Interview of Rick Carter
UCLA Library, Center for Oral History Research, University of California, Los Angeles Interview of Rick Carter

Transcript

Session One (December 22, 2017)

COLLINGS:

Today is December 22nd , Jane Collings interviewing Rick Carter at the Young Research Library, and we'll start at the very beginning and hear about where and when you were born.

CARTER:

I was born March 24th, 1950, at St. John's Hospital in Santa Monica, and my parents, Ruth and Richard Carter, had been married I think for just a couple of years. My mother was twenty-five—I think, yeah, that's right—and they lived at a farm in the San Fernando Valley, so I grew up there for the first—I guess it must be four years of my life. It was walnut groves and orange groves, and there was farm animals. So it was fun to be in the Valley, as I remember, because there was a lot of heat, but one of those sort of wide-open places where you could always just be outside and go. And my earliest memories are of kind of tinkering around with fire trucks and making my own little worlds, whether it was some kind of something I would draw, or I remember my father had a blueprint model of the house that we were in and some additions that were going to be done, and I was just fascinated by the concept that you could be in a space the way you are normally, but there was another perspective that was sort of an above, overall, I suppose, godlike perspective that you could sort of strategize and track how you were in that space, but not necessarily the way you perceived it on your own.

COLLINGS:

How interesting to be looking at the blueprints of your own space.

CARTER:

And I think that was the way that I first had that be an intimate experience where it was not so much formal, as that I understood it represented something that I could get my head down into. So there's something about looking at a plan and almost imagining that it is an overhead shot from a movie in which you boom down and then you are actually looking at the same perspective, only from within the space itself, and then even you can move within it, which is sort of like a camera position.

In fact, just the other day, I was trying to place a set piece in a larger context to try to figure out how it would work, particularly because there were already existing poles that we had to work around, and I found myself doing that kind of boom-down shot to see, well, what would that look from here. It's hitting these marks, meaning from above it's now not interfering with certain parameters that I wanted to make sure were clear, but then I would have to kind of look at it as though I was actually down at ground level or eye level around five feet. And I was doing that in my mind, and I hadn't really thought about it until just now that it probably goes all the way back to that kind of looking and being fascinated that that point of view existed.

COLLINGS:

Right, and being very aware of living within three-dimensional space, which is something we don't think about.

CARTER:

That's right. And I think the other aspect was, probably at that time, if I think about it, because since I was very young, I was still at the point in the first two and a half years

of my life when I had crossed eyes, so I was not—I've never seen with both eyes at the same time. I don't see the same thing. I have a far-side eye and a near-side eye, so it switches back and forth, which creates a kind of a duality in which I'm not seeing normal 3D. I don't see the depth perception that comes from seeing 3D from two different points of vantage. But I think that I was internalizing something that relates to the disparity of those two points of view so that even when I'm mentioning this blueprint and the looking at it from another point of view, even if I imagine then taking it to the object that I was referring to, like a fire truck, and then seeing the fire truck from above as I could hold it, but also getting down to its level so now I'm at the level as though it's big, that kind of disparity of point of view. In fact, probably, the way my eyes are set up, if I was looking at it from any distance from above, I would have been looking at it with my left eye, which is the far-side eye, and when I come down close and be more intimate, it's with the right eye.

And so that kind of gap, even from a young age, I think formed the basis of not just how I look at the world and do my own art work—for instance, the work that I've done, in a sense, commercially, it's like I had a personal side that was the painter that I used my right for, the up-close-and-personal eye, and I had a left eye, which was the more Pop art, landscape, distant eye that became the basis of my production design in movies. I've always sort of likened it to being as though I was—somebody who had something that was intimate as an art form—writing or painting or, in this case, both—but also had this other thing that I went out into the world with, and in some ways it was not as intimate or as vulnerable going out, so it allowed me to go further with it and not sort of have those personal things held up to, I suppose, ridicule, is what the fear becomes.

COLLINGS:

So it's a duality that is actually physically embodied.

CARTER:

And I think that that's the key through-line of my life, starting even in my birth, of always finding myself in the middle of two disparate points of reference, that I find

myself in the middle, sort of like a very strong ambivalence. You know, it's not a weak point of view. And so whenever I hear it in the way people talk, I always can locate that sort of metaphorically as a place. I refer to it as minding the gap, that there's a gap—like in the subways in London between the platform and the train. But I love the idea that in minding it, it's evoking that you're supposed to put your mind or your consciousness into the gap, and I just thought that was a very poetic way of looking at it. And I know this doesn't really reference the exterior part of growing up in Los Angeles, but in a funny way, I suppose it is an entrée into that, which I could illuminate a little bit.

COLLINGS:

Yes, do.

CARTER:

Anyplace that anybody lives, they've got their interior world and then they've got their exterior world where they are, and what the social times are, what other people are doing, how prosperous it is, how desperate the situation is. Los Angeles, for me, has always been a relatively benign place where I can't say that I ever experienced anything that was radically desperate. I've had my best family experiences of having a long-term marriage and kids, so there's a continuity in that regard, and I've lived, in my times, in Hollywood, and the West Side of Los Angeles all the way even going back—we were just looking at this article about the long-hair riot at "Pali" High. I was there, and it was sort of the awakening of this whole other way of thinking about, essentially, masculinity. Really what it boils down to, I think, is there was a rebellion about the male image, actually, because a lot of the ways that people would try to say you shouldn't have your hair long was to say that then you weren't masculine.

COLLINGS:

And specifically, as you pointed out earlier, it was a few football players that were pushing back against the—

CARTER:

Right. Well, there was these dress codes, right, and they would tell you that you had to be a certain way, but then there was so much in the pop culture coming from The Beatles and all of the new things that were happening in the sixties that said to you that you wanted to be a different way. So whenever you tried to go that way, you were being blocked, so then there was a demonstration about why do they have the right to do that, which was sort of part and parcel of a lot of things that were being asked at that time. It was like whose rights should be heard and where do they come from? So the football players, they were upset that this other idea was being propagated, and they were probably being sort of—what's the word—encouraged by their coaches, too, because it was anathema that that would be the male model. But so those were life and times issues. They weren't particularly violent in the scheme of where things went to. When I left Los Angeles and I went up to Berkeley in the late sixties as a college student, it was, of course, much more violent and turbulent from 1968 through the early seventies as far as rebellion and the rioting and the confrontations, you know, the no-business-as-usual aspects of what was going on with the protest movement, mostly about either civil rights or the war in Vietnam. So the war in Vietnam was probably the first outside thing that affected my life. If I think about, as I mentioned, having the crossed eyes, that was rectified in a surgery process over the course of a year when I was young, but never really went away. But it was a significant thing for my development and my life and the way I look at the world. The war in Vietnam, when the draft came knocking, that created another situation in which that's the outside world knocking in to my inside world and demanding that I make a decision as to how I felt about things.

COLLINGS:

And you were eligible for the draft?

CARTER:

I was eligible for the draft in 1968, so right after this event at "Pali" High, which is 1966—I would have been sixteen—I was seventeen and had to decide how I felt about the Vietnam War. So I did a lot of study about it, and I determined that I really was

against my going there. I didn't feel like I was against all war, which was the way you were supposed to be able to state your case if you wanted to be a conscientious objector. If it had been World War II, I didn't feel that that was a war that I would have stayed away from if drafted because it was a different set of circumstances. This one I could never get my head around who we were fighting and for what reason. I mean, in general, I could understand the Domino Theory ideas of those years with the communists taking over the world and we had to stop them in certain places, but it seemed like whenever we would take something, we would have to give it up, and there were these things like you'd have to bomb and destroy a village to save it, or the people that you were putting into power and propping were sort of worse, almost, than the ones that you were fighting against. And so I became a conscientious objector and I applied for it, and the amazing thing was that I got the status okayed by the draft board.

COLLINGS:

So how did you go through the whole process?

CARTER:

Well, the process is first you fill out an application, and they ask you to tell what's the nature of your belief. And I drew upon—I was not a Christian in the sort of traditional sense, but I'd been born and raised in a relatively Christian-background household, and so I started seeking out the aspects of Jesus and Christianity that were more on the peace side of the doctrine. And basically, I really tried to listen to my own conscience, and wrote a piece that was very heartfelt and it was very real to me. I didn't think that it would actually work, necessarily. There were so many people at that time.

COLLINGS:

That's what I'm thinking, yeah.

CARTER:

Well, I think that what happened was, from what I know—and I also worked at it with other people in the sense that I was part of a group when we were at Berkeley to help with draft counseling, but when I wrote this was before that. I went to my grandmother's house in Carmel and I wrote this, and I didn't know how this would affect my dad.

COLLINGS:

Your dad?

CARTER:

My father, in terms of his own feelings about his son refusing to go. He didn't go to World War II because he was diabetic, but he was very patriotic, but he understood that this was a different war and I had to make my own choices, and so it didn't really cause a terrible rift at all. What ended up happening was my grandmother, I didn't know at the time, had been somebody who had been a Quaker, even, and had been sort of a radical in her politics from all the way back from being a suffragette in the—

COLLINGS:

Really? How interesting.

CARTER:

Yeah. So she was a very, very strong woman who also was very supportive, and it wasn't until going up to her place and starting to discuss this that I found that I was, to some degree, within a family tradition, so I didn't feel alienated as some people do, especially in those eras when you had to make a choice that took you outside of the norm of your family or your background.

What I think happened with the draft board was they were so overwhelmed with people applying for conscientious objector, and I actually applied in Berkeley, and I didn't do this strategically, but that's where—I was seventeen right when I started school, almost eighteen, and I turned eighteen—it was on March 24th in 1968. And I think what they did is they just had a quota of the number that they were going to give for COs. I think they put the names in a hat and I think they just picked them out, and then that way they didn't have to go through a process them. And then everybody else they were going to put through a difficult process to try to become a conscientious objector, or they'd have to resist the draft or they'd have to do something crazy like people did in those days. So I got the conscientious objector status. Then that meant that I did not have to serve in a combat role, but I would have to be a medic. If I dropped out of school, for instance, then I'd be eligible for the draft and I'd have to go in as a medic, or if I refused, then I would have to leave the country or I'd have to go to jail.

So I decided to stay in school, and so I had the 2-S deferment until a year and a half from them, was in the December of 1969 there was the first what they called a bingo draft lottery, which meant that they put all the birthdates as Ping-Pong balls into this fishbowl and they picked them out one at a time. So the order that they were picked out was the order that people would be drafted, and they thought that they would get up to about 180 of the 365 days of the year, and I had a number that was more like 220, so I felt pretty assured, because the war was drafting less and less people, but there was still a lot of people. So in 1969 at Christmastime, my father had inherited some money from a great-aunt, and he said—since he knew I was—it was very tumultuous, what I wanted out of things, and he'd actually just been going through having radiation for cancer. So he had a little bit of money that he was given, and for Christmas he gave me a check—my mom and him gave me a check for $3,000, and they said, "This is how much we spent for you all of last year to go to school and all your living expenses." That's how much it cost in those days—

COLLINGS:

Yeah, wow.

CARTER:

—for living and everything, and including going to UC. And they said, “You no longer seem to be in threat of being made to go over to Vietnam if you drop out of school, so you can take this money and do what you want with it.” Now, underlying that, I always felt there was a kind of a message, which was, “You here now have the resources to do what you want. Don’t keep coming back to us and complaining about the world and how terrible it is and what you feel about everything as though we’re supposed to fix it,” not because they were someone who tuned out as much as they were tuned in enough to know that I need to not just have a place to come complain all the time and act out. And I had acted out a couple of times where, for instance, when I came back in 1968 from Berkeley and I was going to go to Chicago to protest the National Convention for the Democratic Party, and my mother was—we had a nice meal, and my mother was asking, “Is there some way that you can make your voice known and protest without getting your head beaten in?” in a very—

COLLINGS:

Very sort of conversational tone.

CARTER:

And motherly kind of just—and I just was scoffing and seething on the inside as I’m scarfing down this hard-cooked—

COLLINGS:

Lovely meal.

CARTER:

—lovely meal that I’m taking for granted entirely. So just about where you are across

from me, my father actually had the expression similar to the one that you have, which is just this kind of smile, and he asked me, he said, “While you’re trying to change the world, can you see any humor in any of this?”

COLLINGS:

That’s a really interesting question.

CARTER:

Well, the blood just went up to my head.

COLLINGS:

Wow.

CARTER:

I was immediately furious. I took the whole table and I lifted it up and I said, “What’s so funny about war and racism?”

COLLINGS:

Well, that’s a very good question as well.

CARTER:

And I stomped out, and, you know, the dog went and finished my meal. And then he came in about twenty minutes later and he said, “This is not what you think it is. We’re not arguing this as though we’re going to solve this. We could have political arguments and whatever, but you’re acting on a whole other level here that is getting

to you, which for good reason, but, nonetheless, you can't take it out like this on us." And I heard him, which was good, and from that point on, there was more of a détente in that way, but it also led to this gift that he gave, which was basically to say—now as a sixty-seven-year-old person, I can look back and think from his point of view, he's just trying to do what he can to give his child or young man, adult, in this case, the resources to make some choices where he can begin to see how the world really is or isn't for him.

So I ended up taking that money, and I dropped out of college in March of 1970. I set off just to Europe and around the world and ended up traveling for ten months till Christmas and went all the way around the world. In fact, I came back, I had $3,000 when I left and I had 500 left when I hit Hong Kong, and bought my dad a Nikon camera and then came back. And I've continued sort of to travel ever since. I went back two years later to Asia to sort of continue what I hadn't finished in that area of the world, and then through my work as a production designer, I've continued to travel. And that trip, going to all those places and having an identity quest at the same time as to who I was and wanting to find that out and being in foreign places allowed me to personalize that part of the experience, whether it was good or bad.

It was not like being a tourist or on vacation. And I only called home once for the entire time, which now I think, oh, my god, what I put my parents through. And also I have a lot of the letters from those times, which is nice to see because it gives me a real insight into how I was and what I was thinking about. There was a point in the trip halfway through where all my mail was lost, and that's what prompted the phone call home just to connect in real time. That seemed a very magical moment to be able to call and to be talking in real time with people who were close to me but were being delayed by two weeks, three weeks, four weeks in any interaction with them, and that kind of distance and then closeness, again, it's part of that duality that I'm very aware of, and the traveling, it can be a very strong experience when it gets into in a deep way, because it brings up all of those kinds of experiences over and over again.

You can come to a foreign place and be so distant from it. You can come to a foreign place and feel so intimate with it. You can meet people that you have no reason to talk to, and maybe can barely talk to, and find intimate conversation in—I call them park-bench meetings where you can go off and, having talked for maybe an hour or something about something, and then you go off and then never see the person again.

The distance between those kinds of experiences—and I suppose that that's what I view, is a do a lot of minding that distance—whether it's a physical geographical distance or it's an intimate part, I pay a lot of attention to that kind of—whether it's gray matter or geographical distance. So what I've just described, in a sense, from starting in Santa Monica and moving in and out, that kind of patterning, it's almost like an EKG or an MRI, of going to levels, right? And then they almost hit like a spiritual level.

Like, if you go to conscience and conscientious objection, you're at a spiritual level because you're looking for faith in something that's guiding you as to what's the moral thing that you should do, how do you feel deeply about, and that you hope is not transitional, that it will guide you, once you've connected it with it, it'll have ways of finding its ways into your consciousness. That range, both the geographical part of it, the confrontation with the social aspects of whether it's the long-hair riot or the war in Vietnam, to personal things that happen such as having crossed eyes and surgery—for instance, with the surgery, I ruined the first surgery because I took the bandages off too soon. I woke up as a two-and-a-half-year-old and took the bandages off, and the nurse, to this day I can remember, came in and said, "Now you can't go home." And if you think about "Now you can't go home" as a message and what does it mean, that's why in watching, let's say, like, The Wizard of Oz, which is the staple of my childhood, and it was a version of a Hollywood way of telling you about this deep story about leaving home and coming back home and what have you learned from being away.

And virtually all of the movies that I've worked on have been journey movies that embody that kind of a motif, so the very patterning of these first twenty years that I'm describing, from being in Los Angeles, the film capital, the dream factory, and then the good dream, the bad dream, the personal dream, the social dream, and then starting to play that out, because I was always into the heroes of my fantasies, whether it was Zorro or Tarzan or Thief of Bagdad. I mean, all of those aspects of Hollywood iconography I began to live once I went into the world, and I'd come to places and they would resonate as though these are places I've seen in the movies that I grew up with, that I already know them, even though now it's the real version. I mean, when I was in East Africa, we were going up the Nile and all these crocodiles and hippos and giraffes and eagles and all this amazing wildlife, and I was thinking—I just couldn't

help but comment, I said, “This is just like the Jungle Land tour at Disneyland.” [laughter]

COLLINGS:

That’s right. [laughs]

CARTER:

Because that was my point of reference, and yet those were intimate-enough early versions that now I was not supplanting them; I was supplementing them now with these new real-life experiences. So that kind of melding of the fantasy that was actually already intimate not just because I’d watched the movie but because I grew up in Hollywood, and I grew up in Hollywood with my father involved with Jack Lemmon, the actor, the superstar actor, and so I was aware of even the process of making the movies.

I’d seen that The Pit and the Pendulum blade, that there was this threatening thing, and I’d been on the set and seen that it was made out of balsa wood. And I’d been to the set of Zorro and understood—it was black and white when I saw it on TV, but it had certain colors, and those colors were even designed a certain way, like whites were blue or beige because that’s how it photographed better. So there was a lot of things that seeped in on that level as well as culturally, how to interface and interact with people in Hollywood and what they were like, what their egos are like, what the patterns are, what people’s agendas are like. I always refer to it now as casual fascism. It all looks very relaxed, people wearing blue jeans, maybe, as though they’re not really judging, but they’re just judging incredibly harshly, just as much as in New York City, it’s just they don’t tell you. It just means that you just don’t get your phone call returned.

COLLINGS:

Now, did you have a sense of that growing up?

CARTER:

I didn't so much. I think I heard about it, but it didn't affect my life, although, in retrospect, there were things that I heard, like Academy Award-winning screenwriters who would come over to my house, or our house, and I would overhear them saying things like, "I can't believe that producer just pissed on my script," and I thought it was literal. I thought, "Why would he do that? Even we don't do that." You know, like, I'm five years old.

COLLINGS:

Even we in elementary don't do that.

CARTER:

Yeah, in elementary school we know better than—that's a very not nice thing to do, and it seems shocking to me. So there was attitudes, what people suffered over, particularly the writers, but I think that I had it absorbed into my system without really knowing about—I certainly didn't want anything to do with it in the early seventies as far as—I mean the late sixties, early seventies, because it just didn't seem like a shallow thing that was just kind of not the—but when I came back from traveling around the world, my father produced a movie called Kotch, so I offered up my services to—because I wanted to start working and doing something. It was a joke when I was traveling, I would think to myself—I'd heard it from somewhere, that "Work fascinates me. I can sit and watch it for hours." But I knew that that wasn't a life that I really wanted, but I didn't know what to do other than my own art work, and as I was discovering in the early seventies, that was not an easy route to making a living.

And also it made me have to be alone even more than I really wanted to. I'd been alone so much during that trip around the world that I think it brought out of me how much I really liked collaborating and interfacing with people, making them laugh and laughing at what they would do, so the few times when I was traveling when I was around people, that I could relax. There was a place in Kenya with the Maasai

warriors where we were building a medical center for a few weeks, and there was a group of maybe thirty of us, mostly black Kenyan children my age, but there was three or four other white people. So the group of us, all of us, would just have a great time just making each other laugh and doing crazy, absurd things, and that was a big relief to me, because I had missed that. I hadn't been around my friends or goofing around. I'd just been either in a foreign place or around people I didn't know or off on the great traveler's grapevine where the people were very judgmental.

COLLINGS:

And you referred to it as "the hippie trail," so I was wondering how you were defining that and who you met.

CARTER:

Well, people in the late sixties started going to Europe partly as a travel—some of them were just leaving the country because of the war, and they didn't know what—going into exile. In fact, at one point, it said if you want to meet an American student, it's better to go to Europe this summer than anywhere else, because that's where you'll find them, and they'll be looking perhaps to meet you. But I was leaving because I wanted more experience. I'd been in 1967 to Europe for a short—more of a tour with a friend, but at this time was leaving in an indefinite way. And so there was a trail that essentially went from Europe through the Middle East through Afghanistan to Pakistan to India and through India up to Kathmandu in Nepal. That was sort of the hippie trail.

COLLINGS:

At stops like Goa.

CARTER:

Yeah, that's right. I never went down to Goa, but I made my way—I went all the way

down to East Africa first and came back up through the Seychelles on a British India steamship going third class, and then I came up to Pakistan and then went over to Amritsar. In fact, I still wear this bracelet, a Sikh bracelet from Amritsar. And then I went up to Srinagar into the Himalayas, and I really fell in love with being in the Himalayas.

So I came back down to Delhi, I went back up into the Kullu Valley in the Himalayas, and that's where I first encountered Tibetan refugees, and I was really fascinated by them as people, had just incredible dignity and intelligence in a way that I just—and such poverty, but it didn't, at least at that point, consume them in a way that so many other places it did. And the Himalayas were just this magnificent presence that really—it was like being in frozen waves—

COLLINGS:

Oh, how wonderful.

CARTER:

—and very spiritual. So I made it finally to Kathmandu, and there's a place where the hippie trail kind of came to the end. It's where people had pie shops, and hashish was legal, and you would just get stoned and sit around and pontificate and think about things and interact. And it was kind of a lost place in a way. Like, it was a lost horizon of an East-meets-West kind of mishmash. You know, you'd have a Buddhist stupa and Hindu gods and then Clearasil selling. And there was Mom's Health Food and pie shops. So eventually I went on a trek and had a really magnificent trek that helped me to orient myself. Here I was halfway around the world from home.

COLLINGS:

A trek into the wilderness?

CARTER:

Into the mountains. And asked myself questions. I got into some good conversations with a couple people about what makes life special and how I felt so culturally determined at that point, up to the point, by the upper-middle-class white guy, now I'm sort of being called the problem for everything, which that seems to have not gone away. [laughs] But at the time, it really—

COLLINGS:

That was a weight.

CARTER:

It was a weight. I had a friend once say while we were in Berkeley, he said, "Well, maybe the only legitimate life is that of a martyr." And it just seems like a sad, crazy thing. And I couldn't even do my own art work, I felt it was so, perhaps, frivolous, you know. But when I got there, I began to sense I was traveling as far as I could, but I was still taking myself with me, that old adage, "No matter where you go, there you are."

COLLINGS:

Exactly.

CARTER:

And had a sense that, again, I'm halfway on the journey from home, right? I'm as far away as I could get.

COLLINGS:

Right, without starting to head back the other way around the globe.

CARTER:

So, from that point, I think I was starting to head back, and for the next four months after that, I kind of knew I was—I didn't know what I was going to do or not do. But the thing that happened then—and it was replayed later after my father died and I went back to the Himalayas, and it became more formalized at that point because I spent a night way up in the mountains in a virtually abandoned Tibetan temple and had, I would say, the only just pure religious experience that I've had where I could absolutely say it got me to my soul and it presented an enigma, but one that I've never felt that I had to question, if that makes sense. I never had to question its existence or its meaning to me. Instead, it's just fueled what I've experienced.

But I think the initial reason I went back to the Himalayas at that point later, in 1978, was because I'd had this experience in 1970, and that was being far away from home, but beginning to feel like I was somebody, even if I was conflicted in many, many ways. I could feel my own identity and rhythms and the yeses and the nos. Sometimes when you think you should be saying yes and you try to say yes or you think you should be saying no and you try to say no, and then there's a point at which the yeses and the nos become both part of—it's like an arsenal of how to get through life, but that I felt that I was using them from another place, which was this place in the middle that could be yes and no. And it was one of the reasons that I, I think, had been so attracted to John Lennon and his music and his words and his philosophy, was because he was able to, at times, articulate through his music and his expressions and his words actual ambivalence and be strong about it.

There was that point in 1968 when he wrote the song about revolution and said, "If it's going to be about destruction, then count me out." And later he sort of did a version, he said, "Well, count me out, in." Then he was being interviewed by someone who was trying to put him on the spot, "Well, which is it? You're either in or you're out." He had this way of—I still remember this interview. He just was very calm and said—took his time, "Sometimes I feel one way and sometimes I feel another," and he

let it just sit with that, and not have to explain, not have to editorialize, not have to make it fit somebody else's expectation. And I think it's that kind of feeling that I had the first time in the Himalayas, that there was something bigger that I was now comfortable with, and that the Himalayas themselves had such a spiritual quality. They invoke something about where the Earth meets the sky and the sky meets the Earth, and it's like there's this kind of—there's just something going on that feels dynamic, almost like if you were looking at it, that it is a life form. And I haven't had much experience with that in my life. I think other people have.

Jumping ahead, I would say Jim Cameron did at the bottom of the ocean, which is why he could then come back from that experience and portray everything he did in Avatar, that that's a reflection of real nature in our world through the lens of an artist and portrayed in cinema. And for myself, that's the level I think I've always aspired to understand and to collaborate with, because when I'm in the presence of people who are wanting to do that and I can see into them, the metaphors and what they're really trying to do, I don't just take it at the superficial level. I dig deeper in order to help them to see the connections that are there, I think, to be seen, so that what their choices are, especially throughout the telling of a story, just start to resonate more and more. Those are things that happen from being away from home, but it's very much, as you can imagine, in line with you go out, like Dorothy, and you find your own mind, your heart, courage, and that they're manifest through other guides, right, but it's really about her.

COLLINGS:

Yes, she has those guides, right.

CARTER:

But they're really speaking to that which is—I mean, all of those are ultimately characters as though we're in a subconscious dream, right? But it has such a strong specific message the way it's portrayed and the way that particular movie impacted so many of us. In fact, it was all in black-and-white when I was watching it for the first ten years because it was always on TV and had a black-and-white TV, and finally I

didn't even know until I was ten years old that it went into color when it went into Oz. And then that's such a big jump, and yet it's been almost the staple of all the work that I've done in movies, is to explore that dichotomy between, again, in that case, black-and-white and color, being at home in Kansas or being somewhere else.

