

David Cronenberg's Videodrome

What's going to get in the way here, the one and only thing that might prevent David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* from reaching the wide, wide audience it deserves is the "I-don't-like-that-stuff" syndrome. You know it; the odds are a thousand-to-one that, at some point or another, you're a party to it. It's your complete unwillingness to go to a movie because the subject matter, or the style, or the genre turns you off.

For me, it's anything about a young man or woman coming of age, especially at the turn of the century, especially in the Australian outback.

For a lot of you, it's science-fiction, horror, violence and, especially, David Cronenberg.

Forget the syndrome. *Videodrome* is as far above the average science fiction/horror movie as Coppola's *The Conversation* is above the average mystery — a movie to which it is thematically close — and worthy of the same kind of careful attention.

What makes it so is that Cronenberg has found, for the second time in only five features, something filmmakers can go a lifetime and never find at all — a real monster. In *The Brood*, he did it with child abuse and created a first-rate shocker, but child abuse is a present reality for only a few of us. *Videodrome's* monster is much more pervasive, devouring and deadly to all of us — it's television itself (Look, I don't want to get preachy here, Cronenberg certainly doesn't, but I happen to agree with his thesis). Television is transforming us all, says Cronenberg, replacing our lived reality with its created images. "It's the retina of the mind's eye," says Brian O'Blivion. That name, by the way, is the character's own creation for himself. This is the first script in which Cronenberg has allowed his sense of humour full play and, in context, he is very witty.

The excellence of the central concept — that we are all tainted by the monster — generates the excellence that fills *Videodrome* at every level. In Michael Crichton's *Looker*, only part of TV is bad: the pure good guys penetrate the baddies' stronghold and stop the evil. Stock plot. Here, Max Renn, president of CIVIC-TV (a station very much like Toronto's CITY-TV) is hero, trying to penetrate the mystery of *Videodrome*, a satellite-beamed program of graphic, plotless sex-and-violence. Renn is the villain because he wants to broadcast this

trash and boost the ratings and the victim because *Videodrome* penetrates and changes him. His odyssey may contain elements of standard fairy-tale archetype, but it's a long, long way from being a stock plot.

Renn's ambiguity is passed on to the viewer in Mark Irwin's tight, well-composed cinematography. When Nicki Brand (Deborah Harry), Renn's lover, tells him she wants to audition for *Videodrome*, he reacts with horror we share, but it's her that's bathed in warm, golden light and him that's in the cold dark at the side of the frame. Similarly, we're made aware of his, and our, taintedness in the establishing shots that feature shining skyscraper cityscapes behind, and above the brown squalor we really live in. Inevitably, the eye focusses on the shining to the exclusion of the squalor, just like TV.

Carol Spier's art direction carries it forward, placing the characters in messy, unattended-to environments and the actors respond beautifully, behaving like shambling derelicts; James Woods (Renn) especially, until brought to life by *The Tube* and its violent fantasies.

Though *Videodrome* is James Woods' movie all the way, all the supporting players are excellent, creating interesting, well-defined characters even when, from a script point of view, they are required to be nothing more than plot devices. Special mention, however, should go to Peter Dvorsky as Harlan, Renn's comic technical wizard, and Deborah Harry, who, despite reported problems on the set that resulted in her part being trimmed, has made Nicki Brand a marvellous kink.

Kinky sex and kinkier violence play a big part in *Videodrome*, as they do in most of Cronenberg's work. The difference here, to reassure the "I-don't-like-that-stuff" crowd, is that they are never "gratuitous", nor indulged in beyond the demands of the story. Nor are they played for titillation, and I speak as a man who enjoys his sado-masochistic fantasies; you can close your eyes during those bits and not feel like you're missing the film's *raison d'être*. If you can close your eyes at all during *Videodrome*, you're unbelievable. This is a film that doesn't waste a frame and that spends an amazing number of them expanding and refining its central idea.

Whether you're predisposed to like Cronenberg or not, *Videodrome* is worth your attention as a thoughtful film on a serious subject and, if that subject and Cronenberg's ideas on it appeal to you, let me recommend a much quieter horror: *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* by Jerry Mander (Quill, New York, 1978) which covers much the same material as *Videodrome*, but through reason, not drama.

The correlation isn't as odd as it sounds. Science fiction has always been a genre of ideas. See the movie. Read the book. Find out just how well ideas can be developed on screen when somebody with talent is at the top of his form.

