FILM REVIEWS

David Cronenberg's **Scanners**

A man is rambling aimlessly through a shopping mall. He does not look healthy. His clothes are ragged, his eyes pale blue and watery. He pauses by tables, scavenging for food. Two middle-class women watch him with distaste, commenting on his appearance. A minute later, one of the women is writhing in what seems to be an epileptic seizure. Two minutes later, the vagrant has been captured and sedated by men in dark suits.

The man is Cameron Vale (Stephen Lack), and he is a Scanner. He is the last hope of ConSec, the security agency which has captured him. The film, by David Cronenberg, is perhaps the most extraordinary science fiction-horror film of the past five years. The story, of artificially created telepaths and their potential war with humanity, of the internecine power struggles within the Scanner underground, of shattered families and lost illusions, is a typical Cronenberg fable examining the effects of science gone wrong. Essentially, it is the same story that Cronenberg has been telling since his student days; but this should not be construed as a negative factor. The fact that Cronenberg continually mines the myth of the Frankenstein monster should no more be held against him than, say, Mazursky's obsession with romance among the liberal bourgeoisie is held against him.

For with the essential death of the socially relevant film (or its relegation to television and to special events like **The China Syndrome** – one need only check *Variety* for proof), Cronenberg is virtually the only popular artist who continues to examine the effects of biomedical research on the individual. As the years pass following the release of each of his films, they become less the bizarre imaginings of a renegade science major and more the prescient news bulletins from the not-too-distant future: consider carcinogenic cosmetics (**Crimes of the Future**) or prosthetic organs and skin

In an extra-sensory battle that literally blows his mind, this Scanner is overpowered by fellow Scanner Michael Ironside

Scanners

d./sc. David Cronenberg **exec.p.** Pierre Danid, Victor Solnicki **p.** Claude Heroux **d.o.p.** Mark Irwin **art d.** Carol Spier, Claude Benoit (1st ass't.) **sd.** Don Cohen **ed.** Ron Sanders **mus.** Howard Shore **p.man.** Don Buchsbaum **sp. efx. co-ord.** Gary Zeller **sp.efx. consult.** Henry Peirig **sp. make-up consult.** Dick Smith **sp. make-up** Tom Schwartz, Chris Walas, Stephan Dupuis **sculptor** Tom Coulter **cost. des.** Delphine White, Blanche Boileau (asst.) **make-up** Brigitte McCaughry **hair** Constant Natale **a.d.** Jim Kaufman (1st), Mike Williams (2nd), Anne Murphy (3rd) **unit man.** Jean Savard **asst. cam.** Robin Miller (1st), Gregory Villeneuve (2nd) **vid. cam.** Robert Morin **dresser** Renee April **const. superv.** Clause Simard **art dept. admin.** Maurice Tremblay **set dresser** Peter Bray **loc. man.** Christine Burt **gaffer** Jock Brandis **best boy** Claude Langlois **elect** Ashand Shaw **key grip** Francois Dupere **casting** Stewart Aikens, Danny Hausman **p. sec.** Danielle Rohrbach **asst. to p.** Kim Obrist **unit pub.** Kay Gray **l.p.** Stephen Lack, Jennifer O'Neill, Patrick McGoohan, Lawrence Dane, Charles Shamata, Adam Ludwig, Michael Ironside, Victor Desy Mavor Moore, Robert Silverman, Louis Del Grande, Lee Broker, Terry Coady Steve Michaels, Malcolm Nelthrope, Don Buchsbaum, David Patrick, Neil Affleck, Babs Gadbois, Griff Brewer, Karen Fullerton, Victor Knight, Elijah Siegler, Tom Kovacs, Harriet Stein, Rollie Nincheri, Mikhail Berkut, Danny Silverman, Louise Draper, Bob Peters, Fred Doederlein, Graham Bachelor, Elizabeth Mudry, Jerome Tiberghien, Barry Blake, Sonny Forbes, Lee Murray, Dean Hagopian, Alex Stevens Danny Hausman, Ken Umland, Anthony Sherwood, Nick Kilbertus, Kimberly McKeever, Geza Kovacks, Time Webber, Sam Stone, Domenico Fiore **p.c.** Filmplan International (1980) **dist.** New-World Mutual (Can), Avco-Embassy (U.S.) **col.** 35mm **running time** 105 min.

grafts which absorb the body into their own private ecology (**Shivers** and **Rabid**), or modes of psychotherapy so extreme that the stress created alters physiological systems (**The Brood**). None of these seem impossible. Some of them have happened.

