

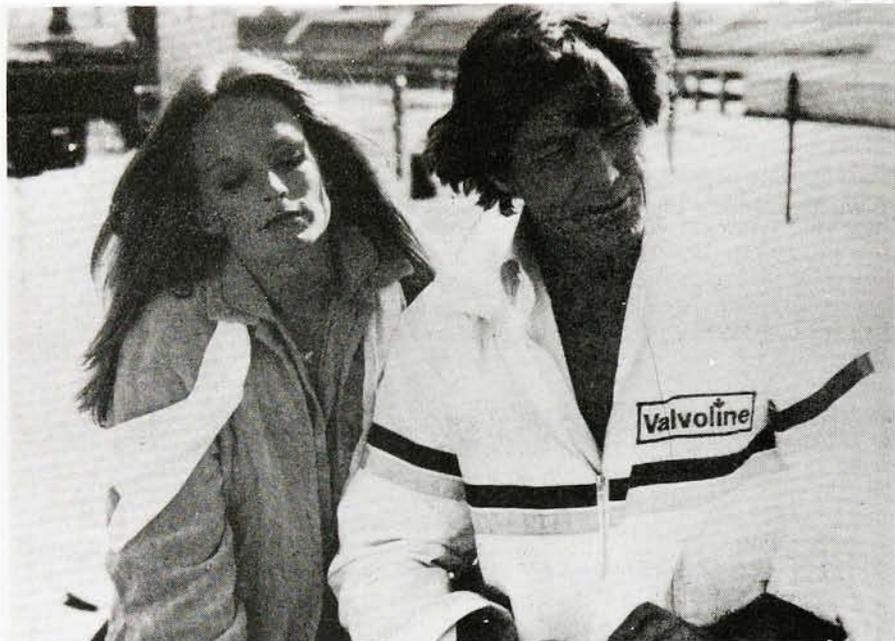
FILM REVIEWS

David Cronenberg's Fast Company

d. David Cronenberg, 1st asst. d. James Kaufman, 2nd asst. d. Jim Long, sc. Phil Savath, Courtney Smith, David Cronenberg, original story Alan Treen, dial. & effects ed. Terry Burge, ph. Mark Irwin, 1st asst. camera Robin Miller, 2nd asst. camera Gary Armstrong, sp. effects Tom Fisher, ed. Ron Sanders, asst. ed. Arnie Stewart, racing ed. Bruce Carwardine, stunts Phil Adams, Mark Damien, asst. sd. ed. David Street, Arnie Stewart, Christopher Tate, sd. rec. Bryan Day, sd. re-rec. Terence Cooke, a.d. Carol Spier, boom Ken Pappes, crew Peter Von King, John Thomas, continuity Margaret Hanly, cost. Delphine White, properties Peter Lauterman, asst. props. Dave McAree, l.p. William Smith, John Saxon, Claudia Jennings, Nicholas Campbell, Don Francks, Cedric Smith, Judy Foster, George Buza, Robert Haley, David Petersen, exec. p. David M. Perlmutter, p. Michael Lebowitz, Peter O'Brian, Courtney Smith, p. manager Caryl Brandt, p. co-od. Sherry Cohen, p. sect. Linda Farmer, Linda Brestich, p.c. Michael Lebowitz Inc. (1979) col. 35mm, running time 93 minutes.

Fast Company is a film about drag-racing (shot in Alberta and the north-west U.S.) that's already been and gone through the drive-in and rural theatre circuits; perhaps under ordinary circumstances one wouldn't even notice it. But there's one circumstance about the film that isn't ordinary: it was directed by a man who is arguably the best filmmaker in English Canada today — David Cronenberg.

In the eyes of commentators anxious about the cultural respectability of Canadian cinema, Cronenberg is more an embarrassment than an asset to this country. As a maker of sleazy horror movies for the exploitation market (and, what's worse, movies that have consistently made money both here and abroad at a time when Canadian films are an iffy commercial proposition), he's often an object of the deepest suspicion for content-oriented critics. But **Shivers**, **Rabid** and **The Brood**, sensational horror films with a cool visual style and a melancholy, sometimes ironic, detachment, can all, in my opinion, take a confident place amongst the small handful of English-language movies that are both genuinely good and



Claudia Jennings as Sammy and William Smith as Lonnie Johnson star in *Fast Company*
photo: Warren Lipton

genuinely Canadian.

