry recognition, critical acclaim and the other markers of success did not come about overnight.

As a graduate film student at the University of Southern California, Carpenter was one of the principals (music, editing, co-writing and some co-direction) behind the show THE RESURRECTION OF BRONCO BILL Y, which won an Academy Award in 1970. Within just a few minutes, BRONCO BILL Y cleverly develops the story of a young man, unable or unwilling to deal with the world as it is, who instead finds refuge in his own western fantasy. Thus, the snarl of city traffic can become a cattle drive, and the uncomfortable looking businessman across the street, a rival gunfighter. Life keeps handing Billy even more embarrassing rebuffs, yet he always bounces back. Suffer-
About the Cover

What you see here—John Carpenter, bearing perhaps a resemblance to the young Edgar Allan Poe, in the midst of some appropriately moody and atmospheric—was arrived at only through several strokes of luck. First, just try to find a pumpkin in Los Angeles in late October. The actor himself, in fact, didn’t even know how to make it happen. The only clue was an uncarved pumpkin that had been discarded by a neighbor.

The idea for the cover of this issue was inspired by the title of the article, which is about the making of the classic horror film, “Halloween.” The cover features a photograph of the actor standing among pumpkins, with a dark and moody background.

The cover also includes a quote about the film’s success and the challenges faced in making it. It highlights the importance of collaboration and the role of the director in bringing a vision to life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Jordan R. Fox, a native of Maryland, graduated from American University in Washington, D.C., with a degree in Psychology. Pursuing an interest in filmmaking, he moved west in 1975 where he managed to find work in documentaries and commercials before starting his own company. He is the author of "The Night Children," a look at the failure of the juvenile system, for KABC-TV. Fox became our Hollywood correspondent in 1978.

Why did it take four years to make DARK STAR? [reviewed 3:40]

It was originally my thesis film at U.C. Berkeley, shot in 16mm as a 30-45 minute film. Dan O’annon was to edit, do the colors, and act in it; I produced and directed. That took two years because we had no money, no nothing. We had the equipment and just did it for ourselves. Then an investor came along, saw the footage, and said “Let’s turn it into a feature.” We sold it. "Terrific! We had some money and shot some more footage. So add another eight months and it’s 15 years. At the end of that time we met Jack H. Harris, who agreed to put up finishing money. We completed the film in 35mm (blowing up the previous film footage in the process). The money wasn’t enough, so it took longer. Again, we had to do it all ourselves—you know, six months over an animation stand putting in stars. Every shot in the film is an optical of some kind. It was four years when we walked away, just before Filmex [the annual Los Angeles Film Exhibition, where the film premiered in 1974].

Which was the hardest part to do?

The beginning and the ending was the student footage—basically the entire film—set-up. We padded it in the middle with the alien, and the other routines. When you see it, it gets episodic and starting to fall apart, it’s the later footage.

Does the film still exist as a short?

In 1975 it ceased to exist as a short. It was never complete and never had the short feature in the feature.

Besides O’annon, you had some other great technical help on the film.

(Optical and matte specialist) Bill Taylor, the man who has received several credits for this film, did some amazing things for us. He saved us time and money. Then we had no money and time again. Stories tend to get exaggerated about Dan and myself. There was no way I could do it all myself, or Dan could do it by himself. We had to ask a lot of talented people for help. Doug Knapp (the cameraman) created astounding illusions with nothing more than a corner of a room and some lights.

Jan Danforth also worked on it. Did you get to know him very well?

Yes, Jim and I had a couple of matte paintings for the episodes—one beautiful one of a nebula that we used in the title sequence—but his involvement was limited. He had just joined our crew on FLESH GORDON, and had just gotten fired from working on other people’s movies. We couldn’t offer enough money, and he had to make a living.

Do you have any interest in the stop-motion field—to the extent of possibly making an animated film?

I’d love to work with Danforth. I think he’s fabulous. But he’s a lot like me. I can’t do his best work; he needs control.

I think the stop motion subject has to lend itself to the technique. No matter what anyone says, the puppeteers are able to bring the beats. They have no weight, no inertia. You can have beautiful puppet artistry, but it still won’t look real.

If you can’t do anything that has something to do with it, then you’re all set. I think some of Harryhausen’s best work was in EARTH VS. THE FLYING SAUCERS. Those damn things looked so real because they were jittery anyway.
O'Bannon seems to have gotten most of the effects credit on DARK STAR. Most of Dan's effects footage was on the animation camera. He shot various lens changes on shots that existed already. The film was production design, and Dan did all that. Bill Taylor put all the elements together, did all the optical effects, the color correction, and the blow-up to 35 mm. He deserves a huge effects credit for the film.

That sort of leads us into the question of your relationship with O'Bannon, post-DARK STAR. Some interviewers have lately been coming away from him with the impression that he directed the film.

That's a long and involved story, a lot of which I shan't tell you, because it gets into personal aspects of Dan and I. DUNE fell apart, and he came back to the U.S. It was a low time for him. The next thing I knew, he had finished ASSAULT, and I wanted him to come see it. He hated it so much, and he felt I had somehow done him wrong so he took this as an opportunity to terminate our friendship.

