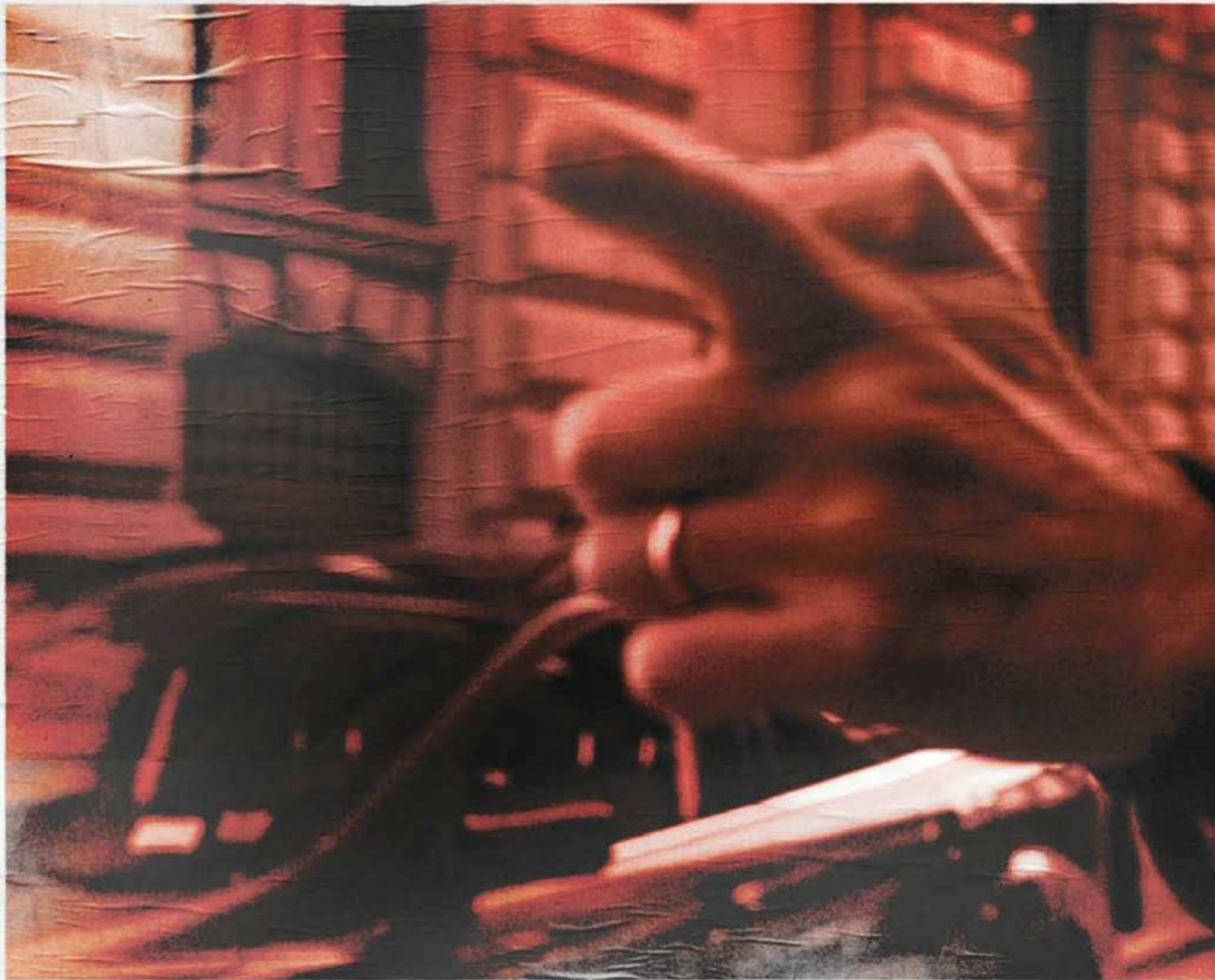

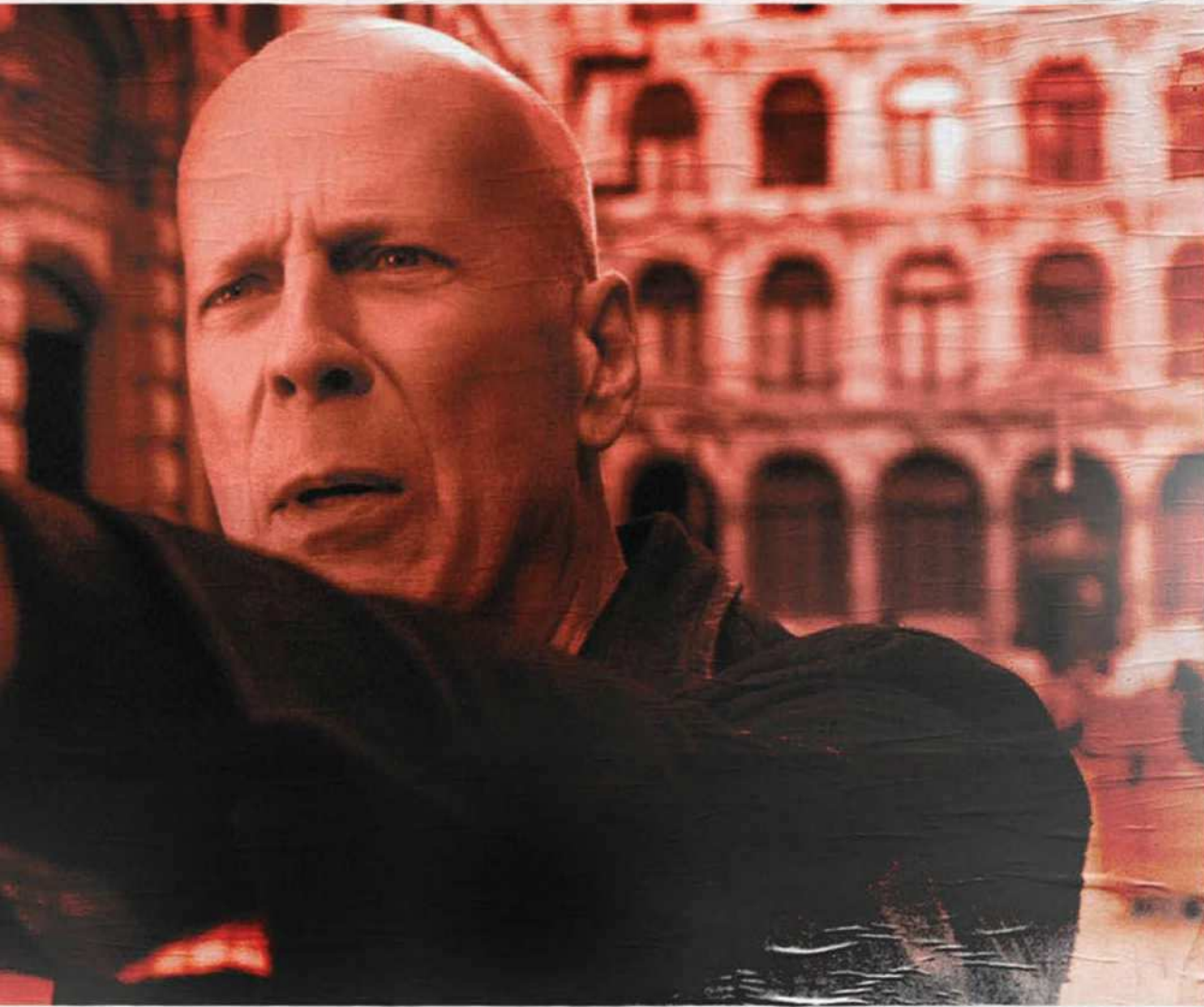


**Slammed by critics  
and often shoddily made...**



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... the **Death Wish** series has few vocal fans. But with a Bruce Willis-starring remake incoming, it's also proved incredibly resilient

WORDS OWEN WILLIAMS

# KILL SPREE



# “A bird-brained movie to cheer the hearts of the far right wing,”

sneered Vincent Canby in the 25 July 1974 edition of *The New York Times*. The movie he was reviewing was *Death Wish*, a new crime thriller directed by Michael Winner, in which Winner's frequent cohort, Charles Bronson, embarked on a vigilante crusade in New York, incited by the murder of his wife and rape of his daughter. And Canby wasn't alone in his disdain. *Variety* called it “a poisonous incitement to do-it-yourself law enforcement”. Roger Ebert in the *Chicago Sun-Times* thought its message was “scary”.

