



Cronenberg and Allan Migicovsky rehearse a scene in *Shivers*

Only when I started to type. Up until that moment I did not know what it was going to be.

What is obviously different about Shivers is the increase in violence and the explicitness of sexual activity. Of course that's also what makes it "horror" as opposed to something else.

That's definitely something I wanted to do. Why it should have come at that point I don't know, but as you well know there are a lot of underground films that are very sexual and very violent. There are a lot of underground films that could never be shown. But certainly symbolic violence was everywhere in underground films, partially I think because the people who felt they were undergrounders had a certain rage and anger. I mean, Kenneth Anger's name is no mistake. That would express itself in my early films. There is a certain violence in *Stereo* and *Crimes of the Future*.

It is more suppressed.

It is, but both those films are about repression as well. In that sense making *Shivers* was a very liberating and very cathartic experience for me. It was not at all degrading and some people have suggested that I've sold out. I'm sure Bob Fulford would have that view, having given *Stereo* a very nice review and then walking in to see *Shivers*. I invited him to see *Shivers* because I thought somebody who liked *Stereo* would like this. And it was my naivety, but I felt that the films were very connected, and he obviously did not see it that way.

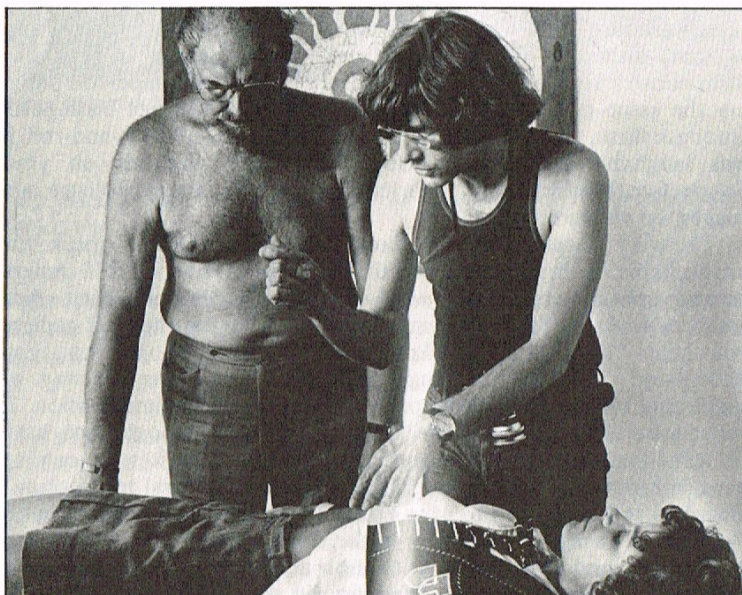
How do you deal with the fact that as soon as you have parasites crawling around, with blood on the screen, the audience that was appreciative of you before suddenly disappears?

First of all you do get another audience. There are a lot of very explicit horror films around that I'm not even interested in because a slaughterhouse is not what I want to see. So I never think of my films as that, although obviously for some people this is a very fine distinction. I remember people who said that all rock-and-roll songs are the same and they really meant it. They could not distinguish amongst them, but to those of us who were fans of rock-and-roll it was laughable to say that. So I suppose it depends on your perspective, but for me all the arguments for off-camera violence and suggestion were irrelevant.

The very purpose was to show the unshowable, to speak the unspeakable. I could not have those parasites happen off-camera because nobody would know what was going on. It's one thing when somebody raises a knife to someone else's chest and then off-camera you hear "swoosh"; you know what's going to happen, you understand it. I was creating things that there was no way of suggesting because it was not common currency of the imagination. It had to be shown or else not done. I mean, you could not have someone looking off-camera saying, "My God, parasites are coming out of his mouth." In truth it seemed absolutely natural to do what I did. And to people who look to Hitchcock as the master of restraint, I'd say you have to look at him in the context of his personality and of his time, and you also have to look at *Frenzy*, too, which has a couple of very nasty scenes. The man did them — he wanted to, no one was forcing him. The times were such that he was allowed to do that, and so I say even with Hitchcock it's not so cut-and-dried.

Shivers and **Rabid** both release a chaos on the world, but in somewhat different ways. How do you view the release of chaos?

I'm looking at these things for the first time actually, but I tend to view chaos as a private endeavour as opposed to a social endeavour. That's undoubtedly because I was born and raised in Canada. I'm sure if had I been born and raised in some other country I would not think of chaos strictly in terms of private chaos. Mort Sahl was recently criticizing modern comedians like Steve Martin because they deal only with personal madness rather than social issues. I guess I see, just making that connection now, that the chaos that most appeals to me is very private and very personal. And what happens is that you have these little pockets of private and personal chaos brewing in the interstices in the structure of general society, which likes to stress its order and control, and that's the collision you see. We were talking about *The Year of Living Dangerously* and in that



Cronenberg explains what he wants Fred Doederlein to do to Cathy Graham in *Shivers*

film chaos was considered in a completely different way: how do individuals maintain order and rationality in the midst of social and political chaos?

