

ment is qualitatively comparable. To offer *Videodrome* to a public that appears to want nothing but more Lucas and Spielberg is an action that commands a certain admiration. The last thing Cronenberg could be accused of offering is mindless reassurance.

Intimately bound up with this is the films' evident neuroticism: the obsessive repetition of themes and imagery, the pervasive fascination with forms of perverse sexuality. To offer this as a (potential) positive feature may seem at best a back-handed compliment, but it's not meant to be: some of the most distinguished bodies of work in the cinema are centred on a similarly obtrusive neuroticism: Hitchcock, von Sternberg and Scorsese come immediately to mind. Neurotic symptoms (like the monster of the traditional horror movie) can be read as at once the product of repression and a protest against it; they may therefore, in the context of a "normality" built on a system of interlocking oppressions, acquire strong positive (positively disruptive) force — under the right conditions. One does not, of course, value Hitchcock's or von Sternberg's or Scorsese's work for the neuroticism itself, but for what it produces when brought into contact (or collision) with other factors, other material: a *Vertigo*, a *Scarlet Empress*, a *Raging Bull*. For this reason it might be considered a pity that Cronenberg so completely dominates his own work, writing as well as directing: there is little room for fruitful collision, interaction, permutation. It will be interesting to see what he makes of *The Dead Zone* (the novel being very interesting in itself).

There is one way in which Cronenberg's work may be extremely interesting to which I (as a mere immigrant) may not be properly attuned: the argument that it is peculiarly Canadian, that it crystallizes a particular national angst. This has a certain credibility: Canada has, on the one hand, a continual dread of cultural colonization by the United States and, on the other, the pervasive American dread (being already effectively colonized) of any alternative form of social organization other than patriarchal capitalism. One can well see that a response to this might logically be the impotence, negativity, fear of change but contempt for the status quo of Cronenberg's films. It does not, however, seem a very *helpful* response (though, again, viewed in this way the films take on a certain value as documentation).

### A Joyless World

It is interesting that Cronenberg's work has received so much critical attention and recognition during a period in which it is so alien to the cinema's dominant trends: interesting, because the vicissitudes of

bourgeois criticism can generally be explained, not in terms of any "critical objectivity," or set of established, time-hallowed aesthetic criteria, but in relation to the changing social climate. Why, in the age of Lucas and Spielberg, the age of a willing regression to infantilism, the age of reassurance and the "restoration of the Father," is Cronenberg — whose films seem to be the precise opposite of such a cinema — suddenly a name to be reckoned with?

When I first saw *Shivers* (under its original title, *The Parasite Murders*) at the Edinburgh Film Festival about ten years ago, the unanimous reaction among people I talked to was disgust. Edinburgh has traditionally been the left-wing film festival; it was dominated at that time by *Screen* magazine, who organized seminars that were right at the forefront of contemporary theory. We were still in the aftermath of May '68 and its related events over the Western world. Even "bourgeois humanists" like myself were beginning to become politicized and ideologically aware. We believed not only that a "liberated society" was possible, but even that it might be within sight. Now, a decade later, a few of us are still trying to cling on to a



*Crimes of the Future* is marked by a pervasive homoeroticism



radicalism the society around us (predominantly cynical and reactionary) appears to regard as increasingly ridiculous.

My point is that opposites are often, also, complementary. If Cronenberg's films are the contrary of *E.T.*, the *Rocky* series, the *Star Wars* series, they are also the other side of the coin. Our dominant cinema tells us that we shouldn't wish to change society because it's just great as it is; Cronenberg's movies tell us that we shouldn't want to change society because we would only make it even worse. From a political viewpoint, we are confronted not with opposites but with two variants on the reactionary. If Spielberg is the perfect director for the eighties, so, in his way, is Cronenberg.

What follows is a recapitulation, with additions, of what I wrote in *The American Nightmare*: the additions are a paragraph on *Rabid* and a brief account of the modifications occasioned by viewings of the five films I had not then seen. I want to preface this with one retraction. In *The American Nightmare* my remarks on Cronenberg were followed by a passage on *Halloween* that began by suggesting that John Carpenter is a more interesting and engaging artist than Cronenberg. Carpenter's subsequent work has revealed this as a critical aberration: the confusions I noted in his early work have never been resolved or interestingly developed, and his work overall conspicuously lacks precisely that "artistic authenticity" I have acknowledged in Cronenberg's. Faced with the choice of re-seeing *Videodrome* or any of Carpenter's movies, I would choose *Videodrome*.