But *Death Wish* was unstoppable. In the US, the \$3 million movie grossed \$22 million and was followed by four sequels, two now infamous for their extreme sexual violence. The final one, 1994's *Death Wish V: The Face Of Death*, was Bronson's final big-screen role. Even without him, the series refused to die, as the fact there's a new remake incoming attests. It has, however, taken time to arrive. In 2006, it was announced that Sylvester Stallone would star in and direct a new *Death Wish*; when he left the project, Joe Carnahan (*The A-Team*) took over. That version languished in development hell too, and is only now making it to the screen, directed by Eli Roth from Carnahan's script and starring Bruce Willis in the lead role.

Judging by the reaction to the trailers, *Death Wish 2018* may be in for as rough a critical ride as the original: “The last thing we all need right now is a new movie about an angry white guy buying a bunch of guns and mowing people down,” said SlashFilm. But Roth is unrepentant. “Everybody complaining about my trailer is saying exactly what Canby said in 1974,” he tells *Empire*. “But you don't make a *Death Wish* without dividing people.”

He's not wrong — and to prove it, here's a rundown of the entire crazy franchise, including the latest iteration.



## DEATH WISH (1974)

It could all have been very different.

*Death Wish* began life as a novel by Brian Garfield, who intended his protagonist to seem anything but heroic. Paul Benjamin (renamed Kersey in the films to avoid confusion with Paul Benjamin the actor) is an accountant whose wife is murdered and daughter rendered catatonic during a random home invasion. He undergoes a post-traumatic nervous breakdown

and begins nightly escapades on New York's side streets.

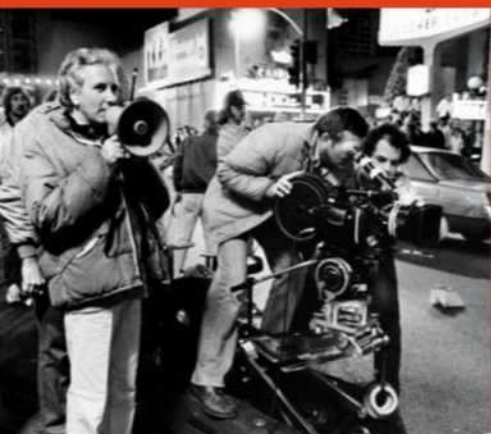
“The point of the novel is that vigilantism is an attractive fantasy but it only makes things worse in reality,” Garfield explained to *PopMatters* in 2008. “Benjamin was a nut who kept becoming nuttier.”

United Artists duly picked up the film rights, and respected screenwriter Wendell Mayes (hot from *The Poseidon Adventure*) penned a Garfield-approved adaptation. Sidney Lumet was interested in directing, with Jack Lemmon and Henry Fonda

circling the roles of Benjamin and police chief Frank Ochoa. But time went on, deals fell through and Lumet opted to make *Serpico* instead. Finally, UA offered the project to Michael Winner.

Not yet the caricature of his later years, Winner had recently directed Western *Chato's Land* and action thrillers *The Mechanic* and *The Stone Killer*, all three starring Charles Bronson. He saw *Death Wish* as a chance to team up with his mate for a fourth time. And Bronson was keen. “Charlie asked what we were doing next,” was Winner's version of the story. “I said [it] was about a man who goes out and shoots muggers. Charlie said, ‘I'd like to do that.’ I said, ‘The film?’ He said, ‘No, shoot muggers.’”

That might give you a clue as to how Garfield's message got lost in translation. Winner's first inclination was to add the



While not at the level of ensembles *The Dirty Dozen* and *The Great Escape*, *Death Wish* was by far Bronson's biggest hit as a solo star. And it would provide him with a rock-solid retirement plan,

thanks to Cannon Films offering him a multi-million-dollar contract: out of the nine films he would make with them, four were *Death Wishes*. For the first sequel, Bronson was paid a then-colossal \$2 million to return to the role.