This is something I haven't quite thought about in such terms before, but I think what that connects to directly is my sense of myself, which is ultra-traditional. Obviously the understanding of myself as an outsider came later, because I am an artist, for one thing. People have certain sensibilities and never quite feel that they are securely embedded in their social context. They always feel that the slightest little thing is going to jar them loose, and they're going to be hopping around. I did not have a very strong sense of myself as being a Jew. I still don't really, because I wasn't raised that way. I did not understand it and had to be educated into it.

I'm not particularly insecure or paranoid, but I understand it very well. I always thought that I would much more likely be put in jail for my art than for my Jewishness. But it becomes a moot point. I have to tell you that a friend, Peter Rowe, saw *Videodrome*, came up to me, said that he really liked it, and added, "You know, someday they're going to lock you up," and walked away. (laughs) That did not help, you know. But I suppose underneath I always have a feeling that my existence as a member in standing of the community is in grave jeopardy for whatever reason. That's a personal chaos — it's as though society has suddenly discovered what I really am, what is really going on inside, and wants to destroy it.

The chaos in Shivers and Rabid is not a personal chaos, it's really a social chaos.

Yes and no. To the extent that those films happen in my mind the chaos is very private. I'm not really playing games with you. I think of it that way. My personal experience of society is not what is in *Rabid*, where people are running amok on the streets. I've never experienced that. So in a very real sense it's just another example of interior, as opposed to exterior, chaos.

In *Shivers* and *Rabid* the chaos arises from very small, private, personal experiments in science. As it starts to filter out and make its presence known, society turns on it and tries to attack it. That's where the conflict comes from. For example, in *Rabid* I'm not positing a city in conflict. The conflict comes from the woman and the disease, and society attempts to destroy that. So until her advent the society is well ordered.

But by the end of Shivers the chaos is not private at all. In fact, there is a suggestion that the chaos is going to extend beyond the boundaries of the apartment complex.

I know, but we're still talking about a group of twenty people going out into the city of Montreal, and that still feels very private to me. In other words, think of the imagination as a disease. There are societies in which imagination is considered a disease. Your art is at the service of the state — that is what art is. So true imagination, which is free-ranging and knows no bounds and knows no censorship, is a disease to be stamped out, to be repressed.

So Shivers and Rabid actually express a form of social alienation because the consciousness that is imagining them has the sense of being an outsider, and consequently there is a slightly paranoid attitude towards society.

That's right, but the paranoia is justified by what happens. This is like imagination as disease — it depends on your point of view. This is something that Robin Wood has never understood — that the ending of *Shivers* was for me a happy ending. I think he really does not understand whose side I'm on in those two films.

If there is a joyous release at the end of Shivers, certainly the release is not joyous in Rabid, nor is the ending of Rabid joyous. Yet you're dealing with the same concept of releasing all this suppressed energy, all this surplus rage.

That's right, because I'm very balanced — I'm cursed with balance, which is to say I immediately see all sides to the story at once. And they are all equal, they all seem to have equal weight. You could tell the same story three times, each time with a totally different tone — one is happy, one is tragic, one is melancholy or funny — and they would all be true. They would all be aspects of the same phenomenon. That can be a curse, maybe it's very Canadian, too. This has been noted by some critics like Carrie Rickey, who humourously said that my political stance, since it seems to come down on all sides at once or none at all, seems to be very Canadian. And that's true, there is a certain point when that can be paralyzing: it stops you from action,

you don't move. If you shove one way, even if it's the wrong way, at least what you get is motion. And it's certainly true that Americans, if nothing else, have moved, even wrongheadedly, but they'd rather move than stand still, which is not the same as what happens in Canada. In Canada we'd rather stand still.