In the movie Avatar when the kind of general says, "You're not in Kansas anymore," that's my line. I'm the one who said, "This is The Wizard of Oz meets Apocalypse Now," and so when you're there, you're entering into another world that is beyond Kansas. So that's how I see the world, but it's partly because of who I am and I think partly because I grew up in Los Angeles in a Hollywood dream factory employee's house doing public relations that still comes into play with everything that I do, and I'm aware of how is something even being presented.

COLLINGS:

Oh, I'm sure.

CARTER:

So I don't know how anybody gets anything from any of this that they'll want to know in years to come. [laughs]

COLLINGS:

Well, I think it's very interesting to hear—and you specifically said "Wizard of Oz meets Apocalypse Now," and I think that's an interesting way of putting it, because it's the story of growing up within, as you said, an upper-middle-class environment, and within the real hegemony of American culture in a particularly pointed way, because you're inside the Hollywood system meets Apocalypse Now, meeting some very profound and cataclysmic political realities that a lot of the youth of that period were probably unprepared to grapple with. Some people would have grown up with a lot of political discussion in their house or perhaps other kinds of background, but most of the people who were hit with that were completely unprepared for it and had to suddenly face a world that was not had been advertised—

CARTER:

Right. Especially in the Hollywood way.

COLLINGS:

—growing up, right? So I just think it's very interesting to hear this story, which is a story of a generation traveling and getting outside of anything familiar to try to reconcile these dominant, entirely opposing forces.

CARTER:

I also do feel that, over time—well, there's two levels. One is I've obviously played this out for the next thirty years after this, so it didn't even stop. In fact, forty years, at this point almost fifty years after the nineteen, twenty experience of traveling around the world for a year. I'm almost seventy, so all these movies play out—I mean, the most recent one, The Post, when you see that one, it goes back to the beginning because it's 1971. I mean, it's literally home base again. It's not the only time I've hit home base, but it's one of those situations where people that grow up a certain way, and then how you replicate that throughout the rest of your life. But mine has been in the course of movies. And I didn't create the movies; they picked me. So the fact that I got picked to do these kinds of movies, and there's so many, and they're all of a common thread, whether it's—it was always a journey. If it's Back to the Future or if it's Jurassic Park or if it's Amistad or Forrest Gump, Castaway, I mean, you begin to see. A.I. Artificial Intelligence travels way into the future, and Munich, they're running around Europe traveling in relationship to their conscience, War of the Worlds, Avatar, War Horse.

COLLINGS:

I even saw Lincoln, I mean that wonderful scene of the dream in the beginning where he's on the boat, and then all of these other locales are—you could almost see them—I know they're not, but you could almost see them as occurring within the bowels of the sailing ship.

CARTER:

Well, they are, because that's the ship of state. And he even described it, because he had that dream, but it's as though he's describing ship of state that he's trying to bring into the harbor and to get it somewhere, but the horizon keeps going out beyond him, so the toil that it took and the toll that it took in order to get that ship anywhere close to being able to land is the life's journey that's represented in that dream. And the values that we've had—Spielberg, Zemeckis, Cameron, myself, even some of the newer generation with J.J. Abrams—is very much reflected from these times.

It's reflected in the Baby Boom generation's desire, some of us, to have transcendent experiences that find a form of epiphany or a reason why something's been happening, that brings with it a catharsis so that you can accept that your life is the way it is and that the world is the way it is, and you find some equilibrium for some period of time. It tends to be disrupted and then you go back into more turmoil. It's very hard to maintain mental peace in a kind of—that it's all one and it's all fine. I mean, some people apparently do it. I would say I feel like I move in and out of it, but that's one of the reasons for the movies and the paintings, whatever I do. It's not about exorcising it as much as expressing it and having it come back out to me in another form that I can recognize it.

It's only been after this length of time since 1974 when I started working on movies till now, which is—what is it, '80, '90—it's forty-something years, almost fifty years, it's going to be pretty soon, of telling stories in this big social way that has a dialogue with the world, and yet my dialogue is very much just with myself, the director that I work with and the crew that I work with, and then try to inspire them. But I'm not really in dialogue with the culture or the audience in a specific way. Sometimes I do interviews and that kind of thing, but, in general, my attention is really just to what do I perceive, why does that mean something to me, and then how can I express that within the context of a collaborative form, which is the moviemaking process. But I think it is generational, and as I see some of the types of movies that are coming up, good filmmaking and everything, but I don't see the same inner drive to make it either really personal, although sometimes I see it as very personal, but to have it all amount to something so that you—it's sort of The Beatles' influence, again, where you can, at the end, say something like, "In the end, the love you take will be equal to the love you make," and to actually, for me, see that that just plays out over and over and over

again through all these movies.

But, as you said, it's about going far away in order to look back, and then be able to get back, not just stay out there and be unassociated with that which I first knew to be my world, but can I incorporate all that, can I bring it back? I wrote something back from when I was traveling, and this young man that I wanted—and it was always just doing people. That's my art work on my own. But to go out and to make my art work reflective of what I could perceive out in the world and then bring it back in that way, and I even said that in 1972. So it's amazing to see how it's played out, even though I certainly, at times, lost track of that as far as being something I was thinking about, but as I get older, because there's a body of work to look at, I can see it in that way. And there's just been a serendipitousness to that travel has become the motif by which I could have that quest or that series of explorations, and then have a medium that would allow me to express it.

COLLINGS:

And express it in a way that has those meditative dreamlike qualities.

CARTER:

Right. And that's been a big part of it, too, which is from the late 1960s and getting stoned and all that kind of seeing things a little bit different and having a dreamlike quality to my perceptions, and yet they have to be able to fit into the real world and be actionable. So, actually, for all the dream stuff I say, I'm also incredibly pragmatic and strategic with what I do because I don't like to be disrupted from the dream in some way that reality slaps me upside the head and says—you know, I just felt like getting coldcocked by reality, because there's a tyranny to reality, as I perceive it sometimes, that means that it has all the bases covered. I mean, if you go and drive on the wrong side of the road, you're going to have a lot of trouble making it home, so you have to be aware of things.

Now, within that tyranny, there seems to be portals at times that emerge, and sometimes they emerge just because the logic of certain arguments and rational run up

against something that's coming the other which it doesn't hold or it contradicts itself or is hypocritical or whatever you want, however you want to encounter, where suddenly something opens up and you go, "Well, wait a minute. I can't get there from here." liken it to the Transcontinental Railway, which it's doing everything—it's touching, but you can't run a train on it if it's only touching at one point. So somebody made a mistake. They could say, "Well, what do you want? It's touching."

COLLINGS:

Yeah, it's close.

CARTER:

Close. But in there is what they used to refer to—and probably still do—it's like Zen koans, where it's sort of a mental thing that you can't quite rationalize or justify. You can only intuit it, but there's no other way, so that opens up something in that tyranny, although sometimes if you really—like the Zen koan of—this is a little riff of "You know the sound of two hands clapping, but what is the sound of one hand clapping?" Do you know what the sound of one hand clapping is?

COLLINGS:

What?

CARTER:

So I used to think about that, and I was halfway around the world, and I went, "That one's easy." [claps] Yay! [laughter]

COLLINGS:

Yay! Well, you're speaking of, like, logistics and pragmatism. I mean, there has to be a lot of logistical thought going on to navigate a ten-month trip around the world before the Internet, no iPhone, no apps. I mean, there's a lot of planning that goes into that on a day-to-day basis.

CARTER:

And I think I was always pretty pragmatic and modest in my engagement with the world so that I was inviting the world to just—

COLLINGS:

Wreak havoc.

CARTER:

Wreak havoc and stretch—I mean, that's one of the things that I saw so much of in the late sixties, too, which was so many people stretching beyond what they could sustain, and it just felt very uncomfortable. So I was pretty conservative in many of the things I thought, but in retrospect, I see how far I went. But I also wasn't stupid on a street-smarts level. I didn't put myself into terrible situation, take drugs in all the wrong places. I mean, there's a lot of things one can do that I did not do, and I'm glad that I didn't, and that sort of taught me that the power of "no" can be very important. It's not just "yes" is the answer, but no is a powerful force that needs to be reckoned with and brought into your arsenal, you know.

But the strategic part of movie planning, I have found that I'm very, very good at intuitively projecting what's going to happen. Now, sometimes I go a little too far, and as I've gotten older, my percentage of being right is less.

COLLINGS:

Why is that? That seems like it would go the other way.

CARTER:

I don't know why that is, but maybe it's because I speculate on even more or maybe I'm more opinionated than I was before, and I'm aware of my own opinions, and then when I see them not happen—but I also note them so that I don't—I try to now bring up whatever it is that I see is happening, strategically where are we within the process of getting something actually created, the set or a location prepped. But I don't—what's the word? It doesn't serve a function for me being right, whereas when you're younger, or at least when I was younger, but I think most people, when they're ambitious, they want to be right because that proves that they're credible and maybe even something else that's even beyond credible. I have found that in my process, if I can engage and inspire people that inspires me, then I've helped the process get to a stage that it wouldn't have been at otherwise.

And when I start thinking like that, and if I think of my role as a production designer, which is basically—most people would say it's setting the stage for the movie, the world that the movie takes place in. Well, if I say that I'm setting the stage, but it's not always for a literal thing, it could just be for, and I'll just go "dot, dot, dot," and that could just be a good conversation in which people have then ideas that start to become not just their own ideas but a collective that maybe even leads to something more than the sum of its parts. And that's the kind of thing that interests me and has interested me over the years because it does probably ultimately, for me, fulfill a form of discovering some oneness or togetherness that I don't have on my own and I'm aware that I don't have on my own, but I'm aware that others don't as well, so I mine what they don't know, but I don't do it in a fearful way and try to say, "You don't know this."

Some of my best times with Steven Spielberg are, like, to look at him and say, "We really don't know what the fuck we're doing, do we?" And he would say, "That's the point. If we knew, then," he said, "I would be, like, working at Denny's carrying out something that's already known, and I'm just preparing it and then serving it." And I

said, “Well, it’s a pretty good job at Denny’s to get to do Jurassic Park. I mean, they are your ideas.” But then if I have a really good idea, he would also say, “And some of my best ideas are not my own.” So that is incredibly encouraging, because then it allows me to have the idea be of value to me, but know that it has to become his idea in order to be put into the movie within the construct of everything else he’s doing.

COLLINGS:

It takes a village to raise an idea.

CARTER:

Yeah. But that idea does have to implemented and not just be thrown into chaos where nobody can take it and make it into something, and yet if it’s a Steven Spielberg movie, you never question—his imprint is absolutely throughout it, and yet the amount that he takes from other people and absorbs from other people is tremendous, but that’s why he can do so much. He’s learned to delegate, and I learned to delegate from him. Once I switched the paradigm, I said, “Look how much he’s delegating to me, so how am I going to succeed when I have so much now to do? I must learn to delegate.” And that’s an intuitive process to how you have people—whether they get what you’re talking about, how they can do something with it, and then they can own it, and then that way, they’ll run with it and feel very fulfilled and see it all the way through and take pride in it, just the way I am. And also if they get credit.

Like, I make sure that they’re recognized and they don’t feel like they’re just in the back and somebody’s grandstanding in front of them. I have felt that that part of the process is where some of the sixties values come out, where trying to treat people well and being more egalitarian and respectful of the humanist aspects of all of our lives, and being inclusive of other people, because I need it. It’s not because I’m being altruistic if I need somebody’s help, and as I’ve gotten older, I’ve been able to say that. And part of that also came from my interactions with Bob Zemeckis on Back to the Future and Forrest Gump. He’s somebody who, in the early years, would really—we’d come upon an obstacle, something that was difficult to solve, he would say, “Well, that’s an insurmountable opportunity.”

COLLINGS:

What a great phrase.

CARTER:

Isn't it? Because it's a wonderful way of looking—you would never be up against that. It's like "Necessity is the mother of invention." When you're there, you wouldn't encounter it, and so now you need to do something else. So it seems insurmountable because of how much it has to be stopping you, but then in that lies an opportunity to do something. And then when you have somebody who thinks like that and he's looking then to be sparked, and then he gets sparked by something you say, and then maybe, in his case what would often happen is he would say something that then we'd be talking about that scene and I would come up with some idea as though I was a reconnoiterer and I'm going out and planting a flag and I'm saying, "How about this over here? What about this idea?" And then his eyes would bulge and he'd say, "Well, what I thought you were going to say is—," and then he'd go into this whole complete thought that you could literally just put right into the movie just as is.

COLLINGS:

Wow.

CARTER:

And I would say, "Were you already thinking that?" And he goes, "No, no, no. Just when you said that, I thought—," and it all happened in a nanosecond.

COLLINGS:

Wow. That's interesting.

CARTER:

Then that made me feel like, well, that means I don't even have to be right, so the freedom in not being right, but just having the right energy for an idea and letting the ideas then be—and if someone else needs to supplant that idea with a better idea, that's fine, but the ideas begat ideas.

COLLINGS:

Exactly.

CARTER:

When you're flat-lined, don't have ideas—and they're contagious and they make people feel high, and then that leads to a kind of sense of transcendence. And then if you get one that works, that's an epiphany, and after the epiphany comes the catharsis. You go, "Well, good meeting." Right? It becomes that joke, "Well, was it good for you? It was good for me." [laughter]

COLLINGS:

"Now let's build it."

CARTER:

Yeah, exactly. And then you actually get to do it as opposed to just a conversation that goes nowhere or is just painstakingly this detail, that detail, or an approval process. There's nothing wrong with having approvals, but it can be relegated to a kind of a very literal job. And to look at it, every movie basically looks pretty darn good. They really do. I mean, so how you judge, well, the art direction—but if you judge it separate from the movie, which many people do—and that's why the awards often go to the most spectacular or the most obviously difficult ones—it doesn't really get to, at least the experiences that I've had where the collaboration is working and that I am,

in my role, a significant collaborator to helping set the stage for not just the physical things that you see or the aesthetics but the very feeling of the movie because the conversations have gone somewhere.

And you can see even the way I'm talking, obviously I'm moving in and out of multi-dimensions, and every once in a while, at least for this context, I feel the desire to say, well, why are we talking like that? What are we learning about this? Is there anything to be learned or is it just free-association and it's interesting unto itself? But I also demand of myself sometimes what am I saying so that it has a perspective. So, like, back in the late sixties when I used to get stoned and we'd just have these wonderful free-association conversations, and then it'd be like going up on a tree, and then you'd go way out on a limb, and then the limb would just crash. And then you'd say, "Whoa, I guess—." And many people at that point thought, well, that whole tree was meaningless because it never led anywhere. I actually started doing something, which was to, even while under the influence of the chemical, be tracking, double-track what we were talking about, so then I would reverse the action.

COLLINGS:

You would write it down?

CARTER:

No. I guess I probably wrote it down afterwards at times, but those were always pretty hard-to-follow kinds of notes. But I actually think I mentally started having fun with—what would happen is marijuana would disengage the judgment so you could then appreciate the moment without a lot of context that might otherwise say to you it's meaningless, and then if you had an idea, just the feeling of an idea, the notion of an idea was thrilling. The quality of the idea might not really be something that would hold up the next day.

But often the thing that was there to be read was an almost kind of Buddha flow that was giving information about what you were talking about, why you were talking about it, and so that tree that was being built—and then finally you decide to go out on

a branch and you go on a limb too far and it crashes, and then the conscious mind is sort of aware that, well, that didn't amount to anything, right, because you just hit the end of it and "boom," and you can't remember where you came from, so unless you recorded it, you didn't know. I found that if I could go backwards—and John Lennon even was the one who turned me on because in some of his songs with the backwards guitars and things—that if I could then trace backwards where we had fallen off, but even keep going back into—and then where we had started—and sometimes I would lead everybody on that trip going back just so that I completed the circle of the journey.

I didn't like going half—like the Kathmandu and just staying there. I needed to get home eventually, and so whether I go and go all the way around or I go and then come back the way I came, I have a strong homing device in me. So the reason I'm bringing up the double-tracking is because everything that I'm talking about, even if it sounds like I introduced a whole other level, because now that means going back in a linear fashion through what was already not linear, but then is there something to follow there, and is that something relate to something bigger that one would say, well, there's a chapter, now you can move to the next chapter that would mean something in the context of either my life or somebody else's life.

So, just as a riff, going back, not knowing what I'm going to say, if I say that at a point—let's just say the end of 1970, coming back from that trip, and I would be asked what did I learn, and then how did that propel me forward into the things that I've been doing ever since then for the last forty-something years, in the most succinct way that I could put it, I would say that being somebody who actually was raised in a family that did love me, and yet knowing that I had to leave that family and the confines of that neighborhood over by Sunset and the VA, surrounded on two sides by war, the Veterans Administration—in fact, three sides, because the—

COLLINGS:

The cemetery.

CARTER:

The cemetery. I was very aware of a world outside of me in which war was raging, without knowing it.

COLLINGS:

Was the news on at night in your home?

CARTER:

Well, it wasn't so much that. It was more that the men from the VA would sometimes wander into the neighborhood, and some of them would be very weird and spastic, cripples. I mean, I had a sense of—and then I'd go over to Westwood and I would go through the graveyard. So some of those kinds of metaphors—and I'm living next to a freeway in which people are whizzing past on their way to somewhere else. So my home is surrounded by war with a throughway coming from somewhere, going somewhere else, and every once in a while, a car comes off or a car goes on from my neighborhood.

COLLINGS:

So if you wanted to design a set for the consciousness that you're describing, it couldn't be better than that.

CARTER:

Which is something that I've had the notion of, but in this context of saying it, seems so obvious. And you can't just see it when you're growing up. I always struggled with it, like what's interesting about somebody who grows up next to a freeway? It's like the Zen koan that, forty years later, you go, well, it's interesting because you're somewhere and everybody around you is nowhere because they're on their way somewhere else, and so travel's already a part of what are all those people doing.

COLLINGS:

Well, and the freeway system was initiated after World War II for defense purposes.

CARTER:

And then also the Veterans Administration on a personal level—I mean, also, I mean they didn't have the medicine, so you could hear people screaming at night at the hospital, you know.

COLLINGS:

Really?

CARTER:

Yeah.

COLLINGS:

From your home?

CARTER:

Well, I had friends who lived closer right to that part of it in the neighborhood.

COLLINGS:

Because that was a psychiatric facility.

CARTER:

That's right. And, in fact, when I left high school before I went up to—no. Actually, when I left—jeez, I can't remember whether it was between high school and college or whether it was between dropping out and then going on my trip, but I think it was high school and college, actually. I did go over and work in a hospital with dogs. They were being tested in their stomachs for how certain drugs affected them.

COLLINGS:

So that was a job that you had?

CARTER:

Yeah. It was like six weeks or something like that, but it was one of those—it was literally a shit job, because I had to take these tubes that actually was what was in their stomach and test it for the pH and that kind of thing. One totally random thought, though, is that there was one time—well, there was the dog side, and then across the hall was the cats. But one time, there was a fire where the cats were—no, it was a fire where the dogs were, so they had to put the dogs in the same space as the cats in a room. They tried to cordon it off. I mean, they did, but it just drove—I mean, it was unbelievable because the smell was like—I mean, they knew there were cats and they knew there were dogs, and it was the most wild, just primal—because dogs will fight with dogs, but you put dogs and cats in the same room like that, they were just going nuts.

COLLINGS:

Wow.

CARTER:

Anyway, I don’t know why I’m even bringing that up.

COLLINGS:

Yeah, that’s funny.

CARTER:

But I do think that, like as you said—

COLLINGS:

We’ve been talking about these—

CARTER:

The dualities.

COLLINGS:

—opposing forces.

CARTER:

That’s right. And I suppose I’m always looking at those and marveling at them when I come upon them, especially with something like that. But I think that the point you made about if you were to design a set that replicated my consciousness or my upbringing and the fact that it would be possible to do so is a fascinating way to make a tie-in with my early years and then the things that I ended up getting myself

involved with for many, many years as a career. And it's an interesting dynamic where it obviously comes from an interior space, to some degree, but because it's my left eye looking out on the far side, it's absolutely about me reflecting what's on the outside, because I have to make all those determinations. Whether it's a fantasy like Avatar or a historical drama like Lincoln or The Post, I have to be aware of what those things are, made up or real, but they all have to go through a filter in me that is my version of both an inner and an outer version of it.

COLLINGS:

Well, as we go on, perhaps in another session we could talk in more detail about your process, but since you raise it at the moment, I mean, how do you do your research? How do you come upon the specificity of what you would like to bring into the dreamscape, so to speak, but something that has to resonate and has to ring true?

CARTER:

Well, the research process, it's interesting, because, of course, on the surface, if it's historical, you ostensibly have a place that you think you can go because you're going to look and see, whether it was a photograph or a painting or an account that's written, what was described, can you find a location that matches up to that? Can you modify a location? Then what you can't shoot at a location, can you build a set in order to have the drama that's required, again using the specific references that anybody would do as a researcher, right? It doesn't make it so much easier than fantasy. It's more specific, quicker. But then it's almost an inverted equation again where what you have to do is now that you have all these pieces, how do you put them together so that they have an organic expressive quality and you can prioritize?

So, for instance, on Lincoln, when I first started, it was a much bigger movie. We had lots of battles and all sorts of scenes were outside of Washington. By the time we were making the movie that we could afford to make, we didn't have all those battles, and it was very clear to me that we wanted to do an interior-based movie about Lincoln that started from the inside out. So, what would be most basic inside-out way to do that? And it really was where he did most of his work was in his office, and

there was some good research that we could rely on, and to then move out from there to do the whole floor that he lived on and did his work as well in the White House, which includes figuring out from descriptions plus the couple photos we could have, like, what the wallpaper looked like, and then being very fortunate to have a place in Richmond called Carter Company that did silkscreen wallpaper the old-fashioned way that we could afford to get them to do. They're out of business now, but we had them do it exactly the way it would have been done.

COLLINGS:

Wow.

CARTER:

So I knew that this was an opportunity, for instance, to create a Lincoln's White House with more money than anybody's ever going to have probably again, let alone certainly up to this point, so as accurately as we could make it would then become something. In fact, it's still standing in the Lincoln Museum in Illinois, what we brought together. They redid the walls in order to fit their space a bit better, and they computer-generated the wallpaper instead of using the walls that had our—because we ended up destroying that part, but the set dressing, everything, the whole layout of it is based on the facts that we could come up with.

But once you start to see that come together and it has a feeling to it—and we don't know everything, so we have to make lots of aesthetic choices, the rugs and various things—then you move out and say, well, that's green, because we knew it was green. And then so what color would Mary and Abe's bedroom be? And I wanted to be different so you wouldn't have any question when you're in the private compared to the official, the presentational part of the presidency, and I picked this purple because I felt it had a kind of a spiritual quality because Mary was so into the séances. Once again, she was in a time when transcendence, transcendental philosophy mattered because of the Civil War. People were—like during the Vietnam War, they were trying to do things up and beyond the here and now because of the, I think, effects of war.

And then we had a few pictures that we could rely on that were of the bedroom in certain small parts, but we had other pictures of the times and things. Then to lay out the hallway, which is the common—where the people would come—and they would literally right up and right next to the living quarters—that formed the basis of the heart of the movie. Now, I knew we needed to put all of our money into that because that emotionally—even though the script would say all sorts of stuff, River Queen and battles, I mean some battlefield stuff, so everything had to be then prioritized differently because of the emotions of what I thought was important to depict. And there's no question that it was right, especially when people would walk around and we did so much of the shooting there, but they would just feel like they were literally—the moment they walked into the set, they were transported. And it's interesting because some of the White House, it's very familiar—we've seen pictures all the way through—but to see it like this, no one has seen it like this.

So what I'm answering is how to take the sum of all those parts but then prioritize them, so when I didn't have any money for signs in Washington, D.C., the exterior, there are no signs to be seen in the exterior of Washington, D.C. We just went to a place, Petersburg, had them take out some telephone poles, which they did at their expense, we put some dirt down, covered up a few things, and just shot, because I couldn't afford it, nor did I want to burden the production with details when we were already doing these other details. We shot in only four places, all of which were free to shoot in, and that's how we justified being in Richmond. And Richmond is where Lincoln really went after the war and it was the seat of the Confederacy.

The place we shot in the Capitol building that they gave us the rights to just go in and shoot, Thomas Jefferson designed it, and, in fact, he designed the portico that is on the White House, even though it was put in twenty years after he had designed it. So I just took the portico and put one on the exterior of the north side of the Capitol building and called it our White House. And there was a lot of choices that were made for economic reasons, but that fit within the authenticity of what I prioritized was important, and that's where the feeling that it's believable, that I care about it, and that it's authentic is the same filter. Now, if it's a fantasy, I have to hear what it is that we're trying to do. Is it Back to the Future II where we want to go to the future Hill Valley thirty years into the future, which was 2012, which is now the past? On that date, I was giving a talk, which was pretty funny, about Back to the Future—

COLLINGS:

That is funny

CARTER:

—because I was in the future, which was now becoming the past as we spoke. But all they'd written was, well, that it's optimistic, because it was really up to the main character, Marty McFly, to have a flaw and not that the future had a flaw. Or if it's Avatar, it's extracting a vision that Jim had about another planet by seeing what he saw in the bioluminescent world at the bottom of the ocean while researching Titanic. A.I. was a roadmap in a sort of nondescript future that was a fairy tale that Stanley Kubrick had initially had a lot of ideas for. So I always draw upon something and somebody or something, and then I work the same way, which is to get things that stimulate me, and then see which things stimulate the director and inspire them so that we could come up with images either as research or then start to make—I'll collage it together or the illustrators will start to draw it and we'll just start exploring does this make us feel the way we want to feel.

It's not just about being accurate and having the budget be a part of it, it's do you get a feeling. And I think that's been the primary strength that I've brought into all this, is that I'm aware of how I'm feeling, and when I try to rationalize that I should be feeling a different way, it doesn't work. I mean, I've gone through it enough so that I know what the voice sounds like that's trying to be rational, like when the wallpaper wasn't working in Biff's apartment in Back to the Future and I just kept trying to say it was okay to myself, but I couldn't because I just struggled with it, and a painter came over to me and he said, "You seem to be troubled. What's the matter?" I said, "Well, this wallpaper's tyrannizing me because it's not right and I spent a bunch of money it and I don't know what to do."

