

# The word, the flesh and the films of David Cronenberg

by John Harkness



Let's talk about evil. In the horror film, there are basically two kinds of evil, with characters and actions falling on a continuum between interior evil and exterior evil. Interior evil is that created within characters (Norman Bates in *Psycho*, the shape in *Halloween*) as a result of warps in their psychological makeup or because of their relationship with society. Exterior evil is an outside force which attacks what Robin Wood would no doubt refer to<sup>1</sup> as the bourgeois patriarchal normalcy of our society – the devil invading Regan in *The Exorcist* is a good example, as are the vampires in any given version of *Dracula*, or the space spores in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (either version).

When critics treat the films of David Cronenberg, however, they generally make a singular error in confining his films to the realm of the horror film, which limits the approach one can take by ignoring their most important element: that of science fiction. Admittedly, this is easy to do, because examples of true science fiction films have become increasingly rare in the past two decades, and the boundaries have never been exactly clear (*The Andromeda Strain* and *THX 1138* are almost the only pure science fiction films of recent years that come to mind) and while a film like *Alien* is marketed as science fiction, its horror element outweighs the science element almost two to one.

What is important about the science fiction element is that the scale of evil in science fiction films is not the continuum from interior evil to exterior, but from accidental to intentional. Did the mad scientist create a human being (*Frankenstein*) or did he create a monster (later versions of the same story, when the creature loses his speech and his innate decency), and which did he mean to create?

Thus Robin Wood's consignment of Cronenberg's films to the category of "reactionary" horror films<sup>2</sup>, based on

what he calls Cronenberg's "sexual disgust" and "the projection of horror and evil onto women and their sexuality" misses the point almost entirely, because he is dealing with Cronenberg in the same terms as Wes Craven and George Romero – as a horror-filmmaker who attempts to examine the nature of society's structure and its dehumanizing of the individual.

If I take issue with Robin Wood, it is less out of dislike (Wood, with a group of like-minded fellows – Andrew Britton, Richard Lippe, and Tony Williams, most of whom studied with Wood at some point – is one of the few major critics to examine the subterranean side of the American cinema represented by exploitation filmmakers like Romero and Craven) than resentment of the way his quintessentially ideological approach to the contemporary cinema acts as a strait-jacket on the films he examines. Politically

correct filmmakers who attack the notions of bourgeois normality (Craven, Romero, Tobe Hooper, Stephanie Rothman) are by definition better than conservative directors like Brian De Palma and David Cronenberg, who by almost any critical standard are better filmmakers than the aforementioned directors.

Wood and company operate within a critical system that acts to limit their viewpoint to issues that deal with repression of alternative forms of sexual and moral expression in the structure of contemporary capitalist society.

It is significant that these concerns emerged in Wood's criticism after he came out of the closet (in the London Times Educational Supplement in 1974) with his own gayness, for it is possible to argue seriously that Wood was a better critic when he was repressing his homosexuality. His books on Hawks, Bergman and Hitchcock are classics of bourgeois

humanist criticism (using neither of these terms pejoratively), whereas the tone of his more recent work suggests that we should ignore that earlier phase of his criticism because it was presented to us under false pretences.

The ideological tunnel-vision of Robin Wood ignores the component of science in Cronenberg's work and it is the science element that lifts the director's work above the realm of the exploitation horror film. There is furthermore a darkly Cronenbergian irony to what Wood once wrote about *Shivers*, ("a film singlemindedly about sexual liberation, a prospect it views with unmitigated horror... The release of sexuality is linked inseparably with the spreading of venereal disease"<sup>3</sup>) now that the most explosive liberation of sexual energy of recent years, in the gay world, has been linked to the spreads of AIDS and Kaposi's Sarcoma (known as "gay cancer").

What I hope to do here is examine the relationship between the two types of evil engendered by the marriage of science fiction and horror, the role of science, and the function of the victims in the cinema of David Cronenberg, particularly the way that Cronenberg's thematic has evolved in terms of the intentionality of the science fiction films from experimentation to accident, from specific to general malaise within the films themselves and within the oeuvre.