He went through some other experiences, leading up to ALIEN, and during that time so did I. I suppose you might say we both went through growing pains. We wrote some letters back and forth. Finally, he said, "Look, I've been acting like an asshole. There's no reason why we shouldn't be friends." We started talking, and now we're on fairly good terms again.

Dan is a pretty unusual guy. There's not a doubt in my mind that he's a genius in certain areas of drama and screenwriting. He is truly one of the best editors I've ever worked with. I will say that his major contribution to DARK STAR, major above all others, was that he single-handedly edited the entire film. But he did not direct one frame. It's insinuated (that he did), and this is part of his anger and his disenchantment with me. To be fair, Dan invested a great deal of his life in that film. The movie business is tough, there are a lot of stakes in it. This is Carpenter's poetically cryptic way of saying that in the film industry, one often needs credit to get credits.

Were there any other scripts you wrote together with O'Bannon?

We started lots of ideas together, but I don't think any of them went to finished scripts. After DARK STAR we were going to do THEY BITE. [The story concept involved the discovery of alien and menacing, of a heretofore unknown species of predatory insect which mimicked biologically whatever it ate, and it ate just about everything.] I was going to direct it, and Dan would do the same thing—Production Design. There came a point in our relationship when we decided not to continue working together. So I took over the project, that was what he was going to do next. I had developed the story with him, but he wrote the script. He took it around and got an option on it. The last thing I remember about the project, they sent me a letter, which I had to sign, saying that I had no interest in the script. [O'Bannon later incorporated many of its concepts into ALIEN, especially the idea of a species being a single-minded, omnivorous biological engine of destruction.]

George Lucas made the student version of THX-1138 at U.S.C., and U.S.C. owns it outright—as well as a piece of the feature version. How is it that you managed to avoid this fate on DARK STAR?

I truly feel there is exploitation going on there. We were taken for a ride on THE RESURRECTION OF BRONCO BILLY. They made a great deal of money on that. (On DARK STAR) I went to a lawyer and said, "Hey, what is this? I'm not working for the school." He said, "You're absolutely right. They're using intimidation on you." U.S.C. wants to own and control everything that goes on there, but they don't. Now I have that school. I learned a lot there. They need money. It's a private institution. They're underfinanced. I don't blame them for trying. But it's still unfair.

So I left. I had a legal right to take the film and do what I wanted with it. When I finished the film, they called me up and said "What's going on here?" I said, "Hey fellas—back off! You don't have any rights to this film. I financed the whole thing. So go away." Basically, they did.

A spokesman for U.S.C., who concealed these events concerning DARK STAR took place before he joined the university, gave us the following statement:

"I'm sure they (Carpenter and O'Bannon) can rationalize it any way they want. If you consider studio stock and lab expenses the cost of a movie, then yeah, they financed it. Coming from a student's point of view, that reflects a very naive idea of what it takes to make a film in the real world. Try that on for size at Barns & Sawyer, or any other rental house. It's like using all the facilities at Warner Brothers for free. Since they are very paid students, you'd have to say it (Carpenter's attitude) reflects something else. It was a rip-off, pure and simple. They pulled all kinds of equipment and services they weren't entitled to. Things definitely tightened up after that. And students who come after them suffered for it.

What's your response to this?

Rip-off of what? It was my picture. Legally, they've got nothing. If they had said to me from the start, "You are a student, and everything you do here will belong to us. Now sign this paper," then I'd be agreeing to certain groundrules. But I signed no contract. [Such contracts later became standard policy, perhaps as a direct result of the flap over DARK STAR. The residue of this controversy apparently hasn't kept U.S.C. from seeking Carpenter's assistance in their fundraising efforts.] If U.S.C. were to own the movie, then they should have hired me, paid me for the script, and distributed it. I paid for the sets, paid the actors, and covered the expenses. If they're going to have it one way, they can't have it the other. There has to be a sharing with the filmmakers. U.S.C. seems to have been a very worthwhile experience for you, yet statistically it has not had any great correlation with getting filmmakers into the Industry after graduation.

It was a marvelous experience. I took every production class they had. I learned everything that I could about the camera, about
sound and editing. But it's true. A friend of mine there, the best filmmaker I ever met in my life, hasn't made it yet. Talent doesn't necessarily have anything to do with it. Tenacity and perseverance are important, and that depends on the person... I was never any good at the politicking or public relations side. My whole approach was to get something made that would get noticed and make somebody say, "Well, that's pretty good. Let's give him a chance."

How was DARK STAR financed?

I financed it until the summer of 1972, when a man named Jack Murphy, who owned a small Canadian distribution company, came on the picture. We already had 45 minutes [the short]. He put up a substantial amount, so we could expand it into a feature. But it still wasn't out, because we had to blow it up to 35mm and put it in the affected. We took a rough cut out to Harris, and he put up the finishing money.

Neither you nor O'Bannon retained any rights to the film. What was the nature of your deal with Harris?

We showed DARK STAR to every single distributor in town. No one wanted it. We had no choice but to go with Harris. His deal was that we got $30,000 up front, but he'd own it.

What happened after that? The film has a strange history.

As I understand it, Harris had financial difficulties around the time the film was completed. He sold it to Bryanton, and then released it. When they went bankrupt, everything went into receivership. [According to reports in the trades, bootleg prints of DARK STAR continue to circulate, turning up with some frequency at repertory houses and film festivals. Atlantic Releasing, who recently acquired rights to the film, is putting a stop to this, and plans its own major release.]

