David Cronenberg's Dead Ringers

Once again, as they did with The Fly, the horses have rushed into print to proclaim Dead Ringers a masterpiece. And once again, as with The Fly, I get to stand on the sidelines, think for longer than most of my colleagues are allowed, and proclaim it isn't a masterpiece. It's got problems and weaknesses all over the place.

It's still a terrific movie, though, far better than most. Jeremy Irons is as good as acting gets. He not only clearly differentiates twin gynaecologists Elliot and Beverly Mantle, he takes each through a wide emotional range with full depth and character consistency. Playing against himself he develops such rapport and rhythm that it's easy to forget the impressive technical feat and simply become absorbed in the characters.

More than that, it's got sequences as good as any ever put on film: Beverly's eyes-averted return to Elliot, who starts others, too.

needlessly

some character or

goes to her, then returns to

Elliot ransacks their

its mood. The sense of decay and

is longer .

one shot, it's everything Beverly tries for and, in

trying,

the first time extras move freely in the frame, the

stepped away from a building into the sunlight,

opening sequence and a couple of transition

less atmosphere.

into the second half, leaving the movie largely

nally effective when it does arrive, allowing

music-free, which makes the music

credits,

with gliding

accompanied by Howard Shore's supremely

anatomy float over black and blood-red,

ominous credits. Antique-looking woodcuts of

major failings

smell the sheets

denial - the sex

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shuffle past

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feat and simply become absorbed in the characters.

There are virtually no characters but the Mantles. Though Genevieve Bujold turns in a

fine, full-fleshed performance every bit as

absorbing as Irons', kinky, pill-popping actress

Claire Niveau is little more than a plot device, a
catalyst to activate the flaw in the Mantles'

shared identity. Though we can see why she

predisbe Beverly to Elliot, who's a thorough cad, so why should we believe him? Except for the

pills she doesn't seem neurotic - kinkv so in my

books is indication of an active imagination, though Cronenberg may well disagree. At any

rate, Claire Niveau is ultimately so unimportant to the movie that she isn't even given a payoff.

The lack of characters is a weakness, but it does serve to keep our attention on the Mantles

and, taken all together, the mood-creating
elements do fully prepare us to give the Mantles

all the pity and terror they deserve when they

finally decide, in madness, that surgical

separation is their only salvation.

But the success of mood comes at the cost of other important elements, among them pacing.
The montage sequence - Elliot ransacks their

apartment for Beverly's stashed dope - is cut so

slowly it loses its effect. Beverly's dream - Claire

takes through the diaphragm that, in fantasy, binds

him to Elliot - is too abrupt. In both cases it feels

e as if Cronenberg feared - needlessly - that his

mood couldn't stand the strain.

The absence of other characters leads to a lack of
definition in the film's social setting - the

world of medicine. We know that what little

identity the brothers possess is as doctors,

medical inventors, researchers, clinicians and

we know they've risen to the heights of their

profession to receive awards, grants and

prestigious teaching positions. But we don't see

how they're regarded as people, whether

they're liked and accepted, or regarded with
distaste as the notorious freaks Cronenberg

paints them as (he doesn't even allow them

parents).

Without something - some character or

sequence - to locate the Mantles with, or against,

other doctors, the gynaecological background

loses much of its potential to enrich the drama.

We see the usual drug use, the dehumanization of the patient, the monstrous ego, the

authoritarian attitude and the hypothetical cast

surrounding it all. But we see it as all Mantle

brothers behaviour and they're weird from the

word go, 11-year-old freaks, as we first see them, who

want to have sex in the bathtub with a

neighbour girl as "an experiment" and who,

when rejected, retreat to "operating" on a

Living Woman anatomical doll. He's making the point

that these guys are naturals for careers in

surgery - but are they the only kind who are?

The Mantles' status as twins, not doctors, is at

the core of their tragedy. Their shared

temperature leads them into gynaecology, but

their twin-ness, the fact that together they

function better than either could alone, makes

them a success. It is their attempt to move

beyond twin-ness, when Beverly falls in love with

Claire and tries for a separate life, that

destroys them. Their status as doctors only

provides the specific shape of their tragedy.

But how one views Western medicine

profoundly affects how one views the tragedy

and, without a view explicit in the film, we're left

on our own. Personally, I think Western

medicine is a good thing, far from perfect, but

good. So I see their fall as real. You might take

from other Cronenberg films, particularly

Shivers, Rabid, The Boost and Scanners, the

view that doctors are at best irresponsible and at worst
dangerous egomaniacs and conclude that Dead

Ringers offers the same view. What does this do to

the tragedy?

You may not see it as tragedy at all. Some

feminist writers - check out the works of Deirdre

English and Barbara Ehrenreich, particularly

Witches, Midwives & Nurses - have pointed to

gynaecology as a male usurpation of an

essentially female job, as a key element in the

overall dehumanization of women. It's a

reasonable view, but if it's your view, you're not

good to have a flying fuck about the Mantle

brothers. No tragedy, no emotional involve-

ment, just a couple of severely diminished

assholes getting what they deserve.