## The road to Hell is paved with good intentions

It is worth noting that there are very few outright villains in the cinema of David Cronenberg. Dr. Emile Hobbes, who creates the parasites in *Shivers*, is attempting to break down the barriers in man, "an over-intellectual creature who has lost touch with his body." When he realizes what he has done, he commits suicide. Dr. Lawrence Kelloid, who performs the skin grafts that become much, much more in *Rabid*, is attempting to save the life and beauty of that film's heroine, who has been horribly burned in a motorcycle accident. *The Brood's* psychotherapist, Dr. Hal Raglan, is attempting to get his patients



● Invasion of privilege: *The Brood* was Cronenberg's version of the whitebread melodrama

John Harkness is the film critic of Toronto's *NOW* magazine, and a regular contributor to *Cinema Canada*.

to bring out their repressions and terrors into a physical manifestation that can be cured, removing the neuroses. Dr. Paul Ruth had no idea that he would be creating a generation of *Scanners* when he invented his tranquilizer ephemeral.

With the exception of *Videodrome*, which we will deal with later, the villains in Cronenberg's films are not his scientists, but outsiders to the central worlds of the characters - *Scanners*' Keller, who is collaborating with the Scanner underground for his own power; *Fast Company*'s corporate manager, who fails to understand the obsession with speed that powers his drivers; the collector in the short film, *The Italian Machine*, who buys a phenomenal motorcycle then puts it in his living room as an objet d'art. The crime in all these films is not ambition as much as it is stupidity.

The problem with intelligence, of course, is that it is human, and thus limited. The failure of the majority of Cronenberg's scientists is that all the implications of everything they do is never quite apparent. Unlike, say, a computer with a chess program, they cannot work out all the implications of each move.

Cronenberg has said that "I make no attempt to say that scientists go too far. I'm very ambivalent about the ecology

resurrected from the dead by a team of dedicated surgeons. The scientific explanation of the strange new organ she develops - a syringe in the armpit that draws blood from her victims and leaves them carrying a virulent form of rabies - is one of Cronenberg's great coups in scientific terms. When Rose receives skin grafts, the graft tissue is rendered morphogenetically neutral (all tissue is the same tissue), assuming that the body will absorb the tissue into its biosphere, ignoring the fact that in intensive care, the body is operating under a different system (being fed on plasma) and that the grafts may absorb the body into a new ecology.

In *Shivers* and *Rabid*, both the "villains" and the "victims" (both terms are to be used with extreme care) are unwitting. The scientific intervention is a physical invasion that effects the brain. When they realized the nature of their actions - Dr. Hobbes in *Shivers* and Rose in *Rabid* - the effect is to kill them, because both commit suicide. The message is quite plain: knowledge kills.

It is reflected very plainly in the straightforward style of the two films. These are not horror films that relish dark corners and lurking menace, but rigidly controlled frames and tautly Apollonian environments - sterile modern apartment buildings and hospitals, and clean, Canadian shopping centres and subways. In an American horror film, it is not at all surprising to find slashers stalking 42nd Street or wolves in the South Bronx, for these are deranged environments, decaying and corrupt. The high-tech beauty of Cronenberg's environments are logical monuments to clarity and order, and the eruptions of madness and disease in these regions is much more shocking. Even his casting of Marilyn Chambers in *Rabid* reflects this ambition, for Chambers, who is all muscle and sinew, is the most high-tech of all the porn queens, a product of self-design (clearly a lady who spends a lot of time in the gym). The film would have been very different had he been allowed to follow his original casting of Sissy Spacek in the lead.

### Children of rage

The relationships in *Scanners*, *The Brood* and *Stereo* reverse the terms of *Shivers* and *Rabid* in two major ways.

First, the films move from the relative freedom of the rootless characters of *Shivers* and *Rabid* into the heart of the basic unit of our society - the family. Second, the emphasis shifts almost diametrically from the effects of the body on the mind to the effects of the mind on the body.

