

# WRITER'S STATEMENT

I was raised in a Baltimore suburb wild with unkempt hedges, disheveled lawns and porches, yards full of car parts and swimming pools, and a church or a bar on every corner. This neighborhood, located just inside the city line, is the inspiration for much of my work and sets the scene for *Metal Gods*. The script focuses primarily on Sean, 14, his 17-year-old brother, Trevor, and their friendship with Jenny, 16. It's both a relationship drama and a coming-of-age story about a group of friends who are literally, geographically, socially, and economically skirting the fringes of the city. Like many adolescents these characters are discovering rites of passage, exploring identity and meaning, all within the context of a community where fractured family, unemployment, alcoholism, and truancy lead to increased social marginalization.

The scenario for *Metal Gods* was born from an image tied to a specific location, containing its own world, its own logic and history, and the seeds of character and scene. The image, as disconnected and rich as anything in a dream, was of two brothers leaving work together and driving in a car with the windows down. It was simple enough, but it inspired me; and as I began to develop chronology and sequence I kept the image close and followed it through to its narrative line. Instead of conforming characters and scenes to a pre-existing theme or story arc, I like to foster everything simultaneously by posing questions and allowing the elements to inform one another. I guess my approach to crafting realism is like a Choose Your Own Adventure book. I work in a linear fashion and at the end of every scene I imagine all the possibilities and play each one out till I find the one that fits. The way scenes fit together and the intervals, with their internal structure and rhythm, are just as important as the scenes themselves.

Since *Metal Gods* is tied to a specific place and a particular group of kids with specific interests, I've researched and documented extensively the twin cultural subjects of the film, southeast Baltimore and heavy metal, referencing personal experience, popular music, social data (Walser's *Running with the Devil*, Arnett's *Metalheads*, MTV's *Headbanger's Ball*), and myriad local sources to build a framework that supports my story. Though I'm hesitant to use music in a non-diegetic way, it is another key source of inspiration and I often use it to generate ideas. In focusing and fine-tuning the screenplay, a lot of these ideas get worked-through and rinsed out. I try to wash and re-wash a script until only the essentials remain. All the other influences that contributed to the scene may leave a faded color or a lingering air, but they don't become part of the plot – they become part of the character's lives: for these kids and their friends, joined in a shared love of loud music, their subculture represents a makeshift, surrogate family, providing comfort, joy, and a set of moral and aesthetic codes to live by.

I hope *Metal Gods* is like the original “Degrassi Junior High” meets Bruno Dumont's *La Vie de Jesus*, meets *Kes*, meets *Mouchette*, meets “Freaks and Geeks”, which is almost full-circle. Actually, I wish it were more like the documentary *Streetwise*. I own a battered VHS copy of that and I watch it every few months. If only I could write characters that good. I like films that maintain an ascetic style of storytelling, yet succeed with vigor and precision at painting rich portraits of human beings in their time, films like Ken Loach's *Kes*, Claire Denis' *Beau Travail*, Pedro Costa's *Ossos*, Tsai Ming-Liang's *Rebels Of The Neon God*, and Ramin Bahrani's *Chop Shop*.

Specificity is an essential attribute of the movies I admire. Attention to detail, locale, and mood: as a writer, I cultivate these tendencies in my own work, and as a director I try to bring them out in the work of my collaborators. It's through the details — captured, transformed, and projected — that the film and its audience will come together. A precise representation of a particular place can achieve the universal. And sometimes, such reflections of life provide hope, present possibility, provoke thought, and inspire new ways of seeing. I'd like to make films that have that sort of transformative power, films that surprise.