

Photo: Atilia Dery

David Cronenberg talks about his recent film "The Parasite Murders" and about the controversy it has stirred up. One of the film's producers, André Link, responds to Marshall Delaney.

it'll bug you.

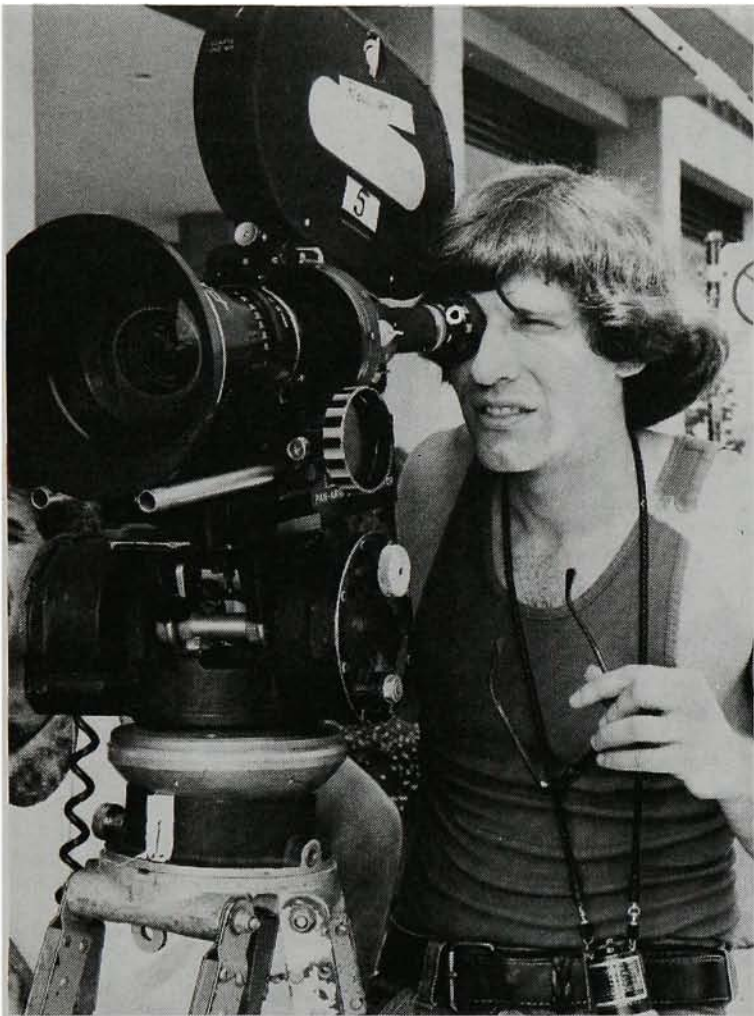
by Stephen Chesley

"The true subject of horror films," says David Cronenberg, "is death and anticipation of death, and that leads to the question of man as body as opposed to man as spirit." That's one of the most important aspects underlying Cronenberg's **The Parasite Murders**, and listening to him discuss the ideas behind the film makes it very difficult to place the movie in the context that *Saturday Night* critic Marshall Delaney and *Globe and Mail* critic Martin Knelman have: a cheapie exploitation feature. Delaney went farther; he im-

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plied that Canadians should not desire a film industry that would produce such a film, and suggested rather strongly that the Canadian Film Development Corporation should be ashamed of putting money in **The Parasite Murders**.

All of which produces a two-sided reaction in Cronenberg. He wrote a strong letter to the *Globe* chastising Knelman and supporting his argument much as he discusses the film below. Delaney brought a different response: "Delaney's reaction seems perfectly legitimate: that he found the film repellent. I think he just was not capable of handling his own reaction to it and therefore became very hysterical. Unfortunately he had to draw the CFDC into it and get distracted by using my film as a platform for an attack on the



David Cronenberg behind the camera

photo: Attila Dory

CFDC. Delaney's response was fine! I liked it. It was silly but it's too bad he couldn't have had that reaction and understood that it was a valid thing for a film to do to someone, rather than denying it and pushing it away.