He said, "Well—." First of all, he'd been to Vietnam, and we had a lot of talks and stuff. He said, "Well, you're not going to let wallpaper tyrannize you." [Collings laughs.] That was kind of like a—and I was going, "I guess I'm going a little far here as an art director thing, right?" I mean, it's one thing about having reality tyrannize me, but wallpaper? And so, anyway, he solved it. He said, "Well, there's this stuff

called cloisonné, and let me spray some of this." It was red and gold. It looked like a whorehouse that I had picked. It was just too much. And he sprayed the wallpaper with it, and usually if it's a color, it just kind of dinges it down. In this case, it took the gold and it turned it silver, and it took the red and turned it purple, and it was like alchemy. It was the most beautiful thing. And then I had some other red columns in. It was Biff now, and it took the process to get there, and so that process matters to me, to not know everything to start with.

COLLINGS:

Yeah, and I wanted to ask you about that because you've talked about getting a sense of what it should look like and the conversations and so forth, and I was wondering what happened once the physical thing starts to come into being. Does the vision change along with its emerging physicality?

CARTER:

Well, it does in the sense that it talks to you, because it's revealing—often the first thing is proportions, did you get the size of the rooms right, did you get everything to line up where you think it should so it's making for good camera angles and it's doing all the things that, on paper, or whatever you thought it would do. And it's funny, because with computers, you can map out more of that, but then again, that also can be not real as it is in a physical space.

Like, right away—one of the things is if you ever built a house and you lay out a house and you're trying to judge the size of the rooms, whatever, the weird thing is that once the walls go up, it appears bigger. You think it would—but it actually makes it feel more spacious most of the time. So I struggle with that, but I have to often come in and make sure I'm there to see it so that if I'm wrong, I'm catching it early rather than later, because the earlier you catch a mistake like that, the less it is to change it. But if it goes too far, then it can really be a problem.

COLLINGS:

So how did you start to learn all of those kinds of logistical details?

CARTER:

I mean, just in terms, again, the emotion of it, where I remember there was a set on one of the first TV shows I ever did, Six Million Dollar Man, and there was a door that was put somewhere in the set, and I knew it was wrong because I'd been in part of the conversation, but I was just the assistant. I figured somebody knew better and I didn't say anything, and then two days later, the director came in and said, "Well, I can't shoot this scene because the door is here and we talked about over here." And I went to myself, I said, "I knew that, and I didn't help anybody by being silent." So I used to always start saying to everybody, "If something doesn't line up with what you think you've heard or you think is right, question it, because it will help the process."

So, on the physical—I mean, I made lots of mistakes right away in Back to the Future II, my first big movie. The whole alleyway going into the future was four feet too wide for what Bob wanted. We had to move it in. It was $70,000. Those aren't fun mistakes to make. Biff's apartment, that was a ten-thousand-dollar one hanging there till it was solved. The apartment, the first apartment, I laid out was too big. Bob came in and went, "I don't know where you grew up, but this is not middle-class." And it wasn't because I hadn't grown up middle-class, it was just I screwed it up. But he never then made it like, "And you're terrible, so you can't do the job and you're fired," or whatever.

So I learned through those periods of mistakes. By making mistakes, you do learn. That's why they say there's no success like failure. Of course, Bob Dylan says, "There's no success like failure, and failure is no success at all." [laughter] But then again, it's that kind of thing where you—in the delegating, if you're surrounded by collaborators who are watching and making it work for them, that doesn't mean they're right, it just means that there's another set of eyes. And so I have likened my situation, whether it's spatial relationships or anything I do—for instance, on the most recent movie The Post, when I went back—and I was just dropped into New York City. I didn't know anybody, so I had to find a crew to pull together.

There was a wonderful group of women who worked on this movie that really just were on fire to make this movie. I think you'll know why when you see it. But the woman who was the location manager, Lauri Pitkus, was so good and helped me so much in the beginning looking for locations. She found this great place to build out newsroom set. So at one point, I said, "I feel sometimes like I've become aware that I'm like Blanche DuBois in Streetcar Named Desire where I rely on the kindness of strangers." And so the code name that we had like to access the site to see it was called "Blanche." [Collings laughs.]

But I say that just because I have a need to have other people check what I'm doing, and I reach out and I ask for that so that they don't view me as somebody just has all the answers, and that's the best thing I can say, is that I'm looking for other people to help me. I think I have good common sense, instincts about many things, and even technical things that I'm looking for simple ways to do things, but mostly it's about the process and getting the best from the most as the way to solve those kinds of issues that are logistic.

But sometimes it's just in the dialogue and bringing up the very thing like are we scheduling too many of these things in a row and can we change it up? Because it's creating a logjam. And then being able to see outside the box and say, well, what if we removed this one item? Does that make the logjam suddenly start to move? And often it does, but you have to change your assumptions as far as what you thought you were doing enough so that it allows you to find a way forward as compared to saying, "We are stuck, there's no way around it, and it's up to someone else to figure out. More money, more time, more—." And then you go you don't have that.

COLLINGS:

And if someone screams enough, it'll—

CARTER:

Yeah, it'll just somehow—

COLLINGS:

—change the reality.

CARTER:

Yeah, exactly. Yeah, like the reality we're in, the whole nation and the world, apparently, or somebody thinks that. Other people have tried. But I think that it's that coming together of people, and it's not quite socialist, I wouldn't call it. I would call it democratic up to a point, meaning there's a hierarchy, the director, the producer at the hierarchy of this in the studio, and I'm at the hierarchy within the art department. But I don't try to make my role—certainly not as a tyrant, and more of a leader that inspires everybody to go out and then know what they're doing, and if they don't, they can ask questions back, then they can take the next steps. But if I weren't there for a bit of time, they could take many steps on their own.

COLLINGS:

Well, you spoke about, like, sort of being dropped into New York City and you had to find your crew. Do you normally have to find your crew? You don't have people that you work with?

CARTER:

In the early years, we were more local and based here, so I would pick the crew up here and work with the same people, numerous movies, probably the first all the way through A.I. The first ten movies had interchangeable people. It wasn't always the same, but some people were in multiple movies. Since that time, I can't think of one

person that's been any two movies back-to-back, even, because the global economy has shifted so that movies are not made in Los Angeles, to a great extent.

COLLINGS:

So has that changed your process?

CARTER:

Well, it is in the sense I have to be even more trusting, because if I'm in London or New York or Richmond, Virginia, or Vancouver or New Zealand, which are all the places that I've made movies, I've hired people just meeting them at the airport on my way somewhere else and they were recommended, and just saying, "Okay, you're on," and just having to trust, and then hopefully it works out. So far, I've been extremely lucky, maybe because I've been working on such good movies that attract such good talent that, for the most part, they're—and then very few have been, like, egomaniacs in some weird way that makes them difficult. So it's knock on wood. But it's changed in that I have to be even more—more faith, more trustful of what can be done by other people that I don't even really know what they can do.

COLLINGS:

Yeah, that's an interesting—

CARTER:

So you have to size people up.

COLLINGS:

—wrinkle on the globalization of the film industry.

CARTER:

Yeah, and it takes its toll, so obviously in terms of amount of time that I'm home. And I've been trying to rectify that over the last five years where I've been home much more than I was during the—there was a period where I was just going away too much. So I'm being impacted, once again, from the outside, but it's been about how the economy has shifted, and that's part of what many, many, many people are up against, and particularly in my field, there's many people that—and they have young families, too, now, so that makes it even harder.

COLLINGS:

No, you couldn't imagine anything more opposite from the old studio system than the situation today, from what I hear.

CARTER:

I know. And the initial period of it was pretty exhilarating to be able to go out into the world again and have it be paid for and all that, to go to Munich and just travel around Europe on that movie. That was like going back and having my older travels relived, and I was even then doing it where I was making a period piece as though it was the early seventies, so the form and the content were—I was old enough to—I could have walked by the main character, Avner, on the streets of Paris, you know, and I knew what it looked like.

COLLINGS:

Yeah, exactly.

CARTER:

So sometimes it's very interesting in that way. It's almost autobiographical. But it does take a toll. I mean, the travel is less and less enticing to me. It just is. But I feel

like a ship's captain that now wants to remember a lot of the voyages and the adventures and where I've gone and try to give them some form that is—it's a little bit like the Orientalist painters who used to travel, and then they'd come back, and maybe someone says, well, that's not what it really looked like, because it's a romantic vision, and I'm going, "That's right. It's a Hollywood movie." [laughter]

COLLINGS:

Right. It is a Hollywood movie.

CARTER:

You know? And there's a veneer there, and even when they're sad, they're tragedies with happy endings. They rarely leave you just like, "Oh, well, that's really real and terrible." I mean, hopefully they're cathartic at that point, because they're such tragedies that they—like Godfather II, you just feel the breadth of the tragedy that that's the way it went.

COLLINGS:

I mean, maybe that's sort of the hallmark of the more recent generation of films that you don't, in the end, have that catharsis, in many cases.

CARTER:

It's interesting, yeah. But I certainly am always looking for it, and I regard it—maybe sometimes they're tacked on and they're not really so interesting, but sometimes they're earned and they work and they give you an uplifting experience that you've earned or you feel like it was earned, because you were putting it through your filter of disbelief, but it won.

COLLINGS:

Oh, that's an interesting idea, that the audience has earned the catharsis by going on this journey.

CARTER:

Yeah. Well, I think they do, otherwise they just go, "That's just a plot point. Oh, look. Everybody's happy." [laughter]

COLLINGS:

I wanted to ask you—and I don't know if you wanted to get into it today or if you have time—about your training, your art training, and then your father said, "Come back to L.A.," and got you hooked up with—

CARTER:

Richard Sylbert.

COLLINGS:

Right. And that was a mentor—

CARTER:

That's right.

COLLINGS:

—so that's training as well. So is that something that you'd want to talk about today? Or I don't know what your time is like.

CARTER:

Why don't I start it, and then we'll see where it—that might be the good up from now, and then that would lead probably into the Back to the Future, and then we could—

COLLINGS:

Talk about the movies.

CARTER:

—if you want to go to those. If you want to, sure, that'd be great. When I came back from traveling in 1972 and had graduated from University of California at Santa Cruz, I had gone to Berkeley, but then when I dropped out, when I came back, in 1971 I transferred to Santa Cruz. I dropped out again for another five months to travel to Asia, which I, in a sense, finished the trip that I had not done in 1970, or I had not gone down into Asia, down to Singapore and over to Bali, and spent more time in that area and back up into Bangkok and then to Taiwan and then to Japan. I kind of rushed through those on the way home.

When I was on the first trip, I made it down as far as Penang, and that's when I decided to turn around and come back to Los Angeles, and it only took me a week to come back after that point, so that's the part I wanted to complete as a journey. And, in fact, when I came back—I think it was a year and a half later and I landed in Singapore—I did go around the world, because that's how I got to Singapore, but it was like I'd never left, like home had become just a dream, whereas when I was at home, my travels had been the dream, but once I got back and was in the smell and the rhythm of Asia, it was like home was a dream. I found that to be really kind of a jarring, but wonderfully jarring, sense of—well, Stanley Kubrick later—when I

worked on A.I., referred to it as a “mode jerk.” It was like in his movie when you see the ape in 2001 throw the bone up in the air and it becomes a spaceship, there’s a big jump between those two things, and what just happened? You have to fill that in. There’s absolutely no—it doesn’t literally mean anything. You just fill it in. So that’s kind of a jerk—

COLLINGS:

Although, like in geological time, it kind of was that fast, right?

CARTER:

Yeah, well, right, right. But, you see, but you filled that in. [laughs] They didn’t hand out, like, the—

COLLINGS:

“And here are the notes for the film.”

CARTER:

“We’re going to play with time, and some of it’s going to be geological.” But that’s how big—it’s so big, you do fill it. That’s a “minding the gap,” to do that. That’s what it was like to go back to Asia, and that time, I started drawing and I was just drawing like crazy. I came back with a huge stack of art work, so I was, by that point, released to be an artist, and at Santa Cruz, that’s what had happened. I’d graduated as an art major. I had been a sociology major at Berkeley, so I finally went the other way, although I’ve always had the sociology as part of my training because I did study it. So that’s a little bit more like the left-eye outside world, and then the right eye is like but you can just do your own version of this. So I then moved to New York to see what it would be like to be an artist there, and I enjoyed it. I lived a year there and I really enjoyed it, but I found that, coming out of the winter, I’d kind of realized a couple things. One is that I was alone a lot because painting, you know, you’re just

alone a lot. And I would go out at night and do all that, and I had a job at the Whitney Museum four days a week, and I would make enough money to live on, but I didn't feel social in a way that dug into things I had discovered, which is how much I liked being around people and collaborating. Or just even if I hadn't done lots of projects with people, I just knew I liked it. And the political situation of getting paintings shown—

COLLINGS:

Oh, gosh.

CARTER:

In fact, I remember being in a bar with someone who said—this guys comes in, he goes, "I got a show. I got a show at the—," blah, blah, blah, some hole in the wall on the Lower East Side. And I said, "Well, how'd you get that?" And he goes, "Well, I slept with the woman who I gave my slides to, and so she gave them to the—."

And I went, "Wow. That's like Hollywood in a reverse way that I—if that's the way it's going to be, maybe I need to be around some system that I already have some awareness of the rules of engagement, because that's not going to interest me to do that." I just remember that being a little bit of a turning point, and, again, along with being kind of lonely. So I asked my father what an art director did. He'd been an art director with Look magazine, and still in print, and he said, well, in movies—I thought maybe it was the person who hung the pictures, you know. And he said, "Well, if you end up coming back to Los Angeles, I'll introduce you to someone."

And within two weeks, I had left. My friend, who I still am friends with, I said, "You know, I've got to go." And for the next, god, three or four years, he'd say, "That was such a flaky transition. You just turned around so fast." And about two years ago, I said to him, "You thought that was a flaky transition? I mean, look what happened. I came back to L.A., met that guy, he became my mentor, and that's what I do, and I've had a career at it." I mean, it was a joke, but I'm saying this is when I got my Lifetime Achievement Award in that pursuit. I could kind of go, "Wasn't so flaky. It just

needed to happen right then, and there it was to happen, finally, the right thing to happen." So I did come back. It had the "art" in it. I met a—

COLLINGS:

Had the word "art" in it.

CARTER:

Yeah, I said "art direction" had the word "art," and I thought—

COLLINGS:

And it had the word "department" in it, and you said you were looking for, like, a mechanism.

CARTER:

Exactly. So I met Richard Sylbert. I went over to have lunch with him that my dad set up one day when he was working on a movie after Chinatown, and it was called The Fortune, and it was local. I liked him right away, he liked me, and he seemed like Marcel Duchamp to me, the conceptual artist. He spoke very pontifically. He'd say, "Kid, if designing movies was music, I can write all the music, I can play all the instruments, I can conduct the orchestra, and I can even sell it out on Tin Pan Alley."

COLLINGS:

Wow.

CARTER:

Very arrogant, but old-school. I mean, he'd done a lot of great work. He'd done The Graduate, Rosemary's Baby, Chinatown, Manchurian Candidate, but he was a New Yorker and he had a kind of a—but he liked me, and I was thinking—I was a hippie with this long hair, and I think I mentioned it was like I was thinking of Joe Cocker, the singer, who would pretend to have a guitar in his hand, and I'd say, well, I'll be like Joe Cocker. I'll just vibe it.

COLLINGS:

But you were an accomplished artist at this point.

CARTER:

But I could draw people and I could do storyboards, sort of, but I couldn't draw background. I still always have trouble really drawing architecture. I can scribble out what I want, but it's always been a—but that's why I need strangers. I need good set designers and architects to work with to get my ideas across, whereas he was saying, "I can do everything," right? But I liked talking with him, so I went and I visited him every day for, like, I don't know, four or five weeks. And then he liked me, and I even got some feedback from his friends, who were friends with my parents, that he, like, thought I had something, which gave me—because I was pretty all over the place as an artist, philosopher, poet, traveler, vagabond, what you don't know is what you know, and all that kind of stuff, which I still am a little bit.

But he introduced me to—well, first I went over to AFI and worked on a movie there, production design. I just sort of offered my services and I really got into it, and that was helpful to be around people and work. I wasn't making any money, but I had some money that I could live on. And then Dick introduced me to Hal Ashby, the director who he'd worked with on a movie called Shampoo, who was working with another production designer who was the production designer that Hal usually worked with, and so I got an interview with the new production designer whose name is Michael Haller. I went in for the interview, and I was wearing red tennis shoes and

Michael was wearing red tennis shoes. These were those days, right? And we immediately hit it off, and he asked me how much wanted, and I said, “250 a week.” And he said, “Well, make it 400, and I’ll get you in the union as well.”

COLLINGS:

Wow. That was easy, because I was going you about how you got in the union.

CARTER:

I’m just saying nobody was more fortuitous to get into the—it just happened to be one of those times when the roster went down, and I was able to get into the union. To this day, I’m sure I knew less than anybody has ever known in that whole Guild when they got in about how to do the—

COLLINGS:

The thing.

CARTER:

—the thing, of whatever you perceive that to be, and yet obviously I knew a process and how to create process and how to be creative in order to learn “the thing.” But I still don’t illustrate, draft, or decorate in any really great way, other than—I mean, I’ve done all those things and laid things out, but it’s much more like the Joe Cocker of it, and maybe Joe Cocker, in a funny way, meets Bruce Springsteen just because it’s become so personal, that the work has reflected such a personable aspect of my character and my own journey.

COLLINGS:

So it's almost like conceptual art.

CARTER:

Well, that's what I mean, and that's why I thought of Dick as Marcel Duchamp. I could see that this is the idea, and remember, in New York, painting was dead in the early seventies, so conceptual—and, in fact, I studied with Hans Haacke for a whole summer, so I was turned on to that the idea can be the thing, I just didn't think there was enough craft to satisfy me if just the idea was the thing. But I liked combining both, so I think I'm very much a child—not child—an offspring of both those sensibilities. In fact, when I was in New York, one of the art directors knew Hans Haacke, which was interesting, because I'd never been around anybody in the movie world who knew of Hans Haacke. So that point of view about it as a conceptual art gave me some latitude in that minding the gap, meaning the minding the gap is then the conceptual space of the art at that point, if I can do it in the right way, but it takes a long time to know all of the ins and outs of it, of what the field is and what you're trying to accomplish. So I was on a movie called Bound for Glory, which is kind of an auspicious kind of one to be on. The next movie that I was on—

COLLINGS:

And you were an assistant—

CARTER:

Assistant art director.

COLLINGS:

—art director. What was your role?

CARTER:

Well, I came in and the first things I did was I did all the shanty huts that the Okies had made when they had come to California, and I remember—and, see, this played to my strength, because I remember that there was some research about all the corrugated tin and cardboard, these houses, and when I did some sketches, which I could do those because they were organic, and I would lay out the huts in the research. But the carpenters, when I'd come back like a day later, they made these perfect cardboard houses that were not—they didn't follow the sketch. They just went, "Well, he must be—," and so they made them perfect. So then I had to undo what they were doing and make up funny—but try to do it in a nice way because I'm a kid who doesn't really know what he's doing, and he's got these seasoned people. So I said, "How about we do this? You're going to build, but if you're right-handed, you have to hammer with your left hand"

COLLINGS:

That's interesting.

CARTER:

You can't have any levels, you can't have any nails, and you can't have any straight lines. And then you try to get as close to this drawing as you can."

COLLINGS:

Boy, that's a really logistics-oriented way of providing instruction.

CARTER:

So I'm not going up against them, because they're designed to be judged entirely upon the other set of criteria, how straight is it, how perfect is it, and I'm trying to undo them of it, but I'm trying to make it so absurd that they start to understand what

we're looking for, what the aesthetic was. I still have a scar right here on my chest where when I went to the dump—I mean, I was the one, like to go and get the tin, and I was pulling tin out of the—and there was one, and it went [demonstrates] right into me. So I still have—so I always think about that. Just to show you how immature I was, though, I asked Michael Haller how long I would be gone on location because I was living with my first girlfriend, and he said about three months, and then when they went over schedule, I said since I told her three months, I said I had to leave and go back, and I left after three months, but the movie wasn't over. [laughter]

And until we died, we still maintained very good friends, but I was so unprofessional in that way, you know. Now, I've sort of done that a few times, but, I mean, I don't do in a harrumph. Anyway, I always thought that was a certain time and a certain person that I could do that with and not hurt my career. But I then worked on China Syndrome with Jack Lemmon, who was my dad's client. He helped me, I think, get a job with George Jenkins, and that was interesting because I got to work with the GE physicist who was very disgruntled and was giving us information about how these nuclear plants were set up. I was in charge of talking with him, and I would really get into it to make it as accurate as possible, which was good, because, in the end, when that movie came out, it was right around Three Mile Island disaster, so it actually mattered that it was relatively accurate, it wasn't just gobbledygook. It was some gobbledygook, but not to the point that it mattered.

There's, for instance, a reality-based kind of movie as compared to a fantasy. But, you see, movies are that way anyway. In the beginning of movies, there was Lumière brothers who went out and they filmed real life and brought it back to people. Then there was Méliès, who was doing fantasy. It's like two sides of the same coin.

COLLINGS:

Isn't that interesting?

CARTER:

Even the first Academy Award for Best Picture, there's two of them. One is Sunrise and one of them is Wings. One's Best Production and one's Best Artistic Achievement.

COLLINGS:

Oh, I hadn't realized that. That's very interesting.

CARTER:

Even last year, the Best Movie was La La Land—no. Moonlight. You know what I mean?

COLLINGS:

Yeah, that's right. That's right, yeah.

CARTER:

But it's those two, they couldn't be more emblematic of those two sensibilities. So, even as it's reflected for me, whether it's realistic or fantasy, that's, for me, part of the juice that I use about conceptual art, that it has to be, because otherwise you'd be playing one standard to the one thing, one filter to the wrong thing. It's all fantasy, it's all made up. The minute the camera's there and the minute you edit the film, you've changed it. So I like that aspect of cinema, and when I was going into these early years, obviously I was just trying to learn the trade of how to illustrate, how to do my job, how to track things, how to help sets get made, but I wasn't an architect, so I couldn't really help in some ways.

What that led to was a movie I did for Disney called Magic Journeys, which was a 3D movie, and, again, remember I don't see 3D because my eyes don't look together. One

eye sees far and one eye sees near, so they're not looking together to see normal 3D, but I designed it. It was a free-associative fantasy that played at Epcot for about five years, and it was a great first movie to work on. It was fourteen minutes long, double 70-millimeter, huge movie, and it was just a free-associative trip with these kids going on a journey of their imaginations. So it was almost, again—if you start with Bound for Glory and then you go to something that's real and it's socially engaged in the world, and then you go to Magic Journeys, already still, even at that point, there's all the makings of all that I was doing once again being played out, the fantasies that I got from my trips around the world and the reality that I had interfaced with, and now it's back and forth in another sort of almost epoch of five years all the way up until the point when I worked on Goonies.

Goonies was the movie where I met Steven Spielberg, and I worked with Michael Riva as a production designer, who he was just a couple years older than me, but what was great was he was fearless, so he kind of released me of the fear. We would just be in it for the right reasons, in fact, to the point where I remember I was going over the Mulholland hill and I realized that we didn't know what we were doing, and we were so far behind, I didn't know how we were going to get it done. But I just shifted that paradigm and I said, well, would you want this job when you were ten years old? And the answer was a resounding yes because I was being paid to be a swashbuckler. That's the way I thought of it. And that movie, to this day—that movie just was—the Library of Congress.

COLLINGS:

I know. I saw that.

CARTER:

Yeah. Because it is such a great kids' journey that is sort of that type of thing we were talking about being in the [inaudible] or the Beverly Glen, and then having an adventure, but there are threats on the outside.

COLLINGS:

Right, right. But it's very muted. You don't know if it's real yet, and then it turns out it is real.

CARTER:

And also it just keeps growing and is growing, and it's a treasure hunt, so it was up my alley and Michael's, and we brought so much to that movie and the spunk of how we created it. We didn't know what we were doing. We couldn't find anybody to even draft the ship that knew how to draw a ship. I mean, we couldn't. I mean, the compound curves. Finally, we did. But the angle of the ship, we would have swordfights to determine which angle was the best angle to put the ship on, or I'd pull out my five-dollar bill and show the scroll on that and say, "Put that on the side of the ship as the scroll." I mean, if you actually look at it, some of the design is so funky that it's hysterical, but I look at it and I just look at it and go, "Kids. Just kids playing," and that's what we were.

That's where I realized that this is something I could do and I liked to do, and that's when I met Steven when I took him on a tour, he and Kathy Kennedy, because Michael was out of town, so I started them in the beginning and it was like Pirates of the Caribbean. I took them on the journey in order, so it ended with the ship, and I think they were very happy with the way I conceived the storyline and could tell them and show them what we were doing, and so he offered me to do the production design a few months later on Amazing Stories, and that was this kaleidoscope of stories that were kind of leftover ideas or fragments of dreams that Steven had that he wanted to put together in this anthology TV series. So I was always coming out of the sixties so fragmented with all the thoughts I had, and yet Amazing Stories was a chance to make it all look coherent, because it was all under the umbrella of Amazing Stories.

So I had nine stages going at all times and so much to do. That's where I learned to delegate. I had to, like, one time just stop on my bike and go, "Okay. I can't do all this." And then I went, "Well, wait a minute. Steven has just talked to me for five minutes about a train going through a house and wants to see me in two weeks, and then we'll have worked out how to do that, so look how much he's delegating to me

and look all that he's doing. Maybe there's a trick in there or maybe it's not just—what if I do that?" So that's how I learned to delegate and to realize how important that was. And I had such a range of directors, from Marty Scorsese to Steven, Bob Zemeckis and Clint Eastwood, to college students. Marty Scorsese had an episode where it was about—it was called "Mirror, Mirror"—about a guy, an actor, who looks in the mirror and he keeps starting to see this phantom, and finally he flips out and he throws something and breaks the mirror, and then he sees the phantom in the mirror. It was supposed to be scary, and it was, sort of, I mean in a psychological way.

