



THE CROW

Despite tragedy, the grim graphic novel reaches the screen.

*By William
Wilson Goodson Jr.*

THE CROW was released May 13 under the Dimension banner of Miramax Pictures, who picked up the ill-fated \$13-million Ed Pressman production after Paramount chose not to exercise their negative pick-up option in the wake of the tragic death of the film's star, Brandon Lee. Helmed by award-winning commercial and music video director Alex Proyas, the dark fantasy also stars Ernie Hudson (GHOST-BUSTERS), David Patrick Kelly (DREAMSCAPE), Tony Todd (CANDYMAN), and Michael Wincott (THE THREE

MUSKETEERS). Makeup effects were handled by Lance Anderson (Wes Craven's SHOCKER), and the opticals were provided by Dream Quest Images.

The script by John Shirley and David Schow is based on the adult graphic novel by James O'Barr, which incorporated imagery from both rock-and-roll and gothic horror. The original plot deals with Eric Draven, personal history and profession unknown, who returns to his old neighborhood a year after being shot in the head.

Apparently indestructible, he ignores bullet wounds and a massive dose of morphine to

Below, the evil triumvirate of villains: (left to right) Tony Todd as Grange, Michael Wincott as Top Dollar and Bai Ling as Myca.



Above: Brandon Lee's appearance as the title character in THE CROW bears an uncanny resemblance to the original drawings of J. O'Barr's graphic novel.





Risen from the grave as an indestructible avenger, Eric Draven confronts one of the men who killed him and his fiancée.

execute a number of dangerous criminals. Through a series of flashbacks, we realize that he is mercilessly hunting down the men who raped and murdered his fiancée, but almost by accident he wipes out a dangerous drug ring in the process. Throughout his adventure he is accompanied by the titular crow, a sort of familiar who importunes Eric not to torture himself by reliving the memories of the formerly happy life that was savagely ripped away from him.

Why a crow? O'Barr originally visualized his avenging angel character accompanied by a giant white rabbit, from a line in ALICE'S ADVEN-

Former music video director Alexander Proyas, on the set.



TURES IN WONDERLAND about being "crazy as a March hare." However, when he found he could not get this to look scary enough, he opted instead for a bird, which since the time of Egyptians has been a harbinger of misery and death.

The story actually began as a form of obscure therapy for O'Barr after his girlfriend was killed by a drunk driver in 1978. Feeling the need for strict regimentation in his life, the artist enlisted with the Marines and did the first 40 pages of the graphic novel while serving in Germany, which helped produce the dark, depressed architecture and weather in his drawings.

