ARROW VIDEO

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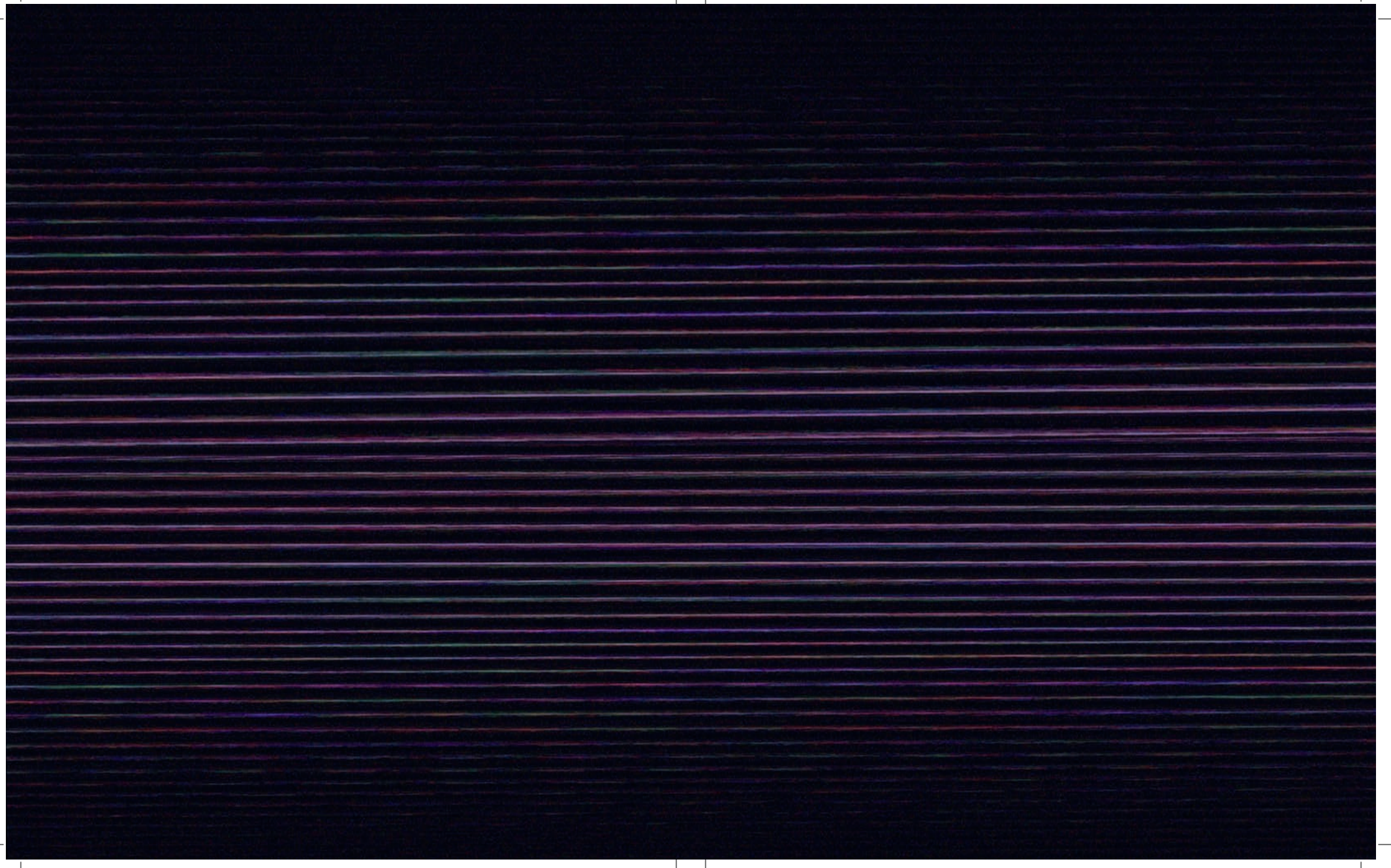
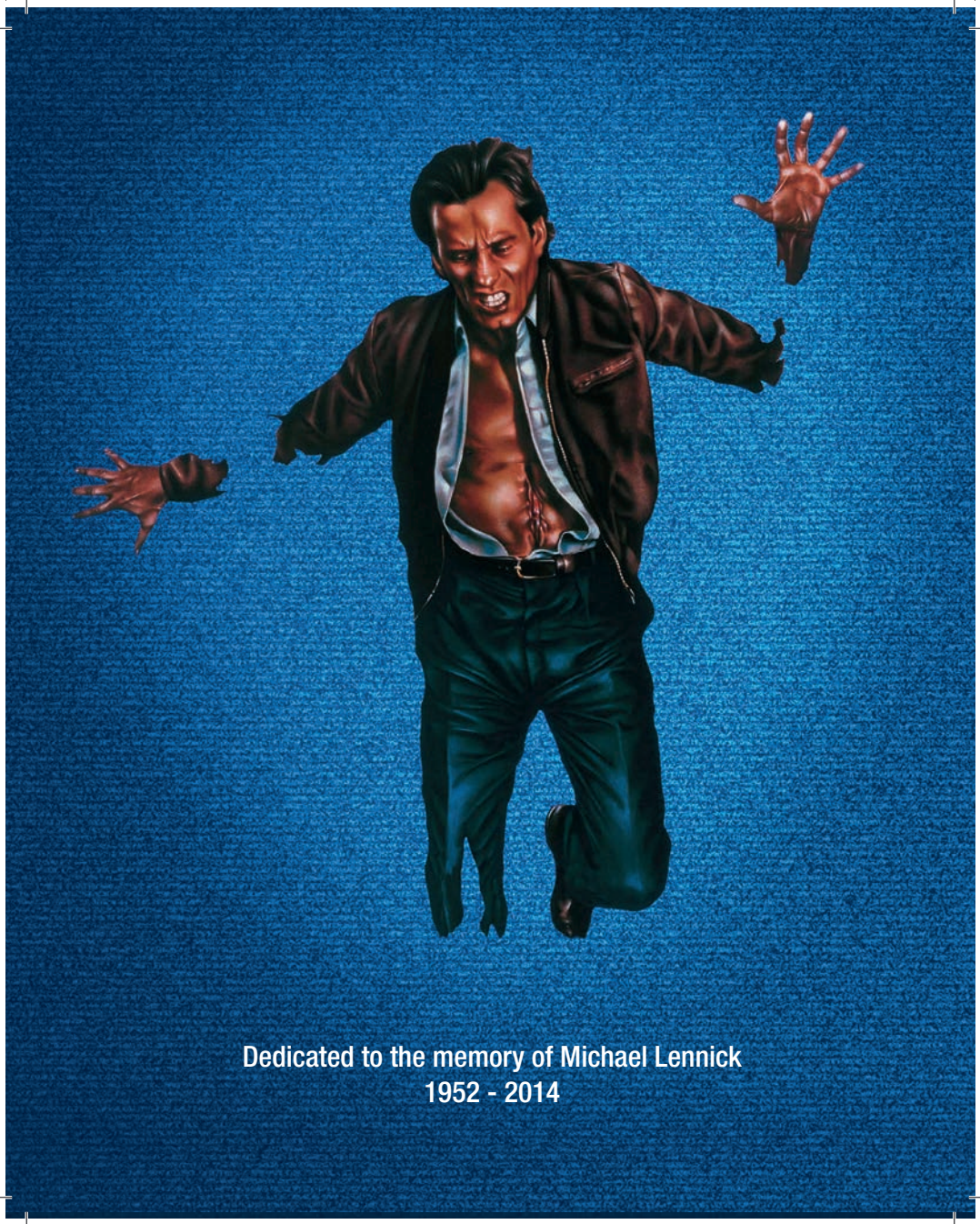