"Surely it's obvious that there should be room for every kind of film from every possible country – I mean anything that disturbs you is not Canadian. It should be nice and somewhat serious if it's Canadian; that's the same old bullshit which has produced so many deadly films. Where else but in Canada do you get a critic not attached to a daily newspaper who is more conservative, more reactionary than a government body like the CFDC? Where else do you get a critic who quotes Judy LaMarsh for his definition of art?"

"He doesn't understand catharsis, and that's what the film can do: it's a release of inner tension to get involved with a film like that and have it end the way it does. That was partly my aim, both publicly and personally. During the three years that I wrote the film my father was dying and we were very close. It was a quite horrible death, no reason for it, it was just bad. No consolations, whether metaphysical or philosophical or whatever. But it's not necessary for people to know about my father. If the film touches some people in the same way, then it's working perfectly relative to their own lives, and that's what the film has done for a lot of people.

"To exist is not necessarily a wonderful thing, and the source of life can certainly be violent and ugly."

It's the old story, really. Whenever you discuss a movie, especially one in the exploitation genres, there are those who will read deeply and those who dismiss quickly. But Cronenberg admits he's made a 'movie', as opposed to his earlier films, *Stereo* and *Crimes of the Future*, and insists that it can operate – must operate to be successful – on both levels. And *The Parasite Murders* has been successful: it's paid back its \$165,000 investment, been sold to

Delaney's Dreary Denegration

It seems to me that one of the fashionable things to do in the intellectual circles in Canada is criticize the Canadian Film Development Corporation. I am somewhat amazed with this phenomenon, not having been born here. Mind you, this Canadian attitude of super criticism of all things Canadian prevails not only with regard to filmmaking, but generally speaking, we find this in all the arts. There are the critics and the enlightened few who constantly and systematically denigrate what is made in Canada. It seems that nothing is good unless it is absolutely perfect and without blemish. It's a good thing we don't have diamond mines here, because if we didn't find a Kohinor every day, in these critics' eyes our mining industry would be worthless.

Some of you might have missed a film article by Marshall Delaney in the September issue of *Saturday Night* magazine. In a seething attack against the CFDC for having invested in *The Parasite Murders* Delaney illustrated the typical Canadian critics' syndrome. I think that Mr. Delaney's article is an untrue representation of the facts, shows questionable judgment, is vile and vicious, and most of all, very opportunistic.

Personally, I am very proud of *The Parasite Murders*. I am glad we made it, and I think it is a very good film. Done on a modest budget, it received a very good reception from both filmmakers and film buyers when shown in Cannes. It was shown at the Edinburgh Film Festival at a gala performance, and in October it will be shown in competition at the Sitges Film Festival in Spain. The film has been sold all over the world and will have its premiere next month in Asia, Europe, and North America. It is a thrilling and violent science fiction film, and I don't think I really have to defend it. I am certain that it will find its public in Canada and elsewhere.

I write not so much to defend the film, nor to reply to Mr. Delaney's criticism, but to point out the dangers of trying to hold the CFDC accountable for each and every investment that it makes. The CFDC is not the Canada Council of the Arts. Its purpose is to create a Canadian film industry. I think that in the case of *The Parasite Murders* it has certainly made not only a wise investment financially but has also come up with a most interesting work. I regret that there are not more films like *The Parasite Murders* being made.

I think we have to create an atmosphere for the CFDC wherein it can, once it is adequately funded, intensify filmmaking in Canada. We are not going to achieve anything with senseless criticism of the CFDC. A great number of tax dollars are dispensed in Canada for various forms of subsidies, investments and aids. I personally am very unhappy that certain magazines, which in my opinion are neither viable nor worthwhile, benefit from government grants. A good number of us probably object to eating subsidized eggs that are not that well kept. I guess some of the critics are also served films not entirely to their liking.

Let us not forget that there are a great number of successful Canadians in the film world who are prospering, and it is perhaps no coincidence that they are not in Canada. Do we have to send all of them away?

André Link
Cinepix

countries around the world, and been invited to several film festivals. There's more there than meets the eye, it seems.

"It's not a conscious thing I do - all my films have a strong physical consciousness - but the whole dichotomy of mind and body and the importance of physical existence is really uppermost in my conception of the film. Being a mind in a body is a conundrum, especially if, as happened with my father, the body starts to go and the mind has not.

