

recall Godard's *Alphaville* in their ability to convert present-day locations into the landscape of an imagined future by skillful control of the camera, and both filmmakers are making essentially the same point about the emotional coldness and attractive/frightening rationality of our physical surroundings.

In both *Stereo* and *Crimes of the Future*, Cronenberg employs his avant-garde obscurantism deftly, using it to try out all kinds of odd inspirations and defusing its potential pompousness and opacity by deliberately making fun of these aspects himself. These are clever films in their ability to play with ideas and settings in a free-associative, almost abstract way, while remaining detached from the implications of what is shown, and in particular resolutely declining to say anything overtly or clearly. They are both neater, less problematical works than Cronenberg's subsequent full-fledged horror films, if only because they are easier and safer in their attitudes. They are sanctioned by the respectable tradition of ellipsis, fragmentation and obscure symbolism in twentieth-century art, and they demonstrate their sophisticated awareness of that tradition by sweetly mocking it. The psychic malaise depicted in both films is part comic and part self-indulgent, so that despite its disturbing overtones it encourages in the viewer a detached and ultimately comfortable standpoint. *Shivers*, in most ways a crasser film than either of its predecessors, is an artistic step forward for Cronenberg simply because its feelings are stronger, more real, more focused and finally more responsible.

Nevertheless, both *Stereo* and *Crimes of the Future* are perfectly acceptable films, entirely successful in their own inventive, slightly precious terms. They unmistakably document not only Cronenberg's recurring themes and obsessions but also his formalist and symbolic approach to *mise-en-scène* — a crucial element of the later films, but one seldom noticed because of their escalated violence and horror.

Shivers (1975)

Cronenberg's first mainstream commercial film, *Shivers*, is a horror movie in every sense of the word. Even among his subsequent films it is notable for its extreme preoccupation with the visceral and the sexually violent. Both of these qualities are united in the parasite-creature, "a combination of aphrodisiac and venereal disease," which crazy Dr. Emil Hobbes develops both for medical reasons and to counteract man's excessive cerebralism and estrangement from his body, and

which then proceeds to run amok in a modern apartment complex on a Montreal island.

The film documents the gradual spread of the parasite "disease" from Hobbe's first experimental patient, Annabelle, to the rest of the inhabitants of the complex. The parasites, originally conceived as a substitute for ailing body organs, and then converted into stimulators of desire, transform their hosts into raving sex maniacs. The central character is the apartment's resident doctor, Roger St. Luc, who investigates the incidents and later becomes, together with his nurse/girlfriend, the last target for the parasites. Although St. Luc has a certain protagonistlike function, most of the movie's time is spent with the many secondary characters affected by the plague. In this respect *Shivers*'s real protagonist is collective — the inhabitants of the complex and, by extension, people in general.

The parasites are as suggestive as anyone could wish, simultaneously evoking the phallic and the excretory. They grow in people's abdomens and are passed through mouth-to-mouth contact; they also fly at faces and attach themselves, leechlike, to bare flesh, leaving massive blotches and burns. In one scene a parasite slithers up the drain into a woman's bath and crawls into her vagina (the phallic suggestion made explicitly); in another, a man slowly extrudes one through his mouth (the excretory); and in a third, the most bloody in the film, a character has his face covered by them, and, screaming amidst the gore, tries to pry them off with pliers. Scenes such as these led Robert Fulford, in a frequently quoted remark, to call *Shivers* "the most repulsive movie I have ever seen," and provoked an outcry of disgust from reviewers across Canada, including expressions of shock that taxpayers' money (via the Canadian Film Development Corporation) had helped to produce the film.

There is no doubt about the grossness of *Shivers*'s assault on the sensibilities of the viewer and on the canons of "good taste" in general. The parasites represent by far the most graphic and extreme example of Cronenberg's thematic polarity of body, and their impact cannot be explained away by pointing to their parodic excess, nor to the stance of witty detachment that characterizes much of the film. Furthermore, sex is constantly related not only to violence and blood, but also to the visceral and the excretory. To say that Cronenberg is accepting of the latter aspects of the human being in a society that regards them as repulsive (and thus that the grossness and shock are in the viewer's mind, not the filmmaker's) would not exactly be accurate. Cronenberg is, here and elsewhere, genuinely fascinated with the visceral, the sexual and the violent — even obsessed by them.

