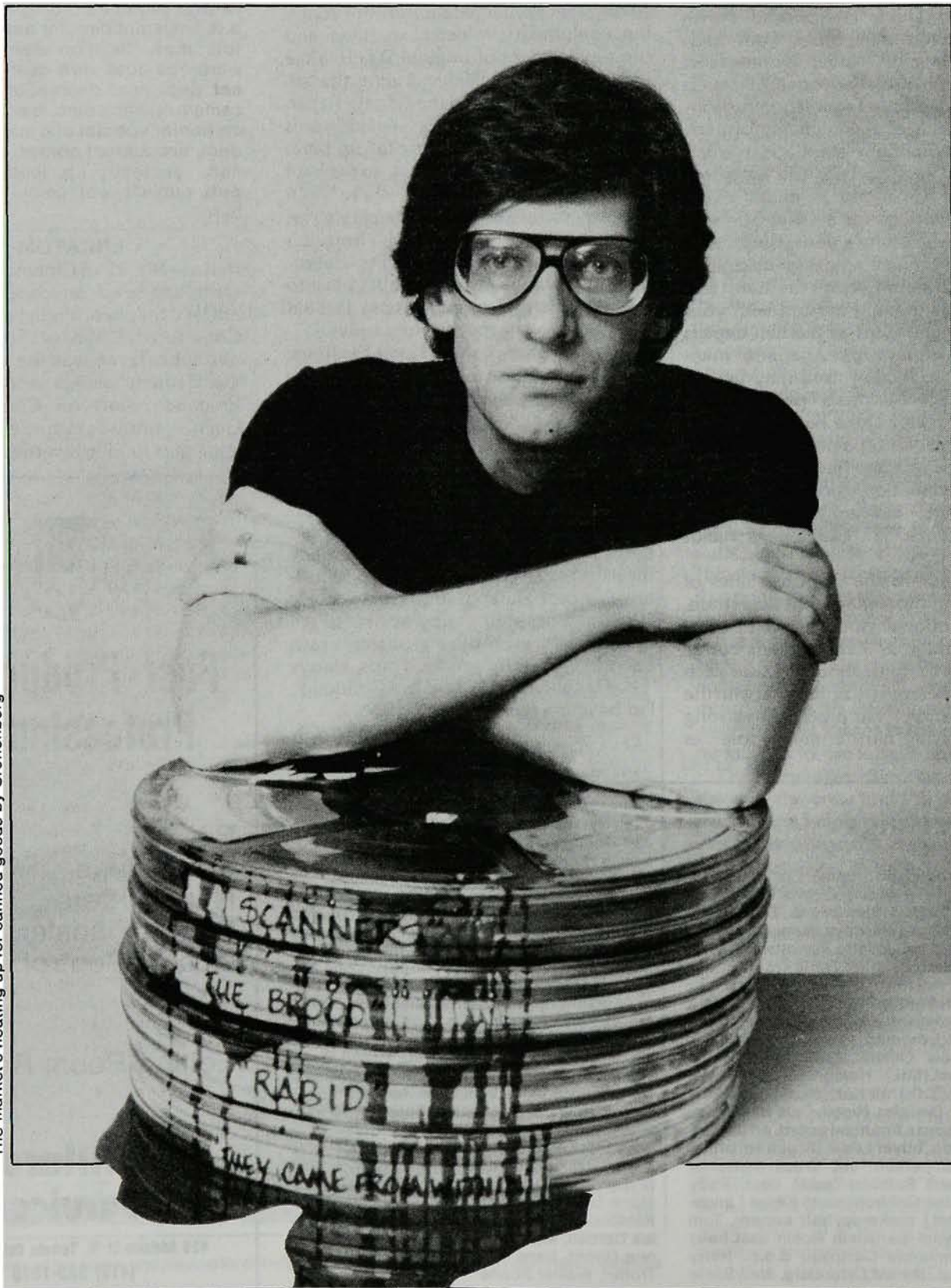


David Cronenberg



The market's heating up for canned goods by Cronenberg

Brilliantly Bizarre

by John G. Harkness

There is more to Cronenberg's films than the blood 'n' gore that turns the stomach. He exploits the implications of modern scientific society to give man a taste of his own worst medicine.

David Cronenberg is a rarity in the English-Canadian cinema – a writer/director whose works are informed by a strikingly personal vision. Despite the impression created by his films, he is not a bloodthirsty ghoul, but rather an intensely articulate artist with a precise sense of what his work is about. It is the thematic content of his films that so upsets the critics; for he is not a filmmaker in love with technique, creating exercises in camera movement that hinge upon the revelation of a convenient psychopath. Rather, he meditates upon death, disease and mortality, telling Frankenstein stories, where the created monster is a form of cancer eating away at our comfortable, cultural worship of physical beauty and intellectual adolescence.

Scanners, his latest film, is also his most technically assured (and it should be remembered that in the following interview, when he speaks of a "larger budget," he is referring to about \$4.5 million – mere carfare for a Michael Cimino or Francis Coppola). It is also his best released film: its New York opening includes two East Side houses, unlike *The Brood*, which was unceremoniously dumped in Times Square by New World.

Cinema Canada: One of the more remarkable things about your work is that there is almost no thematic break between your student/underground films and your commercial work. How do you account for that?

