The word, the flesh and the films of David Cronenberg

by John Harkness

Let's talk about evil. In the horror film, there are basically two kinds of evil, with characters and actions falling on a continuum between interior evil and exterior evil. Interior evil is that created within characters (Norman Bates in Psycho, the shape in Halloween) as a result of warps in their psychological makeup or because of their relationship with society. Exterior evil is an outside force which attacks what Robin Wood would no doubt refer to as the bourgeois patriarchal normality of our society - the devil invading Regan in The Exorcist is a good example, as are the vampires in any given version of Dracula, or the space spores in Invasion of the Body Snatchers (either version).

When critics treat the films of David Cronenberg, however, they generally make a singular error in confusing his films to the realm of the horror film, which limits the approach one can take by ignoring the more important element: that of science fiction. Admittedly, this is easy to do, because examples of true science fiction films have become increasingly rare in the past two decades, and the boundaries have never been entirely clear (The Andromeda Strain and THX 1138 are almost the only pure science fiction films of recent years that come to mind) and while a film like Alien is marketed as science fiction, its horror element outweighs the science element almost two to one.

What is important about the science fiction element is that the scale of evil in science fiction films is not the continuum from interior evil to exterior, but from accidental to intentional. Did the mad scientist create a human being (Frankenstein) or did he create a monster (later versions of the same story, when the creature loses his speech and his innate decency), and which did he mean to create?

Thus Robin Wood's consignment of Cronenberg's films to the category of 'reactionary' horror films, based on what he calls Cronenberg's "sexual disgust" and "the projection of horror and evil onto women and their sexuality" misses the point almost entirely, because he is dealing with Cronenberg in the same terms as Wes Craven and George Romero - as a horror-filmmaker who attempts to examine the nature of society's structure and its dehumanizing of the individual.

If I take issue with Robin Wood, it is less out of dislike (Wood, with a group of like-minded fellows - Andrew Britton, Richard Lippe, and Tony Williams, most of whom studied with Wood at some point - is one of the few major critics to examine the subterranean side of the American cinema represented by exploitation filmmakers like Romero and Cronenberg) than resentment of the way his quintessentially ideological approach to the contemporary cinema acts as a straitjacket on the films he examines. Politically correct filmmakers who attack the notions of bourgeois normality (Craven, Romero, Tobe Hooper; Stephanie Rothman) are by definition better than conservative directors like Brian De Palma and David Cronenberg, who by almost any critical standard are better filmmakers than the aforementioned directors.

Wood and company operate within a critical system that acts to limit their viewpoint to issues that deal with repression of alternative forms of sexual and moral expression in the structure of contemporary capitalist society.

It is significant that these concerns emerged in Wood's criticism after he came out of the closet (in the London Times Educational Supplement in 1974) with his own gayness, for it is possible to argue seriously that Wood was a better critic when he was repressing his homosexuality. His books on Hawks, Bergman and Hitchcock are classics of bourgeois humanist criticism (using neither of these terms pejoratively), whereas the tone of his more recent work suggests that we should ignore that earlier phase of his criticism because it was presented to us under false pretenses.

The ideological tunnel vision of Robin Wood ignores the component of science in Cronenberg's work and it is the science element that lifts the director's work above the realm of the exploitation horror film. There is furthermore a darkly Cronenbergian irony to what Wood once wrote about Shivers: "a film singlemindedly about sexual liberation, a prospect it views with unmitigated horror. The release of sexuality is linked inseparably with the spreading of venereal disease" now that the most exploitive liberation of sexual energy of recent years, in the gay world, has been linked to the spreads of AIDS and Kaposi's Sarcoma (known as "gay cancer").

What I hope to do here is examine the relationship between the two types of evil engendered by the marriage of science fiction and horror, the role of science, and the function of the victim in the cinema of David Cronenberg, particularly the way that Cronenberg's thematic has evolved in terms of the intentionality of the science fiction films from experimentation to accident, from specific to general malaise within the films themselves and within the oeuvre.