"A good horror film partakes of art. It's not excluded any more than the paintings of Bosch, which I'm sure DeLaney would find disgusting because they also involve violence, depraved sex and anything else he finds in **The Parasite Murders**. A horror film should turn surreal at a certain point. It begins by being normal, and then it should take you along. A sense of madness should be in it; Polanski is in touch with that. The art of horror stories has always existed."

Cronenberg describes **Stereo** and **Crimes of the Future** as horror in part, but more science fiction, i.e. they have a scientific element. So does **The Parasite Murders**, but a dream provided the original inspiration for the film. "I had a dream. My mouth was open and this thing crawled out. I was lying in bed, absolutely neutral atmosphere, and that was the kernel of the film." He designed 'The Bug' himself ("It's not an insect, really. I'm a failed entomologist and so I know. We used 'The Bug' as an affectionate term."). And then he began writing and rewriting. He showed it to Ivan Reitman who turned it down because he thought it was too disgusting. Later Cinepix asked Reitman to produce and he consented.

Cronenberg's long-term goal was to make 'movies'. "I knew my earlier films would be inaccessible to many people when I made them; now I wanted to reach a wider audience. I really like movies. It's not a question of selling out. I always wanted to get into the mainstream of moviemaking."

Just before shooting began he had another dream. "I dreamt I was in a theatre with an audience. Certain members of the audience contracted a disease from the screen and then there was a certain amount of antagonism between those who got the disease and those who were immune. The disease caused extremely fast aging; I watched myself growing old. It brought back to me the fact that the film and its theme were important to me. I felt far from what the movie was about just before shooting because of casting, re-writing and so on. You have to know what you're after."

One of the things he was after was professionalism. "Being professional was very important to Ivan and me and we used to talk about it a lot. It's lack of panic in face of pressure. To know what you're doing and what you're after, when to be obscure and when to be clear, how to get an effect.

"There were only two moments in the course of production when I was incredibly depressed. One was when I saw the first day's rushes. For the first time in my life I said 'Gee maybe I can't do this'. I wasn't getting what I wanted, I hadn't yet learned how to get through all the machinery for composition, acting. I loved the big crew on **Parasite Murders**. I've been lucky because my relationship with the crew was pretty good. Partially that's because I've been willing to accept suggestions.

"The other time I was depressed came when I saw the first rough cut. I had taken great care with continuity but I completely lost sight of the pace of the thing. Ivan wasn't involved in the first cut - he's very canny and knows when to be absent - and he's very good at insuring that a narrative line works. He saw what was wrong, and helped us edit. It's not every producer who can do that and not be a nuisance and be effective.

"For the sound and other technical work we used the best equipment in North America; we've got no excuses. Dan Goldberg did the sound, and we consciously tried to

make it very real. We post-synched when we found that relative sound levels weren't right. It's not like other Canadian movies that were influenced by Grierson: the sound is recorded with a shotgun mike and however people do things, for example putting down a glass, then that's how it comes out. Danny had to create ambiance with his special effects. He did all the movement tracks; for example for people putting on coats he used a wet suit. There's a very strong resistance to illusion in Canadian film. You convey physical presence by sound.

"Our special effects man came from L.A., Joe Blasco. He does make-up for the Lawrence Welk show but his real love is horror movies. We used him because no one in Canada could give us what we wanted and we couldn't pay anyone to learn. We did have Suzanne Riou-Garand on the film in order to learn. She's been doing make-up in Montreal and she worked for almost nothing so she could learn. Now we have someone in Canada."

Since **Parasite** is scheduled to open on October 10 in Montreal and later on elsewhere, Cronenberg looks forward to seeing audience reaction. And box office reaction. Meanwhile he's anything but bored. He's just completed a Peep Show for the CBC under its video training programme, and he's been asked to do one more. "Video is a very interesting medium. There's a whole world of directors who are stars in the videotape medium although they're not well known. And the CBC is the only thing we've had in Canada that approaches the atmosphere of the old Hollywood studios, because there are acres of costumes, carpenters, and seamstresses constantly working."

And since we talked it has been officially rumoured that Cronenberg will direct John Hofsess' film **Tenderness**. It's supposed to be soft-core porno; I wonder how the critics will react to that. □

For a review of **The Parasite Murders**, see p. 44.

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