

## John Carpenter Retrospective at the 29<sup>th</sup> Leeds International Film Festival, 5-19th November 2015

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If John Carpenter's film career has seemed to gradually fade towards semi-retirement over the last 10 years, then this overdue retrospective season at the Leeds International Film Festival throughout November 2015 provided a chance to revisit the director at his finest. During his peak period in the 1970s and 1980s he was perhaps the leading figure in the new wave of American horror and science fiction that revitalised the genre, which went on to produce other notable filmmakers such as Tobe Hooper and Wes Craven. His always individualistic films are marked by a lean, Hemingway-esque visual aesthetic and an unsettling mood, matched by the chilly electronic music scores he often composed himself.

The season formed part of the Festival's 'Fanomenon' strand which focuses on fantasy and adventure cinema, as well as video gaming. It opened with Carpenter's most visceral shocker *The Thing* (1982), a homage to the Howard Hawks/Christian Nyby classic *The Thing from Another World* (1951). The Cold War paranoia of the original is translated effectively to the era of Reaganite sabre-rattling, with further intensity added by the strikingly gruesome visual effects which reference David Cronenberg's body horror. The sense of unease that recurs in so many of his films is much in evidence here as the crew investigating mysterious deaths at a scientific base in the Antarctic gradually realise that the murderous creature is a shape-shifter that may be lurking inside of any of them. The LIFF's screening was followed by a satellite Q&A with Carpenter live from Los Angeles.

Much of Carpenter's work contains an undercurrent of social satire but few are more blatant than *They Live* (1988). Reworking the familiar science fiction trope of a magical pair of glasses which reveal the world as it really is, the film exposes consumerism and advertising as parts of a master plan by aliens to keep the masses docile and preserve the position of a social elite whom they are in league with. Viewing the film again at a time when our screens bombard us with commercials for Christmas products, its political commentary seems to have become even more pertinent. The film was also shown in tribute to its star, Roddy Piper, who died earlier this year.

*The Fog* (1980) may have seemed comparatively toned-down on its original release, especially after the excesses of Carpenter's groundbreaking slasher, *Halloween* (1978), but it now emerges as a beautifully crafted ghost story with a moral. With its small town setting and well drawn characters, as well as one of Carpenter's best scores, it slowly builds tension towards its finale of retribution as the citizens of Antonio Bay are forced to pay for the greed of their forebears. Carpenter's approach shows the lessons learnt from Val Lewton's approach to horror where little violence is directly shown and the audience is allowed to fill in the gaps from their own, ultimately more frightening imaginations. Framed as a spooky children's fable told around a bonfire, it might be Carpenter's masterpiece.

*Escape from New York* (1981) is Carpenter's own *Metropolis* (Dir. Fritz Lang, 1927) and his most

ambitious film. Inspired by the Watergate scandal, it presents a dystopian warning of a future America ruled by a corrupt, self-serving elite where New York has become an anarchic, brutal maximum security prison where the inmates run wild. The director's liberating hero is Snake Plisskin, played with gleeful relish by five times collaborator Kurt Russell; 15 years later the eye-patch-wearing anti-hero reappeared in the sequel, *Escape from L.A.* (1996), but the film couldn't match the iconic imagery, commercial success or witty aplomb of the original.

The season closed with the slightly uncharacteristic *Big Trouble in Little China* (1986), a knockabout comedy adventure again featuring Kurt Russell, here channelling John Wayne complete with drawling delivery. His laconic truck driver finds himself battling an evil sorcerer in a plot more fantastical than any of Carpenter's horror movies. It's a likeable, tongue-in-cheek action film but obviously lightweight in comparison with Carpenter's strongest work; it may have marked the beginning of the gradual decline in his fortunes.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the season was the poster exhibition staged in conjunction with the North Bar in Leeds city centre. It featured posters from throughout Carpenter's career including ones for all the films screened in the retrospective. Notable among these were Drew Struzan's memorable designs for *Big Trouble in Little China* and *The Thing*, the latter apparently created in just 24 hours. Their vivid imagery mirrors the disturbing qualities of Carpenter's output.

Carpenter's work retains its place in the history of horror and fantasy cinema for the economy of his direction and his ability to ground unsettling action within convincingly everyday settings. As with the cinema of David Lynch, his is a world where dark terrors lurk just beneath the surface of humdrum America. In a Fanomenon programme packed with potential pretenders to Carpenter's horror crown, this retrospective provided a fine chance to remember why he was once rated as good a genre director as any around.

Robert Shail is Professor of Film at the Northern Film School, Leeds Beckett University. He has written widely on British cinema and his essay on John Carpenter and Kurt Russell is featured in *The Cinema of John Carpenter: The Technique of Horror*, eds. Ian Conrich and David Woods (Wallflower, 2004).