Almost as important, there is a shift in the type of science involved. Dr. Raglan in *The Brood* and Dr. Ruth in *Scanners* do not intervene nearly as radically in the biology of the human body as do their predecessors (*Stereo*, Cronenberg's first, experimental, feature film, is somewhat different, and is included in this discussion as it stands as a rough draft of *Scanners*). There is no surgery in *The Brood* and *Scanners*. Both films deal with a sort of telepathic murder - directly in *Scanners* and by a secondary agent in *The Brood*.

*The Brood* is Cronenberg's version of the whitebread melodrama (he has described it as his own version of *Kramer vs. Kramer*), and the genre is concerned with the violation of privileged middle-class space by unbearable emotions, usually centred on the loss and recovery of a child (cf. *Ordinary People*, *Without*



● The image invades the mind: James Woods and Deborah Harry in *Videodrome*

a *Trace*, *Kramer vs. Kramer*, *Table for Five*).

As a psychiatrist, Dr. Hal Raglan is doing exactly what he is supposed to do; that is, help people bring out their repressed emotions and conflicted desires. His tragedy is that he succeeds all too well, and as one of the few characters in Cronenberg's work to suffer from hubris, he has no idea of when to stop. When confronted with mad Nola Carveth, whose husband has institutionalized her because he fears for the safety of their daughter, he uncovers the bruised, violent soul of a child abused by her mother and ignored by a weak, ineffectual father. While his other patients remain attached to their violent neuroses - one develops a series of welts on his body, another a set of lymphic enlargements that dangle from his neck like the wattles of a turkey - Nola is his prize patient, because she produces actual children, monstrous simulacra without retinae, teeth, speech, sexuality or navels. They are, quite literally, manifestations of her rage (they are short-lived) who are connected to her not by an umbilical cord, but by a mental link that directs them against those she sees threatening her - her mother and father, a pretty school teacher her husband

finds attractive, and ultimately her doctor.

There has been research on the effects of the emotion on our physical beings - calmness and tranquility seem to be related to longevity almost as surely as natural foods and physical exercise - thus *The Brood* has a beautiful perverse logic: If a healthy mind can help the maintenance of a healthy body, cannot the forcing of sick emotions to the surface cause physical changes?

Yet Dr. Raglan is not the villain of the piece. The villain is Nola's own family and the incomprehending decency of her husband, whose job is restoring old homes (a nicely pointed bit of symbolism). In *The Brood*, science is only able to discover and awaken monsters - the seeds are planted deep within the characters themselves, and Nola contains so many seeds that only death can cure her. *The Brood* demonstrates the way that the family can serve as a source of evil and delusion (as Nola's mother remarks, "Thirty seconds after you're born you have a past, and sixty seconds after, you start lying to yourself about it").

Like most of the characters in *The Brood*, *Scanners*' Dr. Paul Ruth is a master of self-deception, believing that