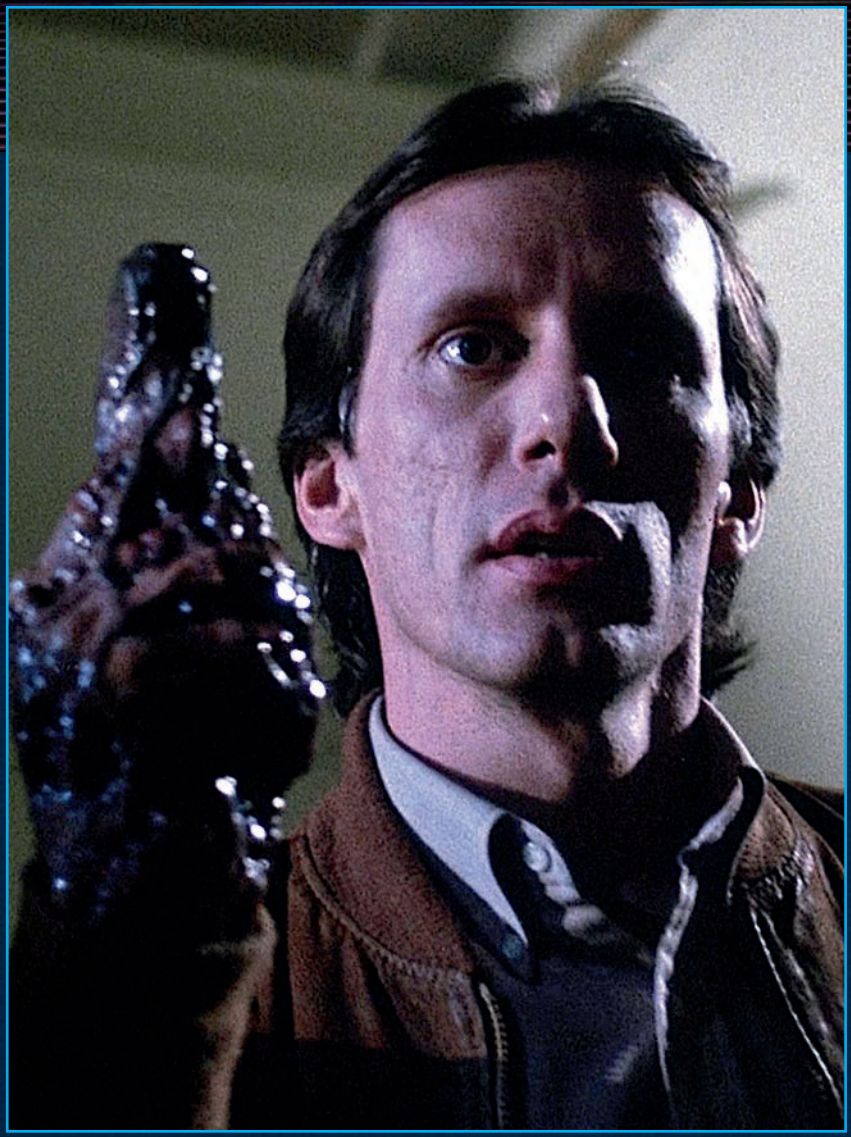
VIDEODROME

