

and though his preoccupation with the creatures inhabiting his body is quite understandable, it does not explain the callous indifference with which he treats his wife. Janine, touchingly, is trying to explain his behaviour and symptoms according to her own anxious theory, which is that he has cancer. (His real disease, namely human-nature-à-la-Cronenberg, is endemic and incurable.) Her attempts at cheerful compliance with his moods are offset by her worried confession of her fears to Betts; and the scene in which she discovers Nicholas sprawled in front of an open refrigerator, then finds the spatters of blood attesting to his ailment in the bathroom and finally is brutally rejected in her attempts to comfort him is poignantly realized. Her anguish rises even further in the later scene in which she tries to comply, in tearful and frightened confusion, with his strange and sudden sexual appetite.

These scenes and the ones featuring Nicholas alone in their apartment also provide the basis for some of Cronenberg's finest *mise-en-scène*. One might say in general that the *mise-en-scène* is always used to add an extra dimension or create a meaningful context for the action. The stylish elegance of the settings is continuously played against the horrors of the drama, in a dialectic of style and content that mirrors the thematic dichotomy of mind and body. The technique is particularly evident in the brilliant floor-level shot of the clean, antiseptic bathroom into which Nicholas stumbles: retching convulsively into the tub, he dribbles blood onto the toilet seat, pulls down a pair of neat, symmetrically arranged towels to wipe his mouth and finally lurches out again, leaving the shot as it began except for the disarray of towels and a solitary stain of blood against the white porcelain of the toilet. This shot, small and relatively unimportant as it is, can nevertheless stand as an example of Cronenberg's filmmaking skills. With its fixed Ozu-like camera angle, its beginning and ending in unpopulated space, its use of doorways to frame and conceal the action by turns and its progression from order to disorder within the context of a detached formal composition, the shot is an anthology of cinematic virtues and an index of the director's control and restraint.

Innumerable examples of a similar nature might be adduced, wherein Cronenberg makes good use of the indirectly lit corridors, glass-and-marble lobby, *noirish* underground garage and elegant apartment furnishings of the complex. Except for the flurries of handheld closeups and staccato editing of shock scenes, and the occasional slow-motion shot, the director's camera is inevitably calm, formally objective and detached. It is a stance that conveys aesthetic distance and a sense of the inability (as well as the unwillingness) to interfere. Cronenberg here stands back from his material, viewing it

dispassionately, often curiously, and with a sense of inevitability amounting to pitying serenity. The latter is emphasized especially in the musical score: moments conveying the progress or extent of the damage, or foretelling it, will frequently be accompanied by wistful or melancholy music. Perhaps the most characteristic shot in *Shivers* — and it has its equivalents in *Rabid* and *The Brood* — is a longshot of the exterior of the complex by night, in which the chaos and violence we know to be going on inside are distanced into a formal composition: both the building and the shot itself are clean, balanced, hard-surfaced, with an attractiveness at once ironic, sinister and sad because it is so removed from the realities within.

The moral here, as in so much of Cronenberg's work, is that the film cannot be read accurately without taking account of its *mise-en-scène*. The action, the dialogue, and the narrative shape may well give a good indication of thematic patterns and central ideas; but the interpretive, inflective function of camera placement and composition, setting and decor, photography and editing, is essential to the actual experience of the film, and to its final meaning.

It should not be forgotten that *Shivers* was Cronenberg's first mainstream commercial film, and that its sheer technical competence (to say the least) is remarkable under the circumstances — particularly considering the miniscule \$179,000 budget. Although its structure may recall Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (in reverse — this time the pods are the sexually alive ones) and individual scenes bring that and other specific films to mind (*Night of the Living Dead* in the ravenous little girl and the zombie-crowds at the end, *Psycho* in the bathrooms), *Shivers* is a forceful and original movie, which, like all its creator's work, catches the spectator off guard and surprises his expectations. If it lacks some of the depth of most of the later films, it is by no means shallow in itself. In one sense it is the most problematic of Cronenberg's films because of its explicit, not to say sensational, feasting on violence and sex. But in another sense it may well be the least problematic in that its thematic oppositions are so intelligible and formally satisfying. In his subsequent films Cronenberg's picture of the world becomes more complex, more responsive to the dilemmas of the individual, and in general more ambitious. But the very simplicities of *Shivers*'s vision give it a unique coherence.