So we started talking, Marty and I, over the phone about a sequence from Lady from Shanghai. There's this great mirror sequence, breaking of a mirror. So he said, "Great." So I laid out this whole thing, and then a week before we were going to shoot, he called up and he said, "I can't break a mirror on the set. I just can't do it. That's just inviting—." And he was at a bad point in his life anyway with—things weren't going so well, and he was just rebuilding that. So I said, "Okay." So I came up with an idea where I put a Plexi mirror and some glass shelves in front of it that we could throw something at—I can't remember what it was he threw—and it appeared to break, and then offstage we had somebody break a mirror and then bring it in already, and Marty approved that that would be okay to do, okay, because he was superstitious, right?

COLLINGS:

Right. That in itself sounds like an art installation from New York in the seventies.

CARTER:

Isn't that funny? Doesn't it?

COLLINGS:

Yeah.

CARTER:

And so thirty-something years, thirty-five years later, when I had a Lifetime Achievement Award at the Art Directors Guild and I was giving a speech—and Marty was there because he was being given an award for Cinematic Imagery, and I turned to him and I said, "So, I need to tell a story. I haven't seen you in thirty-five years. I want to tell the story to everybody about you and I." And he was kind of looking because he was just right here, and I said, "Don't worry." And I told the story about the mirror and about how he didn't want to break the mirror on the set. And I said, "I think that was a really good choice, because look where we are now." [laughter]

COLLINGS:

Oh, that was great. [laughter]

CARTER:

For both of us.

COLLINGS:

Who knows what would have happened.

CARTER:

That's what I said. Who knows? So that was a good one. Anyway, so that was a nice roundabout way of connecting those times. But we all took that very seriously. That's where I met Bob Zemeckis. A lot of fun. There were great—just a kaleidoscope. What I did learn on it—and maybe this would be the way to just sort of end this part of it, would be to say I thought I was fragmented because it was like the kaleidoscopic sixties of so many influences on my travels, so I felt fragmented at times in ways that I couldn't trust myself to go from here to here and then sustain this. That's why it was so important to have the Amazing Stories be an umbrella that made it feel and look

like it was all coherent. We got to do every genre, every type of movie, and just in a little short hit.

COLLINGS:

Yeah, that's interesting.

CARTER:

And Steven had said, "This'll be like a film school for you," and it was. But what I learned was that I started to feel that actually I was something, but that all these different points of view were glimpses from a different angle of the same thing through a different filter, seeing it slightly differently if I was—and so that's when it began to be much clearer to me how I could have an identity and still go all over the place. Just two years before that, when I'd gone down the road of trying to see if I could direct something and how to make that all work, I had met my wife, and Amazing Stories coming together with the first year of us getting together and then us getting married the same year, 1985, really became the launchpad for everything else. Those things finally came together. I'm still married and still have that career, and that was the real home base then that was being set up that still exists today.

COLLINGS:

So 1985 was a very good year.

CARTER:

Yeah, it was a very good year.

COLLINGS:

Okay. Let's leave it there for today.

CARTER:

Okay. Sure.

[End of December 22, 2017 interview]

Session Two (January 12, 2018)

COLLINGS:

Okay, so today is January 12th, 2018, Jane Collings interviewing Rick Carter at YRL, and we thought we might jump in ahead of ourselves to talk a little bit about A.I.

CARTER:

Maybe the best way to contextualize that is to realize that even if I was to start at this point with what would be a linear progression—

COLLINGS:

That would be starting with Back to the Future.

CARTER:

Which is not linear, because its very plot as a sequel, Back to the Future II, was to go and jump into the future, 2015, and then come back to 1985, but things had changed, so it was an alternate 1985, in order to go to 1955 to rectify what had happened in 2015, and eventually in the third sequel, Back to the Future III, to go all the way back to 1885 before returning to this 1985 of now. And, of course, all of that is now in the past because we're in 2018. So jumping out of order, as long as you stay coherent, or as I try to stay coherent, in an emotional context might actually be a good way to be able to not have the linearness of the process obscure some of the more important themes or even the more important emotions or perhaps even more important historical points of reference as seen from a broader perspective. So, with that in mind, I can jump to A.I. because I can overarchingly give it a context and then tell you the story of A.I.

COLLINGS:

Yes, that would be wonderful.

CARTER:

The context for it is that it's a story that Stanley Kubrick, the director of 2001 and so many other movies, Dr. Strangelove, The Shining, and Paths of Glory, he developed this story about a robot child and the journey of the robot child's attempt to become a real boy, essentially mirroring the Pinocchio story, and going through multiple emotions and worlds to eventually try to achieve that goal. The reason that I would bring it up that way is because Stanley Kubrick passed away, and he gave it to Steven Spielberg before he died as something he thought Steven could actually achieve after his death. He even, before his death, thought Steven might be a better choice to tell this story because of the amount of heart that's in the story.

But what's interesting about the story, as told eventually by Steven as the director from the basis that Stanley laid out, is that really it's a dance between the heart and the mind, that it's very much a Kubrickian mind at work but a Spielbergian heart, and a lot of people found that conflicted. I personally thought it was an amazing place to go into, because at that stage in my career I was past the point of trying to prove myself on sort of the logistics and the craft and the aesthetics, but was very interested in the journey that was being told, and also that the form of the journey had something I've never forgotten, which is essentially a four-act structure rather than a three-act structure, because you go through the story of A.I., which I could illuminate, but you end at a certain point which is the natural end of a three-act structure.

But then it moves into a fourth act, and that fourth act actually mirrors the attempt to have the main character realize his goal, but needing to do it through transcending the lifetime that a normal human being would have. So he actually goes into the future and confronts his legacy, which actually is not, at that point in the storyline, entirely different thematically from Back to the Future when Marty McFly goes into the future, confronts his own legacy, and that's a sort of a premise that is a storytelling device to make you think about what you're doing and what the complications and ultimately the effect of your life might be.

In that particular story of A.I., seeking a mother's love is the primary driving force, and seeking it in a way that is actually quite heartfelt so that the very last part of it, which many audiences had trouble with because it kept going, and they attributed it to Spielberg somehow sentimentalizing the tale, which was not true, because it was always Stanley's story and took us into that dimension, because I think it was an attempt to synthesize something that was very deep for both of them, which was actually their loves of their mothers. Steven has a very strong mother presence in his life who's the basis of his whole work ethic, and so did Stanley, and so do I. So I found that I could relate very strongly to the sentiments, and I could also be willing to take a complicated and yet hopefully simple journey to rediscover something that was, in a sense, in the past, but I had to go to the future to find it, if that makes sense.

When you start off as any human being, but particularly I'll just say as a son, with leaving the love of my mother, going to find somebody else to mate with, and then to also recognize that that love is part of what sustains me and my ability to, first of all, love, but second of all, even to feel supported. So I think the going to A.I. as the tale that I would tell from it is a tale like all of these that I might tell, which is really my own, because whatever I tell you about it is my version of it. I'm not just the person who creates the sets, because, while that's my job, I take it very personally, and as an artist I can't help but apply all the ways that I learned how to personalize my travels as a young man into these cinematic travels that I embarked upon.

The specifics of that story, the first third of the story is a domestic tale. It's all told basically in a house. It's set in the future after the Earth has been somewhat flooded, and a couple that have a child that is in a kind of a hibernation state because he's damaged, is giving up hope that they can ever retrieve him, and they've come upon this new way to have a child, which is that they've got these sentient robots who can effect the ability to both give love and receive love. And at first, the mother resists this, but eventually decides that she should go along with it, and there's an awkward kind of getting-to-know-each-other period, but there's a bond that starts to develop, but it's interrupted when the real natural-born child, or boy, is brought back to life enough so that he can come back, and so he supplants this boy robot, David.

COLLINGS:

And bringing with him some very uncomfortable human emotions.

CARTER:

That's right, particularly the jealousy, and setting up the robot boy to always need to compete with him on the terms that he's better at, which is—I mean, even just from the simple part of actually just digesting food, right? So essentially the robot is not designed to even ingest food but to mimic it, but then feels he should go further with that, which becomes a very grotesque scene of what it does to just gunk up the system of the robot. But it starts to speak at that point to the metaphor of being an outsider that can't do the natural thing that would elicit the love that he's programmed to need. In order to be able to even desire the love is how you give love. I mean, it's that Beatle-esque thing, "In the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make." There's a reciprocation that goes with what you give and what you get, which, again, comes from my generation's fascination with that kind of a message out of the late sixties and the Beatles and all that kind of philosophical point of view, which I would say is absolutely woven through all the works that I've been involved with.

A.I. then sets that boy on a journey where he has to be thrown out of his nest by the mother. When the conflict is too great, there's a threat that people feel that he's going to be capable of violence either against the boy or even against the mother when something's misinterpreted as an act of potential danger. Now he's thrown out, so now it's one of those horrific stories where the little child is cast away, not understanding why. It has no means to survive in this world.

COLLINGS:

And cast away to save him.

CARTER:

To save him, but he doesn't know that. All he feels is that he's been put aside in order to be meaningless, essentially. And then we open up into a broader world at that point and realize this is a world in which there are not just this one boy but there's many robots, and there's an actual cultural and philosophical and psychological and personal conflict with robots, and so that there's many robots that are cast aside and they're kind of just wandering the forests and rounded up to even be put into these shows in which they're dismantled for entertainment. And David is caught up in that whole thing, so he's now actually threatened. But what's interesting in that journey is that up until that point, he's only been really able to reference what you would call life or existence in relationship to his programming in relationship to his mother and his father, particularly his mother. Now his own actual, as in any human's, real development experience is his own life is threatened, and he actually defends his life. He actually wants to live on his own terms.

COLLINGS:

So he has this moment of development of—

CARTER:

Under threat.

COLLINGS:

—a will to live, a consciousness of his existence, which is what the Dr. Hobby character had been—

CARTER:

That's right.

COLLINGS:

—striving for in his laboratory.

CARTER:

And nobody knew whether it could have that, but now he's striking out on his own and has his own actual individualistic desire to live. And while it's a violent scene, it's all told quite meditatively, almost, because you're aware that the philosophical underpinnings of a journey and what life is about permeate this movie, even though it has the veneer of a kind of Hollywood spectacle, but it's got a kind of a philosophical meditation, almost, because it never—

COLLINGS:

Very much so.

CARTER:

When you finish that one beat, you're not given a kind of an ending or a finale, you're really just given an opening into the next dimension, and the next dimension in this case is that he's now associated with this other robot, Gigolo Joe, who you have some backstory on, basically is a love robot designed to please sexually. And he has a certain amount of his own existential quandaries, but they're very seemingly superficial, but at the same time, because he's an older male compared to David, there's something for him, David, to learn from the ways of the world, which Gigolo Joe says, "I know everything."

COLLINGS:

"I know women, and we can find the Blue Fairy."

CARTER:

Exactly. So because of the Pinocchio quest that takes them, in a sense, looking for the color blue, if you think about it, because the Blue Fairy, but you end up going to Rouge City, which is a carnal place of sexual desire, and it's like the last place you would think that you would take a young boy. Now, that's where the Kubrickian part goes into a subconscious level that probably Spielberg on his own would not have designed.

COLLINGS:

And there is a place like that in the Pinocchio story as well.

CARTER:

Oh, is there?

COLLINGS:

There's an island.

CARTER:

Oh, there's an island. That's right. And it has all the kind of vices. It's just that this one is overtly sexual, so in the design, one of the aspects is how do we convey that in enough of an acceptable way that is not then—meaning to a mass audience—yet still gets across that that's what this is about.

COLLINGS:

So how did you decide to do that?

CARTER:

Well, I think essentially it's a little bit of playing off the whore/Madonna motif and the sense that you're looking for something ultimately that is sacred to David, which is the mother's love and is not really sexual other than she's a female, so there's the kind of—and it's a mistaken identity with essentially the Pietà image that he mistakes for the Blue Fairy. And so I consciously modeled it after the Pietà because it's one of the most beautiful and feminine images in Western civilization that one identifies with a mother. I mean, it's Mother Mary. And then you have the women in all of their shapes, in all their voluptuousness, forming buildings, so it's kind of the red and the blue contradicting. And, of course, there's that one powerful image of the bridges with the woman, mouth open, you go right into it. So there's a whole way that there's a moving in that is—I just would say it's a penetration. It's a moving within, but what you discover there is complex for the boy, and a lot of it's going over his head. He's not seeing it in those terms, which I thought was a fascinating way to create that kind of an environment so the audience is experiencing it one way, but that's not the way he's experiencing it. He's very single-minded.

So then he goes to Dr. No, who's, again, one of these types of characters that seems to permeate many of the movies I've been involved with, which is—it's a man with white hair telling you things. It could Doc Brown, it could be John Hammond in Jurassic Park, it could be John Quincy Adams in Amistad, it could be—I'm sure there's others I'm not even thinking about. But I was very aware—oh, even the man in Munich who's the French guy behind the consortium that's giving him his information. There often seems to be a white male with white hair who is a guide.

COLLINGS:

That's interesting.

CARTER:

Doesn't mean there's only white men as guides. There's also others, femme fatales as well. Like in Death Becomes Her, you've got Lisle, who gives the potion, or you've

got the woman—ultimately she gets killed, but she's a seductress. And so it's not always for a positive, but often in the more adventurous of tales, the guide is a—it's practically Jungian, I mean at least on that level. But he goes and he finds, from Dr. No, a path to take that next step, and, again, because he's got individuation now—and that's what the argument is about, "My mother does love me. You're telling me—." That's what Gigolo Joe says to him, that, "She doesn't think you're special," and that's just part of the level that he knows this is special but it's not. But he's going, "That's not true."

So he's willing to move on, even by himself if he has to, takes the helicopter by himself. Now, as it turns out, Gigolo Joe goes with him, but they go to the ends of, in a sense, human world, because it's where Manhattan is underwater, and they're going to find the area where the Blue Fairy might exist, because that's when, I guess, she's been last seen there. That's the information. They go there and then they encounter the workshop, where he's on the way trying to find the Blue Fairy, which is like, "Okay, there's my goal, and it's still coherent with where I started." But along the way, and in finding the workshop where he was created, he also finds an even worse obstacle, which is that he isn't special. He is just one of many—

COLLINGS:

Very demonstrably so.

CARTER:

—and literally encounters an alternate self, which is a huge threat to everything that he's just developed, which is an individual identity going on a journey, which is now absolutely challenged by the very fact that there's another one who's like the chipper young version who hasn't gone on a journey that's like—

COLLINGS:

Yes, he seems quite lithe and limber.

CARTER:

"And I'm David," you know. And then he literally destroys that David. I mean, that's his reaction, is so powerfully human in terms of, "Not only am I surviving, I'm surviving on the terms I need to survive in order to be an individual." So these are levels that, within this journey motif I was talking about before, I was incredibly gratified to get to—as a tenth movie, basically, to go this far, okay? Now, we're not done.

COLLINGS:

Yeah, I know.

CARTER:

I'm just saying. So at this point, that could be—

COLLINGS:

That could be the end, but it's not.

CARTER:

Well, that could be almost the end, which would be so negative, because any encounters, all those other boxes of other Davids and Dorises, and it just—his brain—he says, "My brain's falling out." All he literally does at that point is sit at an edge and let himself fall, and he falls into his subconscious. I mean, literally, you couldn't have a more Jungian subconscious set of images with the fish coming in and surrounding him and taking him underwater. And where do they take him? They literally take him ultimately, via the Amphibicopter, to this underwater amusement park where the Blue Fairy does reside. And you go by Pinocchio's journey, which doesn't exist at Coney island, but exists in—

COLLINGS:

But it could.

CARTER:

Well, it exists in Disney, right? So now we know we're in a Disney—it may say "Coney Island," but it's just a sleight-of-hand, because it's literally now you're down into Pinocchio's world, that island that you referred to earlier, in order to come upon the Blue Fairy. And I worked very hard to make that face the perfect face as best I possibly could because that had to be the mother figure, but also somewhat seductive along the lines of—at least as seductive as Michelangelo's—

COLLINGS:

It's a very striking, mesmerizing image.

CARTER:

For me as somebody who does portraits and working that—because it's not just a person. We didn't just cast one person. We sculpted and then we just kept working it to try to create some figure that I was hoping would be timeless, in a sense, of its iconic nature. When he goes in that Amphibicopter with his little sidekick—again, you have, on a journey, somebody to talk to, whether it's a volleyball in Castaway or it's a little stuffed animal, someone that can, in a sense, provide an alter ego, even in that—

COLLINGS:

Yes, the animal is wonderful.

CARTER:

Yeah. So he ends up going there. He cannot—it's just a statue, and he wants her to make him into a real boy, which he keeps repeating, and as time passes, the whole amusement park sort of starts to collapse, he's trapped there. I mean, this is where the movie—I mean, you could end a movie there and say it's a metaphor for the timeless quest for that which you can't have. You can never return home to have that, but in the questing becomes the tale, but it's, in a sense, unfulfilled and somewhat tragic because you're in the search for something you can never get, and you can never return home, really. That's a journey that goes out that does not return home, which is contrary to almost every journey that's ever told. There are a few, but you always have to find something, at least out there, that keeps you—like even if it's Munich, the movie I worked on, I mean, when he was in New York, he's not at home. There's an epiphany. It's an ambivalence, but there's somewhere to take that. But a more satisfying journey, even if it's Apocalypse Now, sort of ultimately you've encountered the horror and you know there's a return at that point, even as damaged as the person is. But in The Wizard of Oz, you return home and you have something you've learned from this journey.

So that's very much a part of the motif that if this had been presented to me without a coda of some sort, I would have been questioning why do we tell all that in order to end here? Well, it wasn't Stanley, nor Steven's, intent to end there, but it is a place where you kind of go, okay, because if the next sentence that you have to say—and is literally said in the movie, 2,000 years pass.

COLLINGS:

That's a mode jump, jerk, as you called it.

CARTER:

Exactly, where you're jumping into something that you can't make sense of, you just have to go with it.

COLLINGS:

"Two thousand years passed."

CARTER:

Yeah. And not only that, it replicates in content the form that the digital revolution in cinema is occurring, because every single thing, almost, at the point forward until you get back home is digital. There's a little bit of reality-based set construction, but a lot of it, that whole first part of it, is all digital.

COLLINGS:

Traveling through the chasm.

CARTER:

That's right. And so that, in form, is what's happening in cinema as the creating of environments that had not been created like that before, including Rouge City. When he's in Rouge City and standing up there, there's an interactive quality that was being presented in the staging of that that had never been done before. So just the moving of the camera, the way it does, it was a breakthrough in order to do that. So now you move 2,000 years in the future, and robots who are sentient beings that now are the, in a sense, masters of this world, they look upon David as like a prototype of themselves, but who lived in the time of their god, their maker, knew their maker, because "we are God," from their point of view.

And one of the things I said would be interesting is if these beings, rather than wearing their emotions on the inside as we humans do, they wear them on the outside, so that that's why when they touch him, you see all the stuff that's being transmitted by David to them and they're transferred on, so that they are getting—and a lot of people thought they were aliens and couldn't quite understand. It was hard to design a 2,000-year-in-the-future being, right? But what they do is they finally give into

David’s desire to return home and to see his mother, because Teddy has a little bit of the DNA of his mother—

COLLINGS:

Right, the hair.

CARTER:

—that just happens to have that little bit with him. So they’re able to take David back home to have, in a sense, what he was envisioning in his mind that would be the culmination of his quest, which is to be loved by his mother and have a perfect day with her. And that’s all that he can have because the rules that they set up are that if you bring someone back, you can only do that for a one-day cycle and then they’re gone forever. So it was a wonderful magical kind of time limit on it, but then again, being able to get what you want, and they have that sort of infinite day, and it ultimately takes them to that place where then he can, in a sense, close his eyes and finally dream, which is the ultimate sort of level that only come, in a sense, with love that has brought everything together, and then that’s the fairy tale, the summation. And, to me, I would say the Kubrickian touches The Beatles touches Steven’s sensibility is my own, is there’s no movie I’ve worked on that is more to the core of who I am—

COLLINGS:

That’s what I was thinking.

CARTER:

—and that was interesting that you just started there. So I’ve always valued that movie more than any other movies because I understood the fundamental code of it, and I also understood how much further it goes into the journey motif than most movies would ever dare to go and still brings you back home. The other ones I’ve

worked on, let's say Avatar, which is fantastic to the levels that it goes to within the—having a force in Eywa that can hear you, that can be Deus ex Machina and help save the day at the end and tie together so much of it, is a truly magnificent journey—and realized so powerfully. Even Star Wars has a breadth to it, ultimately, in terms of exploring those types of levels, the spiritual meets the events of journey.

But as a meditation that goes to the deep levels of our existence and philosophy and where that spiritual component of why do we quest and what do we quest for and what is the return to a home base, particularly at that particular time—I was very aware that if I really had to stop there as a career, that I could not imagine that I had been robbed of any part of fulfilling the vision that I had had while journeying, myself as a young man, that I would get to tell that story one way or the other, which is something I still attempt to do all the time, which is to tell that story of the journey that I went on, which is not the singular, but it did start in 1970, and every time I touch it, it adds to the fact that it's a continuing journey.

But I still would say, even now, just speaking personally—and here we are in the year 2018—that's not gone away, and it's even emotional for me now, given that my mother, who is still alive, has dementia. So now there's an aspect of I'm losing her while she's still here, and she is still an anchor for me in my whole psyche and ability to orient me, because there's nobody that ever takes that place, and yet she's only partially there to be that, not entirely gone, still recognizes me and all those things, but everything—even as I'm talking to you right now, I'm realizing that the parallels are quite powerful, because with dementia, in the form at least that she has it, she doesn't have memory that goes back, nor can she project very far, so every day that I—

COLLINGS:

So it's that perfect day.

CARTER:

Each time has to be a perfect day that—let's put it this way. It is a containable-entity day that then does not necessarily, other than through this sub-level, connect to the

next one. And that's a very powerful, actually, idea for me to just consider right now in light of what you've just brought up with A.I., and that is when things are confined to a set of parameters that are the reality that you're experiencing them in and do not easily connect to the past what came before or that which comes later, which is the natural way to give them context as to what their meaning is, then the only other level so far that I've experienced what that context is is a sub-level of emotional connection or even spiritual connection to why I'm engaging with, in this particular case, my mother with her recognizing me and I'm recognizing her, and I can reference certain things in the conversation or our body language or whatever doing that we both know has resonance to the past, at least, and to some degree to whatever the next set of expectations is, even when they're not fulfilled. But it's not a through-line that is based upon, let's say, the facts of what you talk about. Let's say if I'm saying, "Well, I'm here now because I'm referencing this thing that happened in the past, and we need to resolve it now so that we can move forward into the future," that is not—

COLLINGS:

That's not what's happening.

CARTER:

That is not what's happening. Those connections are cut. So then the question becomes what are the other connections and how do they provide continuity and context so that you then can have emotion, connection, feelings that give it resonance? And I think that that's part of maybe what all of this, and even talking about A.I., jumping out of order, is about is that I could go through a litany of all the movies that I've worked on and what they meant in one way or another, but sometimes what I've discovered is really it's the portals that reveal everything.

Even if you're not seeing all the details of everything, it's the nature of what has all this been about, and so that whether I refer to The Beatles and whatever they meant to me growing up or whether it's traveling to places in order to have that drama reveal what's important to me as my own identity or if I'm storytelling, what's important for a character, what choices I make aesthetically to depict that or what stylistic ideas I

come upon, such as in A.I., I was very aware that I was telling a story—it was almost like the Olympics with these worlds that were like circles and just barely overlapped, and then sometimes almost didn't to the point of a mode jerk, as we talked about, but that ultimately you went through all of this so that form and content starts to come together and then it repeats itself, not exactly, but the next one out builds upon, but then again is separate from, and whatever the continuity of all this is, both sociological, personal, generational, set in time, mixed up in time, starts to—it's amazing how, over time, when you look back and give that context, you can see it as something.

And I have a very strong feeling right now, at age sixty-eight almost, that that shift, similar in some ways to my previous experience with the late sixties, but when I was seventeen, eighteen, and nineteen rather than sixty-seven, sixty-eight, sixty-nine, that the paradigms shifts and you can begin to see that that which came before was determined by other forces than the ones that you're witnessing, and that then the further you get away from it, the easier it is to see. So the World War II generation, the World War I generation, their concerns, their considerations, their humanity was defined by the events that they went through and who then they were as individuals and which people did what, which ones survived, which ones didn't, and the more distance you get, you contextualize what they were about in a different way.

So my generation, the Baby Boom generation, is hitting a point where something is literally shifting—I mean, it has occurred to me—and this is going to sound like what does this have to do with anything, but I think it ultimately has to do with the journey—that what we're actually experiencing, to some degree, in the world is a breakdown on a level that we can even give a name to, and it's called Trump. [Collings laughs.] But seriously. We are not just looking at a fight over the politics of conservative and liberal as we have known them and fought over this as a Baby Boom generation back and forth, and quite balanced in my lifetime between Republicans and Democrats, actually, so the forces that are liberal, the forces that are conservative, that actually blow off steam for whoever's not in power enough at times when they get some power so that it doesn't just turn into revolution again or civil war, because there's such a diversity of interests.

Now there's a breakdown. There's a mental breakdown. We're now even calling it that. And like what you just did when you grimace, it's beyond where you can get

angry at the person. I mean, you're angry at the person, but you're angry because he's in the position he's in. But what's more threatening is that in that position, not having mental acuity to recognize the affect of what you do so that you can just every single day take the people, and it becomes very much like an extended version of spousal abuse when you don't know where it's going to come from, how it's going to come from, but you're trapped in it somehow. But the reason I bring it up is not so much for a political point of view, but on a journey to encounter this, I will just tell you that it's outside the realm of what I would have imagined we'd encounter, and I've encountered it before in my lifetime so far, to feel this way, but nor have I encountered my mother's dementia.

I never accounted that at age sixty-eight I would be encountering a dimensionality in relationship to my mother's generation that would impact me in this way, not only because it potentially is a threat to me just in my own mind, like, ooh, that could happen to me or my wife or somebody I love, but because it's outside of what I'm used to thinking are the parameters. And the journey motif always takes you outside of the parameters that you thought were the ones that you knew, and it doesn't just end when you're in your late sixties as though that's the end of your life if you're going to potentially live into your nineties. So these rites of passage that we go through that we would like to think we've been through and are done with, when it's all thrown up and you just don't know what to do, that's how I'm viewing it.