For DARK STAR's release, Bryanton seemed able to get playdates. There was the book tie-in from Dell, and the beginnings of a science-fiction boom. Why do you think the film failed?

Harris had the book, but I'd say there were a lot of reasons. Actually, it was before the boom. Had it come out a year later and been publicized differently...

The film opened on January 16, 1975—my birthday—on 40 or 50 theaters in L.A. Their campaign was geared to the counter-culture audience—the same people who went to ANDY WARHOL'S DRACULA and ANDY WARHOL'S FRENKENSTEIN. They missed it, and it just didn't play. I'll never forget, the Friday night it opened Dan and I went to some theaters to check it out. People weren't going. When they did go, they laughed and react. But it wasn't pulling them in.

You didn't keep track of the film after Bryanton?

I let it go. Dan stuck with the film for a while, trying to find out who had it. I knew it was sold in Europe. They ran it on the B.B.C., and it just closed the last Avisius Fraway.

At one point Jack H. Harris seemed to be specializing in acquiring student films that could be released theatrically. There's at least one other genre film we know of... EQUINOX.

I wrote the script in 1974. It was about a woman who has a psychic experience and links into the eyes of the Skid Row Slasher. She sees through his eyes while he's killing. It's like a sci-fi, but his vision is gone when it happens. At first she thinks she's going crazy. She doesn't want to be thrust into this maniac's mind. At one point she sees this atrocity he's doing—horrible things crawling out of places. She goes to seances, anything to try and figure this out. Eventually she realizes she's not going crazy, that this is all really happening. She develops a relationship with a cop, and together they try to find this guy. But she can't see his face—only what he sees—the victim. Eventually, looking at a map with pins showing the killings, she learns that the killings are moving closer and closer to her. She is meeting somewhere in the killer's mind, he knows she's there, and he must get rid of her.

At the end of the first film, I had this incredible scene where she must defend herself, seeing herself through his eyes as he comes at her. There's a long, extended battle, and in the last scene in the film she pushes him out a window, sees the pavement coming up, sees him die, but her vision comes back and she's alright. That was the film. EYES. It was simple. It stuck to one premise.

Jack Harris got ahold of the script and gave it to Peters. Originally, Jack wanted to make it independently. But Peters read it and wanted it for Barbra Streisand. It's tough when you're unemployed and someone offers you a deal. The idea was that I would write and direct, and Streisand agreed to the script. And so began an eight month odyssey of writing for her, for him, with him. The essential change they wanted in the story was that the killer had to be someone who was in love with throughout the whole film. All of a sudden at the end she would turn and say, My God, it's Harry! Which destroyed the fabric of the idea, because then it's all in throwing off the audience onto someone else. That's not the point. I rewrote my script into what they wanted, and I left the project because she decided it was too violent. They went through eight or nine writers on it. Finally, David Zelig Goodman came and rewrote everybody's work into what you see on the screen. The emphasis ended up being on the world of fashion photography, which could have been an interesting movie. But it wasn't. EYES. They were frad of the whole sci-fi area and that's the story. The essential cinematic idea was completely changed.

What became of PREG? A very adequate answer to the question of whether the film was good or not is given by the fact that it was never released commercially.

Warner Brothers purchased the script and hired me as producer. They wouldn't let me direct it. This was back in '77. I worked with [executive producers] Arthur Gardner and Joe Levy, two men I respect very much. So we set up a deal. We had quite a number of experiences. I can't go into any detail, but there were several big names in the biz who didn't know what they were doing. Finally, we had a good director, Bob Clark, a new start date and we were halfway through the sets. But Warners cancelled it.

The story was like DELIVERANCE, but with women. It has interesting villains—real frightening and with lots of action.
Some interviews you gave around the time of Assault on Precinct 13 suggested that horror was a much stronger interest for you than science fiction.

Not really. I love science fiction most of all. But science fiction is very hard to do right. Horror is much easier for me. I haven't seen a science fiction film I thought was great in 10 years. I'm no great fan of Star Wars or Alien. What these films have mainly accomplished is to perfect the technique of showing ships moving around in outer space.

How would you go about avoiding that pitfall?

That's difficult. It's all become so clichéd—the massive shots of space, the grandeur of space, big ships moving through space. You come down to certain basic kinds of (space) movies: a western, a war film, a horror film in space. 2001 eclipses them all, right up through Star Wars.

There's one I'd like to do that gets away from all that, a book by Alfred Bester, The Stars My Destination. Unfortunately, the cost of it would be enormous.

Any particular reason for your negative reaction to Alien? A lot of people seem to regard it as an exercise in style, employing techniques similar to those you use.

I didn't like the characters. The story was pretty boring up to a point. There was no sense of humor anywhere. The ending didn't make any sense. Why was that monster standing there watching her undress, when in the whole course of the movie it would leap on you and tear your guts out?

I didn't think it was all that stylistic. It was more like a big TV commercial. Beautiful visuals, incredible sets,Moody, and yet no personal sense of mood. Real cold...They had the greatest monsters ever—up to the end, the man in the suit, which looked dumdum.

