Videodrome

**Insidious effects of high tech**

Never let it be said that Canadian film director David Cronenberg, or fledgling American actress Jayne Eastwood, were anything less than realistic. It's five o'clock on a November evening in the Harbourfront offices of radio station CKY, on the top floor of the Toronto Star building, and they are the only two people to be found in this labyrinth of bright blue and red corridors, plush carpeting, and mirrored wall. Somebody had said five o'clock, but the rest of the cast and crew of Videodrome, Cronenberg's newest film, are nowhere to be seen.

Canadian actress Jayne Eastwood is on the phone in one of the boardrooms, talking to her agent. "This is becoming an event. And Deborah has some pills for David. (No, they're probably vitamins, everyone seems to be paranoid about catching a cold.)"

The Canadian film industry is late, as usual. Or perhaps, as recent articles suggest, it Doesn't Exist. As usual, however, Cronenberg's talent for the unwonted is untapped.

But then actors and technicians begin to arrive, and with them about a million pounds of lighting, sound and camera equipment - some of which is delegated to a downstairs corridor while everything else is being set up. There is never a film to be made.

Meanwhile, the Actors' Building, an hour or so later, are in motion. Station CKY is now station CRAM (fromm), and dancing in the studio, playing the mike like a female Jagger, is Harry, a pop psychologist Nickie Brandt. Worried that she might have edged over into a showbiz act, or off the set, Nickie is certainly quite a show herself - part media guru and part prophet giving advice to some very troubled people.

Cronenberg's films are often full of troubled people and their bizarre problems. In Videodrome the problems begin with an underground TV show of the same name - full of scenes of real-life violence and sex - and the highly secret organization that uses the show as, you guessed it, "the ultimate weapon."

As usual, however, Cronenberg's talent for horror merchant and intellectual savant is for quirky, unendearingly entertaining storytelling hints at some serious thematic concerns about the way "technology is altering everything about us, even our bodies," as the director puts it.

On this evening's shoot, things would appear to be fairly normal, no exploding heads, suction cup arm pits, or parasites slithering out of people's throats - effects work has yet not begun. Although the high-technology atmosphere of the station does lend a touch of unreality to the environment, so do all the journalists, media people and their accompanying crews of technicians, crowded into the CKY newsroom. There is even an NFQ film crew here to shoot a clip of on-location footage to represent the Canadian industry in a film that will be shipped to our embassies abroad.

Appropriately, Videodrome, a film about the insidious effects of high-technology media in our lives, is attracting its fair share of attention from its real-life progenitors.

Paying little attention to the media circus is tall, lanky, American actor James Woods (most recently in Ted Kotcheff's Captured, and also The Onion Field, Eyewitness and Holocaust), as he stands in the stairwell entrance to the station, waiting for his cue. He's remarkably relaxed, typically sardonic. Someone asks him if he's on his mark. Woods replies that he taps his mark to his shoe. "That way I never go wrong."

Nothing much seems likely to go wrong on this latest Filmplan International production by executive producers Pierre David and Victor Solomon. Budgeted at six million dollars, and bought by Universal (who put up 60% of the money) for worldwide distribution, the Videodrome set would appear to be the epitome of industry professionalism.

A case in point: just before the call to action on this latest shot, first assistant director John Board asks for a halter and runs over to change the paper under an extra's arm from a Toronto Sun to a Toronto Star. One must remember, obviously, which newspaper building is the location for the evening.

Cronenberg himself is genuinely enthusiastic about the film. Rumors abound that the special effects being designed by industry wizard Rick Baker (American Werewolf in London) will be rather intriguing: a hand that takes a videocassette into his stomach, TV sets becoming fleshly, living things... But Cronenberg is quick to emphasize his enthusiasm for other areas of the project as well. "In terms of character, in terms of acting, I think it's my strongest film to this point. It's actually quite funny stuff, too, not even black humour particularly."

As for Debbie Harry, he says, "We just don't think of her as having anything to do with rock music at all. She's a gentle young actress handling a big role for the first time, and doing quite well. The technology of film is not known to her. She's learning a lot about the process from Jimmy (Woods). He's very generous that way as an actor."

Everything in this corner of the Canadian film world is yet to unfold as it should. Familiar Cronenberg art director Carol Speier and director of photography Mark Irwin are on board once again. Shooting began in and around Toronto on Dec. 27, and wraps on Dec. 30.

Meanwhile, back on set, someone is telling James Woods that he looks like James Dean. He's probably heard that one before, but only the audience of Videodrome will know for sure.

**John P. McKinnon**

**VIDEODROME**

David Cronenberg & Cronenberg's personal assistant, Rick Baker (who directed the latest shot, first assistant director John Board, set stylist Julee Christie, and set assistant Rachelle Charon) and producer Michael Rea.

**A view of the media - tomorrow: James Woods, Deborah Harry**

**Photo: Rick Porter**

**Poetry in Motion**

In pursuit of the Muse

Scattered across the table is an amazing collection of full ashtrays, half-full cups of coffee, and destroying of paper; notes scribbled on the back of one's other notes - lists of people to phone, and scanned copies of glowing reviews. No, this is not the set of a film about a young artist, although it could well be. It was once the kitchen table of the house that Ron Mann has been living in, and it is now the center of an incredible flurry of artistic activity.

The Toronto film maker has only recently made his feature film debut with a 90-minute documentary about four jazz musicians entitled Imagine the Sound. The film, which was shown at the Festival of Festivals, was nominated as one of the five most popular films. It went on to win the Silver Hugo at the Chicago Film Festival for best documentary and has already