LONG LIVE THE NEW FLESH...





Dedicated to the memory of Michael Lennick
1952 - 2014



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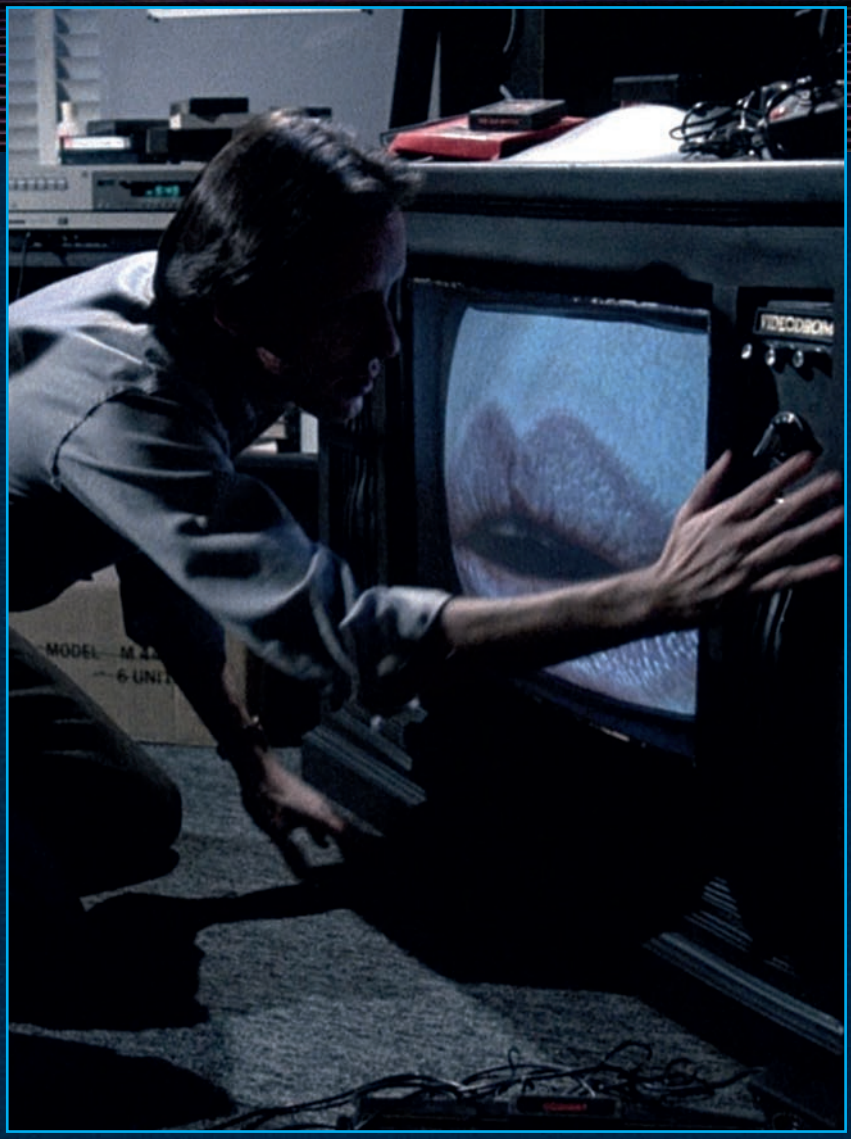
1983

CAST

JAMES WOODS MAX RENN
SONJA SMITS BIANCA O'BLIVION
DEBORAH HARRY NICKI BRAND
PETER DVORSKY HARLAN
LES CARLSON BARRY CONVEX
JACK CRELEY BRIAN O'BLIVION
LYNNE GORMAN MASHA

CREW

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY DAVID CRONENBERG
PRODUCED BY CLAUDE HÉROUX
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS PIERRE DAVID AND VICTOR SOLNICKI
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY MARK IRWIN, CSC
ART DIRECTOR CAROL SPIER
FILM EDITOR RONALD SANDERS, CFE
MUSIC BY HOWARD SHORE
COSTUME DESIGNER DELPHINE WHITE


VIDEODROM

DEFINITELY NOT FOR PUBLIC CONSUMPTION: *VIDEODROME* REPLAYED (2015)

by Justin Humphreys

William Faulkner famously told writers to focus on "the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing". He was only partly right: writer/director David Cronenberg didn't stop with the heart – his cinematic fiction examines the entire human body literally at war with itself and the mind. Like his literary idols William Burroughs and J.G. Ballard, Cronenberg is *sui generis*, but these three erudite, respectable-looking artists are alike in that they are the id's articulate translators.

