

In December 1989, LA-based horror writer David Schow traveled to the Bay Area on a press tour to promote *Leatherface: The Texas Chainsaw Massacre III*, his screenwriting debut. I had the opportunity to speak with Schow in the KALX-FM (U.C. Berkeley) studios. Below are excerpts from the interview:

Q: You are often described as a member of the “splat pack,” and you coined the term “splatterpunk” to describe your particular brand of horror writing. Could you explain those labels: splat pack and splatterpunk?

A: Well, the splat pack came up, I think, in the first issue of a magazine called *Midnight Graffiti*. The erstwhile editor decided that a number of us who were writing horror of a certain tone could be grouped together under what she called the splat pack and what we had already named splatterpunk, which was just a term to describe graphic, kind of visceral, in-the-streets horror. The thing that we used to differentiate it from everything that had gone previously was the idea that Stephen King became popular by taking horror into the family room, as it were. And we took it back out to the streets and the alleys, where it belongs.

Q: What, specifically, are your credits as a horror writer?

A: Well, I’ve had a novel published called “The Kill Riff,” which is my rock ‘n’ roll horror novel, or suspense novel. I edited what is arguably the first splatterpunk anthology, a book called “Silver Scream,” which featured the work of a lot of writers like Clive Barker ... and the best of the proto-splatterpunks like Bob Bloch, the guy who wrote *Psycho*. I came to the novel on the basis of having written a lot of short fiction, which got a fair amount of attention and won a couple of trophies—that sort of thing. In fact, most of that short stuff is coming out in two books, a collection called “Seeing Red,” in paperback, and another called “Lost Angels,” which is a four novella book. And those two books together cover about the last ten years of my short fiction writing, from which everything else derives. The first book that I had published with my name on it, because I did pseudonymous things before that, was a rather lengthy and extensive retrospective on “The Outer Limits” TV series. The be all and end all of “The Outer Limits.” More than you ever wanted to know on “The Outer Limits.”

Q: Past the outer limits of what you wanted to know about “The Outer Limits.”

A: Yeah, it pushed the envelope.

Q: What qualities do you think make a horror film effective? What distinguishes the good ones

from the bad ones, in your mind?

A: I think the purpose of horror movies has kind of changed in the past couple of years, because one thing that you hear a lot of people coming out of horror movies saying is: “Gee, that didn’t scare me.” I don’t think the purpose of horror films is to scare you anymore because one of the ways they try to do it is that they just kind of ram the camera into something in tight close-up and provide a musical shriek on the soundtrack. Being scared and being startled are two different things. I’ve gotten to the point where I go to screenings of these things, and you know how the formula works and you know where the bumps are going to come. And it’s just nothing. It’s like watching a toy perform. It’s like going through the Haunted Mansion at Disneyland too many times: you know where all the stuff is. I think the purpose of the stuff is to unsettle you and make you think: what if there were really people like that out there? Or what if the people I ride BART with, or the bus with or something, what if I’m sitting next to somebody who is blatantly like this. Or who knows what these people do when they go home at night? You know, that kind of thing. It’s to unsettle you and make you ask that question that makes you uneasy.

Q: Can you name two or three of your own personal favorite horror movies?

A: Gee, *Alien* is a big one, still. *Alien* was the last movie I stood in line to see.

Q: How would you compare *Alien* to its sequel, *Aliens*?

A: I think there’s a peculiar difference in those two movies. I think the first one is like a British version of the idea, and the second one’s an American version of the idea.... [*Aliens*] is certainly not scary. It’s more of a “let’s squash the alien cockroaches” kind of movie. And this brings us back to: what is the purpose of these things if it’s not to scare you? *Alien* is imbued with that sense of just imminent dread, of what is going to happen? And that’s a really delicious feeling to have occasionally. In *Aliens*, there are no plot surprises. You know what’s going to happen and you see it coming toward you like a freight train... [In *Alien*], you know something awful is going to happen. Clive Barker talked about this. It’s the dread that he plays so heavily on. And it’s an interesting emotion to evoke.

I went through the ceiling when I first saw *The Exorcist*, and I’m not a particularly religious person. That I think is a triumph of the material because you can get behind the story of this priest having this crisis of faith in terms of what’s hap-

pening to this little girl. You don't have to be religious at all to be affected by that movie. But it's still up there; it's very chic now to say, "Oh, I saw *The Exorcist* on videotape the other night, and it didn't scare me."

I polled the contributors to "Silver Scream" as to what their favorite horror movies were, and I got some really interesting examples. *Alien* was cited quite a few times. Clive [Barker] cited movies like *The 120 days of Sodom* and *Viva La Muerta*—really strong stuff! I mean stuff that's designed to send you running out of the theater. *The 120 Days of Sodom* is really a "how much can you take?" movie. But for a more elegantly expressed sense of it, a movie like *Les Yeux Sans Visage* [the eyes without a face], which was released in this country as *The Horror Chamber of Dr. Faustus*, has a scene that is so clinically chilling because you understand why the character of the doctor is cutting off a person's face to replace his daughter's face. A movie like Polanski's *Repulsion* is so creepy to me even today that I don't want to look at it. It unsettles me that much.

Q: Do you have any plans to adapt your own stories or novels as films?

A: A lot of people have been asking about "The Kill Riff," the first novel. And I know what it would take to make that book into a movie, and we'd have to chop off all the nasty bits to make it into a film. I just finished a novel called "The Shaft," which I wouldn't be averse to adapting into a movie. So, yeah, that factor's there, but it's not the primary reason. I don't write books for them to be made into movies, although it's nice

when people come to you with an offer for movie rights. It's kind of a secondary thing. It's like gravy.

Q: Which of your books would you recommend to people as a good introduction to splatterpunk?

A: "Silver Scream," first of all, the anthology, which is available in paperback now. I edited it so that's a good book to read to get the sense of this stuff not just being graphic, gross in-your-face horror but having actual literary values and strengths as well. Since the collections are coming out, I'll plug those. What the Hell? I'm shameless. "Seeing Red," which is a collection of my short stories, and "Lost Angels."

Q: And we don't want to confuse people; it wasn't the basis of the movie with Adam Horovitz of The Beastie Boys.

A: No, I'm doing really bad on titles. When I first wrote "The Kill Riff," my agent hated the title, and we circulated it under the title "Dead Bang" for a while, which was a John Frankenheimer movie not long ago. And we changed it back to "The Kill Riff," and it sold. But the last three books I worked on—there was another book called "Seeing Red;" there was a movie called *Lost Angels*; and now that I've finished a novel called "The Shaft," there's a dumb movie about politicians in a mine shaft somewhere called—surprise—*The Shaft*, coming out sometime in 1990. So we try to get past these things as best we can. I just sort of studiously ignore them and say, "Well, mine's better."