Rabid (1976)

Cronenberg's next film, *Rabid*, had a bigger budget (\$530,000) and a less restricted setting. Its horror is a rabieslike plague, which causes its

victims to go berserk and attack others (and thus pass on the disease) before dying. The disease springs from the vampirish attacks of young Rose, the heroine, who has developed a strange organic spike in her armpit as a result of radical plastic surgery performed on her after a near-fatal motorbike crash, and who discovers that human blood is the only form of nourishment her body will accept.

The thematic consistency with Cronenberg's previous work is plain. Once again a medical attempt to restore health (and in this case a much more justified and less crackpot attempt than in *Shivers*) results in a wild and inexplicable rebellion of nature: Rose's life is (temporarily) saved, but the city of Montreal is turned into a nightmarish phantasmagoria of terminally rabid crazies and blunt martial law. It is significant that the clinic where Rose is operated on is devoted to plastic surgery — the co-opting of medical science in the interests of keeping up appearances. The Keloid Clinic performs the same function thematically as the Starliner Towers does in *Shivers*, enclosing the human animal in an envelope of clean lines and attractive proportions, smoothing over unsightly nature and denying the unacceptable warts and messy instincts of the body. This remains true of the clinic despite Dr. Keloid's rejection of a suggestion that he set up a franchise of plastic surgery resorts ("I don't want to become the Colonel Sanders of plastic surgery") and the fact that the radical operation performed on Rose is necessary under the circumstances. Though Keloid appears morally justified in his medical decision, his unthinking confidence in the use of an untried technique, despite warnings, looks very much like another case of rational hubris. In any event, the result is a bodily backlash of staggering and uncontrollable irrationality, which produces a series of proliferating horrors.

As in *Shivers*, the action has a social basis. The characters are many, there are a multitude of cameolike anecdotal episodes, and in general the scenario anatomizes the impact of the problem on a large number of people. In addition, the setting is expanded. The disease spreads almost immediately outside the confines of the clinic (in this respect *Rabid* takes up where *Shivers* left off); Cronenberg's interest in all these scenes is to examine the reactions of society to peril of an unfamiliar kind. The normal activities of eating at a roadside diner, driving a truck, visiting a porno movie, riding the subway and going Christmas shopping are all subjected to the transformations of private mania and civic emergency. In turn private terror and public disarray are converted into banal routine, as soldiers systematically gun down crazies in the streets, white-suited men with disinfectant rush in to mop up, and corpses are tossed into garbage trucks.

The epidemic spread of the disease is a boon to the narrative, since the film can merely latch on to the infectees and watch them carry the

malady abroad. The number of possible dramatic situations increases geometrically, encouraging the use of any number of effective locations and providing a motherlode of potential parallel montage to be mined whenever required. Each manifestation of the disease carries within it the seeds of dramatic consequences down the line, as the victim rises to become a predator. This is a situation familiar from Siegel's body snatchers and especially Romero's living dead, as well as from *Shivers*; but in *Rabid* it is played off against the heroine's private and different drama and also catapulted out into society at large, in contrast to the claustrophobic confinement of the other films. The result is a blueprint for a mushrooming action of great forward drive: the epidemic as plot becomes the plot as epidemic.