By 1981, when pre-production began on his film *Videodrome*, Cronenberg had accomplished a feat as unique as his own movies: although his stories dealt with the Cartesian Schism's extremes, he had successfully bridged the Cartesian rift between the drive-in and the arthouse. His work sated gorehounds' bloodlust, but within the context of wildly innovative concepts. Unlike many horror specialists' works, Cronenberg's films, to paraphrase *Videodrome*'s pornographer Masha, have a sensibility, and that is what makes them so dangerous.

In his previous, controversial films, Cronenberg had clinically and thoroughly infected, undermined, and overturned civilization. In *Shivers* (1975), he had shattered the tranquillity of antiseptic, ultra-modern housing. In *Shivers*, *Rabid* (1977), *The Brood* (1979), and *Scanners* (1981), he had reduced medicine, corporations, the family unit, and basic social order to chaos and savagery. Like Ballard's novel *High Rise*, which *Shivers* echoes, Cronenberg focused on the physical and cosmic instability lurking just behind society's comforting veneer, and, more disturbingly, how delicious that instability could become.

In *Videodrome*, Cronenberg's subject was the Media Age. Its protagonist, Max Renn, owner of a Toronto pirate UHF cable station that exists by supplying its viewers with highly sexual and violent programming, stumbles onto broadcasts of an apparently simulated snuff show, *Videodrome*. As Max probes into *Videodrome*'s origins, he and New Age radio psychologist Nicki Brand unwittingly become enmeshed in conspiracies reaching far beyond Max's lowly ambitions.

Videodrome transmissions spawn deadly, hallucination-inducing tumours in its viewers' brains, including Max's. Behind the show lurks the puritanical Spectacular Optical Corporation and its front-man, Barry Convex, who intends to exterminate anyone amoral enough to watch *Videodrome* via its signals. Convex's forces are in an underground war against those of deceased media prophet (and Convex's former partner) Brian O'Blivion, marshalled by O'Blivion's daughter, Bianca. The disaffected Max becomes both sides' pawn, ultimately becoming a cold-blooded martyr – a kind of static-choked Patty Hearst/John Wilkes Booth firing cancer-causing bullets.

Cronenberg wasn't *satirizing* television *à la Network* (1976) – *Videodrome* was a surreal allegory of a visual world in upheaval where, as Brian O'Blivion describes it, "Television is reality, and reality is less than television" and the TV screen is "the retina of the mind's eye." O'Blivion and his philosophy were inspired partly by the works of Professor Marshall McLuhan, who taught at Toronto University and influenced Cronenberg during his matriculation there. (As O'Blivion, actor Jack Creley noticeably resembles McLuhan.)

According to Cronenberg, *Videodrome* began life as a more conventional horror script entitled *Network of Blood*, but when he conceived of Max's hallucinations overtaking the narrative, the screenplay began mutating. It transformed into a creature whose every detail – particularly its title – was distinctive. *Videodrome* started shooting without a completed script, leading to something more experimental and narratively much slipperier than Cronenberg's previous work, though, at a lean 90 minutes, equally tight.

With Universal releasing *Videodrome*, it became Cronenberg's first major studio release, and also his first featuring American stars. Actor James Woods had already given several notably oily performances like his acclaimed performance in *The Onion Field* (Harold Becker, 1979). As the jittery Max, he's too clever for his own good – like so many of Cronenberg's protagonists, his insatiable curiosity overtakes him, leaving him scrambling to comprehend his arcane predicament. In brunette mode, Blondie's rock siren Debbie Harry gave one of her first major dramatic performances as Nicki Brand, with Cronenberg toning down the neophyte actress's larger-than-life stage persona.

Cronenberg's outstanding supporting cast befitted his rapidly maturing grasp of characterization and dialogue. Les Carlson shines as *Videodrome*'s spokesman Barry Convex. Cronenberg intended Carlson's pale, doughy face to eerily resemble televangelist Jim Bakker's, with dead eyes belying his game-show host's grin. "Why would somebody watch a scum show like *Videodrome*?" he disgustedly asks Max.