David Cronenberg: I think it's important that I write my own scripts. It's conceivable that other directors would have more connection between what fascinated them when they started to make films and what they do later, if only they could write. The spectacle of Stanley Kubrick looking at the first ten pages of six hundred novels and throwing them against the wall until he found *The Shining* is sort of pathetic; yet he's admitted that he can't write. Also,

some directors are journeymen and don't have any vision or anything to express. All those factors mean the difference between someone whose work shows continuity and someone whose work doesn't. Someone like William Friedkin, who's a very good technical director, has lots of hits, and certainly knows how to get the juice out of his scripts, doesn't have anything you could call the Friedkin sensibility — you'd have to look very hard to see it in his films. I think it's mainly having some sort of vision that translates into film.

Since we're speaking of vision, how do you see your own work developing in thematic and formal terms?

I think I'm coming closer to developing things that obsess me in more naturalistic terms. I suppose it may be strange to think of *Scanners* as naturalistic, but you can see how it is in certain ways more so than *Shivers*, or certainly *Rabid*. Why I should be doing this I don't know.

There are a lot of people who believe in ESP and psychic phenomena, and I find that some people take *Scanners* as not being science fiction. They seem to feel that they are personally on the verge of being *Scanners*; and coming out of the theatre they definitely can scan, if only for a couple of hours.

It seems to me that *Crimes of the Future*, *Shivers*, and *Rabid* are about the effects of the body on the brain, whereas *The Brood* and *Scanners* reverse the enquiry.

That's quite interesting, and quite right. I hadn't looked at it that way. I tend to think of myself as a Cartesian these days, although when I read Descartes in university, I certainly didn't find much. I thought he was wonderful, but I also thought he was nuts. He's had the last laugh though, because I keep mentioning him, because one of his explicit concerns was the connection between the mind

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and the body, and the mystery contained therein. There's that Bertrand Russell quote — 'What is the Mind? No Matter. What's Matter? Never mind.' They seem connected, yet they seem to be different; and it is a vital concern to human existence, specifically because of death and disease...

The Dynamic Duo...

Exactly. It's interesting that you point out that shift, because it's a two-way street. Certainly **Scanners** is explicitly about how the mind controls the body, even when it's not its own body. It's also metaphorical in that people can cause disease in other people by generating stress. Employers on employees, or on a film set; some directors like to run a set on hysteria and resentment and power-tripping. It's a stress situation for everybody, and that's how some people generate their energy — but the toll is taken physically. **Scanners** has that metaphorical base as well as the science fiction.

It's interesting that you refer to your work as science fiction.

Scanners is, certainly...

It's been said that most people use science fiction as an excuse for horror.

You could say that of **Alien** — but I think that's a rare example. It was sold as a science fiction film, but everyone knew the space ship was really a castle.

There was even a parasite.

That was *really* familiar — and it burst out of a body! When I read science fiction as a kid there was a split between science fiction and fantasy. I used to prefer fantasy if it didn't get too far from human experience. Science fiction used to be very dry stuff which would project into future social or scientific developments and see what the outcome would be; so you find a lot of writers boasting that they predicted satellites twenty years beforehand, and to me that's not very interesting.

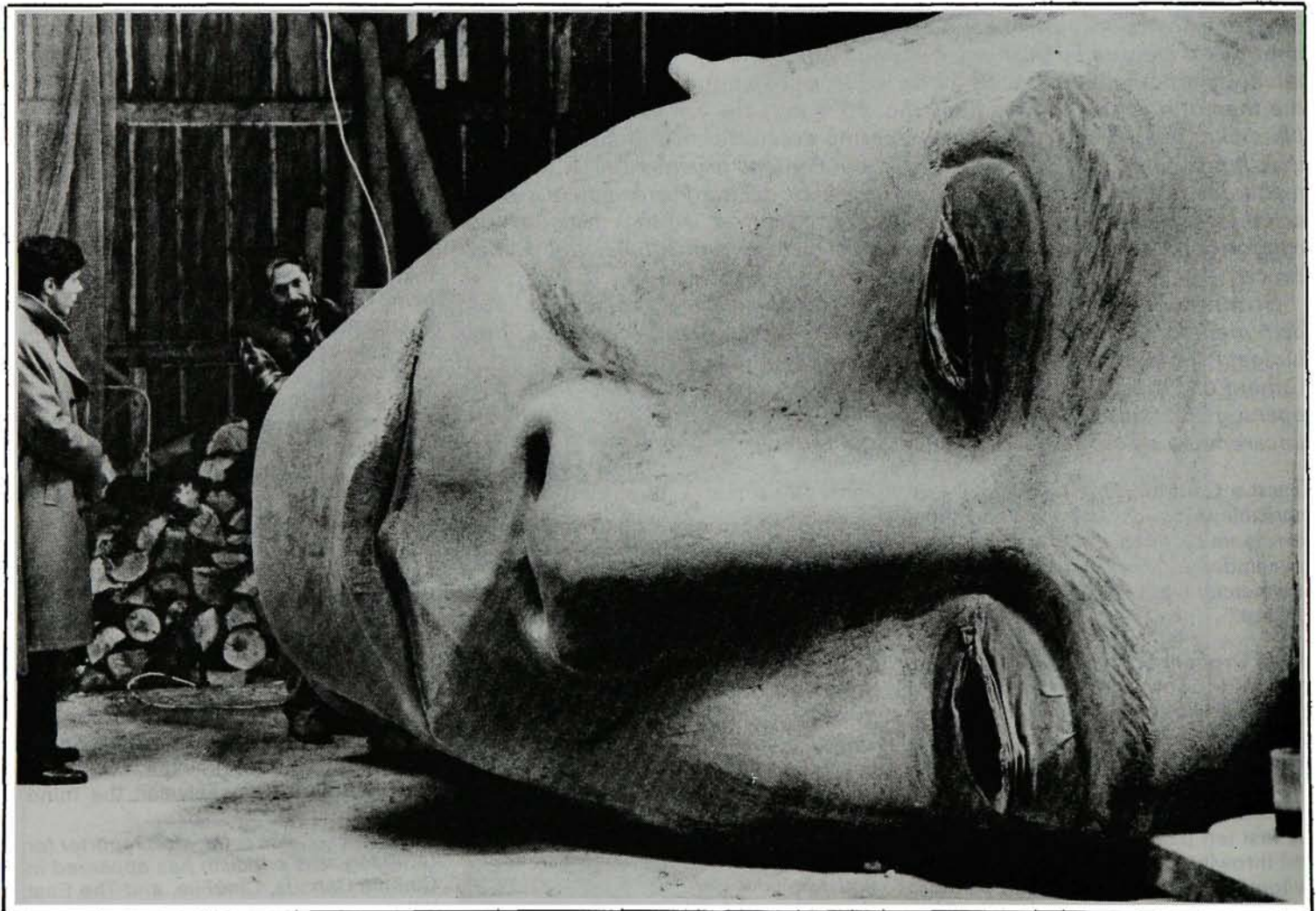
*I think the reference was mainly to film. **Forbidden Planet**, for instance, seems to have a lot in common with **The Brood**. **Monsters from the Id...***