Andrew Dowler ●

VIDEODROME p. Claude Heroux d./sc. David Cronenberg exec. p. Pierre David. Victor Solnicki assoc. p. Lawrence Nesis 1st. asst. d. John Board 2nd. asst. d. Libby Bowden 3rd. asst. d. Rocco Gismondi p. co-ord. Roger Heroux tech. advisor Denise Di Novi p. man. Gwen Iveson asst. p. man. Janet Cuddy p. sec. Angela Gruenthal cont. Gillian Richardson loc. man. David Coatsworth art d. Carol Spier 1st. asst. art d. Barbara Dunphy 2nd. asst. art d. Tom Coulter trainee art d. Jo Ann Landenheim props master Peter Lauterman asst. props Greg Pelchat set dresser Angelo Stea 1st. asst. set dresser Enrico Campana 2nd. asst. set dresser Gareth Wilson 3rd. asst. set dresser Gary Jack costume des. Delphine White asst. des. Eileen Kennedy wardrobe master Arthur Rowsell Sp. make-up Rick Baker music Howard Shore wardrobe asst. Maureen Gurney wardrobe trainee Denise Woodley hd. make-up Shonagh Jabour hair stylist Tom Booth casting/principals, actors Clare Walker (Walker/Bowen) casting extras Peter Lavender d.o.p./operator Mark Irwin 1st. asst./focus Robin Miller 2nd. asst./clapper/loader James Crowe stills Rick Porter gaffer Jock Brandis best boy Scotty Allen electric Gary Phipps key grip Maris Jansons asst. key grip David Hynes grip Brian Daniels loc. sd. mix. Brian Day boom op. Michael LaCroix video co-ord. Michael Lennick 1st. asst. video Lee Wilson 2nd. asst. video Rob Meckler const. man. Bill Harman hd. carpenter Alexander Russell asst. hd. carpenter Joe Curtin carpenters Kirk Cheney, Alan Sharpe, Robert Sher, John Bankson labourer Charles Martin hd. painter Nick Kosonic scenic painters Janet Cormack, Reet Puhm painters Simon Harwood, Elaine Cohen, Bill Gibson trans. co-ord. Don Baldassarra hd. driver Randy Jones driver/Winnie John Vander Pas driver Al Kosonic driver/Mr. Woods Isidore Mussalun driver/Ms. Harry David Chud unit pub./Toronto Jill Spitz unit pub./Montreal Suzanne Daningburg ed. Ron Sanders 1st. asst. ed. Elaine Foreman 2nd. asst. ed. Michael Rea Mr. Cronenberg's personal asst. Richard Zygokiewicz Mr. David's sec. Monik Nantel Mr. C. Heroux's sec. Monique Légaré Mr. Solnicki's sec. Ellen Rosen comptroller Serge Major asst. comptroller Gilles Léonard p. acc't Lacia Kornylo asst. acc't Rachelle Charron bookkeeper Maureen Fitzgerald receptionist Bonnie Gold p. asst's. Richard Spiegelman, Howard Rothschild crafts service Lydia Wazana p.c. Filmplan International Inc. running time 88 min. colour 35mm dist./Eng. Canada & US Universal Pictures Lp. James Woods, Sonja Smits, Deborah Harry, Peter Dvorsky, Les Carlson, Jack Creley, Lynne Gorman, Julie Khaner, Reiner Schwarz, David Bolt, Lally Cadeau, Henry Gomez, Harvey Chao, Kay Hawtrey, David Tsubouchi, Robin McCulloch, Sam Malkin, Ronald Reece.



● The Crewcuts in 1954: faded memories

of time and partly, I suspect, to keep those numbers up, it concentrates solely on folk, MOR and rock and lumps together 35 artists whose only common ground, in many cases, is their Canadian citizenship.

The intention, and the achievement, was clearly to produce a mainstream show for a mainstream viewer, but it is sheer superstition to believe such a viewer actually exists. Through the years, it has been well, though informally, documented that the citizen likely to have a religious experience watching Carole Pope rub her crotch while doing "High School Confidential" is also likely to tremble with rage and visions of Sid Vicious while watching Paul Anka do "My Way" and tell how writing it while thinking of his hero, Frank Sinatra, brought him to tears. Anka fans, of course, will be equally unenthused by Rough Trade and admirers of Valdi's "Play Me A Rock'n Roll Song" will not leap with glee at the sound of heavy metallists Rush and Saga. It is the inevitable corollary to the something-for-everyone principle: you will also produce something for everyone to hate.