They are diminished. Beverly can't feel loved

by her own identity, since Claire's highest

probing of her emotional life, cares about

nothing but medicine. Elliot cares for glamour

and womanizing, that's all. Emotional

shallowness in him appears not as fear but as

coldness. They're both struggling with

limitations that, in one sense, most of us have

long ago overcome, but, in another sense, as

forns, most of us will never face. I find them

tragic and fascinating anyway. You may not.

Either way, the thread of common humanity

is slenderer and better use of their social setting

might have worked to strengthen it.

In the film's middle section, mood excites its

heavy price from action and plot. Claire

discovers she's been fucking both brothers and

walks out. That kills the suspense of waiting for

Elliot to do something drastic to keep his

brother. Then Beverly gets loaded and

depressed. Claire returns. Beverly gets loaded

and depressed. Claire leaves. Beverly -

loaded and depressed - returns to Elliot, who starts him

on a rehab program, which fails, so he starts

another one. Claire returns. Beverly - loaded

and depressed - goes to her, then returns to

Elliot for the final showdown. By which time

you feel like you've been in the theatre for hours.

Part of that feeling comes from the plot

repetition combining with the dinge tempo.

Cronenberg keeps the scenes as edgy as he can

and, without a view explicit in the film, we're left

with another look at Beverly's progress into drug

psychosis. You see, he develops this truly

warped delusion: he thinks the women he's

Jeremy Irons as Dr. Beverly Mantle falls in love with Claire Niveau (Genevieve Bujold) in Dead Ringers

November 1988
Genovieve Bujold, playing Claire Niveau, in Dead Ringers

Dead Ringers

It's Hunter S. Thompson time and we're right back starting at Beverly's drug psychos.

We wait for the instruments to be brought to Claire, convinced that her fate and the Mantles' are intertwined. But when they're brought, Beverly just tells her they're for separating Siamese twins and rushes out to slaughter his brother. That's for Claire and that's for surgical instruments - except Beverly does use them, in no very interesting or explicit way, on Elliot.

With potential to do so much more, surgical instruments for operating on mutant women are confined to standing as a visual correlative to Beverly's mental decay, a function already perfectly well served by the gold-plated Mantle Retractor that he first invents, then misuses and destroys. They make no significant connections of mutants, love, Claire and the Mantles.

Despite its shortcomings, Dead Ringers is, as noted, a terrific, original movie that shows Cronenberg's growth as an artist. The work with actors, camera and cutting continues the growth so prominent in The Fly. The familiar themes, not much developed since Videodrome, receive new treatment, new focus - the scientist examined rather than the consequences of scientific folly; the body's decay and war with the mind seen as springing from an internal, emotional state rather than being imposed from outside.

Yet Dead Ringers also shows Cronenberg shrinking - retaining, almost neglecting his unique, most developed power. The man is known throughout the world for his complex and original visual imagination, for his ability to infuse his fantastic creations with solid, real-world meaning. Why did he create such powerful images - mutant women and surgical instruments - and then so lightly use them? Why use them at all when they so disrupt the flow? Or were they, once thought of, too tempting to abandon?

It is, of course, no part of the artist's job to cling only to the tried and true. Experimentation promotes growth and David Cronenberg particularly deserves the chance to keep on growing.

Nor is it any part of the reviewer's job to deal with the motives and mind of the artist - trust the tale, not the teller, it's our credo. But a couple of lines from Dead Ringers' press kit may do much to explain why the movie is the way it is and why, despite what this going, it is hailed as a masterpiece.

The kit quotes Cronenberg as calling the film "much more naturalistic," and "not a horror movie." Co-writer Norman Snider adds, "This, on the other hand, really deals with some of the horror of life. People can't dismiss it as a mere fairy tale."

As literal truth, these statements are ludicrous. There is scarcely a naturalistic frame or line of dialogue in the film, a condition found in all of Cronenberg's best work. A mood of horror pervades the work and horror films, however fantastic, can and do deal with the horror of life - check The Broad on child abuse, Videodrome on cultural conditioning via TV. And any book capable of dismissing something as "a mere fairy tale" is equally capable of dismissing something as "a mere movie."

As cultural imperatives though, they're dead on the mark. We are generally trained to value "naturalistic" mimetic fiction over fantastic fiction. At the same time, we're trained to suppress our imaginations so that fantastic fiction becomes harder to derive meaning from. No wonder, then, that a "naturalistic" Cronenberg movie draws highest praise and no wonder that Cronenberg, here committed to naturalism, steps so hard on his instincts.

But he has those instincts. He has that imagination and Dead Ringers offers further proof that when he unleashes it, together with his fully-developed talent, he will, indeed, produce a masterpiece.

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