Filmed in Toronto primarily in 1981 with some further shooting in 1982, *Videodrome* involved Cronenberg's stock production crew, including his gifted production designer Carol Spier and composer Howard Shore. Shore's ambient electronic soundscape flawlessly suits the film's biomechanical feel. But more than any other department, the film hinged on its effects.

Videodrome rode the crest of a wave of epic pre-CGI practical effects. This *tour de force* was created by three units led by Michael Lennick, Frank Carere, and Academy Award-winning makeup master Rick Baker. Their effects roved with the emerging script through uncharted territory, including insoluble shots like a functional TV rising from a bathtub. Among other triumphs, they rigged a keyboard onto a copy of Max's TeleRanger TV set and orchestrated a Toccata and Fugue in Flesh. They crafted pulsing VHS tapes, made Max's gun merge with his arm, and produced Max's infamous make-out session with a pliant TV screen. Cronenberg's shifting vision of the film involved numerous re-shoots and filming alternate endings, including a bizarre multi-sexual afterlife orgy.

The film's effects rank among the most visceral explorations, which is really saying something, of Cronenberg's fascination with sexual transformation. A vaginal tape deck rends Max's stomach, which Convex literally fists when he inserts a tape to "reprogram" Max. But is Max's abdomen PAL or NTSC?

Instead of cashing-in on his big studio breakthrough opportunity, Cronenberg made his most outlandishly personal work yet. “A mainstream movie is one that isn’t going to rattle too many cages,” Cronenberg told Chris Rodley, and rattling cages was what *Videodrome* was all about. It more closely resembled an idea-driven, late-’60s New Wave science fiction novel than anything from Hollywood, right down to *Videodrome*’s hallucination-inducing transmissions, akin to the reality-shattering “Hell Weapon” in Philip K. Dick and Ray Nelson’s *The Ganymede Takeover* (1967).

Cronenberg’s films are by his own admission generally apolitical but not *Videodrome* – it’s overtly about censorship, of insidious forces warring for control of what North America sees and of North America itself. Andy Warhol aptly dubbed *Videodrome* “*A Clockwork Orange* for the eighties”. Spectacular Optical’s slogan – “Keeping an eye on the world,” with its eerie, Orwellian ring of phony corporate cheeriness – embodies its mission to police the airwaves by pacifying and reprogramming perceived undesirables via its broadcasts. As Convex leaves Max to a sadomasochistic hallucination, like a true censor, he demurs: “I just can’t cope with freaky stuff.” In the notoriously censorious Toronto, where Cronenberg’s work was forcibly truncated under penalty of law, local censors couldn’t cope with it either.

Cronenberg gives the film a further self-reflexive dimension through touches like decorating cable Channel 83’s offices with posters to exploitation movies like Roger Corman’s *Deathsport* (1978) – films that Cronenberg’s earlier works might have been double-billed with. Cronenberg had appeared on Canadian talk shows similar to the film’s *The Rena King Show*, and had wittily fought through questions not unlike those put to Max. The very fact that the film itself is titled *Videodrome* is an act of reflexivity. *Videodrome* is an allegory for Cronenberg’s own war for creative expression.

This was 1983, and the debate over video censorship was igniting, with the UK’s Video Recordings Act looming, with its subsequent “Video Nasties” debacle. Tipper Gore’s infamous anti-rock crusade was fast approaching, as well. *Videodrome* is about the truest form of freedom of expression: the freedom of *repulsive* expression. Max is no hero – he’s a shady opportunist who exploits free speech, *but* he speaks freely.