Cronenberg has always liked to build his projects from the ground up, conceiving and writing his films as well as directing them. Indeed, he's gone on record as saying that the most important ingredient of a movie is a good script — a surprising remark from someone who has the priceless gift of a controlled and incisive visual style. But one can see what he's getting at after looking at **Fast Company**, a film that he was brought into at the later stages to direct. Although Cronenberg receives a credit for the script (along with Phil Savath and Courtney Smith), **Fast Company** is all too clearly somebody else's basic idea. The scenario, which features a sympathetic group of racing-car drivers and mechanics and their girlfriends pitted against the evil machinations of their corrupt corporate boss, is a witless collection of stale conventions. The characters exist only in the most stereotyped forms, and the action is motivated almost exclusively by the need to keep producing a series of two-dimensional confrontations.

Scant attention is paid to continuity and development in the storyline, and in particular the behavior of the villain seems dictated by no logic or consistency other than the desire of the scriptwriters to keep him as nasty

as possible. Though parts of the script are inoffensive, and there are even one or two effective moments, I can confidently say that on the script level **Fast Company** is without any important redeeming qualities.

What interest the film does have lies entirely in Cronenberg's direction — to such an extent, indeed, that **Fast Company** can almost serve as a textbook example of the limited extent to which a director can salvage a really impossible project. Not surprisingly, the movie's main asset is its visual style — quiet, precise and straight-forward, with that element of neat, cool detachment that Cronenberg shares with directors like Monte Hellman, Terence Malick, and his gifted fellow-Canadians Don Shebib and Denys Arcand. Direction like this is the very reverse of the kind of flashy meretriciousness of **Invasion of the Body Snatchers**, and which has also raised its ugly head in, for example, Jack Nicholson's **Goin' South** and Jonathan Demme's **The Last Embrace**.

In any case, the best moments in **Fast Company** are those in which Cronenberg can free himself entirely of the dialogue and the characters — notably in the many superb scenes of cars being tuned up before races, of helmeted drivers' heads in the deafening roar of the cockpit, of mechanics lovingly dissect-

ing powerful machines in the workshop. As always, Cronenberg is aware of the power of images by themselves, without commentary or emphasis: so much can be shown that doesn't need to be, that *can't* be, explained in terms of words. This is the mark of the purest kind of filmmaker — a Hitchcock, an Ozu, a Bresson, a Rohmer — and if Cronenberg doesn't exactly occupy their exalted station, he is nevertheless of their fraternity.

Despite Cronenberg's gifts as evidenced in this film, though, I can't in good conscience recommend *Fast Company* with much enthusiasm to anyone but dedicated students of the art of cinema, since the banality of the scenario can never be disguised for long. Better far to pay another visit to *Shivers*, *Rabid*, or *The Brood* — truly accomplished expressions of perhaps the most imaginative vision in Canadian films today.

Bill Beard

David Cronenberg's The Brood

d. David Cronenberg, asst. d. John Board, Libby Bowden, sc. David Cronenberg, dial. ed. Brian Holland, asst. dial. ed. Lois Tupper, ph. Mark Irwin, ed. Allan Collins, asst. ed. Carol Zeifman, sd. Bryan Day, boom Tom Mather, sd. ed. Peter Burgess, asst. sd. ed. Jeremy Maclaverty, sd. re. rec. Joe Grimaldi, a.d. Carol Spier, set dec. Angelo Stea, m. Howard Shore, cost. Delphine White, continuity Nancy Eagles, make-up Shonagh Jabour, l.p. Oliver Reed, Samantha Eggar, Art Hindle, Cindy Hinds, Nuala Fitzgerald, Henry Beckman, Susan Hogan, Michael Magee Gary McKeehan, Bob Silverman, Joseph Shaw, Felix Silla, John Ferguson, Larry Solway, Rainer Schwartz, Nicholas Campbell, exec. p. Pierre David, Victor Solnicki, p. Claude Heroux, p.asst. Maureen Fitzgerald, Bob Wertheimer, p. manager Gwen Iveson, p. secretary Trudy Work, p.c. The Brood Inc., col. 35mm, (year) 1978, running time 92 minutes.

