

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