I know where all this came from. O'Bannon has incredible ability at creating these kinds of disturbing images: the chest burster, the thing on the face. If anything, his stuff was watered down.

The film wasn't frightening enough for you.

No. Disgusting and unsettling at times, but not scary.

Do you think O'Bannon directing might have made a more powerful film?

I do. Dan made a film at U.S.C. called Bloodbath (about a guy who crawls into a bathtub to commit suicide). He shoots his wrists, lets the blood flow out and begins to fantasize and flashback on his life. The short was the product of U.S.C.'s second level production course, $10, in black, 16 mm, sync sound, which O'Bannon shot with a three man crew. I'm telling you, the audience walked out of there shaken, limp...When Dan directs his first feature film, I guarantee it will be something to see.

I read your Alien issue very carefully, by the way. The fellow who did the article on the screenplay [9:1:15] was obviously swayed by Walter Hill and David Giler. O'Bannon really got lucked over. Journalism is supposed to get at the truth. The whole truth wasn't there, so why drag him (Dan) through the mud like that? I had a letter all written to you guys about it—actually not just to you guys—but here's the point. It's a movie business, and if you're writing about movies and entertainment, that's something, but there are always internal problems, and always problems with egos.

My nature is to avoid that, so I don't know how much I feel that it helps anybody to go into that stuff. On the other hand, I'd love to give you credit as journalists, you dig around and tried to find the truth. I suppose if you didn't ask me whether Dan directed Dark Star, you might not now.

I defend Dan because I think he's had some hard times, and bad press. I think you might have been led astray by Walter Hill and David Giler, but then I'm talking to Dan these days, and I hear his side of it. After reading your article on the Alien script, I have to admit I (O'Bannon) did take a lot from Dark Star. That was shocking. But what riles me is that the producers tried to take Dan's name off the Alien script entirely. They had the posters printed. They had the credits on the screen—"Screenplay by Walter Hill and David Giler." Now wait a minute, that movie wouldn't have been anywhere without Dan O'Bannon.

I think, if you read the article, you'll see that we say as much. What we wanted to point out was that O'Bannon was no more deserving of sole screenplay credit than Hill and Giler. Mark Patrick Carducci wrote that article after carefully examining the original script by O'Bannon, Hill's first rewrite and the final shooting script by Hill and Giler. The article's entirely factual.

I guess my reaction is an emotional one, because I was there before anybody, and I know that that's a Dan O'Bannon film. I just want him to get the kind of credit he deserves on it. And I don't want him to be portrayed as a bad guy. God, was he better over the crabs in your article. [ Karneski whistles, "Ow!"

And there's no one coming to his defense.

Actually, O'Bannon has numerous interviews published at that time, representing his view of the story. What you don't know is that Dan wouldn't talk to us! He was mad because our early articles on Alien (72:37, 81:24) mentioned its bad similarity to It: The Terror from Beyond Space.

Well, maybe I'm just putting my foot in my mouth here, because I don't know the whole story. I've only read your cover story on Alien. I'm just reacting because he's a friend of mine and I care about him. I have to see it treated with respect. He deserves everyone's respect because he's one of the major figures in the genre, the power of Alien is the power of Dan O'Bannon. I believe that sincerely.

Try looking at it this way: you didn't demand sole screenplay credit on Eyes of Laura Mars, did you? And David Zeig Goodman totally rewrote your script.

That's absolutely true. I had a different attitude. Right up front they told me what they wanted to change, and I had a decision to make: was I going to do the work or was I going to walk away? I was in a little different situation. But that's true, when it came out, I didn't ask for anything.

You didn't benefit from an arbitration at the Writer's Guild, for instance?

No, nonono. I don't believe in that. I'm
You have been described as being an advocate of "pure cinema," which stresses form at least as highly as content, and often more. Don't you think pictures are a medium of messages? Intellectual ideas work better in literature—anywhere but film. Film is a feeling medium. A film invites the audience to project, in the psychological sense. Projection is simply that you invest into the screen your own feelings. The best example of this, in terms of my own work, is a film I don't think is so terribly good—ELVIS. The only thing I can figure out, besides Kurt Russell's incredible impersonation, is that audiences are bringing with them all their feelings about Elvis Presley. When the film begins, they put them right on the screen, and the film carries their feelings along, and elicits emotions out of them. The medium forces you to give something of yourself, and that's where film works.

What about tragic messages? Every great film has a message, or a theme, built right into it. Whether it's ever stated in the film, or whether it's reflected afterwards. But it must arise out of the material. That's not the first thing you try to do.

The controversy that surrounds "pure cinema" is over the elevation of technique. I'm telling a story, and I have a scene where a murderer is going to strangle someone, and I don't know how to do it. Whatever it is, let's make sure that this experience to an audience...what technique will elicit the greatest emotional response.

Then you don't feel the technical side gets too much emphasis.

You want a philosophy? Filmmaking is not people sitting and talking. That's recording—like what we're doing here. Movies move—M-O-V-E— they move. Cutting, camera movement—that's what they're about.

At the same time, technique is not an end in itself. It is the means through which you reach your audience. I don't want to make a film where the story is subordinated to technique. We're all storytellers here.

That brings up the question of the director's hand. A good example could be Brian De Palma and THE FURY, where you have some very juicy shots that show off his camera virtuosity.