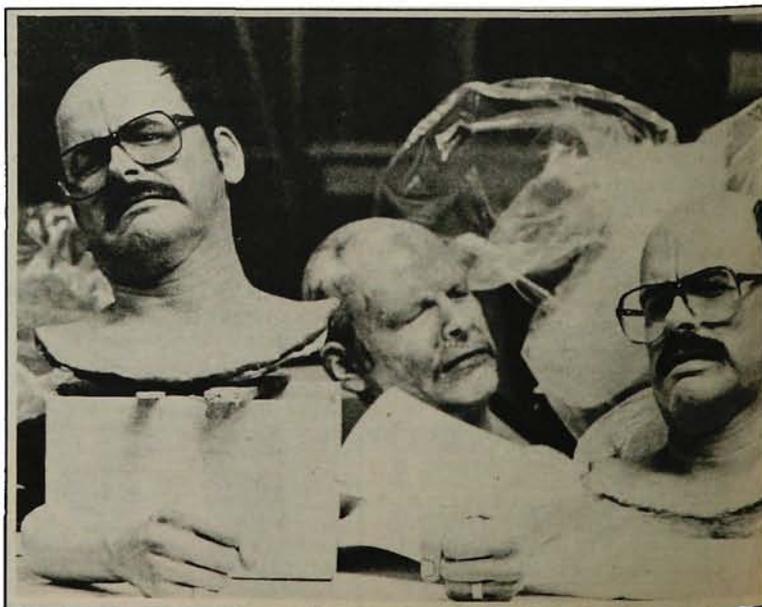


● The body invaded in *Shivers*

movement, for instance. It's not at all clear to me that the natural environment for man is the woods - for all we know, it could be downtown Chicago. The thing about man, the unique thing, is that he creates his own environment. It's in his nature to try to take control of it away from chance. So in a sense, my doctors and scientists are all heroes. Essentially, they're symbolic of what every human tries to do when he brushes his teeth."

The irony, of course, is that chance cannot be controlled, and it is the accident that defeats human intelligence in every one of his films. The distance between what Cronenberg says his films are about (the intentional fallacy) and what people perceive them as is immense. Were the people in *Starliner* apartments (in *Shivers*) better off as repressed zombies in a sterile planned environment or are they better off as crazed sexual zombies in the throes of an orgiastic hunger? Cronenberg views the spread of the parasites in that film as liberating. Yet the predatory sexuality of the various victims is presented in terms of the classic horror film, as if proving the dictum to be found on the wall of the doctor who is one of the film's centres of sanity ("Sex is the invention of a very clever venereal disease").

Rose in *Rabid* is a zombie in a different sense, for she has almost literally been



● The invasion of the flesh: in *Scanners* Louis Del Grande's head blows up

the generation of superhuman telepaths created by his sedative ephemerol (designed for pregnant women) are capable of creating an era of a new renaissance in human society.

He simultaneously gathers unto himself the guilt of having created them, clutching it to himself like a treasure. He seems to ignore the strong possibility that the Scanners may not have been created by ephemerol, but were, like Nola Carveth's monsters, released by his action. It is no accident that the beginning of the "scan tone" heard on the soundtrack when one of the Scanners unleashes his power sounds uncannily like the creaking open a huge iron door, suggesting that, when the Scanners were created, it was not a deformation of the brain that created their power, but the unlocking of a cerebral region that is not part of the ten percent normally used by human beings.

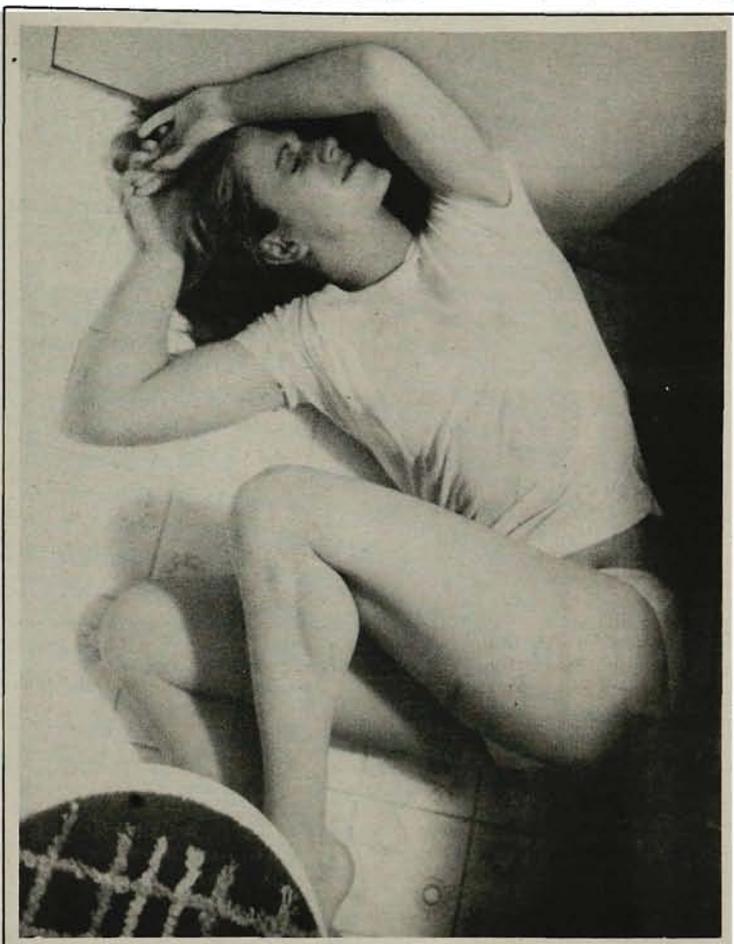
In a very real sense, both Cameron Vale and Darryl Revok in *Scanners* and *The Brood* are children of rage, one set released chemically and the other through pure mental coercion. This is quite different from the artificial telepaths in *Stereo*, who were created surgically and locked into symbiotic and intense telepathic relationships during their stay at the Canadian Academy for Erotic Research, where Luther Stringfellow's motto is "If there can be no love between the researcher and the subject, there can be no experiment."