It doesn't mean I have an ironclad version of it that makes me feel settled with it. I'm aware that it's happening in a way that if I was talking right now to somebody fifty years from now, I would say this is how I am best accommodating this mental stress at this stage, knowing, though, that it does relate to these other levels of journeying that I've been doing as part of my generational reaction to growing up in West L.A. and the influences that I've had and having had the access to the various means of expression that I've had that are there to be seen. They can be read into, but they didn't account for this.

There's nothing in my journey so far where you come upon somebody has got tremendous control over what you're going to experience, but you realize—it's one thing to be diabolical and have a plan, even if it's a plan to hurt you as the character in this journey, but what if they don't even know and they're diabolical in another level? And that's something I never accounted for. So I would be interested in where, if this

ever lasted fifty years, somebody to say, well, oh—and then obviously they'll have a lot of information about where it all went and then what it all added up to and whether there's other reference points other than, oh, look, here's the one—not cassette, but digital thing that somebody's talking about, the "it" before—it's like one of those Twilight Zone, you know, where there's something at the center of it.

And you even recognize it with behavior that relates to—it's, let's say, this entity called Trump. We'll go into a place, and then he'll have all these other men come around him, just kind of support him and say, "You're okay, you're okay," because they're still getting something from him that they feel is important. But at the core of it, it's every single day—in fact, every single day since the new year has started, there's been a breakdown and another breakdown. I'm sure anybody who's in this field who's watching this is very specific—and not unrelated, what I'm saying, to if I take my mother to be—not every day, but every month, that they can tell the—

COLLINGS:

The trajectory.

CARTER:

—deterioration. You don't know exactly what's going to happen, but you know what's going to happen, but you don't know when it's going to happen, but it's going to happen. And so as part of this journey motif, even though it sounds like it's a riff into another thing, it's like saying none of this about movies and all that goes deep makes anybody immune from the life and times that we live in that are so fraught with something that's unpredictable that we can't absolutely know how it's going to hit. And every time it hits, we know it's—we've all been conditioned now, and that's the interesting aspect of it that I feel, too, is it's not as literal as—we're playing out and actually we're going at each other in weird ways too. I mean, I think there's a lot of fighting now, even on people that would normally be on the same side of an equation, because everybody is being impacted by this kind of behavior, and then they don't know where the boundaries are anymore in terms of when they're upset about something, they're really upset. It could be Star Wars, it could be how women are

treated in Hollywood, it could be anything, but when they get into now with this Internet and everything, there's a tremendous ability to act out your anger very quickly because we've got somebody to talk about who's continually angry and upset and belligerent. If I was to put it into movie terms—

COLLINGS:

I was just going to ask you that.

CARTER:

Well, the only movie I've ever seen that comes to my mind is The Manchurian Candidate where there's a queen of spades, and when that card is played, the lead character always responds, Laurence Harvey, because he's been brainwashed to—now he goes into a zone. The minute it's played, he's in a zone that is controlled by that queen of spades, and whoever walks forward at that point can tell him something. That's what they do. They even play it out—not Angela Lansbury's character, but even Frank Sinatra, they try to break him of it by doing all these queen of spades, blow his mind. But the idea, to me, in a cinematic reference point—I don't know where this is going, except for to say the name "Trump" is a trump card now to us. If I look on my iPhone—

COLLINGS:

It always takes you back to the same place.

CARTER:

Trump, Trump, Trump, Trump. Google News, Trump. I just the see the name, Trump, Trump, Trump. Like, two years ago, that didn't mean anything to me, that was just a name. And the fact is the name in its normal use and the specific use, they become the same thing, a trump card. No matter what I'm thinking, Trump's action or words can trump that moment of what I'm thinking, and the reason is also because the levels that

it goes to are not just our social interactions and fighting amongst the things that we're used to fighting about; it's total annihilation. He's got his ability to actually annihilate us for whatever his supposed reason would be, and his form of logic, whatever he thought he was fighting for, he has that ability. So we have never been in a situation like this, and then to have so many people—we don't even know how to fight it. The complicitness of certain people when they're getting their agendas across through this is just enough so that we go deeper and deeper and deeper.

What this has to do with an account that relates to any of this is probably minimal, but I would only just say that it is part of this journey of the life that's been expressed in movies, at least for me, coming where I come from, and now am very aware that at this stage of life I'm not in my fourth act, but the reason that A.I. is so important is because I've experienced a fourth-act structure in that form so that I feel like I'm heading into a fourth act. I feel very much like the resolution of—this is just personal—of my journey has been pretty complete now as far as what I would have known it to be, but now there's something else in trying to get back home. What that home is, on one hand, I'm very aware you can never go home again on a certain level, but that doesn't stop me from trying to find a home that feels like home again, and one of those is literally something I've done—again, this is—I don't know if it really relates other than however it relates, which I kind of imagine is kind of somewhat open-ended as to—

COLLINGS:

Well, I mean, just like headline, I think it relates in the sense that you're talking about your craft in a very particular way, and that's interesting that an individual in this field approaches it in this fashion rather than—it's not about these blueprints and drawings, and then I came up with this—

CARTER:

This design.

COLLINGS:

—computer idea. I mean, this is a different toolbox, and that's interesting.

CARTER:

Okay. I know to some degree I'm unusual in this. I know of one other designer who taps into it quite deeply in this way, Dennis Gassner, who's also my age. He did Blade Runner, the most recent one, and he's done a lot of great movies. We have a parallel path, and we're probably the only two people that talk quite like this about what we do. But just to realize, because I hadn't thought about this within the context of the work, if the journey motif has been for me the thing I've discovered as a life thing and then something I've used as a tool—and has happened to me, because the movies have been so many journeys—that motif of starting at home and then returning home, I'm still trying now to find where to go home to, even though I'm in my home, fortunately, where I live, but that's not the same as it was. So one of the homes that relates in a personal level and which is at least part of California history is the house that my father grew up in, which was in Carmel, that my grandmother, who lived to be 103, and I used to visit her all the time, and she was the place where I went to when I wrote the conscientious objector form, which is basically a question "What's the nature of your belief?" and you have to answer that question, and it's a very deep question to ask, and at seventeen did that.

I now still have that house, my wife and I do, and we've rented it out until the last couple of years. Now we've taken it back and have renovated it. It still looks exactly the same, but it's now got good plumbing and all the things, so it's potentially good to go for more years. So it's a kind of archetypal old-style Carmel house. So we've been going back there, and go back there quite a bit, and whenever I do now, I feel something that's deep about home. It's even an antidote to what's happened to my mother a little bit because it, like, has a restorative quality to it. But also then it's got this slightly yin-yang relationship to me because I'm not ready to retire. I just go there and be a part of that as my—that's my life, and yet I'm drawn to be there more than I have ever up until now because of something that I'm getting.

COLLINGS:

Was that your mother's mother?

CARTER:

It was my father's mother. So that sense of place that I found out on the road I still find in places in my life, and continue to do it, whether it's a movie that I'm creating or in my own life. And as a motif, years from now, production design and what movies are may be looked at in a different way, and maybe it will be illuminating to someone to be able to look at a body of work, if that body of work exists, and see it within a certain type of expression that doesn't even fall within how we normally look at movies now, which is, to a great degree, by either the star vehicle that they represent for the characters and the personalities or the genres that have been defined as this or this.

But this kind of whatever it is that it represents, whether it's a journey genre or whatever one wants to say, is something that I feel that I've contributed to in a deep way, and so that's been at the basis of how I've approached all these movies, as we said, starting from—I mean, just to do the riff of them is sort of a continual what's it—if I was just returning home now and essentially the last place that I went was in 1971 to do the movie The Post, which is very much about—that was the year I came back from traveling around the world as a conscientious objector, which is what that movie is about. It's about conscientious objection.

That's what Daniel Ellsberg does when he releases those pages. It's what Kay Graham and everybody has to do in order to stand up to the government. They have to conscientiously object to this information being held from the public, and so the role of conscience that's in there that has permeated my work and my life is not lost on me as being the—as my son said, "Is it odd or is it God?" [laughter] But it's the serendipity of it is there, because just tracing back just the role of conscience, I can then go back to right where we were just talking about, like in a fourth act finding your mother's love journey. The year it came out was 2001 right before 9/11, three months before 9/11.

From that point on, even though I did one other movie that was very much like taking A.I. a little bit further in terms of literally just boy going into the ice, was The Polar Express, to try to recapture a sense of innocence and a belief in something from before. In this case, it's Christmas, believe in Santa Claus, remembering what it is to believe in the spirit of Santa Claus. That's just like a direct response to when your world is shattered, right? But from that point on, it's become absolutely almost literal as a journey in which each time I'm being called to go on these voyages, it deals with conscience and war, so when I'm called to do Munich, it starts off with the leader of Israel saying every civilization has to deal with compromising its values when faced with certain kinds of situations.

That's the premise. Then how does that play out amongst the assassins that go out to have revenge for the massacre of the Munich Olympics, and what's the toll of that? Where does that leave you morally? And it's very ambivalent. There's absolutely a very strong ambivalence at the end. The next movie—and, again, I'm not making these movies up. They're coming to me, right? And not because they have this thing like they put on my résumé and say, "If you need this, you get this guy."

COLLINGS:

Conscience, journey.

CARTER:

Yeah. "You want to travel somewhere—." So the next one's Avatar. Avatar is about a guy who's a Marine who changes sides. He not only changes sides, he changes species.

COLLINGS:

Yeah, changes form.

CARTER:

He changes form, and so the form side of it is that he embraces the digital realm by being the digital realm, because he's no longer human by the end of the movie. The next one is—well, Sucker Punch is a little bit off to the side. I mean, it does have conscience and war in it, but it's an oddball that doesn't quite fit, but sort of does in the sense—the iconography is so all over the place that it's hard for me to fit it in, not that it needs to fit in. But, I mean, at its premise, it's a girl named Babydoll who is abused as a young woman, taken to this mental institution by her stepfather, and then it turns into, in her mind, into a brothel. And then to escape that, she goes into these dances that takes into these journeys that go—these crazy things that then come back each time till she finally escapes, but she escapes, like, by having a lobotomy. I'm just saying it's like—it starts down the path—

COLLINGS:

[laughs] Good plan.

CARTER:

It starts down the path, but it doesn't—it just keeps getting crazier and crazier. I was game for it, you know, but I didn't relate to it as strongly because it didn't do the thing that all the other journeys have done, which is to account for where they went before, and then try to get you somewhere so there's an epiphany at the end that doesn't just kind of go, "What?"

COLLINGS:

Well, also, I mean, from A.I. and some of the other ones that we've talked about or haven't, there is a journey, but within the journey there's a very strong sense of places along the way.

CARTER:

That's right.

COLLINGS:

These places are worlds. These are entire immersive worlds that are the stopping points along the journey, and from what you've described, that's more of a narrative trajectory. I don't hear the sense of place within it.

CARTER:

Well, I think they were so eclectic, also, as places that they—also, what happened in the places didn't seem to do anything other than a very simple—they were way too elaborate for what was accomplished or what was experienced, so that they just became gratuitous, going somewhere that had the eye candy, but the iconography, while I think it was true to the director, it was just too much, at least for me, and I think for most audiences, seeing as it had like 20 percent Rotten Tomato positive. So it's not that I don't value it, because I do, but within the context of how this has all progressed, because, as I said, this sort of dealing with war and conscience and journeys—I worked on War Horse, which was about an innocence I view traveling through—almost like a Christ-like figure through war.

I mean, literally at the end, I wrapped him in barbed wire and had him carrying those things like he was like carrying a cross and a crown of thorns, and he's literally sacrificed, but then is resurrected and is sort of that which is lost in war or barely survives war, which is any semblance of innocence. And then Lincoln, which is so much about the conscience of what essentially makes slavery wrong, and so what do you do to fight for that, but what toll that takes, not only the—if he'd been willing to not go for that amendment, then the war would have ended earlier. It would have saved 100,000 lives, more than that. So we only say that's worth it now, but in those days, you could have been on the wrong side of history with that kind of decision-making. So that's a journey that very much relates to conscience, and then going through—like, you don't move, but you move through the interior world of what it

takes to get to the end.

And then what's so amazing is just like—so then, like, Star Wars: The Force Awakens, it's about a war, I mean, between the light and the dark side, and it's reawakening a new generation, and there's a legacy of passing it on, and what's lost, who gets sacrificed in that process. And then again, the intergenerational aspects are in play in the movie The BFG, where you have almost opposites, a young little girl and an old man, and they're essentially two halves of the same coin. The two of them together can function to make something happen that actually rights a wrong of the sort of evil giants that are terrorizing children, so the metaphor is that there's an evil out there, a darkness that's terrorizing the children, and only the little girl with the help of this older giant, but who's basically kind of been a pacifist but needs to be called into service, that's kind of Spielberg's, I think, looking both ways at the same time to him as an elder and also still somebody who has a child's wonder about the world and what can change, what the possibilities are.

And I loved working on that one, too, for just those reasons. It's very contemplative too. It gets very meditative, and, again, I think that hurt it for its commercial appeal, but I think it made it very rich as far as what it really has to offer. And in particular, it's got a sequence in Dreamland which is really a wonderful depiction of sort of the essence—if you were to go into a brain and look at how ideas and dreams are born and what would that look like, and you're putting it through a Fantasia filter, like that kind of visualization, it has that in it. It's really quite a sublime sequence. And it's all designed—I designed it with this tree that is a big oak tree, and it looks like a brain, and when you see the things darting in and out, those are like little synapses and things. Then we did a reflecting pool that it reflects in, but it's actually an Escher thing that you can jump into that and go inside and then be upside down, but you're right-side up in that world.

So it has a lot of dimensional—some of the things that I do in my creative process with Steven and designing the paradigms that I'm approaching, and then how to shift them so I see it differently. It's absolutely in play, depicted right for everybody to look at. I don't think too many people picked up on it, but I did, and I knew that that was at the basis of it, that you're literally looking at what is the process of the creation of dreams. And then some of them are good, some of them are bad, and then where do they exist, where do they go, how do they get projected out into the world. And I

loved being able to do it. It was like pulling back the curtain, but then behind the curtain is even more fantastic than what you thought was in front of it as far as kind of—it's like The Fantastic Journey. You're inside, but it's all metaphorically being told, but it still has a threat that's very much like a war from a dark side.

Then to again come back to 1971, which was The Post, and even before, the A.I. one, it was always a journey, because I became very aware early from Back to the Future II and III, and as I said, going into the future to go back, they keep changing and making something better, and then at the end they say the future is what you make of it, you know. So that's the same kind of Beatlesque message or The Wizard of Oz message. And I would have thought that was enough journeying, but I did a movie about eternal life and vanity with Death Becomes Her, then traveled to an island where they're resurrecting dinosaurs from the past, and now they're in conflict with us. And the very narrative of the movie tells you that this is not a good idea, even though it becomes a fun thing that we still have sequels twenty years later.

COLLINGS:

But it's presented in such a way that you can't help but think it's a wonderful idea.

CARTER:

Isn't that wonderful? It's a total dichotomy.

COLLINGS:

There's such a sense of space and wonder, and when the main character—

CARTER:

Hammond.

COLLINGS:

No, I was thinking of the—

CARTER:

Oh, Grant.

COLLINGS:

Yeah, Grant and Ellie Sattler, when they first see these dinosaurs, there's this sense of—

CARTER:

Awe.

COLLINGS:

—awe, and that sells the entire premise right there.

CARTER:

And that's part of where Steven's heart is so open. He doesn't hold his cards back. And there's nothing there when the actors are doing that, so he's asking them to really emote, and he doesn't even know that the dinosaurs are fully going to work at that point. So it's a lot of make-believe investment in something you can't know it's going to work, but you have to invest in it, and then if you're lucky enough, it will be fulfilled, and that's the Hollywood dream.

And then the same thing, to some degree, even though it's got some more ambivalence in it, but just you have a feather, and it comes in and it just lands, and

then there's Forrest Gump, and he's an idiot on a bench telling you his story. And then two-thirds of the way through telling you the story that reflects my time and my era almost precisely—

COLLINGS:

I know. I was thinking that.

CARTER:

It's literally all these beats from Vietnam and demonstrations, and then rooting it in a place that's called home that's very iconic. I mean, it's got the—we built the house just to be framed by that tree so it looks like Tara in Gone with the Wind. It's very simple, it just lives there, it doesn't change. In the script, it first was supposed to change and all this stuff. I said, "Why? This wouldn't change." So that's that home part again. Home doesn't change. You can go off on the journeys that he does, but he comes back and there's Mama. That doesn't change. And then what does he find? Then she's got a certain point of view about life, which is that it is—there's something behind us, that you're okay, even if they tell you you're not. And the mother's love is very powerful, keeping him oriented. But then there's Lieutenant Dan that says it's all fucked up. And then basically when he's at the gravesite with Jenny, he's talking to her and he's asking the question which is it, and he says it must be a little bit of both. And then you meet young Forrest, and at the very end of the movie, there's his legacy, and now, in a sense, the tale has been told, right, and the feather goes off to somewhere else.

So the journeys that are unraveling, they're messages, but they have to be earned. They have to be earned emotionally. The characters have to go through things and have to really be somewhere, and it's been my job to put them somewhere every time so you believe it. If he's in that room, he's looking across at the Watergate to that Democratic thing, that actually was the room that you could see the Democratic—

COLLINGS:

Oh, that actually was?

CARTER:

Yeah, I stayed there and I went, “Whoa, we can actually do this.”

COLLINGS:

Really?

CARTER:

But then, thirty-something years later, I’m doing The Post where, at the very end of that movie when you see it—I don’t want to ruin it for you, but it relates to Watergate. So some of the serendipity when you move through and then something flashes back and moves forward has happened to me. Or then just, okay, well, what’s the next thing? Well, what about—well, we returned to the island, or another island, to experience—

COLLINGS:

The Lost World.

CARTER:

—another level of what’s been lost.

COLLINGS:

But this time, the order, the wonderful order of the—

CARTER:

Right, is sort of all broken down.

COLLINGS:

—sort of mid-century "parkitecture" of the resort is all overgrown.

CARTER:

That's right. And then the only you can do is actually—at a certain point for Steven was to say, "Well, I think we've told this story, but what happens if they come to us?" I mean, this kind of crazy third act.

COLLINGS:

That was great.

CARTER:

We're going to come to San Diego—

COLLINGS:

I love that.

CARTER:

—and have for a moment just a playground of them running through our world.

COLLINGS:

And of course it has to come to a Blockbuster.

CARTER:

Exactly, exactly. So its reference unto itself is playing the nod, nod, wink, wink, and it's literally the screenwriter is running in and screaming at the Blockbuster in that. That's the screenwriter.

COLLINGS:

That's the actual screenwriter?

CARTER:

Yeah, that's David Koepp.

COLLINGS:

How great.

CARTER:

So at that point, if you imagine not everything I just said after A.I., but even at that point, it's a lot of traveling, you know? And then to think, like, well, but what if you were on a slave ship and you were kidnapped from your home and taken, and now

you're a slave and you're being put through—that's your coming-to-America experience, the Middle Passage and the brutality of that, and to walk that into our government and to see what our values are in and around that issue. Or just sort of that one—and that was right back-to-back with Lost World, so I was kind of, like, realizing this is just getting deeper and richer each time, and there's metaphors that I can respond to, and sometimes they're fantastic—dinosaur thing—but it's also historical sometimes.

And then Bob Zemeckis, right at the point for him in his life when he was at the apex with Forrest Gump, was also getting divorced, so he got kind of cast into a whole other dimension. He worked on the movie Contact, and I wasn't available to do that with him because of working with Steven, but I was a fourth-dimensional consultant, so I was one helping him design what was in and how you got to the fourth dimension, because that was a place that was very difficult to design, and I could help do that.

COLLINGS:

How did you help do that?

CARTER:

Well, for one thing, the machine itself, what does the machine look like. I thought, well, let's make sure that it's readable and understandable, so if it looks like an atom, we're all going to think that's it related, at least iconography-wise, to something that could function. And also, if something falls through it, that whole time jump will, like—somebody saying, "This only took three seconds," and yet you had a whole seven-minute scene on a beach in the fourth dimension. How do those—that's that duality. Well, at least it had a space that you could see that it went through. There's kind of a sleight-of-hand there because you're presenting two realities in relationship to one thing, but at least because it's moving, you can imagine that that could happen. Or really esoteric parts like the question of if a message has been sent out, which was the Nuremberg talk by Hitler, which was the first broadcast that went out into—potentially those radio waves beyond—

COLLINGS:

Is that true? I didn't know that.

CARTER:

It's what the premise is in the movie. I think it's true, but it's one of the more—the early versions of a big worldwide broadcast that was—or not worldwide, but substantial enough that they were saying this is the one that the aliens picked up on in the fourth dimension. Now, they sent it back to us encoded with all the plans on how to make this machine. We're talking about things that are premises that are difficult, right, just like Avatar is not easy to say lie down, close your eyes, next thing you know, you're a nine-foot thing going to run away and be somewhere else, but you've got to believe that. If I say it to you, you go, "I don't believe it," but if I can show it to you in a certain way, then you will make that jump. It won't even be a mode jerk. It'll just be like, "Oh, I get it. That's what you want me to do, and I'm going to do it. I want it to happen." So, in the fourth dimension, the question becomes how do you embed that information.

Now, the literal way would be to say, well, you would put it in the pixels or in the grain of the film and you'd put it back—so you'd still see it, but then within each frame—each little grain. But that felt kind of—and the funny thing is it felt literal to Bob. It would be the type of thing at the time he would say, "Well, anybody can think that. That's not good enough." So I started thinking about it, and I came upon this idea, because the idea was—and this is a portal type of idea that relates to something bigger than I may have even been expressing in all of this, which is when you find an avenue in, you can see things from the other side that illuminate everything from a slightly different point of view. So, in this case, the question is what's the fourth dimension of film, which means by definition it has to be something that you're looking at all the time. It doesn't mean that—but you can't see it.

So what would that be in film? That was the question I posed. I mean, fortunately, I was able to pose the question to myself, because that helps. Half of it's just know what the question is, not just, okay, that doesn't work, now what? But the question was, what is the fourth dimension of film? So then I started thinking, well, we know

that time is related to the fourth dimension, the three physical dimensions, then in time, that's something that's often referred to as the fourth dimension. So once I started thinking of time, then I asked myself what am I looking at but I can't see? And the answer, luckily there is one. It's the frame, in between the frames. Every time there's a frame, there's a black, and then you move to the next frame, twenty-four times a second. So you're looking at it—always you're seeing the black.

You're looking at it, you can't see it. It's too fast. So I thought what if that's where they put the message, they put it in between each frame, and then Bob said, "That's a good one." And he and I and one other person are probably the only people to even know that because it's in the movie, but it's not something that seems pertinent. It just solves a reality-based kind of question so that you can get from here to there to tell the story that's fantastic and make it seem like it's all credible, and that's a sleight-of-hand. It's a part of the thinking, whether it's in the script or particularly the production design, how to make something come across as being real when what it's doing is not real, and that's an aspect to the fantasy in production design I've always enjoyed.

So, anyway, that was my sort of offshoot contribution, but it also went to the heart of sort of the fourth dimension of film, which started to allow me to see how I could apply that, which I did, actually, a couple years later, which was I was on Castaway, which is about a man cast out of his life for no reason that he did anything, just got in a plane crash, and he's then knocked out of time, because time was the whole thing he was obsessed with and being tyrannized by, and now he had to reconstruct his life from the very basis of what do I drink, how do I get fire, what do I eat and what's my shelter, all the way to getting back, but never really returning home. He never got to be—he tried, but that home was gone, so he's just left at a crossroads, which is a very strong ambivalence. Now, parallel to that, we actually did the part with Tom overweight, then had a nine-month break while he lost weight, so we did another movie, What Lies Beneath, in between, which is to take another iconically good guy—I mean, at that point, there was Tom Hanks, Tom Cruise—

COLLINGS:

Harrison Ford.

CARTER:

—and Harrison Ford. But now he becomes a bad guy. He becomes Norman, like out of Psycho, and he's malevolent, and it's not just a shower scene, it's a whole bathtub and taking that perfect life—

COLLINGS:

That is a very freaky movie.

CARTER:

Yeah, and especially for women because women like to take baths, and I think just being in that relaxed zone and having that be a threat is a very, very diabolical place. I personally had a lot of trouble—I was glad that it turned out as accessible as it was and not—it's creepy, but it doesn't get totally—I was concerned at the time—I co-designed it, even. I brought even someone else to help me because I had so much to do. But it's one of the more negative movies, that one and I suppose although it's got so much wit and there's a good ending to it, but Death Becomes Her has got a kind of diabolical core to it. That, be on Castaway and What Lies Beneath, and over into Fiji and Russia and Memphis and L.A. and Vermont, I mean, it was all over the place, so you would think, well, I've got my plate full, which I did. But when Steven then came right in the middle of that and said, "I've got this dream movie that Stanley Kubrick has given me, A.I., and I'd really like you to do it," I said yes, even though I had no idea how I could—

COLLINGS:

Possibly do it.

CARTER:

—accommodate. And what I did was I literally thought, along the lines of this portal

about the fourth dimension, that the only—I had the will, I had the desire, I had the energy, but I was up against time because things were overlapping in time. So, in a funny way, I refused to let that be a problem. I decided I'm not going to let time be the thing that's controlling my life as to whether I can say yes to something. So it turned out A.I. was delayed a little bit, so it made it all work out, but I had to do a lot of finessing, and that was sort of when I also made the decision I really wanted to be with Steven's body of work actually more than Bob, not because I didn't get along with Bob or like his vision, but also what he was going through at that time was putting him into a zone that was a just a little—it wasn't quite the insurmountable-opportunities point of view that he'd had before, and so I felt just more akin with where Steven was going. And particularly for that tale that we started with, A.I., is the one that really went to a core of something, particularly the love of a mother, that I identified with so strongly.

And even though I worked on The Polar Express after that with Bob—and that was when he went into another realm of the all-digital—I felt more ultimately in tune with Steven, and so if I had to be making a choice, which I didn't—I never saw it as a bifurcated thing, but that's kind of the way it went, as it turned out, because when Bob got totally into the digital realm, in many ways, there was less for me, particularly, do to. I brought on a co-designer to do The Polar Express who was very digitally proficient, but my role as kind of a—what do you want to call me?

COLLINGS:

Visionary.