It's called masturbation. Now, to be fair, I must admit that I have been masturbatory in my work also, but I do try not to be too self-conscious. A director gets a few tricks under his belt and says 'Hey, watch this! See what I can do!' But it's hollow; isn't it? There's no story. And the underlying emotion are so strong, the technique just amplifies them (without calling attention to itself).

How did you come to get the two television projects, SOMEONE IS WATCHING ME and ELVIS?

Two very different ways. I had written a script for the feature division at Warner Bros. It was based on B F and it was an actual true story—it happened in Chicago, I couldn't believe it. You know, 'this would make a great movie.' They passed on it, because it was too contained, set in an apartment.

But then they decided to do it as a TV movie. They asked me if I wanted to direct. This was my first experience with an all union crew, and they were wonderful. And continued on page 40.
Roots of Imagination

Carpenter's boyhood dream was making horror films

"The first movie I ever saw," John Carpenter told us, "was the AFRICAN QUEEN, in 1952. Then, IT CAME FROM OUTER SPACE, in 3-D. I just couldn't believe that film, especially when the meteor blew up right in my face. That got me sold on films of the fantastic. I knew then that this was what I had to do."

Carpenter was five years old at the time. Carpenter's father, Howard, owned an 8mm movie camera, and John began to take it over at the age of eight, learning and experimenting, and eventually graduating up to attempts at duplicating the movie effects that so impressed him: explosions, gun shots and some stop-motion work. "Most of my stuff was action, though," he recalled, "I got real involved with action—how to stage it and how to make it work."

An article Carpenter wrote in the mid-60s for a fanzine devoted to amateur filmmakers fully documents his early career, and his first "unknown" films. Carpenter was still shooting in 8mm, though by this time he had moved up from his father's expensive Brownie to his own camera, a Eumig 850. His first film, REVENGE OF THE COLOSSAL BEASTS, was the story of giant aliens who land in spaceships and panic a feeling populace. In the 40-minute film, Carpenter experimented with perspective tricks to film the giants, as well as trick endings—the last shot reveals that the ship is from Earth, landing on Venus.

Carpenter filmed three other shorts prior to his fourteenth birthday, in what he calls his "learning" period: GORGO VS. GODZILLA, using clay figures which were manipulated live, TERROR FROM SPACE, a science fiction western involving cowboys and Indians with a monster patterned after the one-eyed creature of IT CAME FROM OUTER SPACE; and SORCERER FROM OUTER SPACE, a comedy. By this time he had formed Emerald Productions, and was using all his spare cash to buy film equipment and supplies, including two projectors, still cameras, floodlights and a rear projection screen for stop-motion work.

Carpenter calls WARRIOR AND THE DEMON his "first really promising film," a 40-minute film involving Samson and the Barbarians and their battle against the evil Argyles who have captured Samson's sorcerer ally. The highpoint of the film features the demon of the title—a cross between a crab, spider and insect—destroying the palace of the Argyles. Shots of it crashing through the palace gates and destroying the structure were Carpenter's first attempts at stop motion animation. He continued to focus on effects and production values, and regarded his last reported short, GORGO THE SPACE MONSTER, to be his best work. Its story of an alien conquering Earth was merely an excuse for staging effects sequences involving spaceships, an army of robots, powerful rays and crawling hands.

Carpenter's Emerald Productions had hoped to "turn its attention to a full-length film which may be considered for release," but instead, he published the first issue of his film fanzine Fantastic Films Illustrated in 1965, and began communicating with other fans and amateur filmmakers around the country. The fanzine lasted for three mimeographed issues, and Carpenter also published two one-shots, King Kong Journal and Phantasm—Torrid Thrills of the Films. "The high point of my career," laughs Carpenter today, "came when Forrest J Ackerman sent me for 50 copies. I knew I'd hit the big time then! I was over at his house recently [a press conference for THE FOG was held there] but he didn't remember me."

Carpenter best sums up the influence of his fanzine preoccupations, in a letter he wrote to the famous Photon shortly after the release of DARK STAR: "My young life was filled with the pulp and pulpum of NOT OF THIS EARTH, IT CONQUERED THE WORLD and ENEMY FROM SPACE. I was only eight years old when I first saw FORBIDDEN PLANET, but I still haven't gotten over it. The young eyes that watched the invisible I.D. creature made its huge footprints in the sand of Altair IV and finally saw the thing fully illuminated in the glowing laser beams would never be the same." —Frederick S. Clarke

Above: John Carpenter, age 11, as The Mummy in his basement chamber of horrors. Left: Three issues of Carpenter's fantasy film fanzine Fantastic Films Illustrated, published when he was 16. Carpenter drew the covers for the mimeographed issues himself, and, showing a fan's devotion, handpainted the covers of the first issue (far left) in watercolor! He also did his own comic strip, "The Valiant for Weirdom, a fanzine known for publishing the early work of Richard Corben. An active amateur filmmaker, Carpenter wrote in his last fanzine issue, "I hope to make something come of the interest I have for this particular field of entertainment."
JOHN CARPENTER

I don't have interference! They (the studio) were a little worried at first. I got called in by the president of the company. He said, "I can't understand your dailies. They're not suspenseful. Where are the masters? Where are the closeups? I explained to him that I shoot film the way it's going to be cut. I don't waste film. If you're worried, we'll have the editor put the sequences together and we'll look at them next week. He did, and said "You're right."

