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FEATURE STORY

AN INTERVIEW WITH CARL MACEK by Cliff Stephenson

About the Interview : Carl Macek is an accomplished author and film historian with a distinguished career in film and animation. Noted for his extensive research of the history of Heavy Metal Magazine as well as the Robotech series, Mr. Macek recently contributed to the Heavy Metal special edition that was released on November 23rd, 1999 by Columbia Home Video. Our interviewer Cliff Stephenson got the chance to talk with Carl at length about his ongoing passion for Heavy Metal and his work in general.

DVDFILE: First off, thanks for taking the time to talk to us this morning.

Carl Macek: No problem!

DF: I've seen the Heavy Metal disc, loved it.

CM: Great!

DF: Loved the commentary and thought you did a great job with that and had a lot of stuff to talk about. That was one of the hardest things about this interview. You talked so much during the commentary, had such great things to say during the commentary and during the book I thought, "I don't know what I'd even ask him"

CM: (Laughs) The disc goes out when?

DF: Tuesday (November 23, 1999).

CM: Oh great.

DF: So most people haven't even had a chance to listen to it yet.

CM: That's good.

DF: Yeah, I think most people will be pleasantly surprised.

CM: I had never done a book on tape type of thing before and I produce a lot of animation myself now and I was very critical of the way I was reading it. I was just curious as to whether or not you thought that it was informational enough to make sense.

DF: Actually it was very much that way. I got a lot out of it and I liked the commentary during the Lyca Reel, which is much more specific to what's going on on-screen.

CM: That's what I liked about it. The thing was with the book, when the book was written, it was laid out basically to the way the film was originally laid out. Then they reedited the film, sequences were out of order so that the chapters were out of order. That was my only criticism, that I had of it, was that it was slightly out of order. When I'm talking in the chapter about Den, you may be seeing So Beautiful & So Dangerous or something like that

DF: Right.

CM: That was one criticism of it and my other criticism of it was that I wrote that book almost twenty-some years ago and it was meant to be read, not spoken. The phrasing is different. I wasn't asked to rewrite it to make it palatable for listeners but I was asked to read the text of my book. So it became a book on tape experience for me. It wasn't meant to be that so I had to start and stop many times because I just didn't like the way I was phrasing it and you can sort of tell that it doesn't seem continuous. It sounds like I'm on drugs or something. But the commentary I thought was better because I was actually watching the movie and commenting on the stuff that I was seeing.



DF: Your reading of the book ran about seventy-seven minutes while the film runs just over ninety, so the thing about the book is, if people just listen to it and don't expect to have to watch it, which I don't think most people will, they'll understand that it's the reading of the book and not necessarily meant as a commentary. And if you're not watching the screen for references, I mean you wouldn't be watching the movie as you're reading the book.

CM: Correct. So if someone just dealt with it as an audio thing without visuals on the screen, just like playing a CD or something like that.

DF: To be honest, the sequential order of it, the book, I didn't even notice it until you said it just now.

CM: Yeah, when that book was done I was working on that stuff, I was assisting Michael Gross. Part of the book was done to help promote the initial release of the film in the early eighties. We tried to do a, based on the understanding of how the film was to be put together, we wrote the book that way so that it would match the sequences. Then when they edited it, they liked some of the sequences in different order so it's slightly different than how we had the book laid out.

DF: Well, I thought it was really well done and I enjoyed both tracks immensely.

CM: Oh good.

DF: How and when did you first become involved with Heavy Metal?

CM: During the initial production. I used to be an editor for a magazine, "Media Scene," west coast editor in the late seventies and I had done a lot of early writing on science fiction movies like Star Wars and Close Encounters and a variety of other things and I was a genre specialist. So when they started to do Heavy Metal my name came up with a couple of sources and I was asked by Michael Gross to help on the film, both in terms of marketing and promotional coordination along with a guy named Craig Miller. Then afterwards as a kind of an aide or assistant to Michael Gross.

Actually, I got involved with the marketing of the original animation art for the film. But I was very familiar with the artwork. That's why all that artwork exists because I was able to catalog it and deal with it. Most animation artists never maintain to that level that we maintained it, so all along during the production I would go to the various studios, actually all over the world, and go in and talk with a few people. That was the basis of the book too, because while I was out there doing this they said "Hey you're out there, why don't you interview these guys for real and then when you come back turn it into a book?" So I was doing it at the time so I was very familiar with all the personalities and was able to go in and do a work in progress type of thing.