There are these basic, common fears: mutilation, dying and the malevolent unknown. There are the surefire mechanics of suspense, shock and gore. Even a novice filmmaker can manipulate them for a strong, gut-level response. In the audience, we need not think or even learn the names of our fears, we will react anyway. Total titillation. Walk home with nothing more horrifying

than the dregs of an adrenalin rush. It's fun and profitable. It's what's being done in *Alien*, *Prophecy* and *Halloween*. It's what David Cronenberg did in *Shivers* and *Rabid*. It's *not* what he's doing in *The Brood*.

A few horror films, *The Innocents*, *Psycho*, *The Tenant*, work on the head and the heart: a definition of 'grotesque', by John Ruskin, "...the expression in a moment, by a series of symbols thrown together in bold and fearless connection, of truth..." Usually, the truth expressed concerns the inner landscape of one or more characters. Imagination gives understanding. Understanding awakens pity and terror for a condition that may have nothing to do with one's own fears. It can be a very instructive horror.

Cronenberg structures *The Brood* and engages the imagination with a series of mysteries. What is the dangerous flaw in Dr. Raglan's radical therapy, Psychoplasemics? Who or what is murdering the people that Nola Carveth, Dr. Raglan's star patient, hates? How are the murders and the therapy connected? These fuel the action and encourage us to look for clues, to try and beat Cronenberg to the punchline. But, while we're doing it, he's feeding us scenes that lead to an awareness of a second, unstated mystery. Is Nola Carveth really crazy? If so, what are the causes and forms of her madness?

The climax of the film links the two sets of mysteries and satisfies the demands of the plot (and the audience) in as gruesome a manner as could be wished. It also reveals the title creatures as reflections of Nola. These reflections spark others: Nola's daughter as a reflection of her, Nola as a reflection of her mother, her ex-husband, Frank, as Nola's father. This is what sparks our understanding of Nola's inner life and the causes of her disturbance.

The success of the reflections depends on the clarity of the character sketches that precede them. Nola's mother, Juliana, is given like this: We see Nola in therapy, claiming her mother beat her as a child. Is she telling the truth, or as the plot suggests, is she making a distorted confession to beating her own daughter? Cut to Nola's mother babysitting Nola's daughter. She's getting primly drunk. Her behavior with the child suggests nothing so much as a little girl playing grown-up. An old photo shows Nola sick in a hospital bed, while Juliana's bright smile for the camera is a clear denial of her daughter's in-

jury. Her comments — that she *never could* find out why Nola kept waking up cut and bruised — show that twenty years later, she's still dying.

Anyone familiar with newspaper stories on the subject, will recognize in Juliana a typical, abusing parent. To Cronenberg's undying credit, nobody stands up and spells this out for us. Child abuse is not a fashionable subject to be exploited for thrills and cheap moralizing in *The Brood*, it merely happens to be one of the central concerns of the story.

There are holes in the presentation of the other characters. We learn, for instance, that Nola married Frank for his sanity, but we never learn why he married her. We never see how Nola interacts with her daughter. These holes, with one exception, fog the reflections of the climax only slightly. The one exception is Dr. Raglan. We're told he is a prominent and respectable psychiatrist, but this image is destroyed when, in one afternoon, he callously evicts all his highly unstable, highly dependent, live-in patients. This makes him the unfeeling mad scientist, but the climax destroys that image and paints him as the dedicated and caring therapist. None of this chaos is cleared up by the casting and acting of Oliver Reed in the role. His arrogant thug aura is fun to watch, but does nothing to raise Dr. Raglan above the level of plot device. Despite this, Dr. Raglan's fate is wholly appropriate to his place in the story and a snappy comment on the practice of radical psychiatry.

There are a few other flaws in the script — a therapy scene that's a bit too long and a bit too flat and a couple of scenes with detectives that are pure exposition — but none of these detract from the effectiveness of the film. Cronenberg handles the suspense well. The middle of the babysitting sequence, which has begun calmly enough, is the beginning of the killer's approach, a suspense sequence which ends, and ends the babysitting sequence, in bloody murder. The murders, themselves, are fine set-pieces of bizarre composition, sharp cutting and brutal action. The special effects are grisly and convincing.

Mark Irwin's lighting and photography create a world of thick, normal surfaces and suggest, without resorting to distortion tactics, the ugly, unacknowledged passions beneath. It's an atmosphere ideally suited to the story and characters and that seems, quite natur-