They do have a lot in common: without realizing it, I named the school in **The Brood**, the Krell Street School. (Note: The Krells were the extinct race in **Forbidden Planet**.) You do get to the point where, if science is positing life on other planets and your science fiction is going to explore the meeting of us with them, you start to overlap with horror and monsters...

Show the mothers...

Exactly. If life on other planets is bacteria, then who cares, unless they do something interesting. I still think there's a distinction between science fiction and horror, and fantasy, which mixes the two.

Would you describe your work as science fiction edging towards horror?



A head of its time? Avant-garde sculptor, Robert Silverman (right) introduces Stephen Lack to his bizarre studio in **Scanners**

Yes, because I'm not into the occult and witchcraft, which a lot of fantasy is.

How about your style? You seem more comfortable with the technology now...

It takes a while. **Shivers**, first of all, I had no time...

No money, either.

No time is almost equivalent to no money. When people ask me what I get when I have a bigger budget, as I did with **Scanners**, I say more time: the time to experiment a little on the set, and the option to shoot something you know you're going to throw away and then shoot it again. **Scanners** is the first film in which I've actually shot new scenes written during editing, and redone the ending because I wasn't happy with the special effects. It's an incredible luxury to be able to say, "Wouldn't it be great to have a scene where Revok and Keller actually meet and you see them together?" We shot those scenes in Toronto, because the way the film had developed it wasn't obvious that we never had a scene where you saw them together — so their collusion was only verbal; and that isn't a good way to do things on film. That's the main reason my style is evolving, because there is a chance to experiment. Also, I've tried a lot of things in the past and know that they don't work, so I don't have to do them again.

*I was wondering why you move the camera as much as you do in **Scanners**, because **Shivers** and **Rabid** are very static films. Was that a time thing?*

The only film in which I really felt constrained not to move the camera was **Shivers**, because there wasn't a lot of time — unless the floor happened to be amenable to a dolly. I became paralyzed. A dolly shot became a big, big deal, and a crane shot was out of the question.

I went to the symposium with Bertolucci. His version of that was, in the sixties, when everyone was into Godard and the politics of "le travelling," you first had to ponder the *political* implications of the dolly shot. Now, he thinks it's a personal aesthetic question. I don't have a particular aesthetic of camera movement, it's a visceral thing.

*It seems to me that a lot of your style grows out of the corridors at York in **Stereo** and the **Starliner Apartments** in **Shivers**. You have a very tight frame.*

Shivers

...Makes Your Flesh Creep!

by Robert MacMillan

The critics were too busy gagging over Cronenberg's early films to take them seriously. Now, with the success of **Scanners** they have finally recognized his talent. By penetrating the hideous surface of **Shivers (The Parasite Murders)** Robert MacMillan exposes the film's deeper meanings, to illustrate that there is, in fact, a method to Cronenberg's 'madness' — the themes of his gruesome stories are extensions of modern reality itself.

The plot of David Cronenberg's **Shivers** (also known as **The Parasite Murders** and **They Came From Within**) concerns a self-contained apartment complex (isolated from downtown Montreal on an island) that is invaded by a swarm of crawling parasites. The latter penetrate the bodies of apartment dwellers, endowing most residents with an insatiable lust. Doctor Emil Hobbes, the "creator" of these parasites, wants to restore contact between humanity and physical nature. Some persons die horribly in the ensuing violence. In one scene a young man, sick to the point of vomiting from the parasite inside his body, leans over a balcony railing and retches the blood-smeared creature out, watching as it plops onto the umbrella of an elderly woman far below. The old woman mutters, "poor birdie" while the real culprit squiggles across the ground to the environment from whence it came — an apartment block called Starliner.