Even more important than the expansion of locale relative to *Shivers* is the film's grounding in the lives of its two principal characters, Rose and her boyfriend, Hart. Whereas *Shivers*'s central couple isn't all that central, and their characters relatively unexamined, Rose and Hart are taken seriously as people and granted the kind of complex humanity that in *Shivers* is restricted to the secondary character of Janine Tudor. The fact that we really care what happens to Rose and Hart, and that their problems are presented as a parallel and equally important action next to the drama of the plague, adds a dimension quite new in Cronenberg's work — a clear stepping-stone to the essentially private traumas of *The Brood*. In *Shivers* the characters are more often the butts of irony than the vessels of feeling; in *Rabid* the reverse is the case. Secondary characters like Keloid's business parter, Murray, and Rose's friend Mindy are given moments of tenderness, and their deaths beheld more with sorrow than with "savage joy." And the even less important characters of Keloid; the truckdriver, Smooth Eddy; Rose's first victim, Lloyd; Judy, the girl in the swimming pool; and Rose's final pickup (who eventually is the cause of her own death) are accorded a measure of dignity not often to be seen in *Shivers*.

But it is in the treatment of the two central characters, and especially the heroine, that *Rabid* achieves a new complexity. Within the tradition of the horror genre, Rose is the movie's "monster": she preys on people and sucks their blood, she causes death and social disruption. But Rose is basically a scared young woman, waking up after weeks in a coma with an appetite (and a new organ for indulging it) that she can't understand and that she attempts to suppress or displace, trying to avoid thinking about the realities of her bizarre situation as it dawns on her, forced to make agonizing moral decisions she's not equipped to deal with, and finding all her normal resources inadequate to meet this strange and horrifying problem. She is both frightened and ashamed, and her vulnerability is a striking

contrast both to her habitual self-confident sexual role-playing and to the strength and violence of her compulsive vampirism.

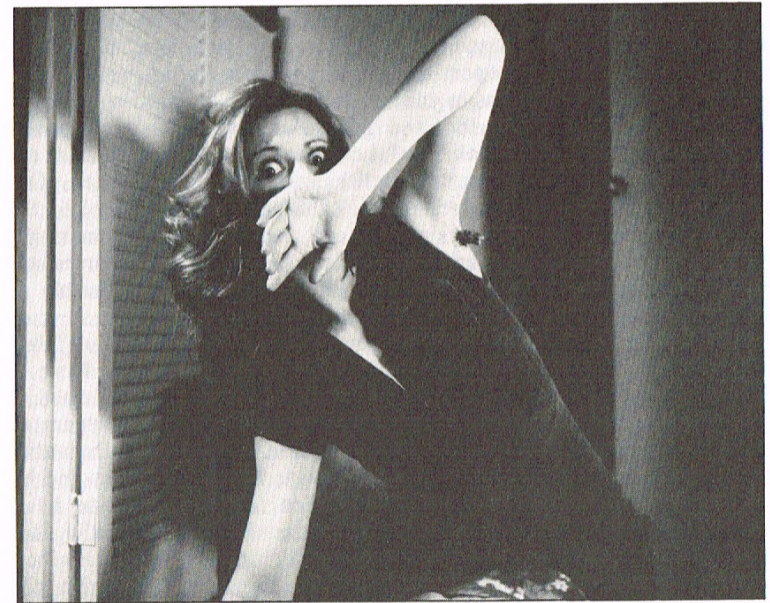
The presence of Marilyn Chambers, Ivory Soap girl-next-door turned porno queen, in the role adds extra resonance. Whatever her abilities as an actress, Chambers was (and is) certainly best known as a sex object pure and simple — as a body, in fact. And whatever Cronenberg's reasons for using her in the film, he was no doubt fully conscious that one look at the marquee was going to be enough to get his audience automatically thinking sex. To a degree the film plays up to these expectations: a certain amount of the naked Chambers is in fact visible. More interesting, though, is the way in which one's consciousness of the actress as a sexual icon colours the perception of all her behaviour. Rose's appetite for blood, and by extension the plague she spreads, are identified with the libidinous desire for sexual excess (just as in *Shivers*), and the action of *Rabid* is therefore connected with the idea of a compulsive/catastrophic liberation of repressed/destructive sexuality.