To cope with this, *Heart Of Gold's* producers have adopted the Laugh-In principle: mix it up and keep it moving; if you don't like what's on right now, stick around, there'll be something to your taste in just a few minutes. On one level this is perfectly true and, whatever your taste, when *Heart Of Gold* finally gets around to it, you're more than likely to be delighted. The researchers and crew have unearthed or created some wonderful pieces of performance and interview on almost every performer covered. I won't list my favorites; it would be pointless unless your taste exactly matches mine (which, incidentally, is why I'm doing this review in terms as general as I can make them).

The problem, though, is that the Laugh-In principle keeps you from savoring your favourites. With a few exceptions — Anne Murray and Ian & Sylvia, among

● Blondie's Deborah Harry adds kink to *Videodrome*



Peter Shatalow's Heart of Gold

Heart Of Gold, Insight Productions' three-hour, three-part CBC Superspecial (aired Dec. 12, 13, 14) is a classic case of the good idea falling among bad ones and going tragically wrong.

According to John Brunton, the show's executive producer, the original idea — a history of Canadian rock — was changed after consultation with the oracle of American TV ratings, which revealed that, in that country at least, prime-time rock drew lowly and humble numbers. So "Canadian rock" became "Canadian pop," which is not at all the same thing.

Pop can include dixieland, big bands, jazz, blues, folk, country, middle-of-the-road (MOR), rock, reggae and anything else that's ever received AM airplay and Canada has produced important and interesting artists in virtually all those fields. But *Heart Of Gold* doesn't try to be complete. Partly from considerations

others — the segments are so short and choppy that you've no sooner settled into a groove than you're jerked right out of it again. After a while, you start to feel like you're watching the world's longest K-Tel commercial.

The good idea is further cluttered by a conflict between the documentary and "entertainment special" aspects of the show. The latter phrase is Brunton's and he insists it describes how he always conceived *Heart Of Gold* to be. But he's given us lots of documentary material and often at the expense of the music. Time after time we are given only fragments of very good songs and songs interrupted for a line of narration or artists' commentary. True, the interruption points are well-chosen, but if music is the point, then any interruption is jarring and destructive of what is very often a fine performance.

On the other hand, there isn't enough documentary material. In one segment, Robbie Robertson tells how he and The Band joined Bob Dylan and got booed from one end of the earth to the other. You're never told why and, if you're at all curious, that omission may make you very resentful (it was because Dylan had never played rock before — this was 1965 — and his folkie audience despised the stuff. So, when he showed up with electric guitars, they decided he was selling out). There are lots of other examples and they all follow the same pattern: enough information to awaken your interest, not enough to pay it off.

In addition, there are a few flat-out factual errors in Donald Sutherland's orotund narration and a couple of unintentional structural howlers, the best being that right after Randy Bachman delivers his seriously-held belief that Canadian music is a world-wide force, we get no-talent Lisa dal Bello desperately shaking her breasts to sell us her one hit, "Pretty Girls."

Most of the moments in *Heart Of Gold* that I liked have faded from memory. What remains is the overall feeling of profound irritation and frustration at seeing a good idea wrecked for bad reasons. Despite this, I hope Brunton got the numbers he wanted, because they just might get him the money to do what he says he really wants to do: a series of 13 half-hours on the same subject. That, rather than *Heart Of Gold*, is what both artists and audiences deserve.

