



Splatter MOVIES



by John McCarty

Rabid

her manifested inner demons, the brood, to claim revenge on them both. Her plan doesn't quite work, but then it doesn't entirely fail either. The ending of the film shows us that small sack-like bumps are beginning to swell up on Candy's arm as they once had on Nola's—tell-tale signs of another brood yet to come. Abused as a child, Candy is in all likelihood destined to become an abusing parent. The vicious circle draws closed; the victim becomes the victimizer.

Cronenberg's wry comment at the head of this chapter about *The Brood* being his version of *Kramer Vs. Kramer* is really quite apt. Both films are about the trauma of divorce and its impact on both parents and offspring alike. *The Brood* is a much darker study, however, for it also raises the spectre of child abuse. "It's basically a horror soap opera," Cronenberg has said. "It is very autobiographical and horrific, the story of my last few years. A not uncommon domestic situation in which all the paranoid fears of one of the partners are suddenly realized. More than realized. It is worrying that perhaps your wife, or your husband, is going mad and will kill your child, which you know is ridiculous, except finally you realize that is not only quite possible, but actually true beyond your wildest dreams."

The major difference between *The Brood* and *Kramer Vs. Kramer*, however, is that Cronenberg has chosen to tell his story of the perils of divorce and parental responsibility not in the manner of a social realist but in the



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In David Cronenberg's *Rabid* (1977), porno star Marilyn Chambers took time out from her X-rated romps to play a straight dramatic role, that of Rose, the victim of a sudden and unexpected motorcycle accident, whose life is saved by a doctor who uses a daring and experimental surgical technique. The operation has an unfortunate side effect—it leaves her with a ravenous appetite for blood. Soon she begins spreading the disease to others, passing it on to them in a unique and grisly way.

manner of Edgar Allen Poe.

Born in Toronto in 1943, David Cronenberg was a late bloomer as far as today's generation of filmmakers go. Unlike George A. Romero, for example, he didn't take to the viewfinder until he was well into his twenties. Prior to that he'd thought of himself as a potential novelist. Cronenberg's father, a fairly well-

known Canadian writer of pulp fiction and comic books, had been a strong influence on him, and so the progression seemed quite natural. But then the film bug bit.

Cronenberg had entered the University of Toronto in 1962 to major in science. Preferring the metaphor of science to the reality of it, however, he switched a year later to the

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movies since his childhood, Cronenberg continued in this vein with his next film, *From the Drain*, the story of a secret agent and a biological warfare expert who are done in by a slime creature that emerges from guess where to attack them both.

Graduating with a B.A. in English, history and philosophy, Cronenberg managed to win yet another grant from the Canadian Arts Council; this one for a film. With it, he wrote, produced, directed, edited and photographed a 65 minute film called *Stereo*, the plot of which, like his most recent film *Scanners*, deals with the perils of ESP. Shot in 35mm, *Stereo* was shown at a number of film festivals in Canada and abroad.

A year later, Cronenberg made another 65 minute film, *Crimes of the Future*, the story of a strange disease which causes people to bleed fluid from their noses and eyes. The disease has an even odder effect on those around the bleeders, however, for it compels them to try to devour the running liquid. Similar elements would again show up in Cronenberg's *Rabid*.

In 1970, Cronenberg received a third Arts Council grant and with it he returned to Europe, spending nine months in France writing and shooting several documentary fillers which he sold to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation upon his return. By this time, however, Cronenberg had become disenchanted with the low-budget, experimental film scene. His desire to make a film that would not only win wider distribution, but pro-

The parasite makes an appearance.

university's English language and literature program. Awarded a grant from the Canadian Arts Council for his writings, he then spent a year traveling and writing in Europe, primarily in Copenhagen.

Returning to the university in 1966 to complete his degree studies, he discovered film instead and quickly proceeded to shoot his first,

despite little knowledge of the craft of filmmaking itself. Called *Transfer*, the seven minute film told the story of a patient whose relationship with his psychiatrist becomes the only meaningful bond in his otherwise fractured life. Much later in his career, Cronenberg would deal with this same theme in *The Brood*.

A devotee of horror comics and

vide him with his first commercial success had become acute. The opportunity came in 1973 when he met Ivan Reitman, the producer-director of a low budget Canadian horror film, *Cannibal Girls* (1970), which had been released worldwide by American International with some success. Reitman's accomplishment now became Cronenberg's chief goal.