Intriguingly, the created telepaths in both films develop pathological symptoms - an inability to deal with the flood of information received by their minds and a tendency towards self-destruction (both Darryl Revok and one of the telepaths in *Stereo* drilled holes in their foreheads to relieve the pressure created by having all those voices in their heads).

Of course, Dr. Ruth is not merely a metaphoric father to Vale and Revok, but their literal father (in the absence of a physically present mother, his oddly bi-sexual name with its masculine pre-name and feminine surname, suggest that they were not mothered at all, the same way that Nola Carveth's brood has no literal father), their competition is not merely between the dream and the nightmare of a Scanner society, but shot through with sibling rivalry and an increasingly Oedipal relationship with the father. In addition, Ruth's association with the Scanner program at Comsec suggests a domineering father unwilling to admit to the adulthood of his children, and thus Revok's rebellion is as Oedipal an action as Nola Carveth's responsibility for the death of her own mother (who is responsible for Nola's rage, in an endless circle of guilt).

The sleep of reason breeds monsters - and in *Shivers*, *Rabid*, *The Brood* and *Scanners*, the monsters function in a world of appetite, desire and murder that is the absolute reverse of the rationality that led to their creation.

Yet from these films, it is difficult to understand in precisely what direction Cronenberg is moving. His overtly Cartesian concerns, and his fascinated horror at the spectacle of physical decay are quite evident. While the technological aspect of scientific intervention is present, it is not nearly as evident as it will become in his most recent film, *Videodrome*, which finally comes face to face with the concern that is at the heart of Cronenberg's world - the interface between the human and the inhuman, between biology and other sciences.



● The body as high-tech: Marilyn Chambers in *Rabid*

### The evolution of man as a technological animal: *Videodrome*

If *Videodrome* is David Cronenberg's masterpiece, it is because its narrative confusion and profusion conceals a driven, inexorable logic. Max Renn, a Toronto television entrepreneur with a taste for the bizarre (mostly prime-time sex and violence), discovers a strange television program that features nothing but torture and murder emanating from Pittsburgh. He assigns his in-house video pirate, Harlan, to discover the location of the signal and a sales agent to buy it.

What he does not realize is that implanted in the signal is an encoded message that works directly on his brain, leading to massive, hyperrealistic hallucinations and, eventually, physical mutation.

Investigating, he discovers a set of interlocking conspiracies involving *Videodrome* (the program) which is attempting to re-order the morality of society, and a counter-conspiracy led by Bianca O'Blivion (daughter of Brian O'Blivion, who created *Videodrome*), attempting to liberate society and move man into a higher state of evolution through integration with the machinery and content of television.

Locked inside what Cronenberg has called the "paranoid inventiveness" of Max Renn, we watch as he may or may not commit murder, may or may not have a video program inserted into a strange, vagina-like organ that develops in his stomach.

The inexorable logic of *Videodrome* is that the illusion is the reality, and when dealing with a medium as insidious as television, it doesn't make any difference which is which. One can interpret the narrative in any way, and find no textual

clues to deny it. Is Nikki Brand, the radio personality with whom Renn falls in love, an agent or a victim of *Videodrome*? Is Bianca O'Blivion an enemy of *Videodrome* or part of a struggle for power within the conspiracy who is using Renn to eliminate her rivals?