ELVIS came to me in the mail; my agent knew someone at ABC. I'm a tremendous rock 'n roll fan—equal with the movies. I opened the script, saw the title, and said "Yes." Elvis' music had done a lot for me, and I wanted to pay some of that back. A lot of name directors had turned this project down, thinking it was too hard. I saw it as a chance to avoid being typed as a director of horror movies. I knew that whether it turned out bad or good, it would show that I could do other things.

Would you consider doing another TV project?

I don't think so—not unless it was such an extraordinary project that it went beyond the medium. I don't like television for a number of reasons: the way it's shot, the way it's sold, the restrictions. What they want you to do in television is homogeneous. They want zero point of view. That's against everything I believe in.

When you shoot in editing units, doesn't that take away a lot of flexibility later on, and add an element of risk?

Yes, it means you pre-plan and commit to what the film is going to be beforehand. All film involves risk. I shoot masters—just not the traditional masters and closeups. What you don't want to end up with is predictability.

Few directors have the advantage of a background in music. It's hard to name even one working today who can compose his own score, as you do regularly.

My father was the head of a music department at the University of Kentucky, and has been involved in almost every aspect of teaching music for thirty years—from individual instruments to full orchestra, and even synthesizers. In addition, he was a session musician in Nashville, playing with people like Roy Orbison, Frank Sinatra, Brenda Lee. He's one of the people who originated the Nashville sound. I would be at some of these recording sessions, so I got the full spectrum from classical to rock and roll and country music. It was mainly just osmosis and being exposed to it. I can play just about any keyboard instrument, but I can't read or write a note. Fortunately, I have a good ear.

What was that anecdote showing the importance of music in your films?

An executive from 20th Century Fox saw a film cut of the soundtrack of HALLOWEEN without music. This was to possibly offer me a film. This person, who shall remain nameless, though it wasn't scary. Later, we added the music, and the movie came alive. Movies are sound and image.

One of the more impressive things about HALLOWEEN was your use of the subjective tracking shot.

We used the Panavision, which is just another brand name for the Steadicam. I couldn't afford to spend time laying dolly tracks everywhere. The gyroscopic mount gives you a drifting look, almost like you're floating. Originally this motion becomes identified with the young boy going through the house, up the stairs and so forth. In the first scene you're forced to identify with the killer: You're going up the stairs; You're picking up the mask; You're stabbing your sister. Every time I use this camera later on, the audience is thinking, "Oh Jesus, am I the killer now? Am I going to creep up on someone?" But no, maybe not.

You make great use of the scope frame.

I love Panavision. It is the best compositional frame of all. Before television they had the square, 1:1.33. It was excellent. You could compose in it very well. Then came CinemaScope, which is a large rectangle. They also came up with an amplified 1:1.33 image, 1:1.85. Every film made now that is not in CinemaScope is 1:1.85. The problem with that is that it's neither here nor there, not a square or a rectangle. It is impossible to compose for. DARK STAR taught me a lot, because so many of the compositions were ruined when we blew it up to 35mm (from 1.35 to 1.85).

The first time I used Panavision I thought, "This is like painting a picture. Look at the room you have, on the sides. You can use space."

Your sense of composition is very clean and direct. Would that be a major influence from Hawks?

He's called "the invisible technician." His style is to watch from a bit of a distance, at his eye level. I'm not influenced half as much by Hitchcock as by Hawks.

I try to be very specific. You don't do anything without a very good reason, whether it's an idea or having something in the foreground or whatever. There must be a motivation to the visual image. That's what I find wrong with so many films. They're meandering and unfocused. You have to lead the audience, show them what you want them to see.

Part of the criticism that's been leveled at HALLOWEEN concerns the nearly last-minute injection of a supernatural element. What's your response to that charge that this is another Bob Clark/BLACK CHRISTMAS-style cheat, pulling the rug out from under the audience?

Poor Bob Clark. [laughs] Don't say that, I'm not that familiar with his films, but he's an awfully funny man.

HALLOWEEN is not about a crazy guy killing people. That's the story, but not what it's about. The movie is about evil, and it's about sex. In my opinion, evil never dies. The script was done to a rigid structure, without a lot of gagging. I was aware some people might raise that objection, but it seemed like the right thing to do at the time. BLACK CHRISTMAS was about to where the killer was. In my movie his identity is irrelevant. Wait 'til next Halloween: he'll be back to getcha!

Another objection that has been raised concerns the supposedly simplistic equation of promiscuity with the eventual victims.

In the beginning, yes. But after that the victims are chosen at random. He doesn't know they're going to be promiscuous, doesn't know anything about them. People get all riled up about that, but they miss an important point. Ironically, the one girl in the film who does not look around, Jamie Lee Curtis, is the one who stabs him over and over with this long knife! She's as repressed as he is, getting rid of this sexual energy. And no one sees this.

HALLOWEEN actually got more serious reviews than are ever afforded an "exploitation" film.

One of the most incredible reviews I've ever gotten was from the L.A. Herald Examiner. Their hatchet man was out for blood, and he made it amazingly personal. He even went after anyone who liked the movie.