Andrew Dowler ●

HEART OF GOLD p. John Brunton, Iain Peterson d. Peter Shatlow assoc. p. Ann Mayall exec. p. John Brunton asst. to p. Susan Hutt narrated by Donald Sutherland ed. Cathy Gulkin photographed by: Mark Irwin, Rene O'Hashi, Robert New, Philip Earnshaw, John Walker, Rick Mason, D.A. Pennebaker, Larry Wood asst. camera Robin Miller, Carl Harvey, John Hobson, Donna Mobbs, Marvin Midwick, Michael May, William Brown sd. rec. John Thompson add. sd. rec. Bryan Day, Randy Johnson, Ron Judkins, Gene Bernard, Chris Edges sd. ed. Peter Thillaye re-rec. Paul Coombe asst. ed. John Brooke film asst. Daphne Pallon grip. Maris Jansons and David Hines asst. grip Christopher Dean & Rodney Daw research consultant Larry LeBlanc researchers John Brooke, Charles Lazar, Claudette Jaiko theme music Fred Mollin titles & animation Stuff processing FilmHouse p.c. Insight Productions Co. Limited in association with CBC and Labatt Brewing Co. Ltd. running time: 3 hours, 16mm Cdn. dist. Insight Productions Lp. The Diamonds, The Crewcuts, The Four Lads, Paul Anka, Bobby Curtola, Ronnie Hawkins, The Band, Ian & Sylvia, Mandala, Joni Mitchell, Lovin' Spoonful, The Mamas & The Papas, Steppenwolf, Neil Young, David Clayton-Thomas, Andy Kim, The Guess Who, Gordon Lightfoot, Leonard Cohen, Murray McLauchlan, Valdy, BTO, Anne Murray, Gino Vannelli, Dan Hill, Bruce Cockburn, Rough Trade, Loverboy, Chilliwack, Lisa dal Bello, Triumph, April Wine, Saga, Rush, Burton Cummings.

Fernando Arrabal's *Odyssey of the Pacific*

Over a year later than its originally anticipated release date, Fernando Arrabal's *Odyssey of the Pacific* has chugged into Canadian theatres, and the suspicion is that this anachronistic clunker will be ordered to pull out fast.

It concerns the daydream fantasies of three children who plot to escape the unimaginative confines of their bourgeois life, on board a resurrected steam locomotive. Unfortunately, the film is deplorably scripted, poorly acted and technically flawed. Its principal problem lies in the leaden inauthenticity of its language — not surprising considering the international melange which contributed to this English-language film. Spanish-born Arrabal does not speak English himself, yet he bravely (or foolishly) made the film in English. The internationally reknown playwright/director co-scripted the film with Quebec writer Roger Lemelin of *Les Plouffe* fame, and his words were conveyed into English by an on-location translator. Another factor compounding this linguistic contrivance was that the actors were predominantly French-speaking, were directed in French, yet delivered their lines, for the most part, in English. That is, when they weren't being dubbed! One is tempted to ask: why was this film even made in English? Surely it would have rung truer in French, not just in terms of language, but also in the actors' delivery and even the film's very content. The impression one is left with is that the film keeps missing the station, as its European sensibilities drive it in one direction, and its attempted North American commercialism drives it in another.

The story begins when nine-year-old Liz and seven-year-old Toby (Anick and

Jonathan Starr, both in their first film roles) spend their summer vacation at the well-to-do country home of their Uncle Alex (Jean-Louis Roux) and Aunt Elsa (Monique Mercure). The childless couple dote dutifully on their charges, dressing them immaculately in Victorian clothes and surrounding them with gadgets, toys and television. One day a young Cambodian refugee boy named Hoang (Ky Huot Uk) arrives, and the three fast friends take to exploring together in the surrounding woods. Their day-trips lead them to the discovery of a crippled ex-locomotive engineer, Thubal (Mickey Rooney), who lives as a hermit in a decrepit railway car. Thubal, who calls himself the Emperor of Peru, sits astride a wheelchair-throne, and with darting eyes, flashing teeth and an annoying glisten of spittle at the corner of his mouth, pontificates magniloquently about whatever madness comes to mind. It is all very reminiscent of Lewis Carroll minus the profound, poetic lunacy. The children stumble across Thubal's hidden locomotive and set themselves the task of restoring it to its original glory. So that Hoang can rescue and marry his mother, they plan to travel to Cambodia on the resurrected train, with Thubal at the engine. Thubal encourages and stokes their fantasies, but at the last minute declines to go with them, proving that even a "mad" adult can't share the fantasies of children.

Arrabal has said that his own children's fantasies were the inspiration for the film, and ironically the fantastical side of the film does seem genuinely linked to a child's imagination: the one believable thread in this whole improbable concoction. A good part of the film consists of Toby's dreams of grandeur. Each of his fantasies involves some ingenious stroke of inventiveness on his part, turning potentially disastrous situations into triumphs in front of an adulatory crowd. But these wildly cheering crowd scenes are so sloppily inserted that they bear no continuity with Toby's filmed fantasies. They are too obviously what they are: shots of ballgame and

concert audiences. Contrasted with Toby's narcissistic daydreams are Hoang's real and tragic memories of his separation from his parents and his desperate escape from Cambodia.

