

Indeed, it is significant that of the major horror-story archetypes, Cronenberg's are the closest to *Frankenstein*, which has the strongest links to the speculative world of science fiction.

The important difference between horror and science fiction is that they operate on different continuities of evil. Science fiction's evil is not interior and exterior, but rather on a scale of accidental to intentional. Did the mad scientist create a monster or a human being, and which did he mean to create? When horror and science fiction intersect, one can almost graph the relationship of the two forms of evil. In *Alien*, the evil is quite intentional (the monster was what the Nostromo was really looking for) and socially interior (the structure of capitalism is using the workers on the ship to bring the monster, a biological ultimate weapon, back so they can exploit its power). In *Them* (the best of a series of nuclear big-bug movies from the 1950s), the monsters (giant ants) are created accidentally through nuclear mutation, so the evil is accidental and socially interior, as the bomb is an expression of the power of capitalism.

Thus Robin Wood's assignment of Cronenberg's films to the category of "reactionary" horror films (see page 24 of *The American Nightmare*) and his discussion of them as based in "sexual disgust" and "the projection of horror and evil onto women and their sexuality" misses the point because he is dealing with Cronenberg in the same terms as Wes Craven and George Romero, as a horror director who attempts to examine the nature of society's structure and its dehumanization 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 straitjacket 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 critical limitations of the system come from the premise that the horror film is saying "Because of this, that happened." Cronenberg, a speculative director, is saying "What if...?"

The ideological tunnel vision of Wood's group ignores the component of science in Cronenberg's work, and that is the very element that lifts it out of the category of the exploitation horror film. It would be interesting to see what Wood now has to say 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" — now that the most explosive liberation of sexual energy, in the gay world, has been linked with the spread of AIDS and Kaposi's Sarcoma (which has become known as "gay cancer").

What I hope to do is examine the way in which science and scientists in the cinema of David Cronenberg create the possibilities of new worlds; the narrative function of his victims; the way that science and its relationship to its victims create an ambivalently disturbing alternative vision to contemporary life; and the way that Cronenberg's thematic concerns have evolved in terms of the intentionality from experimentation to accident, from specific to general malaises in the films themselves and within the oeuvre. What happens when the director asks, "What if...?"

I. 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. Emil 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. Dan Keloid, 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 to bring their repressions and terrors into a physical manifestation that can be cured, removing their neuroses. Dr. Paul



The Brood concentrates on the problems of the family — Dr. Raglan gives psychiatric advice to Nola

Ruth had no idea he would be creating a generation of scanners when he invented his tranquilizer Ephemerol.

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 and 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 the implications of everything they do is never quite apparent. Unlike, say, a computer with a chess programme, they cannot work out all the implications of each move.

Cronenberg has said "I make no attempt to say that scientists go too far. I'm very ambivalent about the ecology 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 to be is immense. Were the people in the Starliner apartments of *Shivers* better off as repressed zombies living in a sterile planned environment, or are they better off as crazed sexual zombies in the throes of 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 found on the wall of the doctor who is one of the film's centres of sanity: "Sex is the invention of a clever venereal disease."

Rose in *Rabid* is a zombie in a different sense, for she has almost literally been 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 body will absorb the tissue, 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) assume their positions unwittingly. The scientific intervention is a physical invasion that affects the brain. When Dr. Hobbes in *Shivers* and Rose in *Rabid* realize the nature of their actions the result is death because both commit suicide. The message is quite plain — knowledge kills.

This is reflected very clearly in the straightforward style of the two films. These are not horror films that delight in dark corners concealing lurking menace. Instead they are composed around rigidly controlled visual frames and taut Apollonian environments — sterile modern apartment buildings and hospitals, clean Canadian shopping centres and subways. In the American horror film, it is not at all surprising to find deranged slashers stalking 42nd Street or wolves in the South Bronx, for these are deranged environments, decaying and

corrupt. Cronenberg's environments with their high-tech beauty are logical monuments to clarity and order, and the eruptions of madness and disease are consequently much more shocking. Even his casting of Marilyn Chambers in *Rabid* reflects this, for Chambers, all muscle and sinew, is the most high-tech of all the porn queens, a product of self-design (this is 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.

II. 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 from the effects of the body on the mind to the effects of the mind on the body.



One of Cronenberg's children of rage — Cameron Vale in *Scanners*

Almost as importantly, there is a difference 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 did their predecessors (*Stereo*, Cronenberg's first, experimental, feature film, is somewhat different, and is included in this discussion because it stands as a rough draft for *Scanners*). There is no surgery in *The Brood* or *Scanners*. Both films deal with a sort of telepathic murder.

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

As a psychiatrist, Dr. Hal Raglan is doing exactly what he is supposed to do — help people bring out their repressed emotions and conflicting desires. His tragedy is that he succeeds all too well, and being one of the few characters in Cronenberg's work to suffer from hubris he has no idea when to stop. 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 lymphatic 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 retinas, 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 schoolteacher her husband finds attractive and ultimately her doctor.

There has been much research on the effects of emotion on our physical beings — calmness and tranquillity seem to be related to longevity almost as surely as natural foods and physical exercise — in which case *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 uncomprehending 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