How do you respond to charges that your films are overly well made, function only on the level of commercial entertainment? Are you trying to establish a solid commercial base from which you can later do something more ambitious and daring?

No, I think I'm doing that already. It's all in there—people just aren't looking for it. And they don't recognize it... Each film I've made I'm extraordinarily proud of, and each one, I feel, is part of me. I don't feel that the criticism of my work from the popular press...
Partners in Horror
Producer Debra Hill shares in Carpenter's success

Debra Hill worked as a script supervisor on more than a dozen features before edging into editing and 2nd unit work. John Carpenter, who knew her for several years, felt she was fully capable of producing, and gave her the opportunity on HALLOWEEN, a screenplay that they wrote together. She also produced and co-wrote THE FOG, and is collaborating with Carpenter on his next, as yet unscheduled project.

Some of the in-jokes in HALLOWEEN originated with her; the film is set in Haddonfield, Illinois, she grew up in Haddonfield, New Jersey, the score, by Carpenter, is credited to the Bowling Green Philharmonic (Carpenter hails from Kentucky); her hands, standing in for Michael's, perform the initial stabbing that kicks off the story. Carpenter and Hill also slipped a plethora of in-jokes into THE FOG. Characters are named after Robert Fuest's DR. PHIBES, DARK STAR collaborator Don O'Bannon; Nick Castle, who played the masked psycho in HALLOWEEN; editor/production designer Tommy Wallace; and Richard Kobritz, who produced Carpenter's SOMEONE IS WATCHING ME. There are also references to Hitchcock's Bodega Bay and the Lovecraftian Wheatley.

But more importantly, Hill met the formidable task of making a modestly budgeted film look like far more on the screen, and called on her background in film production to pull her out of seemingly impossible situations.

"I'm not the kind of producer who puts a package together and finds money for it. I'm strictly a line producer," Hill explained. "A lot of times executive producers are people who deal with getting money, and know nothing at all about budgets, problems, shooting problems or how to read a board. My background is in film, so if a soundman comes to me and says he needs something, I know what to ask for. I speak the language. That gets respect. It is easy to be deceived by the gentle voice and the little girl demeanor Hill displays for interviewers. Colleagues say she is a sharp, knowledgeable producer."

Exclaimed one cast member in THE FOG, "Little girl demeanor? What?! Are we talking about the same person? Debra is a very forceful presence on the set. I'd rate her about eight on the Richter Scale."

"I knew I had it in me, but I was scared," Hill said. "John and I surrounded ourselves with people that I knew and that he knew. They were pulling for me. If I had had to step into a foreign group of people, I may not have done as successfully.

"I had done 2nd unit directing, so I knew what it was like to be a crew boss. The biggest problem was doing out money to friends, having to say 'no.' These are people you spent years complaining about the producers of other films with, and all of a sudden the tables are turned.

"John and I worked for nothing on HALLOWEEN," she said, explaining how the rich-looking film was brought in so cheaply—under $400,000. "I made a very judicious work schedule, with actors coming in when they were needed, rather than signing on for four or five weeks. Donald Pleasence's scenes were done in five days. The entire film was storyboarded, very well prepared. Organization and communication keeps you from making mistakes. Most of the money went for camera equipment and the lab. I called in a lot of favors. I could never match that budget again."

Flush with the success of producing HALLOWEEN and THE FOG, Hill has received several directing offers. So far, the scripts are mostly typical 'women's films. But Hill is holding out for something more to her tastes.

"I don't want to become the 'Queen of Morbid Terror,'" as John calls me," Hill said. "But I do have a natural feel for the genre. Anything that can touch the audience, get them involved—that is to me the excitement of movies. It's bigger than life. I think I write horror well. Maybe it's just a sadistic streak in me. I remember I once said to John, thank God he can get his outlet for killing women in a movie. Think if it was suppressed!" —J.R.F.

Above: Producer, co-scripter Debra Hill goes over Michael's initial stabbing scene with director John Carpenter during filming of HALLOWEEN. Only Hill's hands, standing in for the little boy's, were seen in the film. Left: Carpenter and Hill relax on the front steps of the killer's house. Hill, whose father was an art director on many of the Hope/Crosby "Road" pictures, also served as producer and co-scripter on THE FOG and is working with Carpenter on his next film.
isn’t correct. I appreciate it, and some of the criticisms are valid. But they still are missing the point. You don’t make a film for the critics. The audience is my one criterion.

Even among fairly commercial films though, something like TAXI DRIVER, with a bit more character depth and thematic complexity...

What depth? What complexity? I thought it was a good movie, but it’s not real. It cheats. Harvey Keitel’s character was real, but not the other [Travis Bickle]. I don’t think the film has any more depth than STAR WARS.

In terms of your own work, DARK STAR and ASSAULT were much stronger in the areas of character and theme than what has come after.

I undrerstand everything. I try not to make thematic statements. It’s more in the way people behave. There is thematic material in all my films—between the lines—but it’s not my job to spell it out. HALLOWEEN, ELVIS, THE FOG, ASSAULT—they exist on an entertainment level, and that’s fine, but there’s more going on there.