CARTER:

It was kind of like a guide of vision, a vision guide. And it doesn't mean that I wasn't adapting to it. I did Avatar and BFG, but it was very technical, and I just didn't want to only just jump into that, and so that's I think part of what, if I think about it, led me. But also just that Steven—well, he was just going somewhere. In fact, the one movie actually I left out of this whole thing was after Polar Express, before Munich, was actually the direct response to 9/11, which was The War of the Worlds, which is very

much—if you just—it sort of falls apart towards the last third in terms of they get caught in a house and they go through this whole thing with red weed, and Tom Robbins' character is kind of demented. It takes a turn that it never quite resolves and then recovers from at the end to go back to where it started. But that first part all the way through the ferry scene and this thing coming up out of the ground and just tearing everything apart is really a great horror dream in relationship to 9/11, and it's really staged right—

COLLINGS:

Especially in the beginning when everybody's trying to figure out what happened and—

CARTER:

What it is, and the wind's blowing the wrong way, and, actually, you're in New Jersey right looking almost back at Manhattan. I think some of his best tense filmmaking is actually all the way through the point where the plane crashes, and maybe even the ferry ride is pretty great, but then it just kind of, as a story, didn't know quite how to—I think it was just too in its own moment of reflecting on the terror that it didn't know how to tell the bigger story. There's points of reference for the story, but they're not—what's the word—satisfying as far as—again, I think partly because what happens is the characters can't solve it themselves. It has to come from the outside.

COLLINGS:

Right. There's sort of an antivirus or something that just ends it all, which is from the original story.

CARTER:

Right. And also, of course, we still haven't solved it, so, in a sense, a movie that reflects the inability to solve it from the inside is not lost on the fact that that's the

problem, meaning we still don't have that—I would say, if I think about it, actually—and even being on Star Wars IX, it's something we have not solved. As a civilization, we never solve it quite the way I'm talking about, but we're not able to tell the—it's like almost all these stories I'm telling, they add up to one big dimensional glimpse at something from different perspectives.

COLLINGS:

Well, they tell the story of a post-colonial world. I mean, in Star Wars, of course there's that, and I kind of saw that in A.I. where you have all of these different locations where the Mecha live, and you have all these wrecked Mecha wandering around, and they've all been created by the humans, so you could say that this is like the sort of ravaged third world that's been decimated by the history of colonialism—

CARTER:

Interesting.

COLLINGS:

—and now the colonial powers have sort of retracted into their drowned Manhattan, but you still have these wrecked life forms.

CARTER:

And we literally—just to take your metaphoric analysis, right, which I think is really interesting, and I'll mirror it back to you literally on this date that you've said. What did our president say yesterday?

COLLINGS:

I know. Precisely.

CARTER:

I mean, "Why do we need all these people from these shithole countries?" And doesn't even think that there's any—he can't see into what he's saying other than the point of view that they must be shitholes because the people want to come here, and the people that come here he doesn't have any respect for, and we're having to somehow only just take care of them. But has no sense of context other than this incredibly, well, colonialist, but then not give a shit about anything. It's interesting, because, in a way, that is kind of the real pressure points of what the Western civilization or even China does vis-à-vis the affect of who they are, and Japan as well. I don't know.

I mean, I don't know what to make of it, but I think these are the levels that we reflect ourselves that we can't possibly know when we're doing it, but that through oral histories and time, you can begin to see what people were interested in. And mine seems very interesting to me specifically because I'm telling my story and I have a vehicle to tell it in the sense that I'm saying what I'm saying, but also there are reference points, at least at the moment, out in the culture that one can refer to, right? So there's a dimensionality to that. But the very nature, as you pointed out, of the story that's being told is reflective of something I have no idea of what I'm reflecting.

COLLINGS:

Yeah, because we're just in it. We're still in it.

CARTER:

I mean, even the ability or desire to record it in the way that we're doing it reflects something, you know. It's like we're the McNamaras, meaning we're doing the study

so someone can at some point later look at all this, try to figure out what the hell it is that we were doing. [laughter]

COLLINGS:

Well, I think it's really interesting that you were saying that one of the reasons you decided to continue working with Steven Spielberg rather than Zemeckis was because of this continued ability to create the sense of these places, to have that kind of opportunity to visualize things and not go strictly into the digital realm.

CARTER:

That's right.

COLLINGS:

I mean, that's a real moment in the history of film, isn't it?

CARTER:

Well, and obviously I was there and have been there at some of the important junctures of the creation of it, but it doesn't hold the same emotional allure on an artistic level for me to engage in that that I found so enticing about the production design experience, at least as I'd known it up to then. Now it's gotten to be so much more. So I wouldn't change anything, but I think that it's that part of it, because I didn't find that just the raw space with nothing there and it's all going to happen later just in the film is as satisfying as having a place that everybody can relate to and then it also shows up in film. That duality was very powerful for me in creating physical places. And then it's turned out that many people value that, that is important as well, I mean in terms of the creation. They don't like acting and vacuous things where they can't—

COLLINGS:

Sure. They want to have a response to the environment.

CARTER:

That's right. But probably the deeper reasons is because Steven showed signs, even then, of—in the beginning, he used to storyboard everything and be very controlling of every single shot that he did, but after—with Amistad, for instance, once he started down that road—I mean, even Jurassic Park, to some degree, and Lost World, he was on it as far as what we were going to do, and it was pretty well defined, even though everybody was contributing. Amistad, he was doing three movies in a row. He was doing Lost World, Amistad, and Saving Private Ryan, all shot within one calendar year, and tremendous amount of shooting. He loves shooting, but it meant that we never knew what he was going to shoot when he got somewhere, so I had to lay all of that out as the way I saw it, and then come to him.

And then every once in a while, he'd say, "Well, I'd rather be over here," and we'd have to scramble a little bit. But essentially, he would go along with the program, whatever it was, and especially if it hit the price. Then you just trusted. And we would joke like, "You want to see what you're going to shoot tomorrow?" "No. Surprise me." Most directors aren't that way. And even on A.I., there was one point where I had given a bunch of money away to visual effects and it came in—luckily, I got in a couple weeks early to look at something. He said, "Ooh, I don't know how you're going to make this work." Most directors would say, "How do you expect me to make this work?" He would just look and say, "I don't know how you're going to make this work," which was then the clue to say, "I do need more."

And so then Kathy Kennedy, the producer, would say, "Well, is it something money can fix?" And I could say, "Well, remember the money I gave over here? Well, I need some of that back," and then we could fix it. But the main idea is that I had a lot of freedom to create, and he would just go with what I created. He didn't need to put his mark on everything. And even though Bob was not super precise and persnickety, Steven was evolving in such a way that—particularly, let's say, on the last few

movies, whether it's Lincoln or particularly, let's say, The Post, he just comes in and shoots, and that's very gratifying to me, not in an ego way—

COLLINGS:

A lot of trust, a lot of communication and trust.

CARTER:

A lot of trust and a lot of appreciation, which allows my process to be simpler and simpler, so as I get older, I'm not burdened by the precociousness of a younger person needing to prove everything, get their hands in and work it over and over, so that even, let's say, with J.J. Abrams, who needs to go over things over and over again, I could go to the big pictures and I could swoop in when I needed to, but that's also why I had a co-designer who's now, for instance, designing on his own on IX. I'm an associate producer, which means I'm able to noodge, but even more distant, and not take the responsibility of making every little thing, "Well, maybe this should be like this. Maybe this should be this."

So I think I, even instinctively—that's sixteen years ago, over the age of fifty—was beginning to feel the—I don't know if it was mortality or just the ticking of the clock or just the I can't bring everything I've been bringing to this quite in the same way. I have to finesse. I was very aware of finessing my situation. And now that the travel itself has become problematic for me just to go away so much, I'm finessing even more. But now, as I said, that last zone, which is the fourth act. I think I've had a three-act Hollywood career structure in growing up, but I'd say a fourth act is—and with the paradigms, are very much up for grabs as far as—

COLLINGS:

They are.

CARTER:

—what do we base things on.

COLLINGS:

What is it about, what's it for, who's watching it, and why are they watching it.

CARTER:

Yeah, exactly.

COLLINGS:

It's all a question mark.

CARTER:

And in what medium.

COLLINGS:

Precisely, yes.

CARTER:

And it's like, okay, there's an Academy Award, but what does Academy Award represent? I mean, who goes to see those movies? I mean, like, if the top ten movies are not movies that are getting any box office, then what are they watching? And there's nothing wrong with that unto itself, it's just that it reflects a certain type of person in a certain part of the culture and not a mass version of it, and I'm doubling

down on that because I'm even designing exhibits for an Academy Museum, which is supposed to be for who? Who are we making it for? I mean, I kind of know, but not really, just because I've never really known. I've always had to rely on the filmmakers to say, "Well, we're making this movie because this'll sell."

COLLINGS:

Well, that's interesting, the idea of designing exhibits, because, I mean, in some cases, you could say that a lot of your production design has been an exhibit, right?

CARTER:

That's right. I look at it very much like that, but I don't know if it really fulfills the function of an exhibit the way I'm—I know that I really don't know what I'm doing, but I know that nobody else does either. That's the only positive part, because if you're going to do a museum, normally you have an object, and that object has the gravitas, so your presentation of the object, whether it's a painting or a sculpture or an artifact, then you present. Now, you can augment that object with a film clip that can contextualize it either visually or emotionally or just informationally. But our entity is the film itself, and it's not even just clips, because how do you get emotion out of just that?

COLLINGS:

So they need to be immersive environments.

CARTER:

And yet if they get really too fancy immersive, they're not what the movies were either. Now they're a theme park, and now they become very, very—the theme park becomes very much, "Well, now we just got to up the thrill," thing. So we're competing with the very nature of what the cinema was to begin with as though we're

as good, and you aren't, and now you're like a video game or a theme park and you don't have any of the—A.I. the ride is not a—

COLLINGS:

A.I. the ride is your life.

CARTER:

But how do you then get people—so it's the act of being in a dream state as represented—phantasmagoric state as seen in a dream state through the medium of cinema that is the thing itself, and you can talk about it, but the experience of it has some other thing, which is the combination far more than what I do of just the places, but the whole mood, the way you are, how you become it, it becomes you, then sometimes you're away from it, you're judging it, sometimes you stop it and you go-- And come back to it. I can tell you what's so interesting is I'm enjoying that I have the opportunity to do this. It doesn't mean it's stress-free, but part of it is just to—I'm glad I'm not twenty-five or thirty-five or even forty-five trying to do it, because I'm just relying on enough confidence that whatever I do, I recognize other people don't know, and also I recognize I'm not the only person who knows, so I have to ask for help, and who I ask maybe will allow it to be all that it can be at this point.

But I know in my heart of hearts what I want is for it be a cinematic experience as a journey through a museum experience, and so whatever I can bring of everything I've been talking about into a person who's just walking through and experiencing this and that, and what's the sound, what are they focusing on, and where's the epiphany, like where does it tell you something that maybe you didn't know and you've earned it, that each one of these journeys I've had on a movie has built into it some form of an epiphany. I mean, the epiphany, if it's David, is that he's vindicated that he is deserving of his mother's love, and he gets rewarded to have that, and then he can finally be fully human and just dream and not be in pursuit of something he doesn't have.

That's the epiphany. And the catharsis is to actually go into the state at the end, which

is the one you've been in the whole time, which is just to dream it, and that's where it reflects literally the filmmakers themselves. That's why it's potentially so potent. If, in the annals of moviemaking, it's viewed in a way I would want it to be viewed, it would be that there's almost no other situation where you take two incredibly powerfully visionary filmmakers and you put them into the same material at the same time, because even though Stanley was not literally there, he was there directing from the grave. That was his legacy, so he was—

COLLINGS:

How do you tease apart the two influences?

CARTER:

I don't think you can. I think it's so intermelded. Steven so gave himself over at that stage of his life to Stanley's vision that, of course, it's a Steven Spielberg movie, but he wrote the script, Steven wrote the script. He didn't have somebody else write the script. He had to write the script because there was no other interlocker that could function between those two brains.

So I think that when you look at everything I've been talking about, which is collaboration and where does it break down, there's the prime example of that I was on a movie that was already a duality at its center, and one that's known for his mind and one that is known for his heart. One is known for his pessimism and one is known for his optimism, and where do those two come together? And yet it was the one who's known for his pessimism who designed in the fourth act in order to get to where he needed to go, which is to be able to dream. And I think that's fascinating. I love that stuff, because it's like working on a Beatles album, right? I mean, when you think about the Lennon-McCartney and the rest to be able to—at least from my point of view and my age, growing up, it was like you were so aware that there was a coming together of entities and elements that you could distinguish, but they always served each other's function.

And then even when they started to drift apart and not—there was frictions, and then

albums that were here, here, here, and here, and eclectic and all of that, but you knew it was human. It just felt—it just emanated individuals getting along, not getting along, but still creating at every point in that equation. And as an artist, I just have never seen anything top that. That's just that collaborative eclectic sense of my generation, what I got turned on to, and yet it wasn't a didactic like, "This is the better political system of people all getting together," and then you go, "Yeah, well, what about greed? And what about this?"

COLLINGS:

No, it was a real beginning of the sort of juxtaposition of all kinds of philosophies, foods, points of view.

CARTER:

Well, then people started traveling and going on journeys, so then they came back with cappuccino machines, they came back with brown rice, they came back with Eastern religion, they came back with various things that they found out in the world, tea. I mean, there was English Breakfast tea and maybe some Darjeeling now and again, and now there's how many teas, you know? And then there's even things where you would speculate on the whole notion that what you are seeing is not the full reality and that there is something beyond it that might be influencing, and it was partly because of, I think, marijuana and various psychedelic drugs, but it fit together with something that was creating openings when everything seemed like to be closing in. And now we have that a little bit again where things are closing in on—and what the reaction is, I don't know what it's going to be.

COLLINGS:

Sometimes people speak of a generation in a particular field. Do you feel that you are one of a generation of people in production design or other aspects of the arts in the industry—

CARTER:

Very definitely.

COLLINGS:

—that have also shared these perspectives?

CARTER:

Not as much—I'm one of the people who likes to share that perspective, and in a very kind of open, non-competitive way. Particularly with the guy that I was talking about, Dennis Gassner, we've made it a point—we had both had mentors who were very close, but competitive and never really talked, so we've made it a point in the last ten years to talk a lot. In fact, we even record our conversations because we're really into that we are doing what are mentors couldn't do, which is to share and to be aware of this sort of generational thing.

But I also make a point of it with many of my colleagues to talk along these levels, and then particularly now when it's becoming so apparent, because there's so many people who are now maybe not even working that much anymore, so their life is wrapped up in a kind of—that was their career. But all of us are getting to that point, and I think it's just a reflection on who were we, who are we, and what was the body of work, what did it look like, and then what were the common points of reference that we would have just never been able to verbalize at the time, but now we can see. And that's why I say I think the journey motif that I've been so fortunate to be a part of, because it reflected my life, but also there's many movies that are of that motif and the idea of seeking transcendence and looking for epiphanies, and then just the way the journey between men and women has played out.

I mean, I just think even as we look at some of the things that are happening now just generationally, things that people have been through, when they've been through them, it changes their point of view compared to those that are coming up and experiencing something. Well, I think we all look at it where you see something you

believed in and then you see where it went in the hands of somebody. I mean, you could be an Islamic preacher feeling that and then watch where it goes somewhere that's not what you would have wanted. You could be a feminist. You could be somebody who's for civil rights in a certain way and then it's coming back at you, used by somebody else in some way that was never the way you would have conceived of it. And it's history itself that creates things that are outside what you could have possibly seen as what you thought you were doing, and then it helps you to see what you really did.

COLLINGS:

Just like the A.I.'s. It took on a life of its own.

CARTER:

That's right. And I think that's part of what I think Stanley's genius was, was he cared tremendously, obviously, but he had a dispassionate kind of way in order to get at levels that, in any other way of looking at it, is tragic, what we're doing. I mean, Dr. Strangelove is just one incredible tragedy, but it's unbelievable where it goes in terms of some of its absurd humor, particularly when it gets to—and the audacity of how some of it is created that people don't even blink at, like just the idea that Peter Sellars is playing three different characters and you don't even think about it in the middle of something that's—but it's part of the underpinning that is letting you know that you can laugh through some of this because it is so absurd, and yet it's being played so straight. And then it's being sort of straight, you just can't—and then certain times, it breaks through.

There's this wit, like when it's George C. Scott talking about how his bombers are going to get through, and then you've got Peter Sellars grabbing his own arm so not to Sieg Heil. [laughter] The reason I bring it up is because there's a coolness to it that allows that humor to just bristle, and then you just—and you may not even fully laugh, but that's where the artistry of the director comes through in these ways that they make their movies, that it's not just by the route. And I think I got to be a part of that generation that came up that was liberated by those guys, and then to be

particularly with Steven, but even whether it was Bob or Jim or even J.J. Abrams now or Zack Snyder, they're making the movies that they want. I've never worked on a movie that was just for-hire; the director was just doing a job. They were instrumental in either writing or making this the movie they wanted to make, so they've always been an auteur in that process.

COLLINGS:

Exactly, this wonderful melding of the notion of the auteur, of the notion of independent cinema, and the real resources coming out of Hollywood industry, that's a real moment.

CARTER:

And the celebration of the individual artist's ability within a collective and collaborative thing to be supported in order to make these magnificent visions. It's not always about how big they are, it's just how rich they are with the dimensionality that they're able to express. In the beginning, I thought I came along a little bit late, but then I didn't realize I came along, for me, just at the perfect time, because each one of these junctures, whether it's the digital realm that I went into with Polar Express or A.I., Polar Express, Jurassic Park, Avatar, that dimensionalized the whole pursuit of product design in a way that I could never have imagined and just took me into so many ways—

COLLINGS:

Made some of these imaginative elements even more realizable.

CARTER:

And also for me personally, the things that were my deficits, which was I wasn't a carpenter, I wasn't an interior decorator, I wasn't a particularly good sketch artist for an environment, those were not my forte, and yet I was able to—then I wasn't hung

up on those things, so when it became digital, I didn't, like, become defensive and fight against digital, I went with it.

COLLINGS:

Oh, that's so true.

CARTER:

Yeah, and that allowed me to have a whole other half of the career. I even did something that no one else has followed suit on, which is amazing to me, but they didn't. I thought it was so obvious, but I just start partnering with people, and I would bring in someone younger who knew the other stuff better than I did technically, but I could provide the other part of it, and I would just give over half the credit.

COLLINGS:

So you would describe and collage. I think I read somewhere that you would do collages—

CARTER:

That's right.

COLLINGS:

—and just have a conversation about what—and they would perhaps be mocking things up as you speak.

CARTER:

Then as it's a thing, we just go through, it keeps progressing and progressing, and it's a part of the creative what is it to create if you're an artist on your own, and you go from one level to another level, and try something, another level. And each step, what's the system that then allows for that to accommodate you, and you learn the system enough so you know which buttons to push and what to watch out for when someone's saying one thing or going away off the—and a big part of what I learned to do in that way, like painting, is you prioritize what it is that you're putting your attention to and you're focusing on.

And I could make those decisions and I was given that latitude, and then I would use the budget limitations to my advantage, because that way, you could want everything, but they want it for a certain price, I'd start to help them prioritize it, which actually helped me to then focus on the things I wanted to focus on. And if they said, "Well, no, I disagree. Put the effort here," at least I'm getting that direction and it's direct, so then I can do that. Sometimes it gets hard because limitations can be problematic, but mostly, at least from my experience, they haven't been. And then the few times when it's just blown out the other way, it's not been gluttonous and it worked out. I mean, Avatar expanded way beyond its thing, but it all worked out and it wasn't just like a gluttonous thing where everybody went, "What the hell. This is just a big bloated lead balloon, a lead zeppelin." [laughter]

COLLINGS:

So you would be kind of brainstorming and communicating your ideas to the digital artist.

CARTER:

Right.

COLLINGS:

And I presume at a certain point, they would be reflecting things back to you that—

CARTER:

Oh, sure, sure.

COLLINGS:

—that would start shaping your ideas in a more digital fashion.

CARTER:

Oh, absolutely. And also what are they good at, what are they not good at, how to get the reference point so that what they do is good, particularly in the early years. But one of the amazing things is to realize that just because you can do something precocious—well, the thing I always say about the digital realm is the good news is you can do anything you want, everything. The bad news is you have to do everything. You have to create everything, so the sun, the leaves, the dah, the dah, the dah. So then what happens if you've got all these people, they're all doing their best. That means like if you were God and you have to manage, "Okay, that's enough on the leaves over there. It's okay. On the fire, I got it. The smoke, okay. We're doing some human beings over here, and we really need some focus on this. That's really cool and I hear you, but the rapids, as cool as they are, they're not a whole—let's move over to something else now." And the reason is because people in their segmented things just obsess, and then even if it comes to budget, they'll protect their domain like a bureaucracy to get to do stuff, "Well, if want it to look good—."

COLLINGS:

"If you did want it to look good."

CARTER:

Yeah. And then so Zemeckis will say, “Well, what if I don’t want to see it all, I just want to see the smoke of the fire? How much do I save?” And I’ll, “Motherfucker,” meaning don’t fuck with me, because the people would do that. You know, “Well, if you want it to look like anything—,” and they’re kind of like, in the middle of his movie, telling him what he should or shouldn’t have, and that’s an art to that. I do it all the time, but I don’t do it like that, and some of those computer people, they don’t have the greatest social—

COLLINGS:

So that’s a whole culture then.

CARTER:

Yeah. And then you catch them lying and just padding their own little thing. It just was amazing in the beginning, because he’s a very bright guy, and all these directors, they know what the parameters are of what it takes to get their shots and their days accomplished, so they’ve learned to adapt to the system of moviemaking and all the people it takes to make a movie. For Bob, it became funny, because by Castaway, he’s going, “I’ve got a guy and a volleyball, and I’ve got 150 people and an armada of ships to be out on this island. I just can’t take this. I’m at a crossroads with one guy at the end of a movie, and I’ve got to deal with fourteen trucks that are back here that if I want to turn around, then I have to have them all move. I just can’t do this anymore. I just want it simple.”

So that’s when I went into the digital realm and the motion captures, it was all going to be simple. And all that he did was he replaced all those Teamsters with computer nerds. In fact, you could even tell the same joke in relationship—the old joke about Teamsters, who really actually work incredibly hard, because they have to wake up so early, get all those trucks into impossible situations, be there at the end, move those trucks, and have them be at the next place early in the morning. It’s not so easy, but in the middle of the day, there’s not a lot for them to do. The joke says you’ll see some

teamster looking down and he sees these ants and he says, “Goddamn ants. They’ve been following me around all day,” meaning he’s not doing a lot of moving, right? [laughter] So, same thing can be said of computer nerds. They just go, they sit at their terminals, and they got their Star Wars things or they got their Star Trek things, and they won’t even talk to each other, those people.

And if you ask if you talked to so-and-so about something, they go, “Well, I sent them an email or texted them.” But text, at least you get the response usually right away, but it’s like you don’t know. And then now even those people are the older guard, and so when I talk to some of them—I was talking to this young guy who was a really whiz kid twenty years ago, and he’s wondering where he should—now he’s, like, about fifty, and which direction to go with things, which is around when I was hitting, like, the A.I. level, and what direction do you go. And I just was kind of commiserating with—like, he’s not making this up. You were a young gunslinger, you came in, and now you’re not, and someone else is coming up behind you, and how are you going to finesse that? It’s the fifty-year-old juncture. Then you get further into it when you hit the post-sixty-five, it’s a whole other—you’re sanctioned as old, meaning once you get Medicare, the federal government knows it.

COLLINGS:

Yeah, but you have all this experience that you’re bringing.

CARTER:

That’s the good news. You just don’t have quite the same energy.

COLLINGS:

But if everything’s changing, then how valuable is the experience?

CARTER:

Yeah. I probably should stop now only just because I have to go somewhere, but took an interesting turn.

COLLINGS:

Yes.

CARTER:

I hope it's of value to whatever your point of view on all this is, because you're very nice to be so open-minded.

COLLINGS:

Well, I think it's wonderful to hear your point of view.

CARTER:

Oh, good. Okay.

COLLINGS:

Let me turn this off.

[End of January 12, 2018 interview]

Session Three (February 1, 2018)

COLLINGS:

So we're on, and today is February 1st, 2018, Jane Collings interviewing Rick Carter at YRL, and you were just saying that you are working on exhibits for the new museum, and one of the issues that you're focusing on is the changing production lines. So how are you seeing that?

CARTER:

Well, it's the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences that finally has found a place to create a museum, and so it's at the old May Company at Fairfax and Wilshire. It goes chronologically through the sort of inception of cinema back in the 1800s, late 1800s, with magic lanterns and zoetropes and the different spectacle things, and it moves through the Lumière brothers and Méliès and that of kind duality between the types of cinema that they expressed all the way through the early story films, as they were called, so the whole idea of the medium could create an actual story, not just a spectacle, and then into the early Expressionism often fueled by the German Expressionists in the teens and early twenties in silent movies, leading into the era where the industry started to coagulate and come together, especially in Los Angeles, and the Academy was born out of that, and that's all the silent-era stars of Chaplin and Fairbanks and Mary Pickford and Lon Chaney and that whole group.

It also explores those that were left out of the dream that have had kind of a more outsider perspective, particularly in the early years of cinema. So in the Dream Factory era, which is essentially from the early thirties through the sixties, where the studio systems were the strongest, one of the things that they did is they created is a production idea and sort of the assembly line for the movie productions and all the different crafts that partake in that. So this chart here showing the sort of breakdown at that point, it, in a sense, has the production authority, and it reaches out to the story. It's funny, under the story you have the screenplay, of course, and then on the cast you have the stars, and right in the center is the art director, then you have production and post-production.

And this is all under the director and the producer, but it puts the art department right at the center of the production, and very much, because most everything that was created in those days was a physical set build. They didn't go on locations very often, nor did they have very elaborate special effects, so that began to change in the seventies where the movies would either go out on the road and to locations, as my mentor took them, Richard Sylbert, with Chinatown and The Graduate, those kinds of movies.