The road to hell is paved with good intentions

It is worth noting that there are very few outright villains in the cinema of David Cronenberg. Dr. Emile Hobbes, who creates the parasites in Shivers, is attempting to break down the barriers in man, "an over-intellectual creature who has lost touch with his body." When he realizes what he has done, he commits suicide. Dr. Lawrence Kelloid, who performs the skin grafts that become much, much more in Rabid, is attempting to save the life and beauty of that film's heroine, who has been horrifically burned in a motorcycle accident. The Brood's psychotherapist, Dr. Hal Raglan, is attempting to get his patients...
to bring out their repressions and terrors into a physical manifestation that can be cured, removing the neuroses. Dr. Paul Ruth had no idea that he would be creating a generation of Scanners whom he invented the tranquilizer ephemerol.

With the exception of Videodrome, which we will deal with later, the villains in Cronenberg’s films are not his scientists, but outsiders to the central worlds of the characters—Scanners’ Keller, who is collaborating with the Scanner underworld for his own power; Fast Company’s corporate manager, who fails to understand the obsession with speed that powers his drivers; the collector in the short film The Italian Machine, who buys a phenomenal motorcycle then puts it in his living room as an object d’art. The crime in all these films is not ambition as much as it is stupidity.

The problem with intelligence, of course, is that it is human, and thus limited. The failure of the majority of Cronenberg’s scientists is that all the implications of everything they do is never quite apparent. Unlike, say, a computer with a chess program, they cannot work out all the implications of each move.

Cronenberg has said that “I make no attempt to say that scientists go too far. I’m very ambivalent about the ecology movement, for instance. It’s not at all clear to me that the natural environment for man is the woods—for all we know, it could be downtown Chicago. The thing about man, the unique thing, is that he creates his own environment. It’s in his nature to try to take control of it away from chance. So in a sense, my doctors and scientists are all heroes. Essentially, they’re symbolic of what every human tries to do when he brushes his teeth.” The irony, of course, is that chance cannot be controlled, and it is the accident that defeats human intelligence in every one of his films. The distance between what Cronenberg says his films are about and the action (factual) and what people perceive them as is immense. Were the people in Starliner apartments (in Shivers) better off as repressed zombies in a sterile planned environment or are they better off as crazed sexual zombies in the throes of an orgiastic hunger? Cronenberg views the spread of the pan power as liberating. Yet the predatory sexuality of the various victims is presented in terms of the classic horror film, as if proving the sterility to be found on the wall of the doctor who is one the film’s central characters (“Sex is the invention of a very clever venereal disease.”)

Rose in Rabid is a zombie in a different sense, for she has almost literally been resurrected from the dead by a team of dedicated surgeons. The scientific explanation of the strange new organ she develops—a syringe that draws blood from her victims and leaves them carrying a virulent form of rabies—is one of Cronenberg’s great coups in scientific terms. When Rose receives skin grafts, the graft tissue is rendered morphogenetically neutral (all tissue is the same tissue), assuming that the body will absorb the tissue into its biosphere. Ignoring the fact that in intensive care, the body is operating under a different system (being fed on plasma) and that the grafts may absorb the body into a new ecology.

In Shivers and Rabid, both the “villains” and the “victims” (both terms are to be used with extreme care) are un­writing. The scientific intervention is a physical invasion that effects the brain. When they realized the nature of their actions—Dr. Holbs in Shivers and Rose in Rabid—the effect is to kill them, because both commit suicide. The message is quite plain: knowledge kills.

It is reflected very plainly in the straightforward style of the two films. These are not horror films that rely on dark corners and lurking menace, but rigidly controlled frame and taut Apollonian environments—sterile modern apartment buildings and hospitals, and clean, Canadian shopping centres and boardwalks. In an American horror film, it is not at all surprising to find slashers stalking 42nd Street or wolves in the South Bronx, for these are endangered environments, decaying and corrupt. The high-tech beauty of Cronenberg’s environments are logical monumen­talities. They are created with a sort of telepathic murder—directly in the mind (Cronenberg’s version of Scanners’ Keller) that dangles from his neck like an umbilical cord, but by a mental link that the family can serve as a source of evil and delusion (as Nola’s mother remarks, “Thirty seconds after you’re born you have a past, and sixty seconds after, you start lying to yourself about it”).