Brian Garfield had, in 1975, written his own sequel to his novel as an apology for the film version. In *Death Sentence* (the loose basis for *Aquaman* director James Wan's 2007 film of the same name), Benjamin finds the thrill of vigilantism beginning to pall, and is horrified to have spurred a copycat into action. By contrast, the filmed *Death Wish II* is largely a remake of the first film, except this time Kersey is in Los Angeles and on the trail of specific thugs. The bad guys have raped Kersey's housekeeper and his daughter (this time twice), resulting in the latter's suicide. Kersey takes out the perps one-by-one. The graphic quadruple-rape and murder of the maid (ending with a lingering full-frontal shot of her naked corpse) lasts three minutes in its full version. A public spat ensued between Winner and BBFC censor James Ferman, who made a record-breaking three minutes, 42 seconds of cuts for the British release.

Director Edgar Wright, an enthusiast of *Death Wish 3*, is less keen on the first sequel. "It's pretty reprehensible," he tells *Empire*. "Only of note really for how gratuitously violent it is, and also some of the location work in '80s Los Angeles."

Eli Roth, on the other hand, is a huge fan. "*Death Wish II* was the first one I saw," he says. "It's when they tip over into exploitation. It's just insanity!"

actual home invasion — which happens 'off-screen' in the novel — and to factor in a graphic rape, something which categorically doesn't happen in the book. The bad guys were also amped up, turned into maniacs with bizarre personalities.

A 17-year-old Jeff Goldblum was cast as the deranged gang leader. If it's not a particularly subtle performance — at one point he shrieks, "I kill rich cunts!" — that's likely down to Winner's unique directing style. "I played *Freak #1*," Goldblum recalls. "I was just a little mustard seed. And Michael gave me a fantastic piece of direction: 'Goldblum! Start! Acting! Now!' I've tried to teach acting and I'm a craft geek, but really it boils down to, 'Start acting now.' That's kind of all there is to say."

Something that did survive the journey from page to screen is the way in

which Kersey doesn't go after Goldblum and his cronies. Instead he begins a general war on NYC crime, playing to middle-class fears about the apparently lawless Big Apple of the era. Murder puts a spring in Kersey's step. He paints his apartment a cheerful orange and starts listening to happy music. When Bronson expressed concern that his fans would be turned off by the notion he was enjoying all the killing, Winner told him not to be silly.

"I said, 'Charlie, of course you're enjoying killing people!'" the director recalled in his autobiography, *Winner Takes All*. "That's what the movie's about! You're enjoying doing away with thoroughly evil people!"

Compared to what followed, it was a film of deep political nuance.

**Facing page, top to bottom:** Charles Bronson as vigilante Paul Kersey in *Death Wish* (1974); With director Michael Winner on set; Kersey goes full homicidal. **This page, top:** Stunt antics in 1985's *Death Wish 3*. **Above left:** Winner calls the shots on *Death Wish II*. **Above right:** Kersey in trouble in *II*.





## DEATH WISH 3 (1985)

It was nothing, however, compared to the madness of *Death Wish 3* (according to Bronson biographer Paul Talbot, Golan-Globus ditched the Roman numerals fearing their audience wouldn't understand them). This time, Kersey is out to get those responsible for the murder of one of his war buddies. Charley (Francis Drake) has been living in a run-down New York tenement so overrun

with "creeps" it resembles a sort of *Mad Max* wasteland.

Bronson here uses the berserk .457 Wildey Magnum, which fires long-range hunting rounds. Charley, in turn, has left behind an arsenal of Browning machine guns and missile launchers from World War II. Kersey is given a nod and a wink by the cops to just get on with it as long as they get the credit. And while we're supposed to be in New York, we're very clearly in Lambeth. Real-life 'Subway Vigilante' Bernhard Goetz had recently been arrested in New York for the attempted murder of four muggers; the city was buzzing with debate about the justifiable limits of self-defence, so the shoot was moved to London.

Winner was still having fun orchestrating the lurid mayhem. "He was this very wealthy, privileged, elegant, well-educated guy, but inside he was just this total maniac," laughs Alex Winter, one of the film's antagonists. "I did the stunt where I'm on the hood of Marina Sirtis' car and the other cars are narrowly missing me, and we shot it for hours because Michael enjoyed watching me flail around. Eventually the stunt coordinator was like, 'Michael, we got this on take one — you have to stop.'"

Edgar Wright is such a fan he's put on screenings of *Death Wish 3*. "It's surreally, cartoonishly violent and a fun film to watch with an audience," he says. "It even uses *Home Alone*-ish domestic booby-traps. But there's a bazooka death as well."