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*Shivers*, *Rabid* and *The Brood* were the films with which I got to know Cronenberg's work, and it remains convenient to begin with them: they are so closely connected, sharing an identical basic plot structure, as to be seen as a loose trilogy. Their basis is this: a man of science invents something (an aphrodisiac, a new technique of skin-grafting, a new method of psychotherapy) that he believes will benefit mankind and promote social progress (in *Shivers* and *The Brood*, explicitly a form of liberation); he uses a woman as the (chief or sole) guinea-pig for his experiments; the results are unpredictably catastrophic, escalate way beyond his control, and eventually produce a kind of mini-apocalypse. (*Scanners* and *Videodrome* share much of this plot structure, confirming its centrality to the Cronenberg oeuvre, but introduce two important modifications, both of which serve to make the films less actively objectionable: the chief experimentee/victim is

no longer a woman, and the form of science involved, the ambition of the scientist, has far less progressive connotations, so that the "awful warning" the films offer is less unacceptable.)

*Shivers* can be read as Cronenberg's response to the notion of sexual liberation.<sup>1</sup> As the parasites proliferate through the apartment building, all the taboos of bourgeois sexual morality — promiscuity, female aggressiveness, age difference, homosexuality (both male and female), incest — are systematically overthrown. The film identifies this with the spread of disease, and views it with unmitigated horror and disgust. The parasites themselves combine strong sexual and excremental overtones: shaped like phalluses (and one invades a woman in a bath via her vagina), they are coloured like turds. Disgust is indeed the film's dominant and pervasive tone: by the end it has coloured the presentation of every human physical activity, becoming a kind of obsessional aversion therapy for such things as kissing and eating. Cronenberg (in the 1979 panel discussion at the Festival of Festivals) claimed that this disgust is not really sexual — it is disgust with "mortality" itself, with the fact that the human body is prone to disease, grows old, decays. As an "explanation" of the films, that strikes me as fairly ludicrous: it totally fails to account for the sexual nature of their imagery, and it merely substitutes another form of negative and unhelpful morbidity for the one the films insistently project. I pointed out the oddity of the ending of *Shivers* long ago, in my *Film Comment* report from Edinburgh: when all the apartment dwellers have succumbed to the parasites and set out to infect the rest of the world, all signs of disease have disappeared. No reason is given for this; of course, the author of a work of horror or science fiction has every right to ask us to accept a fantastic premise, but I think she or he is then obliged to follow its logic and not arbitrarily alter its data. The absence of disease can, however, give rise to the question, what, then, is finally so terrible about this invasion? If these people are now neither sick nor unhappy, why can't what they are offering the world be seen as liberation after all? What is even odder than this anomaly is that Cronenberg now seems ready to argue that this is a legitimate reading of the film: it can, of course, only be a reading *against* it, the specific signifiers and generic pressures combining to

1. Harkness, with what may seem to many callous opportunism, finds my remarks on *Shivers* given "a darkly Cronenbergian irony" by the AIDS epidemic. If this has any point in relation to the film, it is presumably to imply that *Shivers* is somehow validated by its prophecy "coming true." A film (of whatever genre) must be judged according to such features as tone, attitude, imagery; a work of science fiction is no more validated by "coming true" than it is invalidated if it doesn't. To suggest that *Shivers* is some kind of anticipatory film about an actual human tragedy can only make it appear even more distasteful than it already is.



express a totally unambiguous horror at what is happening. And what, in any case, could we possibly make of a film that dramatized liberation like *that*?

Perhaps I should make it clear (in view of Cronenberg's suggestion that my dislike of his work is somehow bound up with "justifying my sexuality") that I am not in the least accusing *Shivers* of being anti-gay or anti-lesbian: it is anti-everything, and if there is one thing it cannot be accused of, it is discrimination. One may feel, however, that the film reserves a special frisson of horror for the release of an active, aggressive female sexuality, and this is pursued much further in *Rabid*. Here, as the result of a skin-graft experiment, Marilyn Chambers develops an all-purpose sexual organ in her armpit: a vagina that opens to let out a nasty sharp little phallus that drains her victims' blood and gives them rabies. (The sexual connotation of her encounters is, I think, quite obvious: she is seeking release or satisfying a "hunger.") It is true that the film presents her as a victim (and the victim of a misguided male), but I don't think that radically affects the issue: the horror the film is playing on is the dread of the release of what Freud called the woman's "masculinity," which our culture is so concerned to repress.