Of course it is not enough simply to show something — anything — that is disgusting or shocking and then claim that what is going on

is the beneficial release of repressed feeling. But *Shivers* does not do this. Its violation of moral codes governing sexuality and violence is systematic — and it is connected precisely to the deadening effects of an overly rational and antiseptic way of life. The raw expression of impulses ranging from the naughty to the murderous takes on real significance in the context of the specific environment depicted in the film. Like *Stereo* and *Crimes of the Future*, *Shivers* takes place in surroundings of smooth, coolly attractive, dehumanized perfection. Starliner Towers, on its own island “far from the noise and traffic of the city” (as the promotional voiceover that begins the film proclaims) is a citadel of twentieth-century Cartesian order. Laid out in architecture of rectangular functionalism and decorated in the ultimate tasteful elegance, it is indeed a microcosm of modern urban values in an upwardly mobile society. All rough edges have been removed, all feeling subsumed into an atmosphere of clean, detached blandness. It is, in the terms of Cronenberg’s vision, a perfect denial of body, of instinct, of the unconscious, of death.

Cronenberg’s camera treats this environment, and to a degree also the people who inhabit it, with the detachment it deserves, creating endless compositions of great formal attractiveness. Right from the beginning he sets himself the task of establishing the film’s dialectic: bringing an environment expressing rational values into violent confrontation with the messy, anarchic subsurface of the human animal.

The first post-credit sequence intercuts the apartment manager’s cooing sales talk to a cozily domestic couple with the murderous assault on Annabelle (presented to the viewer with no explanation at all), and swiftly follows with a parallel montage of Hobbes’s graphic operation on the half-naked unconscious girl juxtaposed with a man staring into his bathroom mirror using a Waterpik on his teeth. The latter sequence is immediately complicated when the man, Nicholas Tudor, has a brief, violent abdominal seizure and then blithely goes in to breakfast amidst smooth, colourfully decorated surroundings and proceeds to treat his solicitous wife with an indifference bordering on contempt. We are at once thrown into the conflict of everyday contemporary lifestyles versus unexplained and disturbing violence — a conflict that escalates in intensity and complexity throughout the film until the orgiastic, nihilistic surrender of the final climax when the last remaining “rational” survivor goes down under a sea of arms and mouths. The quiet coda ironically re-establishes the appearance of order as the parasite people drive away from the island to spread the mania abroad.

Thematically speaking, the parasite plague (or parasite liberation) is also based in the excesses of reason. Although Cronenberg denies

that any animus towards or even criticism of science is to be found in his films, it is more than coincidence that the telepathic experiments in *Stereo*, the cosmetics in *Crimes of the Future*, the parasitology in *Shivers*, the plastic surgery in *Rabid*, the physiological psychology in *The Brood*, the drug research in *Scanners* and the television “break-throughs” in *Videodrome* all have unpleasant results ranging from the personally destructive to the socially cataclysmic. Science here must stand as a representation of human reason in general. And in Cronenberg’s films catastrophe arises from the rational attempt to improve the human animal. Given the destructive consequences of instinct (especially when suppressed) and the spectacular failures of reason, one much conclude that Cronenberg is (at least excluding *Scanners*) a pessimist. *Shivers*, despite the comic distance from many of its characters and the black humour of its scenario, offers a disturbing view of humanity unstably polarised between cold control and voracious appetite with nothing in between capable of surviving the withering crossfire.

This is not at all to deny the massive presence in the film of “a certain savage joy” (to use Cronenberg’s own words). The parasites may be stomach-turning and frightening, but their effect on people is not simply to turn them into monsters. People as well as architecture and decor can function as temples of rational control and emotional denial, and their transformation by the disease is as important dramatically as the transformation of Starliner Towers is iconographically. Minor characters, such as the smarmy apartment manager (Ronald Mlodzik again), the tuxedoed waiter, the diffident and fastidious old French-speaking couple and the mother and child in the elevator are clear symbols of ordered normality sent resolutely, even gleefully, to the wall. The overthrow of reason, conventions, standards, good taste and everything that is part of the machinery restricting human animality is accompanied by an exhilarating and terrifying sense of liberation as the bonds of restraint are sundered. Of course this is a central feature of horror movies in general, but in *Shivers* the liberation is made explicit by the “savage joy” on the faces of the marauders, and especially by the orgiastic slow-motion climax, in which the last man is initiated into the fraternity of excess.