In total Kersey kills 52 creeps, 47 of them in a single scene with the machine gun. Bronson, rarely present for scenes that didn't need him, was unaware of the extent of the film's carnage until he saw what had been edited in around him. Winner had pulled a similar stunt with him on *Chato's Land*, when Bronson had refused to film a scene with a naked actress, and Winner had sneakily cut him into one anyway. On *Death Wish 3*, this behaviour was the final straw. Bronson called the film "too violent, needlessly violent... To me it was awful and ridiculous." He and Winner never worked together again.



Above: Kay Lenz as Kersey's new girlfriend, Karen, in *Death Wish 4: The Crackdown*. Below left: Bronson with Ed Lauter, left, as police chief Richard Shriker.



## DEATH WISH 4: THE CRACKDOWN (1987)

## DEATH WISH V: THE FACE OF DEATH (1994)

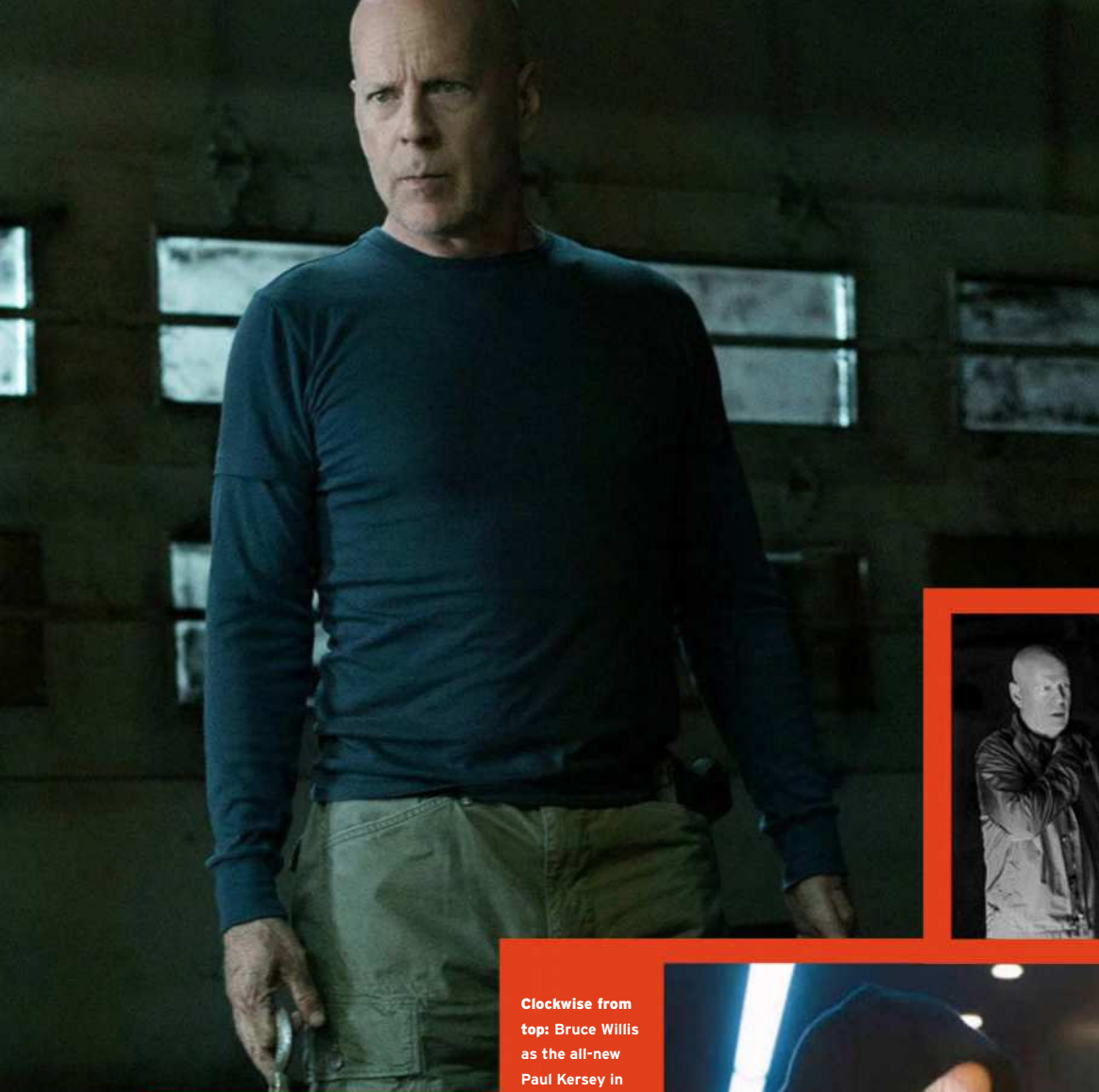
For 1987's *Death*

*Wish 4: The Crackdown*, Winner's replacement was another workhorse favoured by Bronson. J. Lee Thompson had honed his craft on the likes of *The Guns Of Navarone*. Bronson liked his speedy efficiency on set. *The Crackdown* was their seventh film together.

The action — somewhat reduced thanks to Cannon's financial woes — sees Kersey back in LA, with a new girlfriend whose daughter soon becomes a casualty of the drug trade. Kersey is suddenly a far more sophisticated assassin, utilising poisoned cannoli and a remote-controlled football bomb. But he still keeps an arsenal of rockets and machine guns behind his fridge, and uses all of them. The film climaxes with a shoot-out at a roller disco.

There was one last gasp, seven years later, when a 74-year-old Bronson and the Roman numerals returned for *Death Wish V*. Cannon by this time no longer existed, but producer Menahem Golan was still clinging to the series rights, and mounted the film under his new 21st Century Film Corporation banner. "Let's say it was 'dodgy,'" says producer Damian Lee. "Menahem would say we had a certain amount of money, and then the next day it would transpire that the money wasn't there at all."

Kersey's final low-budget enemies were gangsters orbiting the LA fashion industry. And the results were every bit as ridiculous as that sounds. "It didn't do very well," says Lee, "but it did some business on video. There was still some demand for a *Death Wish*. Apparently there still is!"