If *Shivers* evokes *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *Rabid* evokes *Night of the Living Dead* (at the same time anticipating, in its urban settings, *Dawn of the Dead*) — even down to its final images of Marilyn Chambers's body being thrown into a garbage truck. The comparison is instructive. Both films show social breakdown, with human beings converted into predatory monsters; both are entirely pessimistic. But there is an essential difference between the premises of the two films, with marked ideological consequences. Romero's ghouls are the embodiment of established values/dominant norms; from the beginning of the film, and consistently throughout, they are linked specifically to the tensions and conflicts within the bourgeois patriarchal family. The problem for the survivors, then — merely implicit in *Night of the Living Dead* but magnificently developed in the sequel — is to extricate themselves from these values and create new ones, new forms of relating. Nothing comparable is even implicit in *Rabid*, where the catastrophe is caused by an attempt at progress and takes the form of released female activeness, dramatized as horrific and disgusting. It is important to distinguish clearly between pessimism and negativity, two very different phenomena that are often confused. Our current social/political situation gives one few grounds for optimism, and it is scarcely surprising that many of the finest contemporary works of art (the operas of Sallinen, for example) are deeply pessimistic (though not at all negative).

*The Brood* develops this attitude to female activeness ("mascu-

linity") much more explicitly; it is also interesting in that "science" here becomes psychotherapy, directly concerned with the release of repressed energies. Again, the central victim/predator is a woman, Nola (Samantha Eggar); again, the film engages with one of our culture's major radical issues and treats it in the most reactionary and negative way possible. Cronenberg's defence of the film (that he saw Nola as just an individual character, not an archetype) strikes me as merely another instance of his extraordinary ideological innocence. It is impossible to make a film without involving oneself in the network of contemporary social relations, and without revealing one's own position within that network. The choice of "individual case" that one makes is, precisely, the dramatization of that position. *The Brood* is concerned with the oppression of women, the repression of the woman's "masculinity," the secret, internalized rage that this repression produces. It then proceeds to attribute this not to patriarchy but to the fact that Nola's father was weak: it was all the fault of an aggressive mother. The implication is clear: patriarchal dominance is "natural," any deviation from it will result in disaster. The misguided psychotherapist (of course) succeeds only in making things much, much worse: he finds a means whereby the repressed rage can be externalized and released, in the form of Nola's monstrous, murderous children. The scene of childbirth gives us one of Cronenberg's most remarkable images: the unborn child, a huge excrescence on Nola's body, has the appearance of an enormous penis, a vivid literal enactment of Freud's perception that, under patriarchy, the child is the woman's substitute phallus. The implication, again, is quite clear (and highlighted by the film's immediate historical context of the growth of radical feminism): at all costs, women's repressed "masculinity," activeness and rage *must* remain repressed — their release would be catastrophic.

If Cronenberg's films are reactionary, they are so in a quite unusual way: they are not reactionary in the simple, easily comprehensible way of *Rocky*, *E.T.* or *Poltergeist*, they do not reaffirm "establishment" values — except perhaps negatively, by default. When what we call "normality" appears in the films, it is presented as unattractive and joyless. In fact, the films seem unable to affirm anything, and unable, at the same time, to offer any very helpful analysis of the oppressiveness of our social institutions. It seems very odd that Harkness should describe him as a "visionary": in the sense in which I have always understood the term — the "vision" of a Blake or a Janacek, in which the furious protest against oppression is accompanied by intimations of a possible transcendence, the coming of the New Jerusalem, or the "transfigured city" of the Janacek *Sinfonietta* — Cronenberg is as far from being a visionary as



any artist one can think of. The world of his films is not only a world without joy, it is a world in which there is no *potential* for joy. The films lack any sense of the tragic (though Marilyn Chambers in *Rabid* achieves a certain pathos): nothing of value is lost, because nothing has value. It is this total negativity that gives the films their interest (I would describe it as a “clinical” interest), but it is also their crippling limitation. It accounts for the uniform drabness, the lack of energy, the fact that, while frequently repulsive, the films are almost never exciting or frightening (which perhaps explains the rather meagre box-office response).