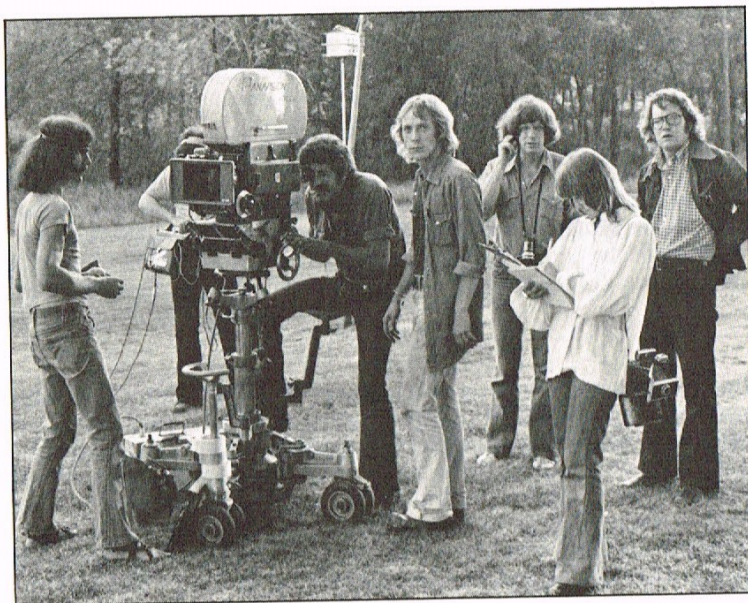
How much does this have to do with the fact that you're moving from a collective protagonist in Shivers to more of a focus on the individual in Rabid?

I think that's an interesting point. Something might seem funny when you're seeing a group of people slipping on banana peels, but when you get closer and see that someone is breaking his head open it's suddenly not so funny. In a sense both situations are real but the vantage point is different. I don't think they are contradictory. I think *Shivers* posits that disease has a positive aspect. The parasite takes a little blood, but so what — you've got lots to give and in the meantime it does this for you and that for you. Why not give it a chance? You know, that approach to disease.

And *Rabid*, says, yes, but if you really take this personally all the way to the end, what happens? What are the consequences on a personal level? And then it's suddenly not so funny, and it's a little hard to carry it all the way to a happy, funny ending. It has a lot to do with how I was feeling when I wrote it. That's not facetious at all. You don't approach these things from a schematic philosophical distance. You approach it from the inside out in order for it to have the energy to work. It has to come from the inside, and you invent the rationale and the philosophy afterwards.

I try not to be that conceptual about it to begin with; filmmaking is a very instinctive act, no matter how verbal it is or how rational some characters in it might be. The creator is working very much on instinct, always.

Don't you think in Shivers that the audience automatically identifies with the doctor who wanders through the emerging chaos. This is underlined by his growing relationship with the nurse. When finally both of them become infected, there is something human that has been lost, so it's not a joyous release.



The crew on *Shivers* — Robert Saad behind the camera, Cronenberg is the third from the right.

But you're wrong. You're right and you're wrong. There's a repressed sexual something going on. He's a saint, don't forget. He doesn't really get close to her, to kiss her, until the disease has introduced itself. If this is civilization and its discontents, this is a disease of the id arising. What it destroys is the socially acceptable way of a man and a woman coming together, but it replaces that with a very bizarre, strange, alien mode of coming together.

The standard way of looking at *Shivers* is as a tragedy but there's a paradox in it that also extends to the way society looks at me. Here is a man who walks around and is sweet — he likes people, he's warm, friendly, he's articulate and he makes these horribly diseased, grotesque, disgusting movies. Now, what's real? Those things are both real for the person standing outside. For me those two parts of myself are inextricably bound together. The reason I'm secure is because I'm crazy. The reason I'm stable is because I'm nuts. It's true, it's palpable to me.

So what I'm saying to you is that you're right. Certain audiences won't accept *Shivers* at face value, *but* there is a devil in the film.

Each of my films has a little demon in the corner that you don't see, but it's there. The demon in *Shivers* is that people vicariously enjoy the scenes where guys kick down the doors and do whatever they want to do to the people who are inside. They love the scenes where people are running, screaming, naked through the halls. They like these scenes, but then they might just hate themselves for liking them. This is no new process. It is obvious that there is a vicarious thrill involved in seeing the forbidden.

There is real horror when the kiss happens.

Yes, I think you should feel that as well, but I think all these things push and pull at the same time. *Shivers* does not lend itself to an easy schematic breakdown which I think is the sign of a good film. The characters experience horror because they are still standard, straightforward members of the middle-class high-rise generation. I identify with them after they're infected. I identify with the parasites, basically. Your argument is turned upside down if I say, of course they're going to react with horror on a conscious level. They're bound to resist. I mean, they're going to be dragged kicking and screaming into this new experience. They're not going to go willingly. But underneath, there is something else, and that's what we see at the end of the film. They look very beautiful at the end of the film. They don't look diseased or awful, they're well dressed.

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Your films seem to take a classic Freudian stance towards the structure of the personality in the sense of a balancing of the forces of the conscious and the unconscious mind. The unconscious mind is something that can't really be liberated with any confidence whatsoever. It has to be watched. Is it possible to interfere with this mechanism at all. How do you feel about that philosophically?

I think it *must* be interfered with despite the fact that the consequences are sometimes horrific. You have to live a life that balances between safety and disaster. I don't think the aim of life is to find a niche that is totally safe and secure, because I think that's death, really. On the other hand I don't personally want to live in the