Like most of the characters in The Brood, Scanners’ Dr. Paul Ruth is a master of self-deception, believing that Dr. Ruth in Scanners does not intervene nearly as radically in the biology of the human body as do their predecessors (Stereo, Cronenberg’s first, experimental, feature film, is somewhat different, and is included in this discussion as it stands as a rough draft of Scanners). There is no surgery in The Brood and Scanners. Both films deal with a sort of telepathic murder—directly in Scanners and by a secondary agent in The Brood.

The Brood is Cronenberg’s version of the whitebread melodrama he described as his own version of Kramer vs. Kramer, and the genre is concerned with the violation of privileged middle class space by unbearable emotions, usually centred on the loss and recovery of a child (cf. Ordinary People, Without a Trace, Kramer vs. Kramer, Table for Five). As a psychiatrist, Dr. Hal Raglan is doing exactly what he is supposed to do: that is, help people bring out their repressed emotions and conflicted desires. His tragedy is that he succeeds all too well, and as one of the few characters in Cronenberg’s work to suffer from the for­cing of sick emotions to the surface cause physical changes.

Yet Dr. Raglan is not the villain of the piece. The villain is Nola’s own family and the uncomprehending decency of her husband, whose job is restoring old homes (a nicely pointed bit of symbolism). In The Brood, science is only able to discover and awaken monsters—the seeds are planted deep within the characters themselves, and Nola contains so many seeds that only death can cure her. The Brood demonstrates the way that the family can serve as a source of evil and delusion (as Nola’s mother remarks, “Thirty seconds after you’re born you have a past, and sixty seconds after, you start lying to yourself about it”).

Like most of the characters in The Brood, Scanners’ Dr. Paul Ruth is a master of self-deception, believing that...
the generation of superhuman telepaths created by his sedative ephemerol (designed for pregnant women) are capable of creating an era of a new renaissance in human society
He simultaneously gathers unto himself the guilt of having created them, clutching it to himself like a treasure. He seems to ignore the strong possibility that the Scanners may not have been created by ephemerol but were, like Nola Carveth's monsters, released by his action. It is no accident that the beginning of the 'scan tone' heard on the soundtrack when one of the Scanners unleashes his power sounds uncannily like the cracking open a huge iron door, suggesting that when the Scanners were created, it was not a deformation of the brain that created their power, but the unlocking of a cerebral region that is not part of the ten percent normally used by human beings.
In a very real sense, both Cameron Vale and Darryl Revok in Scanners and The Brood are children of rage, one set released chemically and the other through pure mental coercion. This is quite different from the artificial telepaths in Stereo, who were created surgically and looked into symbiotic and intense telepathic relationships during their stay at the Canadian Academy for Erotic Research, where Luther Stringfellow's motto is 'If there can be no love between the researcher and the subject, there can be no experiment.'
Intriguingly, the created telepaths in both films develop pathological symptoms—an inability to deal with the flood of information received by their minds and a tendency towards self-destruction (both Darryl Revok and one of the telepaths in Stereo drilled holes in their foreheads to relieve the pressure created by having all those voices in their heads).
Of course, Dr. Ruth is not merely a metaphoric father to Vale and Revok, but their literal father (in the absence of a physically present mother, his oddly bisexual name with its masculine preposition and feminine surname, suggest that they were not mothered at all, the same way that Nola Carveth's brood has no literal father), their competition is not merely between the dream and the nightmare of a Scanner society, but shot through with sibling rivalry and an increasingly Oedipal relationship with the father. In addition, Ruth's association with the scanner program at Comsec suggests a dominating father unwilling to admit to the adulthood of his children, and thus Revok's rebellion is as Oedipal an action as Nola Carveth's responsibility for the death of her own mother who is responsible for Nola's rage, in an endless circle of guilt.

The sleep of reason breeds monsters — and in Shivers, Rabid, The Brood and Scanners the monsters function in a world of people, desire and murder that is the absolute reverse of the rationality that led to their creation.
Yet from these films, it is difficult to understand in precisely what direction Cronenberg is moving. His overtly Cartesian concerns, and his fascination with the spectacle of physical decay are quite different. Even so, the true significance of scientific intervention is present, it is not nearly as evident as it will become in his most recent film, Videodrome. Videodrome, more than any other Cronenberg film, is concerned with the question that is at the heart of Cronenberg's world—the interface between the human and the inhuman, between biology and other sciences.