They Came From Within, the first Reitman-Cronenberg collaboration, took two years to get off the ground. Major financing was eventually secured from the Canadian Film Development Corporation, heretofore the sponsor of documentaries and educational short subjects. Cronenberg's script, which had a working title of *Orgy of the Blood Parasites*, was definitely neither. Nevertheless, the Corporation bankrolled the film, which was released in Canada by Cinepix under the title *The Parasite Murders* and then *Shivers*. It proved to be the financial success Cronenberg was looking for, achieving quite a bit of notoriety in the bargain. Canadian newspapers and magazines attacked its subject matter virulently. There was even a debate in the Houses of Parliament over the Corporation's having used (or mis-used) public funds to finance such a film. All of this was very good for business, however and *Shivers* was picked up for United States distribution by American International, who retitled it *They Came From Within* for its American release.

They Came From Within deals with an obsessive scientist (the first

of many in Cronenberg's films) who creates a sexual parasite capable of stimulating the sexual appetite of its human hosts out of all control. The parasites grow in number, sweeping like a strain of venereal disease through a plush Montreal apartment complex, where they inhabit the bodies of many of the residents, young and old alike, turning them into sexual crazies. The film is heavily laden with splatter, but for audiences of the time, it was splatter of a very different kind from what they had been seeing in Romero's films for instance. When one of the malevolent parasites bursts from the stomach of actor Alan Migicovksy and latches onto the face of co-actor Joe Silver, who, while attempting to pull it off with a pair of pliers, turns his face into a raw, bleeding jelly, audiences were again pummelled into open-mouthed stillness, but this time by a new and even more astonishing addition to the *Grand Guignol* bag of tricks. Cronenberg's violent set piece had sprung forth wholly unexpected, catching the audience completely off-guard. His sexual parasite was no knife-wielding assassin or flesh-craving zombie whose blood-thirsty deeds could be anticipated, but a bizarre, almost comic creation, whose grisly explosions of violence permitted no foreshadowing at all. Thus a new and perhaps even more viscerally disturbing form of splatter cinema was born. Cronenberg has made it his special province ever since.

Cronenberg's brand of splatter

cinema is a unique blend of the absurd and the physically revolting. His films revel in scenes detailing the utter corruption of the human body. As will become clear in the conversation with Mr. Cronenberg which follows, however, this emphasis is not altogether self-serving and gratuitous, for it directly relates to a very consistent theme in all of his films so far: the inability of human beings to come to terms with the fact of their own mortality; to face their fear of death.

Cronenberg's splatter movies are also distinctively marked by a blessed absence of endless cinematic quotes and hommages to other director's films which tend to glut the films of most of his contemporaries both in and out of the splatter field. If his films bear resemblance to the work of any director at all, it is perhaps that of French filmmaker Georges Franju, whose 1960 splatter classic *Les Yeux Sans Visage* (*Eyes Without a Face*) has much in common with all of Cronenberg's films so far.

Les Yeux Sans Visage deals with a brilliant plastic surgeon (Pierre Brassieur) whose beloved daughter (Edith Scob) is horribly disfigured in a car accident brought on by his own reckless driving. The surgeon, obsessed with the idea of restoring the girl's features, claims a number of female victims who resemble her and literally (as well as gruesomely) tries to graft their faces onto his daughter's own, but without success. In the end he too is mutilated—by the vicious dogs he uses to guard his estate.

Rabid



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The victim becomes the victimizer in Cronenberg's *Rabid*.

One can see a definite link between Franju's film and Cronenberg's work as evidenced by these common threads: the brilliant doctor whose obsessions lead him to the practice of a kind of voodoo science which brings about his own end; the in-

ability of the characters to face the fact of their own mortality; the comic book plot which is nevertheless staged with a relentlessly straight face; and the blend of the absurd with the physically revolting. I believe, however, that these simi-

larities go beyond mere influence. They can instead be traced to the origins of splatter cinema itself on the stage of the *Théâtre du Grand Guignol* in Paris. *Les Yeux Sans Visage* is not only a clear cinematic descendant of France's gruesome theatrical tradition, but a sort of hymn to it. It is also a French film, one of the few splatter movies, in fact, ever to have been made in France due to that country's strict policy of censoring scenes of graphic violence on the screen. It is no coincidence, I think, that when Cronenberg's very French *Grand Guignol* thriller *They Came From Within* was first released in Canada, it enjoyed its greatest popularity among French-Canadian moviegoers, who even saw the film under a French title, *Frissons*. Obviously a familiar cord had been touched.

By some strange and sinuous path, it seems, French-style *Grand Guignol*, now no longer a fixture in the country of its origin, had reached its full expression in the films of a remarkably kindred spirit in a country with a common national bond.

A Conversation With David Cronenberg

John McCarty: I've interpreted *The Brood* as really being about the effects of child abuse. Would you agree?

David Cronenberg: Oh yes, Definitely. *The Brood*, I've often described only half-jokingly, as my version of *Kramer Vs. Kramer*. It's sort of the nightmare side of that movie in