## David Cronenberg Filmography

### Shorts

**Transfer** 16 mm color  
**From the Drain** 16 mm color  
**The Italian Machine**  
**Secret Weapons**

### Features

**Stereo** (1969) 65 min. 35 mm B & W  
**Crimes of the Future** (1970) 65 min. 35 mm color  
**Shivers** (1975) 35 mm, 87 min. p.c. Dal Productions Can. dist. Cinépix (US title: *They Came From Within*; Quebec title: *The Parasite Murders*)  
**Rabid** (1976), 35 mm, 90 min. dist. Cinépix  
**Fast Company** (1978) 35 mm, 93 min. p.c. Michael Leibowitz, sc. Cronenberg with Phil Savath, Courtney Smith  
**The Brood** (1979) 35 mm p.c. Mutual Films/Elgin International dist. New World-Mutual (Can), New World Pictures (US)  
**Scanners** (1980) 35 mm, 105 min. p.c. Filmplan International dist. New World-Mutual (Can), Avco Embassy (US)  
**Videodrome** (1981) 35 mm, 88 min. p.c. Filmplan Int'l dist. (Can., US & Eng.) Universal Pictures.

Max Renn's suicide - the final scene of the film - is equally ambiguous. What leads him to suicide is the promise of rebirth into a more highly evolved state (the next stage in the evolution of man as a technological animal) but there is no guarantee, which suggests that Renn, whose dying words are "Long live the new flesh," may be the first martyr of a new religion.

One of the most interesting elements of *Videodrome* is the fact that while there is overtly evil activity for the first time (Barry Convex and Harlan are explicitly turning Max into a monster that they can direct), it is also the first time that the victim is a witting accomplice in his own destruction. Were Max Renn not interested in the pornographic violence that his television station peddles to the public, he would not be hooked into the *Videodrome* signal. Were he not fascinated by the changes happening in his own body, he would not continue to view the signal. While his first murders, those of his partners, is done under the compulsion of *Videodrome*, his second murders, of Harlan and Convex, are committed as acts of vengeance.

Despite its narrative and moral confusion, *Videodrome* serves to clarify the relationships of science to man, destruction and creation, man and society in the works of Cronenberg. There is little of good and evil in the world. There is accident and evolution, whereby creation can become destruction, villains become victims (often the first victims), and victims can turn the tables with frightening suddenness.

The linkage between science and evil is a perverse one, almost entirely separate from intention, and society is less important by far than individual morality. What anti-Cronenbergians, who attack his films on social grounds, fail to see is that his work is not so much about present society and its discontents but about alternative social structures based on our world.

It is an essentially visionary world that would be capable of arising from our own, and while Cronenberg publicly expresses his belief in man as a technological animal, (the bloody fear and mutant desires of the films are deeply ambivalent towards these changes). Science can create (or unleash) a new race of beings without knowing what those beings are capable of - and unaware of the potentials of that race for self-destruction. It is a world fully cognizant that every human endeavour, every human institution, and every human relationship is a two-edged sword, and that good turns to destruction in a blink of the eye. Cronenberg's *New World* is a world that reflects the incoherence of reality (explain, if you disagree, the logic to be found in mass murder, nuclear weapons, starvation, television, and bureaucracy) and thus strikes at the very heart of the way our world works. ●

### Notes

The author would like to acknowledge the assistance of the following people and organizations for providing the opportunity to review the films of David Cronenberg in the preparation of this article: Susan Kennedy of the Canadian Film Development Corporation. Admit One Video, Debi Weldon of New Cinema, Ilona Pokol of Cineplex Corp., and Virginia Kelly of United Artists Classics.

1. In Andrew Britton, Richard Lippe, Tony Williams, and Robin Wood *The American Nightmare: Essays On the Horror Film*, Toronto, 1979.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 24
3. *Ibid.*