

Selling movies by the gross

^{A124} The macabre art form of David Cronenberg

By RUTH-ANN MacKINNON

David Cronenberg makes movies that repel, repulse and reap a lot of money.

His purpose is to give the audience a twist — a shock. Gross movies. His products are twisted — schlock. And gross they do.

Cronenberg was in Calgary this week to appear on the television show *90 Minutes Live*.

Included in the interview were clips from two films Cronenberg wrote and directed: *Rabid* and *Shivers*. There were audible groans from the audience when it was realized that the nice-looking young man on the stage was responsible for those disgusting films.

His horror movies, without a doubt, have a long way to go before they reach respectability in the eyes of Canadians.

Shivers, his first major film, is about a pencil-sized parasite that infects tenants of a high-rise complex and spreads like the plague, demonizing its victims and, eventually, itself becoming a living "thing."

That movie has grossed more than \$3 million in 33 countries in 14 languages.

Rabid, released in May, is another bizarre medical fantasy. The plague in this

one is passed through a vampire-like protrusion from the armpit of Marilyn Chambers.

Cronenberg hopes *Rabid* will make \$10 million. So far, he said, it has grossed \$1 million in Canada and \$4 million in the United States.

It is perhaps not surprising that many Canadians secretly wish to disown this wayward Toronto filmmaker and burn up his weird creations.

But there's no denying it. They're popular movies and they're Canadian.

"It's kind of scary to think that was everybody says is true — that you're not recognized in your own country," Cronenberg said in an interview after the television taping.

I write and direct my own films and there's nobody else in Canada who has done that more than once and has been financially successful more than once.

"I've won prizes for my films. But here they don't want to know," he said.

Cronenberg isn't talking about movie goers. They obviously want to know. He's talking about the people who dominate the domestic industry and the people who criticize his films.



THE RABID CAME TO DINNER
... putting the bite on hubby

● The Canadian Film Development Corp. lent money for *Rabid* "under great duress," even though it's an organization, like a bank, that needs some successes to compensate for the many failures in which it invests.

● The Canadian motion picture distributors' association, according to Cronenberg, refused to consider *Shivers* for its Golden Reel Award — for the Canadian film that made the most money over the year — an award based on fact, not opinion.

● The Canadian Film Awards judges nominated *Rabid* this year for only one category (sound editing). Cronenberg feels this is a token gesture and adds, "The general feeling with the film awards has been that they've always shut me out."

As for film criticism, the only rating Cronenberg hears is by the physically deranged characters in his movies.

"It's part of the syndrome," Cronenberg said, "of not being recognized in your own country until you leave it."

The fact is that Cronenberg might leave, since he's nearing the high-budget level in the horror hierarchy. This could mean that he's nearing the respectability level, also. *Rabid* might not be class stuff, but nobody's slamming doors in the face of the man who made *The Exorcist*.

Cronenberg likes Toronto and doesn't like the idea of moving to California. But he definitely has ambitions. "I have to go wherever I have to go."

Cronenberg is confident that his are good quality films, because he has won prestigious awards for them in other countries. *Shivers*, for example, won the Grand Prix at the International Festival of Horror and Fantasy Films in Stigtes, Spain, an annual event for science fiction and horror movies from around the world.

He also dismisses as nonsense the claim that his films are not typically Canadian because they don't have a typically Canadian theme. "French films are French because they're made in France," he said. "My films are very Canadian. They've got Canadian actors, they're filmed in Canadian cities. But they're also universal because they're horror."

About the possibility that Canada might (horrors!) get an international reputation as

the country that produces horror movies, Cronenberg simply suggests that other Canadians start making international calibre films. "I think there should be a lot more of us," he said.

Clearly, his major obstacle in Canada at the moment is reversing the idea that his films are trash.

"I really like the genre. I see schlock horror films and I like them. I also see very extreme art films and I like them," he said.

"People have violence in them," said Cronenberg. "Life guarantees you frustration, and if the violence isn't allowed to come out one way, it'll come out another way. Horror films are a catharsis. If you have the temperament for them, they can purge the violence from your nervous system."

"Those who blame violence on the streets on violence on the screen are," says Cronenberg, "second-guessing the psychotics."

He cited the example of the American man who went berserk and started killing after seeing *Roots*. The man blamed his actions on the highly-acclaimed television series, saying it made him realize how downtrodden he had been.

"Is somebody going to say we shouldn't show films like *Roots* now?" Cronenberg asked.

"I have no trouble distinguishing between screen violence and real violence," he said. "The mere hint of a real fight on the street paralyzes me!"

In that way, Cronenberg identifies with the people who go to see his movies and also, he thinks this is one of the keys to his success.

"People who don't like horror films but make them for the money always fail because they're condescending to the genre and to the audience."

Cronenberg makes horror films for pleasure — "I'm completely broke right now. I have zero money in the bank and I'm thousands of dollars in debt. I should be getting some money for *Rabid*, but that won't be for another six months..."

How does he handle the strain and frustration of no money and no recognition?

"That's why I make violent movies."



KEEPING IT ALL ON ICE