All of the foregoing has allegedly embarrassed and frightened audiences and several reviewers. Toronto journalist Clyde Gilmour wrote: "I didn't hear any actual retching at the matinee I attended, but I nearly gagged despite what I had thought was old-pro immunity." Marshall Delaney devoted a scathing editorial to the subject of **Shivers** in *Saturday Night*. The movie was rejected by the pre-selection committee at the Canadian Film Awards, 1975 and last, but not least, the Town Council of Cambridge-shire, England, banned the picture.

So much for notoriety. Let's consider the meaning of **Shivers**: is it artistically successful and morally defensible or not? The fact that anyone who examines this movie must account for its contradictions merely complicates the issue. Most critics, in my opinion, have been thrown off course by trying to force a single meaning onto the narrative. **Shivers** does not pretend to be coherent. Rather it examines arcane or insoluble problems and invites affective, violently negative evaluations through its uncompromising viciousness. To perceive the extent of this hatred ex-

Robert MacMillan writes plays and teaches in the Cinema Studies department at Carleton University.

After seeing *The Brood*, a friend of mine remarked that even your long shots are tightly framed; you never see anything in the frame that is irrelevant.

I get a very strong visceral feel when I look through the camera. That's innate, not conscious. I suppose it has to do with my sense of control. When CinemaScope and split-screen came along — De Palma still talks about it — everyone said that you're going to let the audience make a choice of what they want to watch. I've never approached film that way. To me, it's an artifice, and to pretend that it's something else...The audience will of course be involved. A person's reaction to certain colours is very individual. I want to cut down variants in response, because I think there will be a lot of variants anyway. Perhaps framing tightly — I've never thought of it this way — is a means of control. Film is an abstraction. Each shot is not so much what you use as what you decide to exclude. You are abstracting something from its context and shooting only that.

It also has to do with close-ups and the human face — talking heads. **Scanners** is very much about heads, and very often talking heads. You know, children are fascinated by the human face. They reach out and touch it and are delighted by its every move. One of the most exciting things you can put on the screen is a talking head. When I have one and its doing great stuff and saying great stuff I stay on it.

Bertolucci said — and it explains a lot about how his films work — that he knows nothing about lighting, he leaves that for Vittorio (Storaro), but the one thing he keeps for himself is camera movement. To block a scene, he goes out on the set with his viewfinder and walks around. Then the actors come in and he tells them how to move. I find that incredible because I find it very difficult to gauge the size and interplay and depth of various actors. But it explains why sometimes his camera is going away from people just when you want to see their faces. It's a very possessive thing.

The way I work is to have the actors come out and we block the scene together. I think that if you write your own scripts you feel a little less threatened in terms of your auteurship. You're not afraid to allow the words to dictate everything in certain scenes.

I think that's the reason you find people who are afraid of talking heads. A director then feels that the scene belongs to the writer and the actors. To me, that's a very destructive insecurity.



Strange bedfellow...
Alan Migicovsky's
lumps are alive!

pressed by critics is to recognize the picture's audacity. In the following argument I shall try to illuminate certain aspects of the film, and illustrate the ways in which some critics may have misjudged it.

Reviewers have centered their attack on several factors: craftsmanship, morality, purpose, and meaning. First, the technology: some portions of the soundtrack, particularly the opening scenes (on the prints I have seen), are nearly inaudible. These scenes account for less than two percent of the narrative, hence the general reference by some critics to tackiness seems unwarranted. Possibly, they refer to pacing, to those narrative intervals wherein this movie, unlike its Hollywood counterparts, slows down so that nothing seems to transpire.

For example, the narrative begins with slides depicting the various social benefits of apartment living. These are shot in a non-beguiling fashion so that one can easily mistake satire for lack of enthusiasm. A follow-up sequence involving a security guard ("Never had it out of the holster"), is unimaginatively staged and several scenes of similar flatness occur throughout the picture. But is this a case of incompetence or of intentional tone or mood? Cinephiles who have seen Cronenberg's **Crimes Of The Future** (1969) may recognize this cool manner — a quietness or restraint, the employment of one-dimensional performers and the slow passage of events. In **Shivers** this "Canadian" reserve — a kind of camera shyness and quiet delivery of dialogue — contrasts oddly with the Hollywood brashness supplied by performers Joe Silver (Linsky) and Paul Hampton (Doctor Roger St. Luc). But this diversity of method contributes to the movie's textural richness. The flat scenes seem appropriate because they provide a vivid contrast to Cronenberg's very electric screenplay and they add to the picture's bizarre amorality.

Despite the aforementioned "tackiness," one can also point to a considerable measure of slickness in **Shivers**. Take, for example, the very convincing scene of Nick (Alan Migicovsky) watching several large parasites as they move and bulge *inside his body*. This sort of staging (most of it the work of Hollywood make-up man, Joe Blasco, is of swiss-watch precision. This syntax ("special effects") comes from the popular cinema and is more the *sum total* of its metaphysical technology than a story *about* some metaphysical experience. The sexual awakening of Betts (Barbara Steele), on the other hand, is expressed through a different sort of technical



To keep from being eaten alive, Joe Silver fights off the parasites.

expertise — in effect, precisely photographed body-language. Her bare feet walking on broken glass, blood stains on the bathroom floor, the slow motion semi-pirouette towards her female lover...all of these indicate her troubled identity. Her humanity is mysteriously questionable and viewers know that something humanly impossible has entered her vagina. Her remote personality coupled with parasite infestation invest her with an unrecognizable reality, to be precise, she is sexually aroused but no longer human.