Although the film essentially poses the children as mere vehicles for their own fantasies, nothing can excuse the wooden expressionlessness of their acting, especially that of Starr and Ky Huot Uk. And Mercure's and Roux's efforts are marred by the weary vapidity of the dialogue. Rooney did his scenes on weekends (usually in one or two takes), travelling back and forth from a play he was then doing on Broadway (*Sugar Babies*). He too is a victim of the film's dialogue, but his hyperbolic rantings are hammed to the hilt, even though delivered from a wheelchair. Widening the film's credibility gap even further, the extras appear embarrassingly aware that they are in a movie. Apparently, the playwright-turned-director Arrabal has little skill extracting from actors what it takes to give a film authenticity.

On a more positive note, there is an anachronistic element to the film which harkens back to age of steam. It is manifest in the children's outmoded clothes, in the vaudeville troupe they encounter on the railroad tracks, in the locomotive, and in the very feel of the photography itself. Appropriately, the Acadian folk singer from New Brunswick, Edith Butler, arranged the musical score. Just as through her ballads she attempts to keep alive the spirit-memory of a displaced people and their obsolete Acadian language, in *Odyssey* the haunting song which accompanies shots of the locomotive seems to be attempting to raise the extinct machine from the dead. Unfortunately, this film is stillborn, if only because Arrabal refused to deliver a potentially poetic vision in its appropriate language.

Lyn Martin ●

ODYSSEY OF THE PACIFIC d. Fernando Arrabal sc. Arrabal, Roger Lemelin d.o.p. Ken Legargeant art d. Rene Petit, Fernand Durand cost. des. François Laplante ed. John Broughton sd. Claude Hazanavicius p. Claude Leger, Romaine Legargeant assoc. p. Fabien Tordjmann, Joel Nuffer asst. to p. Ann Burke p. man. Suzanne Roy unit man. Michel Siry asst. unit man. Harold Trepanier coor. Yolaine Rouleau chief acct. Micheline Bonin, Armand Soussan, Natacha Poloudnenko, Anne-Marie Berthier accts. Jeannette Ruffet, Christine Guilbault p. sec. Jacqueline Soussan, Pascale Reiher, Noëlle Guichard a.d. Michel Gauthier, François Chopineau, Michele Mercure, Pascal Roulin cont. Catherine Breton cast. Daniel Hausmann, Michele Mercure cam. Claude Larue asst. cam. Daniel Jobin, Joslin Simard, Camille Maheux 2nd cam. Maurice Roy, Georges Archambault stills Takashi Seida, Fred Smith sd. ed. Nadine Muse asst. ed. Elizabeth Guido, Sarah Mallinson ad. eff. Henry Humbert, Jean-Pierre Lelong dia. d. Hubert Fielden, Hélène Lauzon mixer Michel Descombes ward. mist. Dominique Forest ward. asst. Louise Rousseau make-up Micheline Foisys props Serge Bureau asst. prop. Simon La Haye, Pierre Gros D'Aillon, Herminio Billette, Philippe Chevalier sp. eff. Louis Craig, Jacques Godbout, Henri Simard head elect. Denis Baril elect. Brian Baker key grip Raymond Lamy grip Philippe Palu drivers Daniel Mercure, Yves Lamarre, Pierre Siry, unit pub. Lucienne Appel, Monique Mollette teacher Sandra Saint-Laurent lab. Sonolab Inc., Montreal mixing studio Sonolab Inc. equipment Cinémarl optical effects Film Docteur du Québec Inc. music produced and published by Les Éditions Lise Aubut Enr. 1981 Produced with the financial participation of Film Corp. Entertainment Finances Ltd., Canadian Film Development Corporation, L'institut québécois du Cinema, Antenne 2, Le Musée Ferroviaire Canadien, Canadian Pacific Ltd., p.c. Ciné-Pacifique Inc./Babyline Films, S.A. running time: 59:21 colour, 35mm Lp. Mickey Rooney, Monique Mercure, Jean-Louis Roux, Guy Hoffmann, Anick, Jonathan Starr, Ky Huot Uk, Valda Dalton, Jean-Pierre Saulnier, Marie-Josée Morin, Maurice Podbrey, Vlasta Vrana, John Stanzel, Michel Barrette, Michel Bartolini, Georges Taborky, Kim Ny Ith, Trach Chanh, Jean-Pierre Ronfard, Annilie Schmidt, Andre Melançon.



● Ky Huot Uk, left, Jonathan Starr, and Anick: Lewis Carroll minus the lunacy