

OPINIONS

FREEDOM FOR IMAGINATION

It is four a.m. on a cold, dark Christmas morning, and I'm standing outside the Hotel Geneva in Mexico City waiting for the crew to finish loading the equipment.

There is a problem. Sergio, the production manager, has decided to bring his prize Doberman Pinscher. Politely, the crew negotiates the Doberman's exit, and we find that we're still one car short.

"Hire a taxi," someone suggests. And we do – all the way to Morelia, some 300 miles away.

By noon, we are rolling down the hills of the Lake Region – a Volkswagen caravan careening down the narrow, winding roads, four hours away from the first setup of **Miguel's Navidad**, the second in a planned trilogy of Christmas films.

The crew, essentially Mexican, is eager, co-operative and totally professional. The actors too are Mexicans, with the exception of Roberto Contreras who is Mexican-American – the "Wet-Back Bandido", we call him. Harry Makin, from Winnipeg, is the cinematographer. He is the inspiration – a painter with lenses and light. We pass small villages, spotted with curious faces. Occasionally, a tired burrito carrying a heavy load will stumble by.

And the thought has to occur: What the hell is a Ukrainian boy from Toronto doing in Mexico on a Christmas Day?

"Why, making a Canadian film" says Harry Makin, who is quite a wit.

"What's a 'Canadian film'?" asks Alexandro, our grinning Mexican film censor, who is along for the ride to protect his government's point of view. Indeed, Alexandro, what is a "Canadian" film? As with your own Banco de Cinematografia – only the CRTC, or the Secretary of State, knows for sure. Viva Canadian government – the Friendly Giant!

Alexandro's question opens a can of worms. It's frightening when you come to think of it. The government has enough difficulty dealing with foreign ownership, let alone legislating esthetics. It's also ironic. While the government has permitted foreign ownership of Canadian resources, it zealously guards filmmakers in the name of nationalism.

It is high noon in Mexico. And although Sergio is at the wheel of the van, lost as usual taking a "shortcut", I know that I'm on the long road to Morelia to make a film.

Is it a Canadian film? There are some who would say no. Certainly my investors never seemed concerned with the question. Their only query was whether they would get their money back.

To my mind, the validity of nationalism in cinema is a specious concept. Filmmakers, like all artists, belong to a world community; not to a country. Cinema, like art in general, is international, as is the market for films.

The independent producer deals with the reality of this international market. The filmmaker who, on the other hand, receives government money deals with a political reality. The danger with the latter is that in a very subtle way, the film producer becomes dependent on the government and its point of view. It is the proverbial Pavlovian response syndrome. The malaise in its advanced stage is "creative myopia". Consider its manifestation: the calendar art of Nazi Germany, or the films from the Soviet Union. To be sure, there are exceptions. Eisenstein and Dovshenko spring immediately to mind. But even their films – such as Eisenstein's **Thunder Over Mexico** – express party dogma.

Lake Patsquaro at night; remote and lonely. It is December 26 and we have been filming for two days. The fishermen with their butterfly nets have come to shore. We watch silently from our island, where we have worked feverishly to complete the flashback sequence before sunset. And I realize why I have traveled all these thousands of miles to film here. I came to Mexico to seek out and to record a "perspective". My focus is specific: Christmas films for children. My market is world television; specifically, Canadian and US networks. My films, more than anything, portray a mood, a time and a place.

Location has always been a filmic motive for me – perhaps due to limited resources. A visually unique location, plus a good cinematographer, means production values one could never build into a set. Location circumstances have even dictated the story.

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Making films certainly demands sacrifice. It is difficult enough making a film, and the producer needs all the help he can get. Any restrictions on his mobility, any attempts to politicize his work make the task all the more difficult.

Sweden lost Bergman because of tax laws, and Italy lost DeLaurentiis due to government restrictions. And we too will lose, as we have in the past, our producers, writers and directors so long as government film bodies foster chauvinism in cinema.

The purpose of making a film is not to conform to a definition that the government prescribes, but to follow one's own creative sensibilities. For cinema – like all art – is, in its quintessence, freedom; freedom of the imagination and of the spirit. And so long as that holds true, politics and nationalism are its direct opposites.

We, in Canada, should learn to make quality films that are accepted in the world market. Only then will the world recognize us as Canadians; only then will our film industry flourish.

George Mendeluk

YOU SHIVER BECAUSE IT'S GOOD

Why David Cronenberg's *The Parasite Murders* was retitled *Shivers* I can't imagine. But even under its new title it continues to suffer the insensitive abuse that was reported (and well rebutted) in *Cinema Canada* No. 22. What has not been established is exactly what the film is saying through its shocking effects.

Shocking it certainly is. The film is a relentless flood of murder, rape and upchuck. But complaining about a horror film's nauseating effect is like complaining about dancing in the streets in a musical, or horses and jeans in a Western. That's what we go to see one for. Nausea, fear and shock are the conventional effects of the horror genre. The critic's task is not to complain they are there (they come with the territory) but to work out how they are used.

The film opens and closes with a media-sell voice-over, detached from the action, oozing the complacency of modern urban man. The opening is a sales pitch for the Starliner apartment building on a Montreal island, where the drama will take place. The closing is a news bulletin by a go-go disc-jockey type, assuring the listener that nothing dangerous has happened. We've seen the danger, though, and been shocked out of the complacency of the frame voices. We must be further shocked at the complacency of the closing media man, as the Beautiful People drive out in their performance cars to infest the world.