British reviewers who emphasize the comic ingredients in this movie fail to suggest its crude vulgarity and downright nastiness: Nick retching a parasite onto his wife's pillow while he and she prepare to make love, the thin rope line of blood down a wall and across the laundromat floor, the parasite that crawls up an elderly woman's walking stick, or the sexually aroused man crushing a cherry pastry into his mouth. Conversely, those Canadian critics who saw only violence in the picture, missed the humor. To cite only the obvious instances: Steele's parodic lesbianism while she lounges on a double bed with Susan Petrie, the frequent "medical" lighting that equates food with disease or cleanliness with fear (one example: the eerie glowing light from an open refrigerator door in a dark room). One might mention the "turned-on" canines, the cross-cutting between strangulation and electric toothbrushing, between breakfasting and acid-burning violence, or the suggested parallelism between a dill pickle held by Rollo Linsky (Joe Silver) and the similarly shaped parasites, or even the scene of Nick talking to his parasites.

This comedy/horror ambivalence is introduced in the opening scenes of the narrative. After a short prologue, *Shivers* begins with two simultaneous morning scenes that are intercut, perhaps inexplicably. Both scenes have the character of what one might call slapstick comedy-terror, and their inexplicable relationship to one another — established through deliberate intercutting — seems all the more unsettling. In one, a middle-aged man chases and wrestles with a teenage girl wearing a private-school uniform. In the other, a young couple prepare for the day ahead. The wife busies herself in the kitchen while the camera draws the viewer's attention to hubby's abdominal discomfort and coughing. By this time, one has seen the older man break into the school girl's room, prevent her from escaping through another door, then strangle her and tape her mouth. Obviously a

With more time and money, do you have more control? Have you been able to do what you wanted to do within schedule and budget limitations?

I have been. I've been lucky, because I've worked with strong producers. Basically, people trusted me, and we've always been able to argue things out, so that when it finally hit the screen, I've been able to say, 'I'm responsible for that.'

But I've never been as involved with the distribution of a film as I am with *Scanners*. Avco-Embassy thinks that *Scanners* will be the biggest moneymaker they've had, and they're behaving accordingly. Bob Rehme of Avco was with New World when they had *Rabid* and he's wanted another of my films since then. They bought *Scanners* in first draft. They sent me the results of sneak previews, asked me what I thought of the ad campaigns. I think it has to do with the fact that I've endured for all these years and have finally begun to develop a following in the States.

I think it's been so slow in the States because you seem to have suffered from both bad reviews and spotty distribution.

Especially with *The Brood*. I was most disappointed with the way *The Brood* was handled in the States. That's one reason we didn't go with New World for *Scanners*.

*You've suffered from some of the worst reviews — I put off seeing *Shivers* for a long time after the Marshall Delaney (Robert Fulford) review. How do you react to that sort of criticism?*

Unfortunately, *Saturday Night* has the kind of readership that makes it difficult for you to get financing for your next film. Fulford sounded as if he'd be happy if I never made another film. That he thought it was repulsive, that he hated it, fine; but to say that this person should be responsible for closing down the Canadian film industry, that to me was irresponsible, hysterical, and nuts.

You get to the point where you like the critics who like your work and dislike the critics who don't. It's not objective but it is emotionally objective. It serves a survival function — why be a masochist? It's different when someone who likes your stuff thinks your latest work isn't very good. In a way, that hurts more than someone who's always hated your work. But when you make a movie, you're

exposed to literally hundreds of people who tell you what they think. A critic just becomes one more person who's seen your movie and who may or may not be very intelligent, or knowledgeable, or respected, and that helps ease the pain. The difference is that critics write, and are published, and are read — and that's as it should be. But it's really annoying when it keeps someone from seeing the film who would have liked it. That drives you crazy.



Trying to hold on to their sanity, Stephen Lack and Jennifer O'Neill in **Scanners**

*I've always been intrigued by the names in your films — you seem to have a gift for them — the Institute for Psychoplasmatism in **The Brood**, Ephemerol in **Scanners**...*

They're very important to me; if I read a script and the names are John Smith and Mary Brown, I automatically start to lose interest. If you are creating an artifice, every part of that artifice contributes to the whole. You can't just say 'Give them any names, the names don't matter,' because the names do matter. Often, a character doesn't come into sharp focus for me until I've found his name. Ephemerol, for instance, just came to me. Part of it was Demerol, and part of it was ephemera, and part of it, though it's spelled differently, is effeminate, a female feel to it, 'cause it's a drug for pregnant ladies. It just sort of felt really right.

murder scene, yet the motivation is unclear: why *this* man and *that* girl? What could she possibly have done to deserve this end? One's conjectures are abruptly short-circuited by the other obtrusive sequence. Husband Nick examines his stomach (close-up in a mirror). One person has been inexplicably murdered, another seems mysteriously ill. As the narrative progresses, horror is continually undercut by comedy: one consequently fails to learn very much about the old man and why he acts as he does, and Nick remains a disturbing, malevolent young man without biographical or psychological flesh.