DF: So with the sequences being animated in Canada, France, England, and the US, how difficult was it for them using animators from all over the world and how was it able to come together so well?

CM: It was an interesting process because what they chose to do was to back into a production completion date so that it could be marketed by the studios during the summer. Given a very short production schedule and the omnibus nature of the film, it was determined that it was easier to make a film with different studios handling each of the sequences. Originally they had much more elaborate linking devices which fell through because of logic considerations, like you're talking about, they realized that it would be very difficult to combine work from studio A and studio B. So what happened was, by contracting with various studios in England, Canada, and the United States, they were able to do preproduction, production and post production in a relatively short period of time. And it kind of worked out because each cartoon sequence had its own style. I thought it was kind of interesting.

DF: Were the varying styles of animation that they used in Heavy Metal completely by design or just out of necessity due to the fact that all these different animation studios were doing their own pieces?

CM: It was basically by design because all of the various original pieces were in different art styles.

DF: So with Harry Canyon and the B-17, since those were original stories for the film, who made the decision on the animation style?

CM: I would assume it was probably Michael Gross, who was the art director at the time, who was originally an art director for the National Lampoon and was one of the key players in the whole production. He was very influential, he's also an artist, so a lot of the stuff he drew himself. Some of the characters, like he re-pictorialized Zeke and Edsel from Angus McKie's original. They actually had done storyboards with Angus McKie's original characters in the first Zeke and Edsel and they kind of looked like, one guy looked like Jerry Garcia, you know a heavy set guy, like a dooper guy and the other guy looked like the creature from the black lagoon in the original comic strip. Gross actually created the original drawings that later evolved into those characters.

So he was doing a lot of that work and was very familiar with the artists in comics at the time. He got American comic artists like, well he knew Berni Wrightson, Wrightson did the Captain Sternn sequence, but he got people like Howard Chaykin and Neal Adams and a few others to work on different things. Mike Ploog for example who did a lot of the Taarna designs was a comic artist, a very, very successful comic artist. So with Gross clued into the whole scene, he was able to recognize different design elements that were popular in European magazines and American comics at the time and

incorporate them into the film.

DF: You were describing during the Den sequence in the rough cut that the shading style the animators were trying just wasn't coming out quite right and had to be abandoned and sort of refigured. How much of Heavy Metal was somewhat animated like but had to be dropped for whatever reason.

CM: The biggest area of change took place in the Den sequence. Originally they weren't going to do Den, originally they were going to do the Arabian Nights, Corben's Arabian Nights. And it's funny because they had animated some test scenes of Corben's Arabian Nights and some of that animation ended up in Heavy Metal with Den and the Queen having sex. So they cannibalized the animation but redesigned it to fit the new characters. When they started to do the Den sequence, they probably did 60% of it in this particular style and if you look at the movie you can see that the style changes.

After the film, a comic book artist, Phil Norwood who did Alien vs. Predator is his most famous thing, was sent to England to help redo the scenes as much as possible for Den and under the short time frame that they had to do this, he wasn't able to complete all the scenes. So that's why some scenes of Den he looks like a buff comic book guy and other scenes he looks different. Another reason was that there was a shortage of animators in England at the time due to the heavy labor-intensive work that was being done in a short period for all the different episodes of Heavy Metal. A good portion of it was done in London.

Then there was some stuff, there was an entire sequence, the Neverwhere Land sequence, that was completely eliminated. There were a couple of other sequences animated and cut out. Taarna was actually even a longer sequence. Originally Taarna was the linking device.

DF: Instead of the...

CM: Instead of the green ball. Different little vignettes of Taarna: 30-seconds, 1-minute, 2-minutes as linking devices. That was eliminated in favor of the version you see now. Gremlins also was changed. Originally Gremlins was going to be gremlins with little monsters ripping a plane apart, and they thought that was a little too elaborate to do in the time frame so they just changed it to the B-17 thing which made it a real mood piece.

DF: How common is that in animation?