**Clockwise from top:** Bruce Willis as the all-new Paul Kersey in Eli Roth's *Death Wish*; Willis and Roth prep a scene; Willis' Kersey is a trauma surgeon; Willis with Camila Morrone and Elisabeth Shue as Kersey's daughter, Jordan, and wife Lucy.



## DEATH WISH

(2018)

Eli Roth's remake could have been a return either to the grittier *Death Wish* of the '70s, or the one-man-army silliness of the '80s.

As it turns out,

Roth has tried to juggle both. On the one hand, he tells us that, using the device of talk-radio hosts acting as a sort of Greek chorus, "We very clearly and intelligently debate the vigilante issue. We got Sway from Shade 45 satellite radio, and Mancow Muller,

who's one of the big radio DJs out of Chicago, and let them argue it out. It played out in a very realistic way."

But Roth does love an exploitation movie, and he was excited by the opportunities for some creative old-school carnage. "My pitch to the studio was that I could give them amazing kills that would make the movie," he says. "It's not *Hostel*; more like when David Cronenberg did the bath-house fight in *Eastern Promises*. I told them I'd render it in a way that the audience will absolutely lose their minds."

Finally, he wanted a classic Bruce Willis performance: "that *Die Hard*, *Unbreakable* movie-star Bruce that we haven't seen for a while." The Willis Paul Kersey is a trauma surgeon in Chicago: as volatile a city now as New York was in 1974. Used to seeing the effects of street crime first-hand, he takes the law into his own hands when tragedy strikes nearer to home. And his job means he's perfectly placed to piece clues together from the criminals that cross his path at work. The new film, Roth says, is structurally a remake of *Death Wish II*, in that Kersey is on a particular case.

The trailer appears to revel in callbacks to some of the original *Death Wish*'s more famous moments: Willis pointing a finger in a 'bang-bang' motion is a clear homage to Bronson doing the same thing at the end of the original film. But Roth is hoping he's created some iconic beats of his own. "The key," he says, "is to make a movie that's smart and new and fun." And extremely violent. And, just perhaps, politically reprehensible. Maybe, by tapping into Winner's winning formula, *Death Wish* 2018 is smarter than it looks. ●

**DEATH WISH IS IN CINEMAS NOW**