But the character of Rose certainly amounts to more than the popular conception of Marilyn Chambers. The surface of the character is that of a nice, normal girl, albeit one who has been around — and this impression operates on the spectator as a denial of preconceived expectations. Cronenberg is interested not so much in the explosions of the id as in the simultaneity of reasoned, compassionate behaviour *and* explosive id within ordinary human nature. What we get in *Rabid* is a three-fold contrast: 1) Marilyn Chambers, sex queen, turns out to be 2) a sweet, vulnerable girl, Rose, but then 3) Rose turns out to be the perpetrator of a raging, destructive passion. The reverberations become almost Pirandellian when Rose visits a porno theatre and subtly encourages a man to make a pass at her, whereupon she strikes for blood. The statuesque assurance of Chambers's carriage, the stylish independence expressed in her wardrobe, and the provocative knowingness of her behaviour around men (all qualities suggestive of power and control) are set against opposite qualities of innocence and human weakness: the angelic simplicity of her face; her childlike, piping voice and a tentativeness in verbal delivery (inexperience as an actress perhaps paying unexpected dividends here); and a need for comfort and aid openly expressed in moments of fear.

Further levels of ambiguity are suggested in Rose's attacks themselves, which carry strong sexual overtones but are less explicit in this respect than those in *Shivers*. In *Shivers* the parasites are essentially passed from body to body by a voracious kiss, whereas in *Rabid* the initial infection comes from Rose's armpit spike, employed in an embrace. Open-mouthed kisses are always sexual, but embraces

can be simply affectionate or consoling or loving. In general Rose's method of attack is disturbing because of its suggestion not simply of aggressive sexuality but of emotional need and even human vulnerability; and if the assaults in *Shivers* resemble rape, Rose's in *Rabid* have an affinity to lovemaking, with overtones of mutual consent or at least a degree of mutual responsibility.

The three attacks we see at length are particularly clear in this regard. The first, on fellow-patient Lloyd Walsh, begins with his discovery of her thrashing around convulsively in her hospital bed, her breasts uncovered. She appeals to him to hold her because she is cold, and when he complies with mixed feelings she strikes, precipitating a wild, convulsive embrace, punctuated by gasps and moans, which then subside into quiet whimpers and shudders as Rose soothingly strokes his head with postcoital tenderness. The next attack, on a drunken farmer, is actually in self-defence, as he lurches at Rose with sexual mischief in mind and is rewarded with a spike in the eye for his ogling assault. The attack on Keloid follows the same pattern as the one on Lloyd, except that it is preceded by a scene in



Rose develops a strange organic spike as the result of radical plastic surgery performed on her in *Rabid*

which Keloid comforts Rose in his best bedside manner. When she collapses onto his shoulder in distress, the viewer flinches in anticipation of another attack, only to be met with the fact that this is an ordinary frightened person seeking reassurance, not a vampire on the rampage. This is the scene that best brings out the deep ambivalence of attack-as-embrace latent throughout the film.

When Rose is driven from her girlfriend Mindy's apartment by the need for food (i.e., blood), it is significant that she chooses the denizens of a porno theatre as potential victims, the implication being that if anybody has to suffer it should at least be someone indulging in a sleazy appetite of his own. And when Rose decides to submit herself to a self-punishing "experiment" to discover whether she is the one responsible for the epidemic, it is more than coincidental that she should choose to pick up a man on the loose.

In each of these cases the male victim's sexual appetites have been a factor, and the ensuing embrace has been to a greater or lesser extent voluntary. Rose's phallic spike (achieving penetration) not only becomes an expression of her aggressive sexual-emotional need but also infects the recipient with similar needs — or, symbolically, awakens in him a dormant hunger. The suppressed desires of the body, once aroused, cannot be controlled and moreover give rise to a chain reaction of epidemic proportions. In this respect *Rabid* presents sex, and even sexual love, as a matter not to be toyed with. Marilyn Chambers, icon of easy sex, and the males who seek casual sexual favours from her become tokens of the dangers of assuming that sex can be indulged in as a pure appetite without consequences. One might go further and suggest that *Rabid* allegorically depicts the potential social catastrophe inherent in a culture that encourages sexual impulses without really considering what innate forces are being unleashed. (This is a train of thought that leads directly to *Videodrome*.)