Then the digital age kind of started hitting in the nineties, which is a part of the era I've been a part of, and the interesting thing for me on, I suppose, both a very real pragmatic level and conceptual level is that the role of the art director/production designer has evolved. And one of the things is just the evolution from art director to production designer, because, for instance, it's still called the Art Directors Guild, which is what I'm a part of, because they love that name. I mean, that's why I got into it, because of the word "art" in it, and you have an art and you're directing art, what could be better? Just those two words.

But production design became the sought-after title once Cameron Menzies, who did Gone with the Wind, created that paradigm in a movie, which is sort of the penultimate of being at the center of the movie and how it's created as a production, even when directors came and went, for instance, on Gone with the Wind. So that became what I would say is a paradigm in people's minds, but in practice, it rarely occurred, and it was actually abused tremendously by some production designers such as Cedric Gibbons, who became the top production designer at MGM, and he put his name on every single movie that came out. So he has, like, twenty Academy Award nominations, six or seven Oscars, and he even supposedly designed the Oscar, but what he ever actually did is really in question, whereas Cameron Menzies, you can at least see the illustrations that he created.

So the evolution of the production designer out of art director as the top sort of visualist of the movie other than the director, of course, has evolved. It also evolved a lot because it changed methodologies from just sets on the stage or the back lot, as Cameron Menzies did, where all those movies in the fifties and early sixties, to then movies out on the street in locations where sometimes they wouldn't even need a production designer. They'd just get a set decorator to come and dress an existing

place. And then with special effects coming back in the late seventies with Jaws and Star Wars and Close Encounters and those kinds of movies that became the blockbuster cycle that we're still in, especially with the corporations now fueling them—and, of course, the budgets have grown—the production designers are still at the center of it, but there was a point where it was very much, I think in the late 1990s, where it was really under question as to what that role was, given the fact that the visual effects supervisors had such an advanced technology with the computers that were coming in, making the imagery, so they really, I thought, could probably usurp the production designers' purview, for the most part.

But it was interesting, because they didn't. They did not actually conceptually move into that zone, and that zone is kind of an artistic zone. There was like a blank canvas that you have to imagine what it could be, not just how to realize what it already is. There's different types of visualizations in a movie. One is the what could it be? First of all, just what's the idea at all? That often is the purview of the writer and the director, is coming up with the idea. But often there's a visual idea that's needed, not just an illustration of an idea, like something that you say, well, that's what it is and that's how it's going to be manifest in the movie. And that's the idea. One of the movies I just recently did, The Force Awakens, and the major threat by the dark side is that they're going to take the light out of the sky or out of the star and then use it as a weapon. That came as a visualization, not as a plot point from the director or the—

COLLINGS:

It came as a visualization with you and your crew?

CARTER:

That's right. I asked the question, "What would actually scare you for real or metaphorically if the dark side was coming back? What would they do?" One of the older people who'd been on the first Star Wars, Dennis Muren, who was a visual effects supervisor, said, well, if they could take the light out of a star, that would be a great metaphor. And then we thought, well, how do we visualize that? But we ended

up doing it and turned it into a weapon that was used by the dark side in that is the main threatening force. So that's just an example, but—

COLLINGS:

Yeah, it's a great example.

CARTER:

—it's where you're not just illustrating an idea, you're coming up with a notion that performs a function in the movie fundamentally as to why you're watching those scenes unfold. But with the advent of the computer, conceptually that position was, I think, not under attack, just that the adaptation to it and not just be relegated to the idea that the production designers did physical sets and that's all. And I was very much at the center of that evolution because I had the first part of my life, and it was right up until the movie A.I., and with the advent of the computer coming in with the dinosaurs, it hadn't fully been utilized in the service of making worlds, but it was in the service of making characters or creatures.

So A.I. actually was an opportunity to take the very form that was evolving and put it into the content of the movie, and, in fact, the structure of the movie is the first third of the movie is a domestic drama set in the future with this robot being brought into the family, but it all happens in a house, and all the technology you see—there was very little technology, actually, that you ever seen in the movie other than the boy himself. And it was done as a fairy tale, so it wasn't trying to predict the future as much as say, "Here's what might happen in terms of the aspirations of an artificial intelligence as it relates to human beings." But the first part of that movie was structured literally—and I think Kubrick and Spielberg instinctively knew this, but they weren't necessarily addressing the technology when they projected the story. So what I mean by that is the first part, it was a domestic drama for the first forty minutes, fifty minutes of the movie. Then the boy is cast out into the world.

COLLINGS:

Right, into this forest.

CARTER:

And the forest. And then he goes to Rouge City, and then he goes to beyond the edge of where humans go with the water having submerged Manhattan to find his own maker. All of that part, even including then going down underneath the water, is a part of what I would call the road movie, you know, takes on the quest of identity has we had in the early seventies, who are you and how do you survive and what's your meaning of your life.

COLLINGS:

And it's also asking that question of cinema, too, as you have put it.

CARTER:

That's right. So what's interesting is as it's going on that road, it starts to evolve more and more in the sense that the worlds that it goes into are less and less capable of being created for real in the physical world, so that even Rouge City became actually one of the first shots ever where you had characters and a moving camera move in an environment that was digitally put in there later with the blue screen and all had the same parallaxing views that were shifting with the moving camera from that point of view. So we did a lot of what was then known as tracking, where the characters are in space, and then how that relates to the background, different than what we ended up doing later with Polar Express or Avatar where the entire characters and background are being simulated in a computer.

But in this case, the step was Rouge City was you're now going into the digital realm, which was, for me, fulfilling, and what Richard Sylbert has said about his progression, taking what he learned from Cameron Menzies about building sets on the back lot or in soundstages, and then he integrated the real-life world of locations into the overall

design. There still was some stage sets. Then I was going into this dimension where there'd be stage sets, as we had on A.I.—we built those at Warner Brothers, a number of stages there—and then going out a little bit into location in Oregon and in the forest, and also building locations in huge environments, like at the Spruce Goose Dome for the Flesh Fair and the forest. Those were all built inside because they were night scenes, and we built huge exteriors, but inside of a huge dome.

And now once he went into the water and he was in this kind of CG water world, then the interesting thing was the progression moving forward was, well, 2,000 years are going to elapse, and that was all digital at that point. So every single thing that you saw for the next three or four minutes moving into the ice was all a digital recreation until we started integrating the live-action David back into those worlds once he was in the ice world and then was brought back into his home, and then that was an enhanced version of the physical.

So it was kind of coming back together and being a hybrid again for the end. But I found it to be very much like what I referred to earlier, I think, some of the way The Beatles imagined—or at least the way I imagined what The Beatles stimulated in me, which is this kind of expansive form of entertainment on a questing kind of theme, sort of like a day in the life where you start with something that seems almost tangible, becomes more and more surreal once you realize that you're caught, in that particular moment, in between—in form, the question you're being asked is can you empathize with this artificial being who's so close to a human being, but reminds you every once in a while that this is an artificial being.

So the very thing that the parents, particularly the mother, Monica, is being asked to regard in relationship to this new surrogate son is the same thing being asked of the audience: can you empathize and relate to this kid's journey when he's not really a real boy? But then he aspires to be a real boy, fights for his life. How can you not then give him that regard? And I found that fascinating. I mean, I could, but I think that was one of the troubles that the movie had with a wide audience, was partially just because it was asking you to make a jump that maybe people are not entirely comfortable making with who they empathize with.

COLLINGS:

Well, I love the movie because it's so self-reflexive, and structurally-- It is structurally what it is saying, and that's something very unusual.

CARTER:

I look for that, too, and it's been one of the—and I think that was the movie that was the penultimate of my experience. Maybe Avatar also has that as well, but I think that because of Stanley Kubrick's involvement in the inception of it, the self-reflectiveness of making a movie about what you're making the movie about and knowing it, even in a slightly cool way, is one of the things that drew me to it so strongly, because I could see it was a dance between that self-awareness and the heart that only wants what it wants and does not really want to be aware of itself because then it gets in the way of the feelings that the heart wants, but at the same time, at the center of it it's a heart driving it, but then you're questioning whether the heart is real in terms of being human.

It comes from us, and then it asks that very real question, is what we create us? And in some ways, there's no way that it isn't, but then again, it's not because it's not—even if we're—I mean, it's like one step removed, because if God or whatever form of whatever created us, and then we create, someone can say—and it's a fundamental argument or debate, which is anything we create is us, and it's in the image of whatever begat us in whatever form you put that. Or are we the turning point at which it no longer is of what was created, which is us, and it's our creation? I would say that when you're an artist, there's a lot of times when you can't tell the difference as to whether you're the creator or the creation is flowing through you as the medium in order to get created in this next form. And I've even joked to myself that we as humans create, but we're amateurs. We're not professionals, because that's procreation.

COLLINGS:

That's true, yeah.

CARTER:

But all those kinds of notions are actually at work in that movie, and the physicality of the movie was substantial in the sense that we took over six—

COLLINGS:

Yeah, talk about that. You're talking about the second part of the movie in the Spruce Goose Dome.

CARTER:

Well, even the first part, I would say. We built the apartment, and one of the themes that we had, some of which came from Kubrick's initial explorations with the illustrator, Chris Baker, that I picked up on and I went further with, which was the motif of the circles and kind of—

COLLINGS:

Yes, the home is circular.

CARTER:

Yeah, like a half circle, and the Flesh Fair's circular, the pit, the moon, the Ferris wheel.

COLLINGS:

Even that very predominant back wheel of the little machine, car machine.

CARTER:

Exactly. So that there was a kind of a moving—Dr. No's insignia. Everything, when we could, we put the circle in—to me, it was like Olympic rings intersecting, because it wasn't so much that they were all—they seemed to be almost equal parts in a journey that were linked. There'd be some form of a transition from one to the next. So we built this sort of half-circle, quite large interior set on Stage 16 at Warner Bros. It's the same stage where we'd done the Jurassic Park main road part with the T. rex coming out and trashing the car and terrorizing the kids. It was also the same place that we built the ship for Goonies. So I always have a nice feeling about that stage—

COLLINGS:

Is that right?

CARTER:

Well, there's a way that you can anthropomorphize almost anything, in a way, if it becomes a place that you're used to going and having an experience, and particularly if it's with a lot of people, so that you're walking into a big space and there's nothing there other than the bones of the building, and within it you are imagining, and with a lot of people figuring it out, you actually watch something be created. And then in a very Buddhist kind of impermanent way, it all gets destroyed and it's only there either in a photograph that was taken or it's in the film in whatever way it was shot.

But it's very different than the feeling of the physicality of having something there that you've had a part in the construction, if it's a pirate ship or it's a T. rex or it's that house. There's certain stages that I've had numerous sets on, many at Universal, but that I have a feeling about the stage literally, because it's like having a magic box that you get to fill with imagination, and you go check on it and watch you thing and you

tweak it as it goes together. I mean, it's one of the real joys of being a production designer, art director, is to be responsible for so much coming together, and it's one of the things that when you do the motion capture, you don't have that. So anyway, we built that on one of the stages. We built the Dr.—what's his name?

COLLINGS:

Johnson?

CARTER:

Hobby, his place at another—

COLLINGS:

That's a very interesting studio that he has. It's very nineteenth century early medicine—

CARTER:

That's exactly right. What we did is instead of going forward trying to project in a kind of sterile way maybe what the future would be, and particularly because Steven was back-to-back going to do Minority Report, which has lots of predictions about the future and its technology. It permeates the whole movie, whereas ours was really about, I thought, more of a nineteenth century fairy tale, and so the science that you see is very rudimentary, not that it's test tubes, but the dressing of it, the feeling of it, the woodwork, the windows, all of it feels like it's a bit retro.

COLLINGS:

Right. And you've got this gathering of—

CARTER:

All the Davids.

COLLINGS:

—students. Oh, in the beginning, yeah, and all of those.

CARTER:

So, for me, what it was, of course, was it was Geppetto's workshop, you know, meaning that's why you saw all the dolls. Those were all the Pinocchios, but it's just that the one Pinocchio found out that he wasn't the only one, right? And to make that very—they're not behind glass cases and they're not in some kind of foggy thing with some weird—

COLLINGS:

Some kind of vapor or something.

CARTER:

Yeah, or just very architecturally designed just for that. It's more like he made then, and then as he made them, he—

COLLINGS:

Stuck them up on a—

CARTER:

—hung them up. And they were all there as part of his grief, really, because it was all based upon a loss of his own child that he was replicating. So keeping the environments, even the place where they lived, it was not about it being so much futuristic as it was, it was kind of a little bit like the House of Tomorrow in Disneyland meets Frank Lloyd Wright, was the way I was thinking.

COLLINGS:

Yeah, I think that's a great way of putting it.

CARTER:

I wanted to make it warm, and particularly because if the Earth is flooded, then there's a lot of water, and I just felt like greenery would be actually in a lot of places. We don't really see out the windows. I mean, I put obscure things on the windows, but that just helped so we weren't fighting the artificiality of backings all the time. Another circle, for instance, is just when David's sitting at that bed when his mother or when the robot comes at the very end. There's just this big circular window, which we just sort of put into the motif, anytime we could, something that was just kind of big in its simplicity, which was the circle. So then the next part, as I said, on the journey we went down to the Spruce Goose, which is an enormous space—I can't remember. Whereas a normal huge stage is 200 feet long, this was 500 feet by 200-and-something feet or 300 feet of usable space in a circular space, so we could do the whole Flesh Fair inside. On all those scenes, it wasn't outside at night, which with a little boy, that's very problematic as an actor. You just can't do it.

COLLINGS:

Oh, that's interesting. Yeah, of course. That makes sense.

CARTER:

Just the work restrictions. Then all the forest that we were in, not in daylight, but once it got into night, that was all on stage.

COLLINGS:

That's a very deep, dark forest.

CARTER:

And kind of like Snow White, right? I mean, it's like that kind of threatening and moody, and that's where the pit with all the robot parts is, and then the big moon rises on the—

COLLINGS:

That is an astonishing machine.

CARTER:

The moon machine?

COLLINGS:

Yeah.

CARTER:

Well, I think that's a perfect Kubrickian idea, where you see something and it's a natural occurrence, supposedly, like a moon rising, and then the moon rising becomes

a threat because it's actually a machine with an intent, and the intent is bad against you. Even though you're a robot, you're now relating to it that it's another level of machine, but it is being commandeered by a human. So the allegiances are really quite interlaced with not confusion so much as what side are you on. The side that you're on is threatening the boy and the other domestic robots is actually us, but it's now threatening something that we maybe value.

Now, that same theme, of course, is in Avatar, because we become the bad guys, our whole species, compared to where our human sentiments as a person in the audience take us. In fact, I would even say, now that I'm thinking about it, the ending is very close to the same also, which is that even though in Avatar it's Jake turning sides and switching to this other—if it was robots, he would have become a robot, if he was a Na'vi, which is another form of being, then he's taking that. But, in fact, what he's doing is he's embracing the other, which in this case is not just the other on Pandora, it's the whole digital form of creation.

So the embracing of that in form is the same as what's happening in the content, whereas in A.I. what's happening is you're emoting with David, and when he dreams at the end and gets his life's dream accomplished by having a perfect day with his mother, you're with his sentiments, and yet you've been reminded over and over and over again he's not human, and that which is human, which was the mother, is passing away and gone, so you're only left with him and then that little toy robot, Teddy.

So I think there's probably, at some point, something to be said for this transition that the filmmakers are reacting to in terms of thematics, whether the movies are successful or not, how they integrate something that's subconscious that relates to—I would say it's an age-old issue, but it's humans and that which they begat artificially. And then that can be a robot or it could be a half-bionic child, artificial insemination, I mean any form of that which is being aided or even caused by or created by something that we create. It's one step removed, right?

COLLINGS:

Yes.

CARTER:

So I think subjectively as we embrace as artists its power, we're also sometimes reflecting our own fears. Jim Cameron would claim, I'm sure, that what he's doing is he's utilizing all of that in order to create cautionary tales for our own humanity, the limitations and what are we doing. At the same time, by embracing that form, he's potentially giving it even more power that he may or may not know its actual effect on us. That's not to say it's a deliberate conscious affect, but all you have to do is feel your—if you were to try to describe your relationship to your iPhone and somebody didn't know what it was, they would, I think, say that there was a kind of a dependency that borders on an addiction that you don't have control over, even though you're using it supposedly—or we are using it for what we perceive to be our intentions to accomplish things, and then the more that we can accomplish, the more that we partake of that drug or that addiction in order to accomplish more.

There's no way that I think we can be doing—I'm just spinning philosophically—that we can be involved that much in this type of an activity that was not here for us to do fifty years ago in the same way, not like this kind of intense—it's the casualness of it, it's the familiarity of it, it's even that which makes us feel like we are in control of it. And all it takes is what we're experiencing now to see when some aspects of that start to turn so that the very fundamentals of getting at something become impossible because the form itself, while making it democratic, it dilutes the ability to have a singular there there, so the values that you bring to it that you might even associate with fundamentals of human values start getting shifted, in some manner affected.

I can't tell what it is, but I think at its core it has to do with being able to focus, whether it's on a conversation with someone or another person. There's just this other presence that if I'm looking at you and I'm ten years younger, maybe, I'm just going to maybe have the phone out here, and I might even just glance and double-track and think that I'm paying just as much attention to you as I would if I wasn't doing that, which I'm not. But the point I'm making, I can imagine believing that I can double-track like that and there's no problem.

COLLINGS:

Well, it's also just the awareness of these vast crowds of people that you have at your disposal to consult on things, to weigh in—

CARTER:

Or be insulted by.

COLLINGS:

Be insulted by.

CARTER:

So they get your blood pressure going up and down over things that are not right in front of you at all. The question is, is it something that's any business, really, of yours in a normal—what we thought of as normal up till now—human identity.

COLLINGS:

Well, in Avatar, this vast group consciousness is viewed as something that can be channeled for the good, but perhaps that's optimistic. We don't know yet.

CARTER:

I would say that's very true, and I think that we are in the midst of something that we can almost know for sure is going to be considered historically with different perspective than what we have about it right now. I mean, we always are, but there's things moving so fast, and you read all the people that you want to, and nobody seems to be able to say, "I got it, and this is what we're looking at, and here's—." I mean, everybody's fighting very hard for something that I don't think I was even aware that

we were fighting for, but whatever that is, we're now fighting very hard. I don't just mean on the left or the right wing of the political spectrum. I mean on an identity level of how we identify who we are, whether it's by nation, race, ethnic, culture, global, these types of values of how we identify and that which is considered sometimes tribalism compared to something else, but then what's sustainable and how do we really live? Like, what differences have we really seen in our lifetimes?

So, going back all the way to the beginning of this interview, growing up in West Los Angeles, a child of Hollywood, going into the movie industry as a place of dreams to be fulfilled, progressing through it in the various forms that I've been able to, to have those stories all out there and reflective for me of my own journey, all of those things feel to me like of a time, and I'm even aware of that. It's not that it's coming to an end; it's coming to some form of not being what's really happening at the most vibrant part of what our culture or society is about. It doesn't mean everybody my age. I'm just saying personally I feel not so much a—what's the word? I have a perspective on things, but that perspective—it's interesting, because George Lucas said something to me, and he doesn't often talk like this, in metaphors, but when I was starting The Force Awakens, he said—as he was sort of handing it over, and sort of ambivalent about handing the whole thing over, but he said as he's gotten older, it's like the difference between being young and seeing with binoculars everything up close that it's bringing, and if you take the binoculars and you flip them the other way, it pushes everything away.

Now, on one hand, you can say that that's giving your more perspective because you've got some distance between the raw emotions and passions that you have and then the thing that you're engaging or not engaging, but the other part is there's just a distance, and whether you can figure it out or not—and, of course, the other thing is to not feel like because things have changed, that categorically that means it's for the worse or that the bitterness that could happen to people and you see happen all the time, particularly when you stop at the end of things and you go—a lot of people can take that harness off and go, "I feel freer now not to have to do all that."

But that's not my relationship to my work. My work has always been a good place to go, and it's not that it isn't, it's just that as I get older, my perspective is shifting, some of these issues about technology, about focus, and just the stories that we tell with movies and the way we tell them and how that evolves, it's a philosophical point of

view not because it's a young person's sport to be philosophical and think you're going to surf some wave that you're going to see all the way to the end of your life and then you're the one who got it, you've found a philosophy and you could surf that. It's more like philosophy comes because there are so many questions, even after you've been in and doing and you think you found some forms that give you some criteria to look at things, so even when we're talking about this duality that I've talked about or this duality now that I'm presenting with the technology and the more practical side of physical filmmaking.

And those are just small waves, really, in what the levels are that this expression is, because what form cinema takes, the communal experience of going to a theater or what you see on a small screen or how you view your dreams, and just because they're smaller doesn't mean that they're not big. It's just that in the art direction realm, going back to this chart, the reason that art director's put there is because in order to realize these dreams, somebody pretty important has to be at the center in the sense that they hold a lot of responsibility to making the visualization process, which is being recorded by the camera, strong and productive, and in a production setting, making it such that it actually performs what it's supposed to for the people at the top and for the audience.

So I take a lot of pride in that, having been a steward of this epoch of it, but I'm very much aware that it's hitting that point where—I don't know how to put it. You're so aware that you're not inventing the wheel when you get older, how many people have been there before you in this stage of life. If it's my mother, she'd say aging's not for sissies. [laughter] There's lots to be read into even that line just in terms of what's a sissy, what I grew up with, or just any of those ideas. But as I hit it, then it becomes a whole new thing for me, even though it's literally age-old. So some of these perspectives on the movies, they're philosophical because that's the only way I can really regard them, because I can talk about all the specifics, theoretically I can talk about them, but I'm so not interested in them anymore because they sound like as though I was a craftsman trying to explain how a nail and a hammer work together, and you see it everywhere you look, and you're amazed that it works, and that somebody who really can maybe show you—and then how they learn to hit the hammer a certain way and not have to hit it five times, and how to make an assembly-line version, and all those things that people do with their lives to make their work lives more efficient or better or more meaningful.

But at this stage, it's very hard to get that into that. When I was younger, I could do that. When people interview me now—because they'll never know. They just can't know. "So what does a production designer do?" They have to ask that question, but at least they can ask the question because they've got a visual in front of them that they think relates to what I'm doing. If I'm an editor, they have no idea. They can't possibly look at a bad edit, you know? They can only know—what they see is what they get, and that it either worked or it didn't. They don't even know there was the edit to begin with, right? And then the musical score, that's kind of—if you can extrapolate it, maybe you can say, "I like that music," but did it fit the movie? Sound effects, you can't even possibly hear them, other than a few things—

COLLINGS:

Other than what they were.

CARTER:

I mean, these parts of the movie process are so intangible for people when they're perceiving their dreams in this form that it's truly—and even the Academy that tries to honor the excellence is swept up in whether the movie works overall, because if it doesn't—any set that's constructed, if you got cheesy or cheap or shallow or stupid things going on in front of it, looks shallow, stupid, cheesy. I mean, it just can't escape that. Every once in a while, you're in a movie and go, "Well, the acting wasn't so great and the story I'm not sure, but I really like the way it looked and felt," but that's a rarity, and usually—

COLLINGS:

I feel that way about The Man in the High Castle. I mean, the story is fine and everything, but the sets are—it's the sets. It is the set.

CARTER:

So that that's what's drawing you in to even being there to watch at all. And that's good, as long as you stay with it and you think that that will survive. I found that, in general, most people cannot regard art direction or production design in that way and let it sustain them for very long. I would say twenty minutes usually is—because you're not emotionally engaged with what's going on, either the story or the characters. And secondarily, you find yourself admiring it, which is different than believing it and just being submerged, which is when—that's why two hours can go by in a movie when you're just in it, and you maybe note that, "Ooh, that's—," but now you're in it. "Oh, look, that—," now you're in it.

COLLINGS:

"Oh, that wallpaper is fantastic. It's perfect."

CARTER:

But if you're kind of going, "I can't wait for the next wallpaper," then you're just that kind of a person, but you're in a real small minority. And I'm not the type, also, that goes back and looks at my own work, the things I've been involved with, and say, "Oh, I wish I'd done this," or, "I could have done that." It's too consuming making it happen for the first—

COLLINGS:

Consuming.

CARTER:

Consuming. And my ability just to create it with a group of people at all is just too overwhelming to say, "Well, I should have done this." Every once in a while, I'll say, "Well, maybe that movie could have been shorter and maybe there could have been

some scenes taken out and it wouldn't have missed that maybe overall," but then again, now I'm just getting into someone else's part in it, as though someone would say to me, "Well, wouldn't it have been better if," blah, blah, blah, "you picked another color here or did that?" So it's the gestalt, the overall of the whole movie is so overwhelmingly the experience that when we pick it apart, even in this, I would hope that anything that comes out of anybody listening to this is just that there's a type of thinking that goes into what you've seen that may not be evident when you're just looking at it on its surface because you can't see it, but then maybe if somebody illuminates that, then you say, "Oh, they were thinking about this, and that's interesting, that interpretation." But usually not in the middle of it, more in a, I would think—I'm not going to say academic-only setting, but certainly to the extent that somebody is studying the subject for whatever purpose, and just the way with art sometimes when you learn something was created for a certain purpose, and then you go, "Oh, look at that. Now I see it. I couldn't see it before."

You can be attracted to a movie or a painting and go, "I'm just attracted to that, even though I don't know the subject matter. I don't know who's in it and what's it about." Then maybe you find out, "Oh, that's Christ and Mary Magdalene. Oh, that's interesting." So what is the story that that is now conveying about those two? Are they intimate? Is there a suggestion of that? Is that part of what's risqué or is that just something that's heartfelt? And is it commissioned by someone who maybe didn't want to hang it because it was too provocative in that sense? Then it adds something to the regard of the work, so I think that's kind of what I would think anything along these lines does. And then maybe just to try to imagine it, it's, again, that thing of at certain time periods, a certain body of work was created in a certain place by certain people who were thinking a certain way, not all the same, but they were of a generation.

COLLINGS:

Well, that sort of brings me back—what you said about this almost Buddhist practice of going into a large soundstage and all of these people putting this world together and then having it be dismantled and be gone, so here we have A.I. where, of course, that happens, and in any movie, that happens. And then in the last scene, there's that moment, the day that you experience, and then that's gone. So, really, all of that

mirrors the experience of even going and seeing a film and living within this world, and then you walk outside and it's all gone, so there's this construction and destruction even within your own mind. But then in the case of A.I., you've got David, who was going to presumably outlive this day, and now films are not on nitrate, they're not even on film, they're digital, they won't decompose, they won't get acid syndrome, they're just going to be migrated forward in whatever digital format forever, presumably.