The ironic sophistication of *Shivers* is nowhere more evident than in the treatment of the hero, Dr. Roger St. Luc. His relaxed manner and air of confident assurance soon begin to appear not just inadequate, but smug and out of touch. It doesn’t take long for his public relations sangfroid to crack, revealing the hard, brittle ego underneath. Although his violence under stress is disturbing (as when he beats an attacker to death with a crowbar), St. Luc is basically a comic figure — a nice send-up of the cool, up-to-date professional

who always feels he has things under control. It is fitting that he should be the last to succumb to Cronenberg's wild Eros, especially after his indifferent shrugging-off of his nurse's lazy striptease in an earlier scene. As one after another of the film's characters fall to the parasites, his immunity begins to seem like a perverse willfulness. Why should he survive when all the best people have succumbed? In this way Cronenberg co-opts the viewer's sympathies for St. Luc's eventual destruction. In that final, horrifying/ecstatic climax, he is in some respect getting a richly deserved come-uppance.

Several of the other characters are in fact more sympathetic or more interesting than the "hero." Miss Forsythe, his girlfriend, displays a willowly Veronica Lakeish charm, and in her case the boundaries between normal and pathological sexuality are meaningfully blurred. The dream she narrates towards the end of the film, which postulates an omnisexuality (shades of *Stereo*), serves as the bridge carrying us over from "normal" subconscious sexual chaos to the horrors of parasiteland. But there is something else here as well. In this monologue, delivered significantly in the dirty basement of the complex rather than its antiseptic living area, horror is finely balanced with a positive urge to reach out and accept everything that seems disturbing or frightening:

Roger, I had a very strange dream last night. In this dream, I found myself making love to a strange man. Only I'm having trouble, you see, because he's old and dying, and he smells bad, and I find him repulsive. But then he tells me that *everything* is erotic, that everything is sexual. You know what I mean? He tells me that even old flesh is erotic flesh, that disease is the love of two alien creatures for each other — that even dying is an act of eroticism. That talking is sexual. That breathing is sexual. That even to physically exist is sexual. And I believe him. And we make love *beautifully*.

This speech expresses a suggestion of tortured emotional ambivalence underlying the action at a deep, otherwise almost unarticulated level. It indicates that Cronenberg is struggling to accept the world of the body, of sex *and* of decay and death — the world of the parasites. Certainly it is an ambivalence, however, since immediately after the speech Forsythe opens her mouth wide, and a parasite horrifyingly appears in it. But Forsythe is also the sexuality that St. Luc stupidly rejects. He immediately binds her mouth, in an image of sadistic eroticism, to prevent the "disease" from escaping to infect him. When she appears in the final swimming-pool orgy, smiling with an evil sweetness, she is a splendid image of *la belle dame sans merci*



Nicholas Tudor has just had a seizure in the bathroom scene in *Shivers*

coming to claim at last, with an open-mouthed kiss, that part of St. Luc that he has vainly attempted to deny.

Another figure of insinuating female sexuality is Betts, the woman in the bath. She is played by Barbara Steele, an icon of the genre after her countless appearances in European horror movies, who brings all kinds of overtones to the character — a cool, potent eroticism, and a sense of sinister knowingness. She fixes her lesbian attentions — successfully in the end — on Janine Tudor, Nicholas's wife, a traditional housewife ignored and sexually humiliated by her husband, in a kind of sardonic radical-feminist allegory.

But it is Janine Tudor who is the real focus of the film's human sympathies — and the best demonstration that *Shivers*, despite its wicked ironic humour and regurgitative violence, is conscious that finally this is no joking matter. Janine's relationship with her saturnine husband, Nicholas, constitutes the movie's most unstylized picture of real-life problems and furnishes a dimension of ordinary human suffering that helps to confer seriousness on the film as a whole. Nicholas (a memorable portrait of almost catatonic self-absorption by Allan Miggovskey) is oblivious to all outside influence,

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