

Fear and Loathing to Order

How shockmeister David Cronenberg served up his latest smorgasbord of outrages

BY JOHN HOFSESS

Most countries with busy, profitable film industries produce two distinctly different kinds of movies: there is art or "high culture" for critics, academics and historians of "the cinema"; and there is shock or "low culture" for "the people" — the ones who actually pay to see movies.

A few well-known examples of "low culture" are the *Carry On* movies from Britain (29 of them since 1958) and the Hammer horror films, with those stalwart actors Peter Cushing and Christopher Lee; spaghetti westerns from Italy, erotica from Sweden and Denmark, and the *Godzilla* flicks from Japan. Most of these films are low-budget quickies. They entertain many and edify no one.

In Canada as well — though most of the \$25 million of government funds invested in feature films since 1967 has gone into high-minded projects that haven't earned a cent — shock movies have emerged as the most consistently popular kind of film that we produce. Last November, the showbusiness

weekly *Variety* published a special issue devoted to Canadian films, and produced the box-office figures for the top 10 money-makers in French and English. The French list was led by "skin flicks" — *Deux Femmes en Or*, *L'Initiation* and *Valérie*, each of which earned between \$1.5- and \$2.5 million in "domestic rentals," while the English list was composed almost entirely of the most critically lambasted films that Canadian companies have released — *Death Weekend*, *Black Christmas*, *Shivers*, *My Pleasure is My Business*, *Recommendation for Mercy*, *Shadow of the Hawk*, *Face-Off*. The remaining three films — *Paperback Hero*, *Lies My Father Told Me* and *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* — received either mixed reviews, or, as with *Kravitz*, generally favorable ones, but of the total \$8.9 million that the top 10 English-soundtrack films were re-

Filming Rabid: the decontamination squad picks up plague victims on a Montreal street. And a woman's body is found (right) in a cellar freezer.



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*Maddened by the plague, another woman bites and infects her husband. Right: horror moviemaker Cronenberg cues *Rabid's* heroine, Marilyn Chambers.*

ported to have earned in Canada, \$5.7 million was earned by shock items. And of all these films it was *Shivers* — written and directed by 33-year-old Toronto filmmaker David Cronenberg, for \$185,000 of government money in 1975 — that had the biggest profit-ratio. The film has grossed an estimated \$3 million internationally, for *Shivers* has played in 33 countries, in 14 languages. The film had no "stars" to speak of. No *King Kong* hype. It succeeded simply by word-of-mouth and widespread public appeal.

Cronenberg has just completed another film in the horror genre — *Rabid*, with Marilyn Chambers (once a famous model for Ivory Snow, but she drifted into pornflicks), to be released this spring, after what is expected to be a highly successful sales pitch at the 1977 Cannes Film Festival (the British rights were sold, on the basis of "rushes," two

weeks into the shooting — nothing unusual for a Hollywood film but highly unusual for a Canadian one). If *Rabid* is also a hit, Cronenberg will have the best track record of any English-Canadian director. "I'll make one claim about myself," Cronenberg says. "I think that my ideas — my obsessions, if you will — have more in common with the tastes and interests of a majority of filmgoers than the standards of any film critic I know. The most valuable thing I've learned from my producers — John Dunning, André Link and Ivan Reitman — is that, first and foremost, film is showbusiness. They've found, for example, that it is necessary to make a film that is adaptable to the whims of censors — some excise gory scenes, others snip away at the sex. So we shoot a master version, which we prefer for the most liberal countries, but we also have to know exactly where it will be cut in cer-

Chambers misses death in a bike crash as movie begins, but lives to craze many victims with the plague.



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Photography: Joel Sussman



BY JIM KERNAGHAN

AMONG THE NIGHTMARES fighter George Chuvalo used to have was one in which he was trapped in a fast-rushing torrent of water, almost losing his balance and going down, but not quite. More than once, startled spermates were awakened to hear George hollering for his mother.

As a boy, then a man, Chuvalo was never knocked off his feet in more than 90 professional bouts and now, as he girds for war again after a three year absence ("one fight, I promise, just to retire with the Canadian championship"), one is forced to wonder what turns his career could have taken.

"I know this sounds crazy but the reason I never left for New York to train, was my mother," said Chuvalo recently. "We were very close and, at 18, I just didn't want to leave home. It's something I think about occasionally."

The fact is, he was close to his late mother, a warm, friendly woman who

would attend his fights but not see them. Mrs. Chuvalo would sit knitting.

"God, when I think of how poorly trained I was," recalled George. "My left leg was straight out, not bent for more leverage and punching range, for example. Some things I never got rid of."

"Unfortunately, you can be trained into some bad habits that are almost impossible to untrain once they're instilled. I was crying to be trained by really knowledgeable guys."