CM: It happens occasionally. It happened on movie that I had worked on similarly during that period called Rock and Rule. And Rock and Rule went through maybe three or four permutations until it was actually completed. More recently in a Japanese animated film, Little Nemo-Adventures in Slumberland, the same type of thing was done. Princess Mononoke, for example the new Miyazaki film, there was a lot of animation that was completely redone by Miyazaki because it wasn't up to his standards when he saw everything else in context. It happens, but only when you have very strong personalities controlling the production and are able to convince the financial side that it's necessary for the production to change things.

DF: One of the toughest elements in animation seems to be the animating of human figures. How big a concern was that when Heavy Metal was being developed?

CM: I think it was very significant because you'll notice that a lot of the choices, in terms of animation, utilized rotoscoping as a way to give a realistic movement to certain characters. A lot of Taarna was rotoscoped. Some wasn't, but a lot of the actual Taarna character was rotoscope. The concept here was that they were dealing with humans and most cartoons at the time were not dealing with humans or if they were they were doing them in a stylized manner that was evolved from the animation production as opposed to being an adaptation of existing material. So it was very difficult to do humans realistically and make it be convincing.

Even today, it's hard to animate people correctly. The difference is, for example, the first really successful human that was animated was Popeye. If you look prior to Popeye, there weren't people that were being animated. It was Mickey Mouse and Oswald the Rabbit and Bimbo and weird things. Koko the Clown, but it was a guy in a suit, like a clown suit, so it was very infrequent that people were animated because the point that when you have people involved and you want to try to do it in a realistic way, expectations change. When you have funny animals or highly stylized characters like Elmer Fudd or Egghead, which are real caricature type things, it's much easier to draw in a consistent and overlapping manner which is necessary for animation. So when you do realistic stuff it's very hard and so it was frowned upon. Gulliver's Travels, for example which was Fleischer's first feature, was humans. Snow White, a long time for Snow White to get done. A lot of Snow White, the people were rotoscope. The Dwarves were also rotoscope, but more forgiving.

DF: How much experimentation and altering of the sequential order was done up until the film's release?

CM: I don't know, my only awareness of it would be the various Lyca reel stages that they evolved and there were about four of them. So I think that from version one to version two there were some changes and from version two to version three there were changes but three was basically the way it was. I think they probably had two major changes and then everything else was little tweaks. But I wasn't involved in that level of it because that was prior to my getting involved with the project.

DF: How do you feel the film might have been different if the release date hadn't been pushed up from its intended Christmas release to the August 7 date?

CM: Don't know, hard to say. Sometimes necessity creates certain decisions which make for serendipity. Hard to say. It would certainly be a different film. They'd have probably found a way to put the Cornelius Cole stuff in. A lot of the Loc-Nar stuff was, I think, redone as well based on preview screenings. So who knows? Might have been a little different had there been more time to tweak it prior to its going into previews. Hard to say.

DF: Seems like any time a film has plenty of time before it needs to be released, they'll do as much tweaking as they can.

CM: Interestingly enough, Ivan Reitman actually treated it like a live action film as producer and actually went in and cut stuff that people had spent months animating and drawing and inking and painting and coloring and photographing. It shows that when you've got someone that's coming in that's not part of the initial mindset, you've got a producer that's a superb film producer coming in taking animation and just treating it like film, like dailies basically and editing it. And he did a great job I think in certain sequences. He shortened certain things and eliminated some scenes and some characters and stuff but the overall effect at the time, I think was very successful.

DF: What effect, if any, do you feel that Heavy Metal's unavailability on home video for so long had on the overall mythic quality of the film?

CM: Well I think it becomes intertwined with urban legend so it becomes greater than it would have been had it been part of the normal regime. It fell into that crack in between when video wasn't happening and was happening. It was one of those films that just fell in between the cracks because people were not aware of the potential of video at the time. They didn't negotiate all the rights properly. It was just a matter of renegotiating the rights to get it out which was the basic hang-up. There wasn't any choice to keep it hidden and in the course of time, the memory of it for the people that saw when it first came out was vivid because at the time that the movie came out, post-Star Wars, post-2001, there were very few event films that people could go to and if you wanted to, just get loaded and watch a movie.