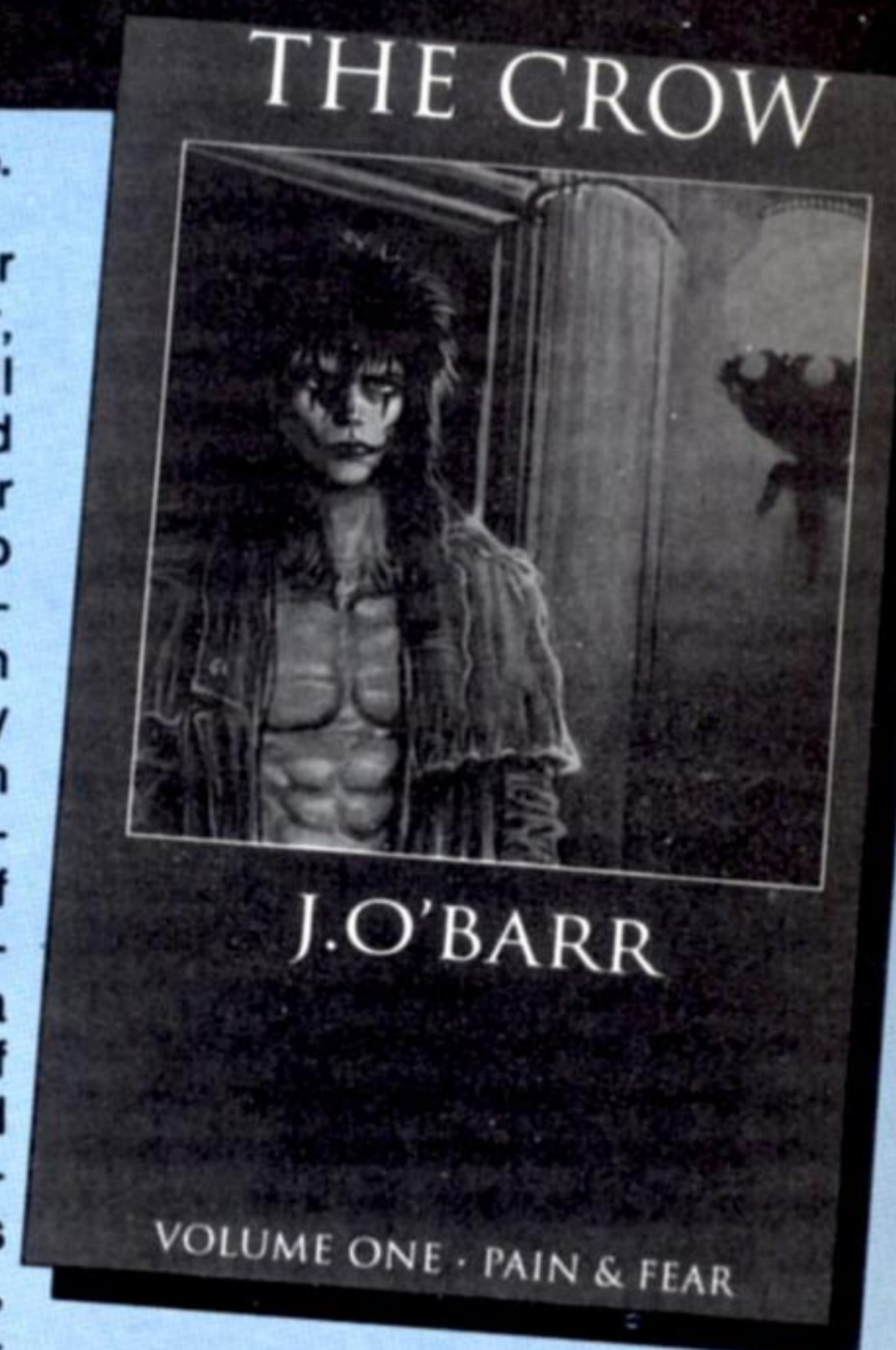
In 1981, he finished the story and began collecting rejection slips from numerous editors who felt the character was depressing and slightly androgynous. The comic was finally published by acquaintance Gerry Reed's Caliber company, in three volumes. Although severely edited, the grim story, atmospheric drawings, and graphic violence developed a strong following among fans of independent comic.

O'Barr was first approached about a film by New Line Cine-

ma, who offered \$60,000 for the film rights to the character, but O'Barr refused to sell all rights to the character. A friend and fan, science fiction author William Gibson set O'Barr up with an agent, who also represented cyberpunk author John Shirley. Coincidentally, Shirley was writing a science fiction script for producer Ed Pressman, and he and partner Jeff Most did a professional treatment of the comic book as a film. When the success of BATMAN: THE MOVIE proved the box office potential of vigilante comic book heroes adapted to the big screen, Pressman asked for a complete script.

Shirley was impressed by the book's combination of Gothic Romance and rock-and-roll imagery. When Eric Draven becomes the Crow, he paints a smiling mask on his face. The look was intended to be ironic, considering the character's total ruthlessness, but it resembles the makeup worn by several bands, such as Kiss and Alice Cooper, and the Crow's habit of carving designs on himself is similar to Iggy Pop's stage act.

Adapting the graphic novel to the big screen involved answering some questions left



deliberately vague in the original. For instance, when asked why, out of all the innocent victims in the world, Eric was chosen to have his special abilities, O'Barr admitted he intentionally avoided specifying whether Eric was a ghost, specter, animated corpse, or a superhuman madman, in order to let the readers decide. O'Barr gave no explanation for the character's apparent return from the grave, except the line, "It's not death if you refuse it."