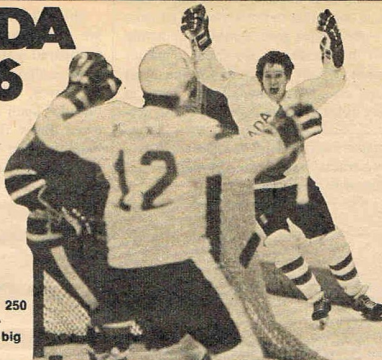
Now 39 and shedding the excess weight his successful real estate and mortgage business have packed onto his blocky frame, Chuvalo goes over his long career and all the top-liners he's faced.

Muhammed Ali ("pit-a-pat puncher"), Floyd Patterson ("terrific hitter for a little man"), Joe Frazier ("tremendous left hook"), George Foreman ("awesome power").

"I only wish I could have met the late Sonny Liston. It would have been a war and I would have won."

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process. Cronenberg adds a further refinement to the word. "Shlock isn't synonymous with 'bad' movies," he says. "A bad movie is one that *fails* in some obvious way — it is miscast, it is boring, it is dishonest, or whatever. A shlock film, by contrast, may aim low, but it can succeed on its own terms."

To put it another way — shlock films aim straight for the id, which may be why critics with anxious super-egos disapprove of them. They deal with visceral matters, and play upon a wide range of fears and feelings of disgust that people normally have under tight control. There are no "monsters" in Cronenberg's films — all of the horror stems from demonic exaggerations of bodily processes. In *Shivers*, for example, he invents a new venereal disease that spreads like a brushfire through a Montreal high-rise apartment complex. As nature takes its course, each "victim" goes through an incubation period of housing a "parasite" that takes several weeks to reach maturity, and that, finally, having worked its way up through the digestive system, is "born" by making the victim retch, whereupon the parasite assumes an independent life of its own — a bloody, slimy, lumpen-whatzit, capable of all sorts of nasty surprises.

Few horror movies have ever lost money for their producers. Except in rare instances where the budget was excessive and the central idea too frail, as in Roman Polanski's recent film *The Tenant*, or the singular case of Tod Browning's *Freaks* (which provoked such public outrage when it was released in 1932 that MGM withdrew it from general distribution for 30 years), horror films have had one of the most dependable markets of any movie genre. There are two particular periods, however — the early 1930s and the present — when public interest in horror films has peaked, and made them especially profitable. In recent years *The Exorcist*, *The Omen*, *Carrie* and others of diabolical ilk, have been among the top-grossing films, while *Jaws* set a historic box-office record for films of any kind. Similarly, it was between the years 1930 and '35, in another period of widespread economic instability and growing apprehensiveness about the future, that such "horror classics" (as they are now called, though they were called quite different names in their day) as *Frankenstein* with Boris Karloff, *Dracula* with Bela Lugosi, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Carl Dreyer's *Vampyr*, *The Black Cat*, the original version of *King Kong* and *Bride of Frankenstein*, among others, were released and became huge successes throughout the world.

Horror movies, according to Cronenberg, have their roots in such "psychologically revealing fairy tales as *Beauty and the Beast* and *Little Red Riding-Hood*. Whatever seems to be going

on at the conscious level is relatively unimportant; the real story is going on underneath. And like dreams, or fairy tales, their impact depends mainly upon their psychological content, which is why, unlike most other kinds of movies, a bigger budget, a more professional cast, more expensive sets and so on do not necessarily make a horror film any better or more successful. Grimm's fairy tales would not work any better if they were written by James Joyce; they would probably work less well, in fact, weighted down with all sorts of irrelevant esthetic and technical considerations. What matters most in a horror film is simply — do the creators of it have the piercing insight to get under people's skin and make their flesh crawl?

"Personally, I find all films about devil

David Cronenberg makes movies that turn people on — by grossing them out

worship and the supernatural to be silly — and therefore not really frightening," he says, "and also, unlike a lot of the horror films made in the 1950s, such as *The Thing*, *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, and so on — terrific films, by the way — there is no fear or hatred of modern science running through my stories. In my own work I never stray far from real possibilities — both *Shivers* and *Rabid* are about contagious physical diseases and everyone in the audience knows that *something* like what they are seeing on the screen could happen to them, and the likelihood of it happening is of much higher probability than the world being visited by Satan's offspring or overrun by giant frogs."

In *Rabid*, Cronenberg gets the plague rolling through a motorcycle accident in the opening minutes of the film. The rider (Frank Moore) isn't badly injured, but his girlfriend (Marilyn Chambers) requires extensive abdominal surgery, including a skin graft, which is depicted with graphic gusto. What happens next — as in *Shivers*, when it turned out that the new strain of VD produced larger and more malignant organisms than usual — is the Cronenberg touch, the absurdist leap in logic. Having read in medical journals about "morphogenetic field theory" he began toying with the possibilities for horrible mishaps. His Dr. Keloid is a brilliant specialist in "neutral field tissue grafting," but even a dedicated doctor who never overcharges the government health-insurance scheme can make fatal errors. He sews up his beautiful patient, with

her somewhat impaired digestive system surrounded by "neutralized tissue," hoping that the tissue will "read" the appropriate genetic code and reproduce a new set of internal organs. Well someday maybe, but not today.