There weren't that many experiential type movies and Heavy Metal was one of those types of things where it was that no-brainer. You'd just go in and laugh, listen to cool music and just get a rush out of it. And that was the design, that was the plan is to do something that could capture the contemporary youth audience in a different way than the Disney films did and in a different way than the Ralph Bakshi films did. Bakshi was more shocking and more adult. He was like Martin Scorsese and these guys were like Jim Carrey. A lot of the impetus to really get this film out has to go to Kevin Eastman of Heavy Metal magazine, who was a real champion of the film and I'm sure it must have affected him greatly as a young cartoonist growing up. He invented the Ninja Turtles with his partner and eventually took some of the proceeds from that and bought Heavy Metal magazine.

So he was very influenced by that film and was very concerned that it should get out and be seen. He was really an advocate to get the film released initially. I actually worked with him to track down a lot of the missing pieces, like the Cornelius Cole scene and a bunch of other things. An interesting guy, really passionate about his interests and gets a lot accomplished.

DF: Let's talk about the sequel, Heavy Metal: F.A.K.K. 2. The IMDB lists you as co-writer but the Heavy Metal website lists you as executive consultant. What's your role in the film?

CM: It's a hard thing to say for political reasons because of the nature of how it was produced, but I was initially involved in the development of the screenplay during the first go-round prior to the final financing of the film. When the film was finally financed as a foreign co-production, because of the quota-system evolved for foreign productions, I could not stay on the production as the writer. So I was given what I guess you could call an honorary credit as an executive consultant, which could be done and so allow the Canadians and the Germans, who are co-producers on this to bring in a Canadian writer and rewrite the script to their desires. So after the initial year-and-a-half of development, during the actual production of it I was not involved. But I was involved in the initial stage of the production.

DF: So do you have any idea where the status of the film is now?

CM: It's complete.

DF: They haven't set any release date for it yet?

CM: I don't think so. I think they're still working on the marketing plan.

DF: Are there any other projects that you'd like to talk about of your own?

CM: I've worked on a variety of other projects off and on, it just depends on where your interests are. I own Streamline Pictures and brought out a lot of Japanese animation in the early eighties before it was chic to do that. My company initially distributed Akira, Fists of the North Star, Wicked City, and a variety of others both theatrically and then subsequently on home video and TV. So I was influential on that front as well to try to bring animation up to a different level. I'm kind of like Pied Piper or a Johnny Appleseed in many ways because I see animation differently than a lot of people do and through my

career, I've been doing this for about twenty-years, I end up gravitating toward nontraditional applications for animation and I do something and then maybe five or six years later it kind of catches on. It's kind of funny.

DF: A little ahead of your time.

CM: Little bit. (Laughs) But it's good. It keeps me thinking.

DF: Well we would really like to thank you.

CM: Well I hope I answered your questions. It's a complex thing where I wasn't involved on a creative level in the making of this movie, the first Heavy Metal movie, but I became by coincidence or serendipity one of the quote/unquote historians of the film because of the book and the exploitation of the artwork on behalf of Reitman and company. It was an interesting thing and that is where I actually learned about animation. It was like going to trade school because I sat there and when you analyze a film piece by piece and see how it's made and see all the elements in a very intense way you really get a strong sense of how animation is done. As opposed to just being one aspect of it, if you're like a storyboard guy for example, you only have a small view.

But if you can go through and have the script and the storyboard and the layout and the artwork and the exposure sheets and you see all of the finished product and everything all at once in an overview, it really gives you an education if you have the desire to suck up the information. Which is what I did and I eventually became pigeonholed into animation. Before Heavy Metal I was a science fiction genre specialist. After Heavy Metal I became a very, very specific animation genre specialist.

So it's interesting to see how certain things influence your life and the movie was very influential in my career and probably in the careers of a lot of other people. John Bruno, for example whose an Academy Award winning special effects guys and now a film director, one of his first breaks was the Taarna sequence, directing that. Michael Gross, Joe Medjuck, and Ivan Reitman with Ghostbusters, all drawing upon the experience of Heavy Metal. I mean when you look at Heavy Metal and then you see Ghostbusters, you can see the influence of Michael Gross and company on Ivan Reitman's production. Ivan Reitman, great storyteller, great filmmaker now working in genre product. It was a very influential mix of people, I think, and a lot of them have gone on to much greater success.

Uh-oh, a bird just flew into my house...

DF: We'd like to thank you very much for talking to us today. Thanks Carl.

CM: Bye now!

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