Shirley, on the other hand, contends that Eric was empowered by unknown forces because "he was destined to



BRANDON LEE

“Eric is a man who has been pushed to the limits of his sanity and finds himself in a situation he is not capable of dealing with, so he creates someone who is, the Crow.”

“I could not stop for death, so he kindly stopped for me.” In keeping with the source material, Eric’s look as the Crow suggests a rock-n-roll revenant.

be the Crow, by the depth of his love.” To Shirley, the Crow is a pure chi force, the force of will sought by Asian martial artists, fueled by romantic obsession.

Shirley did the first four drafts. The final script is by splatterpunk author David Schow. In the comic book, the death of Eric and his fiancée, Shelly, is a purely random act of violence. In the film, they are killed as part of a plot to drive the tenants out of a building by developer Top Dollar (Wincott). We also find out that Eric was a rock musician before his death.

Neither of these changes upset O’Barr very much, but he is concerned about a change in the crow that accompanies Eric. O’Barr’s crow was more symbolic, seen and heard only by Eric, like a voice of reason in his head, calling him back from the dementia that threatens to engulf him whenever his thoughts drift back to his dead fiancée. In the film, the crow is quite substantial, even able to scratch out the eyes of an attacker (Bai Ling as Myca) who has surmised that the bird is Eric’s link

to the spirit world and thus the source of his supernatural powers.

This sort of physical action required some impressive bird wrangling by Gery Gero, of Birds and Animals Unlimited, who utilized four different ravens, each with its own speciality. “Each animal is different,” he explained, “and we just take advantage of that. We have a bird that would sit still, one that is good at flying in and out of things, and a bird that was good at landing on shoulders. A particularly difficult and macabre stunt was training the birds to attack and tear little bits of plastic flesh off of the dummy head.

This missing voice of the crow was to have been replaced by another character. In the book, a skeletal figure of death is twice seen, representing Eric’s loss of his fiancée. The script expanded this silent figure into a mysterious messenger of the dead, the Skull Cowboy, played by THE HILLS HAVE EYES’ Michael Berryman in a complete skeleton suit with exposed ribs and an elaborate prosthetic makeup. The character’s dialogue laid

out the mythology of Eric’s powers much more explicitly than in the comic, but the character was dropped in post-production, apparently part of the re-structuring that took place after Brandon Lee’s death. This cutting moved the film back in the direction of the comic, leaving several questions unanswered. This in turn necessitated a brief voice-over narration, read by Rochelle Davis (who plays a neighborhood kid Eric takes under his wing), telling us that the crow escorts departed souls from this world to the next; but sometimes, when something terrible has happened, a soul cannot rest and must return to earth to finish some task.

Shortly before his death, Brandon Lee commented on the enigma of the character’s return by saying that the Crow “has some powers that make him different than a normal man, but he is still a normal man. He is reacting to a terrible tragedy, the death of the woman he loved. The only thing that makes this remarkable is that his death was involved, and he has come back.”

Of course it is impossible now to watch the film without being influenced by knowledge of what happened on the set, and even relatively matter-of-

fact statements take on a strange resonance in retrospect. For instance, Lee, who had always avoided a bulked appearance, explained his reason for losing even more weight for the movie by observing that he saw the character as having a “real skinny, gaunt, rock-and-roll look, like Iggy Pop. Being as he comes back from the dead, I felt he should not have a real robust appearance.”

Still, even without the regrettable tragedy that seemed to identify the actor with the character he was playing, Lee would have perfectly embodied the Crow as an actor and performer. Although his resemblance to O’Barr’s drawings was more physical than facial, the character’s white face makeup helped the late actor submerge himself in the role. “You are dealing with a man who has been pushed to the limits of his own sanity,” he observed, “and finds himself in a situation that he, Eric Draven, is not really capable of dealing with. Using some of the totems he picks up in his adventures, like the spent shell casing he ties in his hair and the electrical tape he applies to his body, he creates someone who is capable of dealing with the situation, The Crow.” □

The vicious gang of remorseless thugs, led by David Patrick Kelly’s T-Bird, who murdered Eric and Shelly under orders from Top Dollar.