Reviewers in several countries have responded with revulsion and anger to **Shivers'** morbid and tasteless character. It is, I assume, intentionally tasteless much in the manner of **Pink Flamingos** (1974), **Texas Chainsaw Massacre** (1974), and **L'eau chaude, L'eau froide** (1976). But then taste is not a prerequisite of art — a fact established in ancient history and reaffirmed by **Les Fauves**, **Der Blaue Reiter**, and the surrealists, to mention a few modern manifestations. The legless man in **Los Olvidados** (1950) is not tasteful, nor is the chicken-woman in the last scene of **Freaks** (1932), yet they serve a moral and intellectually enlightening end. John Hofsess' distinction (*Maclean's* October 6, 1975) between sensationalism and "shallow" sensationalism underlines this point. **Shivers'** sensationalism, as he suggests, may be intellectually provocative rather than shallow.

One reviewer described the movie as a mere "succession of crude shocks." In fact, the narrative unfolds in a direction from crude to *more complex* shocks: for example, the pushing and shoving strangulation in early scenes with Hobbes and his teenage mistress/patient precede the scene of an elderly lady ("I'm hungry...I'm hungry for love"), who rapes a much younger man; and that precedes a sequence of the same man who punches another to the floor so that a mother can crawl on top of the victim while her female child mounts for a kiss, thereby delivering a parasite to his mouth. Similarly, sexual references increase in number and variety as the story develops. Even the parasitical "disease" undergoes transformation: at first, simply mysterious, it gradually assumes additional medical, then sexual, and eventually socio-psychological characteristics. Perhaps no consistent reading may be made of this, a fact noted by two British critics. But must one regard structural complexity of this sort as mistaken, inept or as incoherent? Perhaps **Shivers** lacks a rational premise; nonetheless, it contains a serious point of view and one that grows out of its structure.

Many reviewers assume that **Shivers** is merely a device for terrifying people and therefore hate it. Granted, some critics may have been terrified, but no evidence has emerged to demonstrate the effect of this picture upon audiences. Given the primitive state of audience-sociology, any number of hypotheses are possible. Let's try the following for example: the creature-parasites are fascinating through their peculiar motivation. On the one hand, these "aphrodisiacs" succeed in transmitting sexual feelings from one human to another and consequently seem purposive. Moreover, they have the capacity to hide, to crawl, to leap into the air, and to maim. Yet, to say that they can "think" seems like stretching it; perhaps because they are so visually unlike "conscious" beings. One reviewer's reference to self-propelled calves' liver demonstrates my point: liver is familiar, but can it really take over a city? In other words, does this movie actually terrify audiences, or rather, feed on the individual viewer's speculative fancies?

By and large, reviewers have ignored the story's clever use of setting. The narrative examines questions of urban environmental determinism, the ways in which social space and individual human anatomies parallel one another. The parasite headed for Betts' vagina emerges from the round orifice of her bathtub drain. And another slug is found by children in the anatomical slit, or mouth, of a common mailbox. The satirical thrust of this seems unmistakable. A crude psychoanalytical interpretation might deal

with the problem of egress and entry within self-enclosed apartment spaces. The real joke however is more obvious, poking fun at contemporary architecture that is based on social-blockage principles.

A parallel situation was described in Buñuel's *El Angel Exterminador* (1962). Members of the Mexican bourgeoisie are inexplicably trapped in an apartment during a dinner party — although the doors are wide open, they remain rooted to the spot. Society quickly breaks down due to its internal contradictions and, without food and social amenities, these rich socialites are reduced quickly to savages — that which they may have always been. In *Shivers* the apartment-dwellers are trapped by their privacy, in effect isolated from their sensual (bodily) responses, and, in addition, socially separated from Montreal by their oppressive architectural setting. With its own shops, recreation facilities, and private medical clinic, Starliner Tower is a kind of hospital — indeed the clinic may serve as metaphor for the whole environment. Then, without warning, the parasitic disease passes from resident to resident as if providing the missing linkage in this society. Suddenly, one's stranger-neighbors become one's closest friends albeit through excessive and parodic sexual connection. The clinic doctor (St. Luc), as hero, is placed in the comical position of racing to stamp out or halt this increasing neighborliness, some of it tending toward uncontrollable violence. More precisely, one only *assumes* the doctor to be hero. In reality, given his previous inattention to social alienation in the building, he serves as the villain of the piece.

Several reviewers have referred, sometimes angrily, to plagiarism in this picture, as if plagiarism were some kind of cinematic crime and not the life-blood of cinema history, as, in fact, it is. In any event, *Shivers*' "plagiaristic" analogies with *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers* (1956) and *Night Of The Living Dead* (1968), work for the picture rather than against it. (See: Richard Combs, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, March 1976). Both the Siegel and Romero movies employ the stock device of setting a bizarre event within a relatively normal environment. Conversely, *Starliner*'s milieu (first indicated by a smothering promotional voice over the credits) is sexually and socially abnormal.

Far from borrowing the undigested conventions of other movies, Cronenberg has turned them around. In a peculiar fashion, the parasites represent the intrusion of "norms" into a world of deviant behavior. As the narrative ends, the parasites have all but disappeared. Where did they go? Were they merely images of self-reference created by the performers in this adventure? Writer-director Cronenberg seems ambivalent with respect to the pain/pleasure dialectic he has created. In this regard, Christian Viviani (*Positif*, July/August 1975) claimed that *Shivers* was a subtle parable of sexual taboos. The movie is opposed to the quasi-Freudian pop psychology of Norman O. Brown, but it does not take, as some critics suggest, a hateful position toward sexuality. Rather, sexuality seems like a metaphor for human nature — frightening because it is unfathomable.