CARTER:

Well, David then, in a sense, is the medium, right? He's the embodiment and the metaphor for the medium itself, and no matter in whose hands or in what form, lives on beyond us and is those people in the future's best version or access point to what begat them, but more distantly.

COLLINGS:

And the aliens are even having that kind of experience with David.

CARTER:

And they're not even aliens, which is the very interesting ambivalent thing, because in designing them, what does a future robot look like? And it ended up, for Steven, wanting to look like that, which looks a lot like his aliens, right, which tells you that his aliens are not aliens, meaning they are from somewhere else, as these creatures are from somewhere else in our imaginations, and they're metaphors for an other. But saying they're from another planet or saying they are artificial intelligence is, in fact, one and the same, which is why the ambivalence between them being aliens or just robots that have been begat by us is an absolute mystery, ambivalent place, which I think is great, because it ends up being unable, in a sense, to predict anything that is that clear as to what that other might be.

But you know it when you see it, and you can call it whatever you want to call it, but that's what it is. It's other and it's beyond us and it has a relationship to us that's

not—it's actually, in this particular case, not malevolent, although if you look at Spielberg's work, you could also see, let's say, in War of the Worlds, a design for a malevolent version that you can easily imagine coexisting with the aliens that you see in Close Encounters or the robots that you see in A.I. as though that's all part of some otherness that is in existence, but really it's only in existence in our subconscious version of how do you invoke "other," right? And I think that starts to, I think, define something that I don't know what it is, but I can tell that it's defining something about how we're thinking now and the fact that these filmmakers could put out this type of imagery and have it be received not always perfectly or great, but—

COLLINGS:

But be understood.

CARTER:

But to be understood, or the way it's not understood, still potentially provocative in its time, thus it has a language. That's why when you look back, you see the epochs and what they were doing. Like, Byzantine perspective, what is that? Right? But we can also begin to go, "One-point perspective, I see what they're going after, but what is that all about?" as compared to even David Hockney's latest work, which is multiple points of perspective, and then it starts to look sort of like some things in the past before they had that point of reference of a singular point of view capturing a moment, which often is really just the influence of the camera saying we can imagine catching a moment, as opposed to pictures before, paintings before, which are not capturing any moment in time, that's a whole series of things. In the Sistine Chapel, you see Adam and Eve with the apple and the serpent, and you see them leaving in the same frame, so it tells you that story.

Now, when you're doing movies, even though you seemingly are capturing one moment at a time, one snapshot that leads to the next moment, they also do play with time in ways, not just in the most literal way, like saying, "We're going to take you into the past," or we're going to do what Chris Nolan does, which is to show you intercutting three different timeframes, like a whole day, an hour, like, a week.

Dunkirk does that. It intercuts three stories, but they're all being told in a different timeframe, but it all holds together. You can track that. Where I'm going with this is to say there's so many subjective moments being created in cinema when they edit it together that it starts to reflect how we perceive ourselves and time and our dreams, which is different than what came before, and it'll be very different from what comes after, and it will only be seeable once you see far enough into the future to look back on it and say, "Ah, that's why they were doing it that way. They needed to do this."

COLLINGS:

It very much describes the cultural sense of how time works, how one perceives reality, which is now very fragmented, and there's a lot of simultaneity in terms of attention, as you were describing before.

CARTER:

And let's just say somebody in the future was listening to this, so we're addressing that person and saying for some reason, we think it's very fragmented right now compared to something that we perceived before. And then they're listening to us and going, "You think that's fragmented?" Or, "Yeah, it sounds like you're all over the place." I don't know which it'll be from whatever their perspective is.

COLLINGS:

Well, it's going to depend on what happens in terms of energy, I suppose, because everything that we're talking about requires enormous amounts of energy.

CARTER:

That's right. See, but even that, we think we're so smart because we think we're now regarding energy as an issue, and that somehow that puts us—

COLLINGS:

Might be nothing.

CARTER:

It might not only be nothing, it might just be the tip of the iceberg of something that was only representing itself or making it seeable, just like artificial intelligence is, like as though—I'm trying to think of what it would be like, but I can imagine—and even while making A.I., it was the most philosophical—even if Avatar plays that out, it's much simpler in its dynamic as compared to—it doesn't then bring in the intimacy of mother's love and child rivalry.

COLLINGS:

And the relationship between the audience and the film. I mean, you could say that it's the audience that activates David and keeps David alive, and, in fact, that's what happens in every film.

CARTER:

Yeah. But it's being, in a sense, commented on while it's happening, and it's almost like with Kubrick having Spielberg doing it and being not there, he no longer carries the responsibility of being intelligible or approved of in a certain way, so the story that Steven was able to tell is being guided the best he can by just giving over to what he thinks Stanley would have done or liked and not necessarily judge it too much. That's why I think he had to be the one to write the screenplay. I mean, he took it on as an absolute dialogue believing in what Stanley had laid out, but I think Stanley was getting to a point where he was free of making a movie that was catering to an audience as much as it was a—it's like Goya at the end of his life. Goya was not painting for the court anymore. He wasn't painting things that he probably thought would even survive, because they were just dark paintings with rags, and very, very, very troubled by the Civil War and humanity, and Disasters of War. That's not to say

that A.I. is only negative, because it obviously offers this kind of glimmer of emotional truth about love, and particularly a mother's love.

COLLINGS:

But is that what Spielberg brought to it?

CARTER:

No, I think it was inherent in the story. I mean, I don't think you can tell the story, which was all laid out by Stanley, without the—I think he emotionalized the relationships in the acting and what performances he wanted to see out of them, but the story arc was always about you love your mother unconditionally, and she, for reasons that we as humans in the audience can perceive, has to let you go because you're—David doesn't know that he's acting out of his own jealous instincts in relationship to his brother Martin, or his half-brother, whatever form of brother he is, but the very fact that he is acting at all in relationship to the brother who is jealous means that he's partaking now in something that ends up, unbeknownst to him, to be life-threatening to the mother. I mean, he certainly could poke her eye out, if nothing else, with the scissors. So then it's like this has gone too far. I can't tell you who's at fault, what the thing is, but there's the son, he's human, we can deal with that, but we don't know what this means.

COLLINGS:

Right. It could turn into a malevolent being just like Dr. Johnson-Johnson's—

CARTER:

That's right. We don't even know that that's like—it's not the intent, even. It doesn't matter. It's just not human, so it's not going to have the same parameters of even punishment, so take it back to its maker and—it's like in Woody Allen's Sleeper. Take its head off and replace it or something. Upgrade the model. But she can't do

that because she realizes that she will literally be destroying it, so she just says, "Don't go that way. Go that way, and that's all I can do." That's a wrenching scene of, like, a mother who does love him but, both for his own good and her own good, has to separate, and so the trauma of—and for him, he has no point of reference as to—other than the budding emotions of, "I'm real, Teddy's not." He knows he can't criticize Martin inherently for his own survival, but he can criticize that he's not a Teddy. So that's all Stanley.

Then put him out into the journey and the spare parts and the moon rising and the Flesh Fair and Rouge City and finding Dr. No and going to Manhattan and finding your maker and then finding out that you're not special and then just going into your subconscious underneath and going to just being taken wherever you can go because you no nothing other than being driven by some forces way bigger, and what are those forces that are taking him? See, we're no longer watching him; we are him. Because, I mean, all that happens is he goes in the water and a bunch of fish come around, and it's like the subconscious just, like, just guide him. They guide him where he needs to go at that point, right? As far as he can get on his own is just ask the single question or ask the demand of this figure, which is, "You're the one who can make me a real boy." It's like a roadmap that's inescapable the way it was laid out.

You could be emotionalized and reinterpreted a million different ways, but what he laid out there was so fundamental in its expansiveness, and that everybody wanted it to kind of, like, conform, but I don't think Stanley was conforming to anything, because he was already gone. And so now if you're going to make the movie, you're making it from his point of view for his point of view, which is no longer contained in a three-act structure. Now you're just 2,000 years—the only way to figure out what this is about is just to make something up that's emotionally resonant, hopefully, and it's 2,000 years from now, which is beyond our ability. Not 1,000 years, no, it's just like—

COLLINGS:

"Two thousand years passed." What?

CARTER:

What? Okay, visualize that. Okay. And that becomes kind of also emblematic, potentially, of our era in which we've had some dreamers that were capable of dreaming this big of a dream, Kubrick, Spielberg, Cameron, Zemeckis, the Star Wars of it, and I've just been fortunate enough to be sort of ringside seat and participating in those dreams as this person who saw a big dream when he knew it, which was some combination of The Wizard of Oz and Disneyland, right, because Disneyland is a physical space you could go into and still kind of, in real time, dream, and yet the cinema of it, it was cinematic, you went from place to place, and they did this kind of journey, and then you'd be exhausted and you'd have the long ride home from Burbank.

COLLINGS:

Well, there's an interesting progression where some of the theme park rides are developed out of some of the films, and then you could argue that certain films, in effect, take the next step from theme park rides in terms of being a highly immersive, spectacular experience.

CARTER:

Yeah. I was definitely there for the Jurassic Park, Back to the Future ride, the movies that Universal created. I even helped design some of those. In fact, The War of the Worlds set of the plane crash is still a part of the attraction at Universal. So, just inadvertently, almost, between Back to the Future, Jurassic Park, War of the Worlds, Avatar, Star Wars: The Force Awakens, and Lincoln, which has our set at the Lincoln Museum in Illinois, so that's five or six movies that have lived on in the theme park or historical park, and now I'm designing this museum, the exhibits, and trying to do that, which is not easy to do.

I don't know why me, but I find myself at the nexus of those things, and it's incredibly thick with not just politics but the morality of our time, who gets included, who doesn't get included, and for what reasons, you know. I mean, that's a whole

other discussion to have at some point. I'm not sure getting to have it right now, but what I'm trying to get at is our culture is now going through some very wrenching times in which issues are being brought up in relationship to art and artistry and who gets included and who's not included that you could not imagine even three years ago.

So it's moving that fast, and to kind of respond to whose voice is the loudest in the present tense is kind of where we are, and that's kind of not just where we are with arts, certainly with where we are in politics, right, and maybe even where we will be with war. I mean, this is not necessarily going to be a time, at least far as I can perceive, where reason and patience is going to win out. I think people are pushed so quickly beyond their patience points that they go into an attack mode because they feel they're being attacked.

COLLINGS:

Well, maybe the museum should be designed up until, say, the year, I don't know, 2010, and then there would be a participatory thing where visitors send Tweets or something about what they think the rest of it should look like, and then that would be designed ten years from now.

CARTER:

If it were so easy, and the reason is because we don't think like that. So we have to tell a story now that relates to the inclusion of people that would not be told in the traditional, up till now, way of telling the story, which now would be relegated—would consider, well, that's the white man's point of view on it. What about this other point of view that exists? How do you include that, and why can't you tell that story? And at what point does the initial story fall apart when you're trying to just do that? So now that's just theoretically, but is absolutely real in terms of what I would call the exclusion side, and it's the exclusion side that claims to have a moral imperative attached to it, which I'm not antithetical to at all personally, but that's just my personal take.

So just because I think, oh, yeah, that's valid—and, yes, everything we always do is subjective, but when you pay attention and you say, "Well, yes, you know what's the good thing? Inclusion." Right? You could hear that. You could imagine that's just—you hear that everywhere. What about exclusion? Now, who gets excluded now? Because now that same moral imperative is saying that on top of us wanting to be in, we want those out because they are offensive. And that's happening now. So now this moral imperative seeming righteous, whatever, has decided who should be included and who should be excluded, so the very thing that they were offended by, which was being excluded, becomes the thing that they are doing.

And that's happening for real, the minute you put anything in a cultural setting like this, and that's just a different type of era. It's like walking into the late sixties when up is down and bad is good and Disneyland's bad, that's fascist, you can have long hair there, so those are a bunch of bad guys, or dah, dah, dah, dah. I mean, everything turns on itself, and it doesn't just turn one way and that's the way it is forever. It just goes that way, and then something else happens.

So, just going back to this body of work, this is kind of a group of movies that I think are influenced by what happened in the late sixties, that social turmoil, and a group of white men and women, but particularly—and then dealt with some of the issues that they could the best they could, given the commerce of the time, what was perceived as the way to make money or not, and that's the body of work that was created within those parameters. And when and if that truly shifts, then that will bring up another group of people, because I was very aware in the very beginning I knew lots of smart people, but their zeitgeist was different than the one of the way it was going, and the ones that I got involved with were ones who, fortunately for them—and for me by extension—the audiences wanted to see those kinds of movies.

If Steven Spielberg came earlier and tried to make it in in the early seventies, truly early seventies when everything was anti-establishment and anti-classical storytelling, he wouldn't have been perceived the same way. Doesn't mean he wouldn't have adapted somewhat, but he found his time to be appreciated. George Lucas, Bob Zemeckis, Jim Cameron, their dreams lined up with dreams that people wanted to pay money for and to promote, and big chunnels were created to the world in order to get those dreams out, whereas many other people had other things that then they couldn't get any financing anymore. And if it's a movie, you need to have some financing, so

that means other people have to buy into the dream even before they've seen the dream.

COLLINGS:

Well, in the case of Jim Cameron, it seems that his shift into the—it's always so fascinating that we call it the digital realm because it's like a place that you go to, and in Avatar, you've got the industrial space, and then somebody like Jake goes into the digital realm, which is this phantasmagorical place, and I think that's probably how most people are experiencing the Internet and visiting websites. So, it seems that if this is his vision, then he's perfectly positioned to have a movie where I think with the IMDb, the list of crew is fifty pages long. [laughter]

CARTER:

There you go.

COLLINGS:

So, I mean, that's a large community—

CARTER:

That's right.

COLLINGS:

—that he was able to marshal to promote this vision, which is seen by an even larger community.

CARTER:

Well, I think that it's also that ability, yes, to command a whole group and to get them on a wavelength, and that you have to be able to hold the center of, and that's a unique talent as well as just directing, frame by frame, a movie. So, in order to get that kind of vision across, it takes a certain kind of talent that is very, very unique, ultimately, because it's not only that part of it, it's also that every time Jim Cameron makes a movie, he's making the most expensive movie that's ever been made and he's putting the studio at risk.

He's at risk because he puts everything he's got into it, including financial, so that if he has to—at a certain point when it's going over, he'll put his money back into it, and if it succeeds, he succeeds even more, if it fails, he's getting hurt. But that's his methodology and that's him as a person, but as a capitalist, they don't usually like that kind of being put into that context, but they are every time because he cannot help but do that. But that's the way he also psychologically makes sure that everybody is at the level he's it, which is there's something at stake. They're not just doing their job and punching their clock, and, "I got it. We're going to see the money at the other end."

So Avatar as a sequel is a no-brainer, no matter what they spend on it, but if you do four of them, now you're going to be making something that is going to cost almost as much as they've already made in order to make the others, and now everybody's got to watch it and they've got to pay attention, and they're going to have to fight with him over certain aspects, and he wants to have some of those fights, not because he's trying to be antagonistic, it's just that if he wasn't, I think he would feel that his vision wasn't challenging enough, not just for the movie itself but the whole form of how it engages the marketplace and those that put up the money to begin with.

COLLINGS:

Right, because the form itself—

CARTER:

That's right, the medium.

COLLINGS:

—as in A.I., is integral to the meaning.

CARTER:

That's right. Yeah, it's integral even to what is investment, what is risk. And he, on top of that, is Canadian, so he's actually an outsider from the system, to some extent, who has made his way into something, and he loves it, but he's also not, in a sense—he's not supporting the system as much as he's in business with the system in order to realize his vision.

COLLINGS:

What would supporting the system entail?

CARTER:

Well, I think it would be like, "Let's be reasonable. Now, we can't spend that kind of money on a movie." And then let's say it was Zemeckis, as it was on Back to the Future II as a sequel, when the sequel was going to cost $70 million and the first one only cost 35, but all the elements that were in Back to the Future II and III were in I's script, all those places, and the head of the studio was very supportive, but he said, "We spent $35 million on the first one, even with the reshoots, and made a lot of money, and it's great, but we don't want to spend $70 million on a sequel. Twice, you know, that's too much."

So Bob's response—again, this'd be more—it's like more supportive of the system. Jim would just basically—he would go, "Well, then I'm going to go somewhere else

and make it," or something like that, and then he would call that bluff until finally they acquiesced to letting him make the movie, even if there would be continuous fights. Bob was more of like, "Well, why don't we then break it up into two movies for $90 million." So that's like playing—and then they went, "Oh, okay. Yeah, we'll do that." So now each one of them is ten over, but that type of math they could accommodate, if that makes sense.

COLLINGS:

So is there more and more not supporting the system going on, do you think?

CARTER:

Well, the system's awfully strong, so it can pretty much crush what it doesn't want. It's just that Cameron is delivering them what they want. I mean, he's never been a bad bet, so if he didn't get them their money on the other end, then he would not be allowed to do it. They would literally pull the plug. But he fights in such a way, and he's always delivered before, so he's not a bad capitalist bet, but it's risky and it keeps them up at night, just the way he's kept up at night. So I look at that as his way of making sure, "If I'm going to be up at night doing this, everybody else is going to be as well."

COLLINGS:

So were you kept up at night working on that one?

CARTER:

Sure. Sure, yeah, because it's just so many details and so many things to think about. On that one, I felt like I was a—what's it called—an RF cable, like from a TV to an old VCR, and I was trying to carry—at that time, it was FireWire 800 data, down to New Zealand and back, and not just by me, what I would do on a call or a Skype conference thing, but I would go down there for whatever, but it was just the amount

of information that I had to synthesize and then make into a coherent process so they could do their job.

COLLINGS:

The Weta Workshop.

CARTER:

Not only Weta, but the actual set builders, because they had no infrastructure to make sets like that. They didn't have any of the processes we have here. I mean, we were turning to China and to shipbuilders. It's a small island, so they had to literally revamp the whole—not revamp, but shipbuilders became part of it. The whole infrastructure of the country came up and met the challenge—

COLLINGS:

That's what I was thinking when I looked at the credits.

CARTER:

Yeah. New Zealanders are a very can-do group, and they really got into it and they performed fantastically, but I was having to carry a lot of that information down and synthesize it so it could be understood and then put into a methodology that could work. In fact, Jim had come to me at one point—it might have taken us normally, for something that elaborate, five months to build everything once it was designed, but this took ten months. So we weren't even fully designed, but I had to get things going, and Jim just wasn't ready to go through all that, so he was working out all these other motion-capture things. So finally when we were turning to this, he says, "Now—."

And this is three months after we'd started building, and the producer knew, but he just didn't really comprehend that we were doing that. I literally had to just say to myself, "Well, I'm going to take the shit if I have to because this has to happen for the

good of the movie." But he came and he said, "Now, I don't want you to start building until I've worked out all the lighting in this virtual thing." And I knew we were already—it wasn't to say we couldn't accommodate some things we learned, which we did, and he loved the sets, but it was a process that we were extending into, in form, something that was difficult, even just on the physical side, let alone the digital side, to create those characters, and particularly Neytiri and Jake and the ones you had to really emote with in some manner and know how they were feeling. But anyway, I think that's probably about all I have to—

COLLINGS:

Okay. Let me just ask you one last question. The Post, it really seems to resonate with today. Is there a way that you feel that your production design work in that film sort of helps it to feel like something that's not just entirely a period piece?

CARTER:

Well, I think the first and foremost is because I grew up in that era. I was twenty-one in 1971, having traveled around the world, and this was my coming back and becoming aware that all those things that had bothered my conscience about the war and my not going to the war were now being vindicated by a government study, not just Ramparts magazine or the Berkeley Gazette that was against the war from whatever their sources were, but now an actual study was being revealed that corroborated all of the issues of corruption, and not just corruption, but a needing to lie and to cover over what had happened in order to sustain something that was ultimately unsustainable and costing so many lives. So to know that not as something to study but that I'd lived through, I was the guy who could come in and say, "I know this period. I know what it's about."

And I made a big collage with the group that was like a Rauschenberg about the whole era that got the younger people into the kind of craziness of it, so on a method level—and we hired a lot of women on the movie partly just because they were who were available, but they were just the perfect group. I mean, not just that two of the producers were women and the primary first screenwriter, but—and the production

manager and the two art directors and the set decorator and the props person. I mean, and they were just right in a zone of it was perfect for them to get into this story because of it being about Katharine Graham finding her voice, and then her ability to become a true hero in terms of the press finding its voice and establishing that fourth estate sense of who monitors the government.

But on the personal side, knowing about the issues, I could be much more—what's the word? I knew we had to just get everybody working very fast. We had to be shooting within eight weeks, so let's go. I'd been mentored by the production designer who did All the President's Men, but we didn't have the money nor time to build a set, so I just went to a building that we found and said, "We're going to do it here," and then we did a tremendous amount of work in it. But the structure was there, and I knew that meant that Steven would just come to work every day like he's working. He's making a movie and he's putting out a paper at the same time, in the same way, so the form and the content are very close. We're making this movie the way they put out the paper, and we're doing it for the same purpose. We're doing it as a social arbiter of what is right in terms of that perception of what secrets should be not kept, and the democracy does die in darkness, so those values. And then going back to that time for cinema when movies were that kind of a social arbiter of conscience for people to see issues brought up, and it swayed how they felt about things.

COLLINGS:

Yeah, exactly.

CARTER:

So all of that was very much a part of my upbringing. I try to work it in whatever I can, but this one was the most directly political. Lincoln was very political on certain levels, but it was even more distant to things that even more people would agree with, whereas this is something that's right in the middle of, like, well, what is treason and what are our allegiances, and just to think of how complicated it is now. Literally the group that's in power is going after the institutions which are the ones that are actually holding together the institution to begin with in terms of—these are times we've never

even seen anything like this, let alone—it's not just the press, it's all sorts of—for what?

For some agenda and maybe even some psychosis. This movie was at least a small version of being able to do something along the lines of what I'm good at and to organize people to perform a function, what they are good at, and so we could bring a production together very quickly, and within essentially eight weeks have a movie that would then be able to come out and become a part of the dialogue, such that it is, with the culture. Mostly it probably hits those that already are convinced there's something terribly wrong, but it at least reaffirms to them that there was a time when this played out in a way that was positive. We don't know that it's going to now. We don't know that we would have a Supreme Court that would go that way.

COLLINGS:

I thought that was an extremely important element to have at the end of the film rather than just have that as a sidenote.

CARTER:

That's right. And to celebrate that, because that that was part of our institutions working for what I would say is a humanist, democratic set of values. But there are other values out there that we're always up against, and I would say that almost all the movies I've gotten to work on to some degree celebrate a certain kind of value that would be perceivable. Maybe it would be called liberal, I'm not sure, but it will be perceived a certain way. And I think The Post falls into that as the most kind of direct engagement in kind of—while it starts far away as far as like—and this is Kay Graham, and there's lots of design aspects to their homes and how their work lives come into their homes and how we put them back-to-back on stages, so it's like Juliet and Romeo.

I mean, it's a platonic love story, really, in which they make each other better. But the real, I think, summation of it is that as the movie quickens in pace towards the end, even though you know basically what's going to happen, how it happens and how

complex it is makes you realize how hard it was, and then it goes right through being about them to—and basically going, "I don't think I can go through this again," and it's like a joke that Katharine Graham's telling, because we know now when we see the next scene that she's about to go in through it again, only this time it even brought down the guy who was the antagonist, which was Nixon. And the funny thing was it wasn't about him at all. He was only protecting something that was something he felt the need to protect, but it was nothing critical of him.

It's just that he was propagating the same lie, and so that if that lie was true for them, it's going to be true for him. It turned out it was even more lies than just about Vietnam, and once you start, that cover-up just doesn't stop. And then you want to hope that the truth wills out, and, oh, what a tangled web we weave, and that eventually you get brought down. But we don't know that, and every time it comes back around, a lot more is at stake than when it's just history. And, being older now, it feels like I don't know where this one's going, you know, and I think there's been a certain amount of satisfaction in the last thirty years that things would play out—and I would even say—

COLLINGS:

The sense of an evolution in the right direction.

CARTER:

And even just a balance. Honestly, in my lifetime, because the president has been held by Democrats and Republicans, each side has had some form of the pressure valve removed. Now it's going past very quickly those lines of putting the country first, and now the retribution that's going to come from the left to the right when the left finally finds its way, and that won't all be good either. And then finding a balance between these two things, because I think that the person at the center of that, Trump, will have no compunction about—there's no line that he won't cross, I mean none whatsoever.

He would never step down, he would never admit that he's wrong on any level, and so there will be no way to ever get him, that personality, out of power, other than

removing him from power, and that's going to be by force. And that force I don't even think's going to be able to be, personally, in the form of impeachment, because I don't think that will ever happen, unless somehow the body politic is so outraged that they actually elect all Democrats to perform that function, but even then, I—so that's how dramatic the movie that we're in that is our lives appears now.

But I do not personally feel up to being able to fully metaphorically engage that one and understand. If called upon by Steven, I will try to perform any function I can within the world that he perceives as being valuable, but other than that, I'm a little more arm's distance if I can be. Who knows whether I will be, just because it really—I think I felt like I knew what was going on subconsciously and I was on this journey, and now the last part of it, however long it is, is taking a turn in which the fights that I only heard about are now about to happen again, the World War II-level fights.

The wars that I faced, that I was a conscientious objector in relationship to, were wars of choice. Vietnam was a war of choice. I'm not sure World War II was, and now I think that we're heading into a war that's not of choice, because, first of all, it could be thrust upon us and you're not going to know what you think, because if it's against North Korea, you know that you're not on their side, but you certainly don't trust our side for telling you the truth or negotiating something that could have been negotiated.

COLLINGS:

Yeah, see Pentagon Papers.

CARTER:

Yeah, yeah, exactly. And is there anybody with a prick of a conscience who's keeping a paper trail for all of this? There's The Post.

COLLINGS:

There’s The Post. Okay.

CARTER:

All the news that’s fit to print and all the cinema to be made.

COLLINGS:

Right. Shall we leave it there then?

CARTER:

Sure.

[End of February 1, 2018 interview]