As for Hart, he is seen even more clearly than Rose as a sufferer, and moreover one condemned to passivity. His love for Rose is established as early as the pre-credit sequence, and it is reaffirmed at salient points throughout the film. It is Hart's fate to be separated from the object of his concern and affection for virtually the entire action. He is in Montreal when she awakens from her coma, and by the time he gets to the clinic she has fled to the city while he is restrained on the spot by a quarantine order. When he actually does finally come face to face with her, he finds her bent over the inert form of Mindy, extracting blood, and this, together with the experiences he has undergone in connection with the plague, causes him to burst out at her in a frenzy of reproach. (She responds first with defensive whimpers, then with her own reproach to him for the

motorcycle crash; and the two of them end up locked in a paroxysmic embrace of love and hate that encapsulates the contradictions the movie is exploring.) But it is not long before Hart is out of it again, lying unconscious at the bottom of a stairway, and nothing is left for him but to sob and rage futilely over the phone when Rose calls him from her last victim's apartment.

Hart's situation in the film is an extremely painful one, and we as viewers are not spared that pain. But the spectacle of the hero's inability to affect *anything* in the movie is an ironic one; and Hart's enforced impotence deprives him of full dignity as a character and makes him faintly ridiculous even while we are sympathizing with him. Surely it is not mere coincidence that his name should suggest that body organ associated with the tenderer emotions, and hence an encoded message to the effect that love is not enough.

Rabid has been called by some sympathetic commentators (and by Cronenberg himself) a "light" or "fun" movie, and though I cannot at all agree with this as an overall assessment (at least when comparing the film to Cronenberg's earlier work), the movie certainly has its share of wit and humour. Some of the humour seems expressive of the filmmaker's high spirits and zestful irony, but the rest has a deeper relevance to the underlying themes of the film. The more playful examples include the subtle jokes about plastic surgery and health in general; the deft employment of radio and television news announcements in the background (here expanded from their role in *Shivers*); the foreign porno movie's dubbed soundtrack, which serves as a deadpan counterpoint to the scene in the cinema, and even manages to supply dramatic relevance ("reality is like a dream"); and the beautifully executed shopping-plaza scene in which Rose is approached by an absurd young swinger on the make.

More characteristic — and more disturbing — is the appalling humour of the more violent scenes. The rabid farmer attacks an order of fried chicken and then the people in the diner with equal gusto (the horrific as bad manners). Keloid goes berserk amidst the familiar medical rituals of an operation ("give me something to cut with, nurse"). A functionary from the mayor's office is interrupted in the middle of his bureaucratic excuses for not taking the epidemic seriously by a gang of rabid construction workers who assault his car with a jackhammer (civic politics and municipal labour unrest as horror). Mindy's polite embarrassment at a sick-looking woman on the subway is subverted when the woman dives hungrily at another passenger. A cop in the shopping plaza accidentally machine-guns Santa Claus. The shooting of the crazy who attacks Hart's car is done with the boredom of casual routine. Their humour is derived from a lunatic exaggeration of ordinary situations, and a contrast

between “normal” and “insane.” They are disturbing because they make explicit a covert recognition (which we all share to some degree) of the powerful forces lurking beneath the surface of ordinary appearances.

Once again Cronenberg’s mise-en-scène functions to enrich the meaning of the film. The settings, far more numerous and varied than in *Shivers*, operate in the same symbolic manner. The Keloid Clinic, with its neat rooms and corridors and sterile medical facilities, the happy-looking home where Hart’s confidant, Murray, finds his family destroyed, the bustling festive shopping mall that explodes into violence, the nighttime city street dominated by a colourful neon restaurant sign where a soldier snipes down crazies — all of these and other locations offer an ironic contrast between the decorative expressions of a society that thinks it is in control and the messy and violence evidence that order — and its concomitant aesthetic cleanliness — are precarious things indeed.