A British National Film Theatre brochure of 1977 describes *Shivers* as "agreeably unsettling" with a "nicely subversive humor." But the implied comparison with *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers* does not hold. Cronenberg's picture undertakes more than the undermining of middle-class security; it examines disease and related fears that cross class-differences and class conflict. This is not black humor, but a peculiarly glossy humor — closer to scientific investigation than to satire, or to the humanist context of satire. *Shivers* raises questions about the nature of the universe. Given their anthropocentric view of truth, the humanist critics were bound to be angry.

□



Not moonmen, but technicians in a chemical plant where a powerful mind-altering drug is made

All your films, it seems to me, are essentially Frankenstein movies.

Yes. That's one of the reasons I thought I would do Frankenstein. I realized that of the three or four archetypal horror stories — Frankenstein, Dracula, perhaps Jeckyll and Hyde — I was really closest to Frankenstein. It's the return of what's been created, and also the father/son, man/god connection between those things.

*Also, your monsters are so fouled up by what's been done to them...I'm thinking especially of Rose in *Rabid*, who can't even believe she's a monster. I've always*

felt that was an extraordinary ending to **Rabid**.

Thank you.

Let's talk about your films in relation to other people's work. When **Shivers** and **Rabid** came out people remarked on the parallels between them and **Night of the Living Dead**.

Well, **Stereo** and **Crimes of the Future** were made before **Night of the Living Dead**. Certainly I'd seen it before I did **Shivers**, but that almost made me leave out a scene that looked a little like **Night** — where the people come over the hill.

I'm aware of their presence and I'm influenced by them in an industry sense. I know that people I take the script to are going to think about these other pictures, but that's not the kind of influence you're talking about.

This isn't an accusation of plagiarism.

I'm not insulted. This is part of the criticism game. I'm interested in all kinds of directors and watch all kinds of stuff. I think I'm beyond being influenced in that very generative sense, because my style and my vision, such as they may be, seem to be innate.

There's no particular filmmaker that I'm obsessed with, because I didn't go to a

David Cronenberg Filmography

Shorts (1967-1970)
Directed & Scripted

Transfer
From The Drain
The Italian Machine
Secret Weapons
Stereo (65 min.)
Crimes of the Future (65 min.)

Feature Films
Directed and Scripted

1975 - **Shivers**
1976 - **Rabid**
1978 - **Fast Company**
(Co-scripted with Phil Savath & Courtney Smith)
1979 - **The Brood**
1980 - **Scanners**



Shades of 1984... Futuristic guards take aim at the enemy

film school. But I went through that with my writing. For a while, everything I wrote was an imitation of Nabokov. Before that I went through my Evergreen Review period, obsessed with William Burroughs.

It's a phase you go through, and I found it very suffocating. When I got into film I approached it sort of sideways. It wasn't 'I'm going to be a filmmaker.' So what I wanted came out naturally. I didn't study shots, I didn't study **Citizen Kane** and Howard Hawks or John Ford — I didn't know anything about those guys, except that I'd seen all their films; but only as a kid going to the movies, and that's very different.

So Bogdanovich is being suffocated by Ford and Hawks, and De Palma is still being suffocated by what he perceives to be Hitchcock. I feel very fortunate that I haven't had to suffer that on film. I've sort of done it in unpublished writing. When I came to film, I didn't even think of that stuff.

*It's been noted that **The Brood** and **Kramer vs. Kramer** are essentially the same film.*

I've said that, too. It is my version of **Kramer**, and for my money it's a much more realistic version, emotionally, because I've been through that. I hadn't seen **Kramer** until about a week ago, and I was surprised when I saw how untrue **Kramer** is. It's been touted as very realistic, yet emotionally it's a total fiction. I have no qualms about saying that, in a very real way, **The Brood** is a more realistic film. Where is that anger, that rage, that desire to kill? Everyone's so

sweet, so compassionate, so understanding. She's on the witness stand and he's saying "No, don't say that about yourself, you're too wonderful." That's bullshit.

After only eighteen months with his father, the kid seems to have no interest in the possibility of living with his mother. Now that is a fiction. The ambivalence of the kid is not portrayed. The reversal at the end, so sweet, that's supposed to be a happy ending in some way, and obviously isn't.

But yes, I did notice the similarities.

*OK. It seemed to me that the great undeveloped theme of **The Fury** was the potential for species war. In a way, **Scanners** is the subtext of the De Palma film.*