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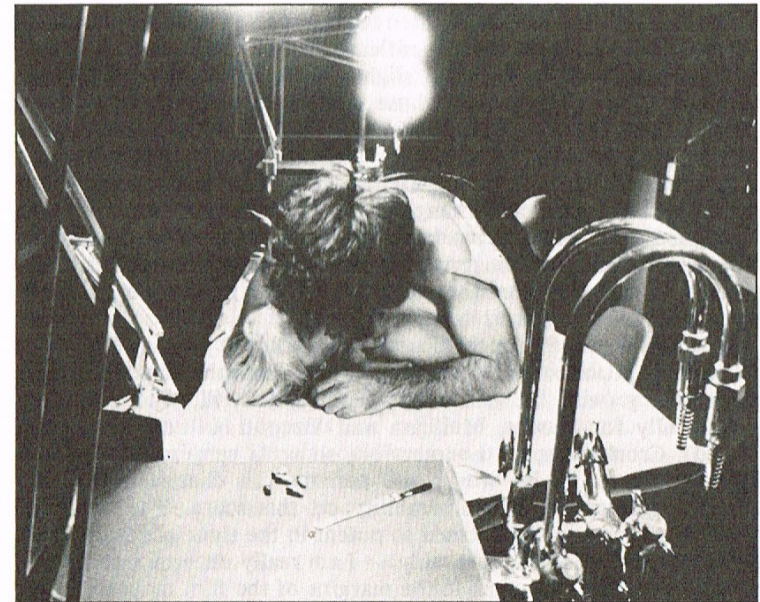
It remains to discuss the modifications to this view of Cronenberg necessitated by viewing his other five feature films: the two early “experimental” movies (*Stereo* and *Crimes of the Future*); the would-be “commercial” *Fast Company* (it was in fact an unmitigated box-office disaster); and the two films released since *The American Nightmare* was published. The modifications are slight.

*Fast Company* can be disposed of very quickly. No one (as far as I know) makes any claims for it whatever, and it is indeed utterly conventional. Indeed (some nudity, sexual explicitness and coarse language apart, plus the fact that it is in colour) it seems virtually indistinguishable from the numerous “B” movies I used to see when I was a kid, in the thirties and forties: one feels, nostalgically, that it should have starred Richard Arlen, Wayne Morris and Barton MacLane. On that level, it’s not bad. Its interest within the Cronenberg oeuvre lies in its professional competence. This is not, of course, to suggest that Cronenberg’s other films are *incompetent*, which would be silly. What *Fast Company* does is prove that he can make a decent, ordinary little movie. The term “conventional” can have connotations that are not necessarily negative: if *Fast Company* has a certain energy that the typical Cronenberg films lack, this doubtless derives precisely from the conventions of classic Hollywood cinema. The existence of the film underlines the fact that the peculiar distinction of the “real” Cronenberg films — their very peculiar flatness and drabness — is a matter of artistic choice. Accordingly, the film increases one’s respect for Cronenberg — one’s awareness of the authenticity of his work.

The two “avant-garde” movies, on the other hand, come initially as something of a shock. Not that they are by any means incompatible with the subsequent films (indeed, *Crimes of the Future*

should be seen as their prototype); what is startling is their explicit and pervasive homoeroticism. Cronenberg (in the interview in this book) attributes this to the presence in both films of Ron Mlodzik; yet, according to the credits, Cronenberg himself wrote, directed and edited both films (Mlodzik is credited solely as an actor). If one switched off the soundtrack of *Crimes of the Future* (the loss would not be great), one might easily assume that the main body of the film had no ambition beyond chronicling a series of somewhat kinky gay pick-ups, with the participants perversely interested in each other’s feet: one is interrupted by a jealous lover, another is brought to a halt by the second man, who is understandably pissed off by the extremely limited manner of intercourse.

*Stereo* should perhaps be read as marking, at the outset of Cronenberg’s career in feature films (I have not seen the shorts that precede it), a crucial moment of hesitation. The Cronenberg structure (the attempt at progress that goes disastrously wrong) is already there embryonically. Yet the film has an openness and uncertainty that I don’t find in any of the subsequent works. What is especially remarkable is the way it moves towards (a) an explicit lecture on



The one film where people enjoy eroticism — *Stereo*