This (perception) changes from person to person and country to country. It depends on how you look at films. You know the basics of the auteur theory? In France, before the war and up through 1946, they didn’t see any American films. After the war they entered them everything. The fellow who started the Cinematheque saw all of Howard Hawks’ work in, like, one week. They (the French critics) suddenly said, ‘Wait a minute! It doesn’t matter what the project is, or who the writer was or the producer. There are concerns that go from film to film.’ You have to look at somebody’s work—their entire work.

You’re talking about dealing with characters in thematic ways. That’s not the way I would make a movie, because I believe it’s pretentious. This is my own choice as a filmmaker. That stuff fades. I think you will look back on films that were considered works of art, and see how shallow they are.

This is just a shot in the dark, but should we take your position as being a preference for expressing these things primarily through action, much as in a film like Kurosawa’s SEVEN SAMURAI?

You’re getting close. I’m against interpretation in a classical sense. Film is a visual medium. Pictures are more powerful than dialogue. The samurai is a good example, because it’s a strict form; each time you make one, you have to go back and establish the legend of the samurai. He is.

My approach is not the only way. I’m not saying I’m right all the time. But my approach is to shorthand a great deal of the material that I’m not interested in, and get down to what I am interested in.

Susan Sontag says several things in her book Against Interpretation which I kind of believe in. I’ll see if I can give you the quotes. She says: “Interpretation, which is based on the theory that a work of art is composed of items of content, violates art. Art makes art into an article for use, for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories. Ideally, it is possible to elucidate interpretation in another way, by making works of art whose surfaces are so unified and clear, whose content is so explicit and whose structure is so direct that the work can be just what it is.” I feel that sums up my attitude towards filmmaking, much better than I can express it myself.

Are you in the position of the writer/director, interested only in directing his own scripts?

No. I’m interested in scripts that I can do, those with cinematic values. By which I mean point of view, moving camera, and other things I value as a director. It could be most any subject matter though.

But you won’t sign on for something you can’t rework?

No, no. It can be someone else’s script, but I have to be free to rework it as necessary. It would be fabulous to get a script where there was no need to touch it. But I have to be able to make it my movie.

People like Spielberg and Lucas seem to be devoting two or three years to each project. You, on the other hand, seem to prefer to work more quickly and to have a larger output.

I’m interested in making a body of work that encompasses more films. Just as a director—purely without commercial considerations—because you learn and grow from every film.

Variety’s review of THE FOG made an interesting point. Some critics are trying to lay this heavy Hitchcockian mantle on you, and the tremendous expectations that go with it. But their reviewer pointed out that Hitchcock didn’t really get up to speed until his sixteenth film.

Of course not. There’s all this pressure to become an instant auteur. That’s kill you fast. A director can’t operate under those conditions. But it is important to be commercial.

The kinds of films I’ve made have been considered exploitation films. You cannot fail at those; if you do, you’re sunk.

So far you haven’t stayed in the low-budget area, with one of the major reasons being the advantage of control. Larger budget projects are likely to involve less control and more compromise—or at least collaboration. Are you amenable to that?

That would depend on what I was collaborating with. I haven’t been willing to give up control so far. I’m making a tentative step in that area with Universal on THE THING. It’s the first film where I don’t have contractual control. I don’t want to move too fast into bigger budgets.

The idea of doing a large budget project doesn’t give you pause?

Not at all.

In your original concept, THE FOG depended almost entirely on mood and atmosphere for its effect. But this no longer the case. There have been some changes?

Yes. We went back and added the visceral shock. Had this not been a fantasy, it (our original plan) might have worked. But it was a miscalculation on our part. We’ve come a long way since Val Lewton. My commercial sense told me something was missing.

I don’t mean to put down Val Lewton. I just came to a point on THE FOG where I said: “They have seen ALIEN, HALLOWEEN, PHANTASM, and a lot of other movies. If my film is going to be visible in the marketplace, it’s got to compete with those.”

Originally I was trying to compete only with Val Lewton movies—very understated horror with a brooding atmospheric feel to it. But if you released ISLE OF THE DEAD today, I don’t think it could compete because it doesn’t have those visceral shocks.

Anyway, we screened the first versions for Avro and some of my colleagues whose opinions I respect, and a lot of them said ‘Don’t touch it.’ But Debra and my editor, Tommy Wallace, agreed with me. Avro was great about it, advancing the money to shoot additional scenes. Their attitude was ‘Get it right this time. We will not make less than 10%, but what a difference!’

What, specifically, was added in post-production?

The title sequence, showing Antonio Bay falling apart. The whole top-of-the-lighthouse sequence at the end, with Wormface. Little things scattered here and there. The trailer dethongs were shot to show more. We added some explicit sex, and all the visual effects were redone.

The first version runs a bit short?

It’s a complicated matter. This film is a montage from beginning to end. There’s very little moving camera; it’s done in cuts. I wanted to try that. The tension, and the timing, and the motion comes from cutting.

Above: Dan O’Bannon as Pinback, the comically bumbling crewman of DARK STAR, a film he co-wrote with director John Carpenter while both were students at U.S.C. O’Bannon also edited, was responsible for production design and some special effects. “He did not direct one frame,” however, insists Carpenter, referring to the way intercutters have lately come away from O’Bannon with that impression. Below: A moody scene between Talby (AndreijahParnich, voice dubbed by Carpenter) and Goodtime (Brian Narelle) which O’Bannon duplicated in his unused ALIEN script.