Yet Cronenberg's scientific metaphysics alone would not be enough without his marked ability as a filmmaker. His movies are scary, and in their extremity have scared off many of the critics who refuse to recognize quality in the horror film. They have especially frightened the timid upholders of good taste and moderation. In his now famous review, Marshall Delaney called **Shivers** "the most repulsive movie I've ever seen." Exactly. David Cronenberg's movies are definitely not nice. But the blame cannot be laid on a convenient knife-wielding psychopath. Instead, his films force us to confront the stranger in the mirror, the body which faces little better than decay, disease and death.

Whereas Cronenberg's earlier films were about the effects of the body on the brain, his most recent — **The Brood**, and now **Scanners** — are concerned with the reverse.

The Scanners are a group of highly powerful telepaths and telekineticists. ConSec, in a program led by Dr. Ruth (Patrick McGoohan), has attempted to use the Scanners for intelligence. The Scanners, however, have defected and formed their own organization around the eldest, Darryl Revok (Michael Ironside). Faced with the possibility of a Scanner war on humanity, Ruth pulls his secret weapon, Cameron Vale — who has been living the life of a derelict, unable to deal with the world because of his inability to shut off the voices in his head. Dosed with Ephemerol, the drug which puts the scanning powers under control, Vale learns of what he is and what his mission will be. In search of Revok's organization, he discovers that the underground, led by Kim Obrist (Jennifer O'Neill), has organized itself into a counter group against Revok's organization. To divulge more of the plot would only reduce the pleasures of Cronenberg's labyrinthine narrative; so, let us simply say that those who have been following Cronenberg's work for the past several years will catch the drift more quickly than those who are unfamiliar with it.

Someone once remarked that the ideal 'horror director' would have Cronenberg's ideas and DePalma's style. **Scanners**, however, is a quantum stylistic leap for Cronenberg as a director. It is certainly his most designed film; and full credit should be given to art director Carol Spier and cinematographer Mark Irwin (both of whom worked on **The Brood**), who have given the film a cold, spectral look, filled with the artifacts of a high-technology society – the florescent tones of the shopping mall where Vale is captured, the metal and concrete of ConSec headquarters, and the eerie nightworld of the Montreal streets where one of the film's most satisfying set-pieces takes place.

The set-pieces, never before a Cronenberg strength, are extraordinary. The scene in the sculptor's (Robert Silverman) grotesquely crowded studio where Vale fends off four of Revok's agents, or the final, fatal confrontation between Vale and Revok, have the sort of split-second precision one associates with a Hitchcock. Unlike DePalma or John Carpenter, one never feels that he is indulging in technique-for-technique's-sake exercises in bravura camera movement.

The result is a film which is very stylish and very frightening, yet without the maddening narrative holes that are so distracting in a DePalma film.

Unlike much of Cronenberg's work, it is very well-acted. Often, particularly in **Shivers** and **Rabid**, one begins to grit one's teeth whenever a bit player opens his mouth. **Scanners** has a solid cast, with at least one performance that should be considered when the 1981 Genies are handed out. Steven Lack, previously known for his free-wheeling raps in Frank Vital's **Montreal Main** and Allan Moyle's **The Rubber Gun**, plays a solid Cameron Vale, with few of the mannerisms of his earlier roles. It is difficult to imagine another actor who could simultaneously suggest both the vagrant wanderer, with a head filled with other's thoughts, and the cool exploiter of his own astonishing gifts. It's largely those pale blue eyes, at once translucent and concealing, that convey the character's shifting power and hint at the massive reserves that lurk invisibly beneath his placid surface.