When Rose’s attack on Lloyd is discovered, the cheerful yellow-and-white abstract painting on the wall of her room in the clinic has been knocked askew from its rectangular “rightness” and is disfigured by an anarchic red smear of blood — now, in effect, a new piece of abstract art more expressive of the real state of things than it was before. The mayhem throughout the city late in the film is intercut with scenes of Mindy affectionately tending Rose with cold compresses and suggestions that she should just rest and not worry; and the melancholy irony of these motherly attentions — so tempting in their offers of escape into childhood and innocent suffering, and so impossible to accept — is subtly emphasized by the clean and pretty pink-checked sheets of the bed Rose lies in. And on a more abstract or philosophical level, the large spherical sculpted head split in two, which adorns the apartment of Rose’s last victim, seems to express the film’s vision of man as a schizoid creature whose head is at war with his body and is yet inescapably connected to it. (Incidentally this object is a clear foreshadowing of Ben Pierce’s powerful sculptures in *Scanners*.)

Cronenberg’s increasing skills as a filmmaker also ensure that *Rabid* has the crisp excitement of a well-told story. The control of the narrative impulse via editing (i.e., parallel montage) has already been mentioned, but in addition it might be remarked that the action sequences are filmed with greater finesse and restraint. The spectacular car crash created when Lloyd attacks his cab driver is breath-takingly staged and edited — no more perfect morsel of action cinema exists. In all the details of story construction and cinematic technique, *Rabid* represents an advance in control and refinement over *Shivers*, and is perhaps Cronenberg’s most compelling film as

pure narrative prior to *Scanners*.

But *Rabid* is a better film than *Shivers* not for these reasons, but because it is a deeper and more serious one, and because for all its humour it reveals a tragic vision of life that seems a recurring feature of Cronenberg’s work. *Rabid* is full of characters we care about — even if only a little bit — and they all suffer deeply or die or both. All the plans and adjustments and attempts to cope that the characters make in this film come to grief. This is indeed a trait of many horror movies — and an index of the genre’s subversion of the myths of normality. But in *Rabid* there is a particularly inescapable realization that nothing works and everything good perishes. Rose’s travail is derisively compensated by a few moments of strength and power (though all she really chooses is her death), and Hart is left with nothing but his impotence and sorrow. The film’s final, unforgettable image is of Rose’s body, her face looking more seraphically innocent than ever in death, lying in an alleyway and being tugged at by a dog, before being picked up and thrown unceremoniously into the back of a garbage truck. Her face is turned over into the rubbish, but she is not defiled. Rather there is a sense of tragic waste, and, finally, catharsis and elegy, that sets the seal on *Rabid* as a serious and deeply felt work.

The Brood (1979)

The Brood again represents an upward move for Cronenberg in commercial terms — another increase in budget (to \$1.4 million) and two stars with international reputations, Oliver Reed and Samantha Eggar. But in other respects the film is on a much smaller scale than *Rabid* and *Shivers*. For the first time Cronenberg moves out of the social sphere and wholly into the personal one, concentrating on a private calamity. Although all of his films are personal in an artistic sense, *The Brood* has a special reference to Cronenberg’s life, since, by his own testimony, it is based on the painful breakup of his first marriage. But the autobiographical elements in the work are irrelevant to a critical reading of it, and they are only of interest in that they go some way towards explaining its depth of feeling and peculiar sense of anguish.

Thematically, *The Brood* is once more rooted in the mutual interdependence of mind and body. But whereas the previous films begin with the tinkering of physical science that produce predatory feelings (lust in *Shivers*, hunger in *Rabid*), *The Brood* begins with the mental science of psychology, whose reductionist logic produces