The film is a jeremiad about man's abandonment to the pleasures of the failing flesh. Mad Doctor Emil Hobbes has been experimenting with parasite implants to assume the function of flawed human organs. His pride is, of course, the sexual application: a parasite with aphrodisiac effects. He plants the red little phallic critters in his mistress, then waits for them to spread, turning the world into a great sexual orgy (the global village with a *Playboy* vengeance), thus saving man, as Hobbes sees it, from the tragic fate of having lost contact with his body.

The film dramatizes the horror of what we often take to be one of the happiest triumphs of our time, the new sexual permissiveness. The key spreaders of the parasite are figures representative of the modern liberation of sexuality: the precocious Lolita-type, the adulterer, the old man with his megavitamin vitality, the Swedish couple, the bachelor swingers, hetero and gay.

Cronenberg's Emil Hobbes is a direct descendant of Thomas Hobbes, the seventeenth-century philosopher whose *Leviathan* argued the primacy of the physical nature of man and his universe. Hobbes provided the philosophical rationale for Restoration libertinism, so Cronenberg goes back to his name for his horrific vision of the libertinism of our time. Indeed the shape of the little critters is a cross between your standard red phallus and your swimming whale.

The apartment setting, a self-contained tower on an island, is an image of the isolation of the sensually obsessed. The apartment facilities cater to the appetites

and to the image of the beautiful life, nothing else. The apartment residents are characterized as lonely, insular people, condemned to a sad privacy until the monsters free them for a horrible parody of community, love, encounter session, primal therapy, virtually every mind-blowing, self-exalting fad on the psychological market today.

Cronenberg often seems like an Old Testament prophet in his horrifying vision of what happens when man sells his soul for his appetite, values "guts" more than reason, and labors under the delusion that fulfilment can be had by ingesting something (a kiss, a pickle, a pill, a little critter, or what have you). It should bemuse the reader to find such a traditionally moral work attacked by such traditional critics as Messrs. Robin Wood, Gilmour, Fulford, and Knelman. Are they all secret swingers chafing under Cronenberg's lash?

True to the traditions of the genre, Cronenberg specializes in the slow accumulation of danger, then fills familiar objects with threat. The parasites are passed on by sexual contact at first, but then they take on individual life and travel independently. They attack from washing machines, mail slots, bath drains, to the point that we're terrified at the opening of a fridge or a contact-lens vial. Such is their independence that one man even converses with his little critters as they throb tumescent in his tummy.

Cronenberg inflects the conventions of his genre. For one thing, his vision is heightened by the fact that these are not monsters from outer space but from within ourselves. The parasites are images of our own sexual compulsions. Thus they pop up in the horny.

One scene is a conscious variation on the famous shower scene in *Psycho*. Hitchcock had the lonely girl attacked from the outside world when she was most vulnerable. Cronenberg's attack comes from within, as the critter creeps up through the bathtub drain to sexually enter — and this is the crucial point — the girl (Barbara Steele) who has been moping around in pre-masturbatory loneliness and has been lying open in her tub as if in subconscious hope of such a visit.

The final overcoming of our central hero, the doctor (Paul Hampton), occurs in the apartment swimming pool, which is a public extension of that private tub. The doctor's nurse and her initiator (Steele) are in the pool. That climactic scene has several shades of meaning. The wet blanket is finally getting into the swim of things, one might say. The girl's lonely tub has grown. It's also a parody of a baptism, as the community surrounds the pool to celebrate the immersion of their new member. Finally, his nurse's oral insertion of the parasite is a reversal of male penetration. In the last two respects, the scene is a witty play on the missionary position.

The film is most dependent upon its horror genre in its inflection of the traditional threat to human personality. In its forebears, the humans are endangered by depersonalizing, de-energizing forces. The film belongs to the tradition of zombie movies, like *Night of the Liv-*

ing Dead and the pod variant in **Invasion of the Body Snatchers**. But Cronenberg dramatizes depersonalizing in sexual activity, the thing we have come to take as our most personalizing activity. That's what makes the film both so shocking and such a strong moral statement. Where we expect to find zombies we find people who are fulfilling our fondest fantasies, of sex unlimited by law or by physical capacity. The film is shocking because Cronenberg's zombies are what we want to be.

He draws us into this position in the scene where his hero doctor continues to chat coolly on the phone, impervious to his nurse stripping in front of him. He seems to bear out Emil Hobbes' contention that modern man has been cut off from his blood and his impulses. We expect, indeed require, him to make love to her, then and there. But of course he is a man of reason and responsibility. He is not the zombie but the rational man. The real zombies are the orgiasts, whose physical hyperactivity belies their void in will, soul and sense.

Cronenberg's film has suffered the same critical disdain that was accorded **Psycho**, **Night of the Living Dead**, **Invasion of the Body Snatchers**. Perhaps serious art in the horror genre must expect to be reviled before it is understood. **Shivers** (by whatever name) will join those classics. If Cronenberg continues to grow this film will rank with **Psycho** as a personal statement. At the very least it will rank with those other two films, as a powerful expression of an anxiety of its day, so deep it hurt.

Maurice Yacowar



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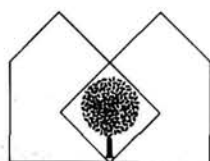
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