Cronenberg's fancy, at this point, sinks deeper into dark dreams. What the tissue "reads," he postulates, is that the patient, who has been kept alive on plasma because of her inability to digest food, needs a steady supply of fresh blood. Instead of recreating the organs required to digest a complex diet, the new tissue develops a proboscis — an elongated feeding organ for sucking blood — that just happens to grow out of the woman's armpit.

"Vampire fangs have been done to death," Cronenberg says cheerfully. "I felt the need for something new. Besides, it's amazing just how many Freudian connotations can be found with this retractable *thing* in an armpit." (I didn't ask him to spell them out.) The thing itself was designed by a special effects makeup artist in Hollywood, Joe Blassco, who made several of them in various sizes. As to how it works — let's just say that few survive the friendly embraces of Marilyn Chambers in this movie, and to make matters worse, like certain insects (*Mosquito* was the original title of the film), she carries a disease fatal to ordinary humans, hence the plague that spreads through Montreal like a new form of the Black Death.

"Horror films — like dreams — are often in 'bad taste,'" Cronenberg says, "or so they appear, when judged by a censorious mind. But that in no way denies their validity, even their necessity, for we all need periodic releases from the tyranny of 'good taste.' The trick in making a successful horror film is to give the audience a kick, a shock, a twist it's never had before, but one can't get too far out or the audience will end up being alienated."

Cronenberg would never make a porno film, for example, even though he concedes that the ultimate horror film might have sexually explicit material in it. "But I'll never make that film," he says, "partly because I don't see any point in making films that can only be shown, as far as I know, in about eight or 10 U.S. cities, and a few European outlets; but mainly because my imagination doesn't work that way.

"I am a strong believer in people doing what they *have* to do. I make horror films because I really enjoy them. There are many directors who, if they made films like *Shivers* and *Rabid*, would be slumming, and their condescending and cynical attitude would show up on the screen."

In 1966, a year before his graduation from the University of Toronto with a BA in English literature, Cronenberg began his present career by writing and directing two short films, *Transfer* and

From the Drain, that were widely shown in Canada along with other underground and student films fashionable at the time. Three years later, he produced his first feature, *Stereo* (in 35mm., black and white) and another feature the following year, *Crimes of the Future* (in color). They had running times of about 65 minutes each (too short for theatrical distribution, too long for most television slots) and cost, together, around \$30,000. Both films were science-fiction stories of an emotionally stoic nature, and while they got good reviews ("An interesting first," *Montreal Gazette*; "Fresh and unconventional," *Montreal Star*; "A very special film, an exceptionally elegant dream," Robert Fulford, *Saturday Night*), they earned in film rentals "slightly less than \$1,000."

At that stage of his career, Cronenberg was following a classic syndrome of the Canadian film director of the 1960s — making "personal" films that only a small band of hardy souls wanted to see, and watching his lab bills and production debts mount steadily. At the same time he got married and began raising a family (a daughter, Cassandra, now 5). Then, in 1973, he teamed up with producer Ivan Reitman, whose investments ranged from *The Magic Show* with Doug Henning, currently entering its second year on Broadway, to producing films such as *Cannibal Girls*. The result of their collaboration was *Shivers* — and even before the film opened anywhere, the producers had sold foreign rights to so many countries that a full return on its production costs was guaranteed. The film also won the Grand Prix at the International Festival of Horror and Fantasy Films, in Sitges, Spain, an annual event for science-fiction and horror movies from around the world.

And now, with *Rabid*, the largest international distributor of shock films, American International Pictures, has expressed interest in acquiring the U.S. rights, an arrangement that would make all the additional deals to be made in May, at the Cannes Film Festival, "icing on the cake."

"When I was poor and esoteric, I was praised by the critics," Cronenberg says. "Now that I'm making films that are a popular success, I'm panned or cast aside. There's a moral in there somewhere." (At the 1975 Canadian Film Awards, *Shivers* wasn't even permitted to be shown, let alone recognized as an entry.) To Cronenberg, it's all very well to talk about masterpieces and great works of cinematic art but the people who pay for the indulgences and aspirations of the cognoscenti are none other than the much-maligned inventors of shock, schmaltz, kitsch, smut and trash — cultural blue-collar workers like himself. In matters of culture, to say nothing of engineering, it always pays to remember that it's the broad base of a pyramid that supports the peak. ☐

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