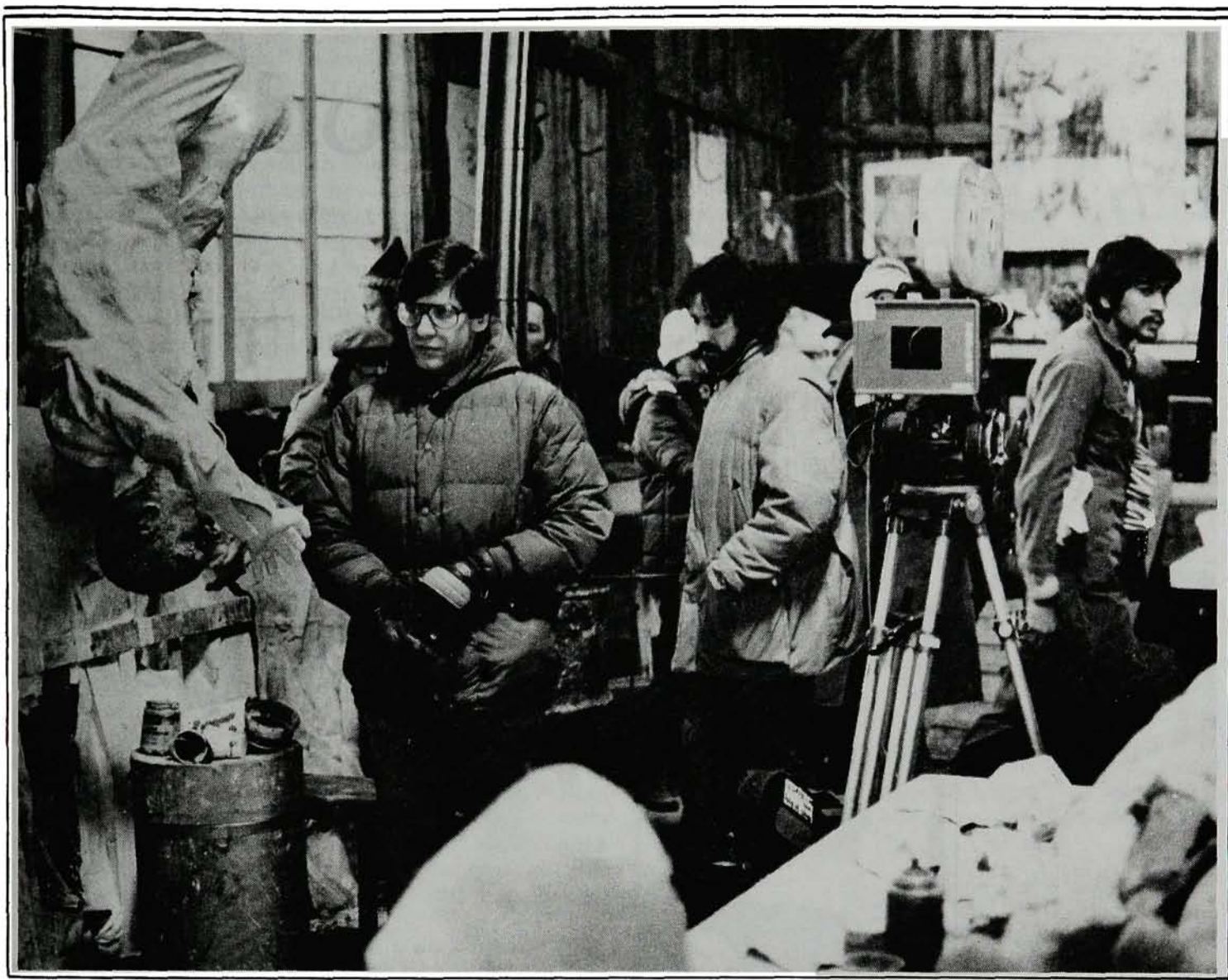
In more ways than one, although **Scanners** is really a return to **Stereo**. When I started to make **Scanners**, I chose to ignore the existence of **The Fury**, because I didn't want to stop doing things that I thought I could do, just because they'd been touched on by De Palma.

But I agree with you, though there were a lot of things that bothered me about **The Fury**. It particularly drove me crazy that he'd spend a lot of time setting up some phenomenon and then completely ignore it later. You can play any game by any rules, but once the rules are established you have to follow them. That's one of the reasons the film failed.

What you're talking about is interesting, but they're not really a new species because they've been artificially created...

To a second generation...

But even then, artificially. Only when



Cronenberg checks out one of the dummies hanging around the studio.

the genes start to take over do you call it a true species. Of course, when you're talking about designer genes it becomes a moot point. If the world is half Scanners, even if they've been artificially created, you have to consider them a true species that has to be dealt with.

I think that's a fascinating aspect. There's such a clear-cut gap, an abyss between a normal person and a Scanner. That is one of the reasons I gave the Scanners such extraordinary powers, because a normal person faced with a Scanner feels that he's facing another kind of creature.

What's next?

I can feel my strength growing, but not because I've had to destroy opposition, just that I'm accumulating a track record. It's one thing to come from nowhere, like John Carpenter with **Halloween**, and

make a lot of money. I haven't had a film that's done anywhere near what **Halloween** did, and so the other way is to hang in there and if your stuff is any good, you'll get your track record. I suppose I'm still looking for my first film with a major, and I've certainly heard more horror stories about them than about the minors.

I have an idea for my next film, but it's really too soon to talk about it. If what I'm writing now develops, it will be less science fiction and more what people think of as naturalistic, even though it has a very bizarre premise.

Your bizarre premises have come to seem more and more realistic.

And I'm not doing anything about it, the world is doing that. When I did **Shivers** and **Rabid**, any of the medical people we connected with thought it was

realistic, not ridiculous. In **Rabid**, they were fascinated by the idea of a graft that could think, that would invent its own solution to certain biological problems. **Scanners** may be totally realistic in five years.

One final question. What's your favorite colour?

For Ferrarri's, red.

(See p.34 for a review of Scanners.)

For a full critical examination of Cronenberg's work, refer to Mark Chute's "He Came From Within" in **Film Comment** (March-April, 1980); **Cinema Canada** No. 22 for a coverage of the **Shivers** controversy, No. 58 for reviews of **The Brood** and **Fast Company**, No. 63 for a piece on the special effects in **Scanners**; and **Cinefantastique**, Vol. 10 No. 4 (Spring 1981), for an issue devoted to Cronenberg's work. □