Patrick McGoohan gives a professional performance, buried behind Dr. Ruth's greying beard and horn-rimmed glasses. His is the Doctor Frankenstein role, that of a character who errs not through hubris, but who merely gets much, much more than he's bargained for — like the plastic surgeons in **Rabid**, the parasitologist in **Shivers** and the psychotherapist in **The Brood**, he unwittingly creates monsters that turn on him.

The rest of the cast is quite good, particularly Michael Ironside as Revok, and Robert Silverman as the sculptor who insists that his art keeps him sane, when it is all too obvious that it doesn't.

Scanners is most interesting on thematic grounds. One of the most exasperating elements of DePalma's **The Fury** was that it's most interesting subtext — the potential for species war — was completely ignored. **Scanners**, in a way, can be seen as the subtext of the DePalma film, making explicit what the earlier film chose to ignore. The deeply ambiguous climax of the film (with a new generation of Scanners about to be born), demonstrates Cronenberg's willingness to play with the implications of his ideas, and allow them

to continue to an open-ended manner. It also marks the return of the director's essentially apocalyptic vision (in *Film Comment*, Cronenberg remarked that he didn't want to see an apocalypse in his lifetime – yet **Shivers**, **Rabid** and **Scanners** all move in that direction.)

For many years, a small group has been touting Cronenberg as Canada's finest, most visionary director. Partially, this is in reaction to maudlin, much-loved memoirs like **Lies My Father Told Me** and **Who Has Seen The Wind**, and partially, it was because anyone that the upholders of good taste and high culture (e.g. Robert Fulford, Clyde Gilmour) reacted against so strongly could not be all bad. But with the release of **Scanners**, there is no need for defensiveness. Cronenberg is our greatest director, and **Scanners** should be the first in a long line of commercial and artistic masterpieces.

John G. Harkness

Bob Clark's **Tribute**

Tribute is the story of an irrepressible life-of-the-party who refuses to confront the grim horror of cancer for fear that he will exit this life with not a belly laugh but a whimper. It is also, sadly, a film that for the most part refuses to take itself seriously, given the gravity of its topic.

The death-of-a-clown concept is pregnant with dramatic possibility, but screenwriter Bernard Slade (**Same Time Next Year**), and TV's *The Partridge Family*, has little mind for the untidy aspects of cancer. A joke for him is like a drink for an alcoholic: he does not know how to joke moderately, and so goes on long gratuitous gag-jags that wreak havoc with the film.

Jack Lemmon is a New York PR man with an endless supply of jokes and friends. Three minutes into the film he is told – sledge hammer to the temple – that he has cancer. His son (Robby Benson), an earnest, bespectacled sort, visits him for the summer. Their conflicting worldviews, along with the question of mortality, become, ostensibly, the meat of the film.

But then the magic lure of 'comedy' presents itself. And Slade, seemingly, has no will power. Vaudeville schtiks abound. Every ringing doorbell becomes an opportunity for Lemmon to drop his pants, cross his eyes, and go into yet another daffy bit. If it is Slade's fault that the film is loaded down with so much sitcom material, it is to director Bob Clark's (**Murder By Decree**) discredit that Slade, and star Lemmon are allowed to indulge themselves in such shameful burlesque.

At times it is difficult to figure out where the schtiks stop and the film begins. Sandwiched between one scene, where Lemmon throws a testimonial party for a down-on-her-luck hooker (Gail Garnett), and another where Lemmon jumps out of a door as a fertile yellow chicken, there is the scene where young Benson meets up with his love interest, Kim Cattrall (a vacuous model type who could not act her way out of a fashion supplement). Benson and Cattrall are sharing a pastrami and some laughs, on what appears to be a nice summer's afternoon, when out of nowhere the skies open, rain falls, and they are forced inside for a romantic fireside picnic — just like in the movies. **Tribute** lurches forward in similar stock