Cronenberg’s past controversies hadn’t hurt him at the box-office, though, with *Scanners* having once held the #1 box office spot in North America, and on paper, *Videodrome* must have sounded like a bankable genre hit. It starred a pop idol at her most famous and beautiful, and a rising star. It offered cutting-edge concepts, plentiful sexuality, and gore makeup effects by Rick Baker. But what Cronenberg delivered – and what made *Videodrome* so fascinating – was something average viewers would consider a tainted mixture of those ingredients.

An acclaimed actor *was* his lead, but playing a flippant, disagreeable weasel. Debbie Harry didn’t sing, and though she appeared nude, Cronenberg undercut the titillation factor with skin-crawling S&M. The film’s avant-garde ideas and surreal imagery thrust viewers into an unrecognizable world, offering anything but escapism. (To Cronenberg’s horror, Universal deleted footage that even the MPAA had passed, further confusing the narrative... and adding resonance to the film’s commentary on censorship.) Rick Baker’s crew’s epic gore wasn’t the easily understandable, standard horror movie bloodletting – Baker’s seething tumour eruptions and their ilk were indescribable, mind-boggling excretions of the subconscious.

As a Cronenberg film, *Videodrome*, was a victory – he was fully its *auteur*. He had successfully provoked viewers and awoken parts of their mental and viewing apparatuses they hadn't known existed. As popcorn fare, however, it was doomed. *Videodrome* wouldn't wow 'em in Kansas.

In a move that would be unthinkable in today's warped studio economics, Universal actually pushed *Videodrome*, releasing 900 prints in American cinema. Cronenberg pointed out that even executive Sid Sheinberg, who infamously undid Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985), backed him up. An initial preview screening in Boston of a 75-minute version of *Videodrome*, devoid of even a musical temp track and proper sound mixing, was catastrophic. One typical preview card tersely read "SUCKED". One unprepared, uncomprehending preview audience had signed the film's theatrical death warrant.

Universal's promotional campaign reflected its uncertainty about marketing the project, like their trailer aimed at a 'New Wave' audience featuring crude, virtually unrelated computer animation and punk music. *Videodrome*'s theatrical run was, according to Cronenberg, about a week. The film's Masha warned that *Videodrome* broadcasts were "Definitely not for public consumption," and the general public delivered the same verdict for *Videodrome* the movie.

Fortunately for Cronenberg, he was already in pre-production on *Videodrome*'s polar opposite, *The Dead Zone* (1983). Its plot was highly accessible, low on effects, and commercially safe. Cronenberg wouldn't explore material as unconventional as *Videodrome* again until *Naked Lunch* (1991) and *Existenz* (1999), his companion piece to *Videodrome*.

In many ways, *Videodrome* was one of the last holdovers of 1970s cinema's dark riskiness, with its visceral violence, political paranoia, and seedy, downbeat tone. But the film is deeply rooted in the '80s, as distinctly of its era as Nicki Brand's sweater/headband ensemble, dotted with artifacts like Atari 2600s, Beta cassettes, and hulking CRT TV sets, all long outdistanced by the 21st century's unchecked technological evolution. But the term 'dated' is meaningless here, as it frequently is. Within its period trappings and taken in context, *Videodrome* makes dozens of salient points about our own technologically overstimulated era.

In hindsight, *Videodrome* seems enormously prophetic in roundabout ways. Very real violence and sexual acts far more intense than anything Max aired are just a double-click away. Harlan's video pirating seems like smoke signals compared with the hijinks of today's lowliest hacker. Virtual reality technology has steadily progressed to the point that VR cinema is predicted to shortly have a major place in top-flight film festivals like Sundance.

Media saturation is at all-time highs. It is commonplace to see iPhones practically fused with hands like Max's flesh-gun. Millions of people stare transfixed at various screens for large portions of any given day like the derelicts at Brian O'Blivion's Cathode Ray Mission, "patched into the world's mixing board," only now in high-def. YouTube democratised the video screen, making virtually anyone capable of becoming a talking head *a la* O'Blivion, because, after all, televisual life is "more real than private life in the flesh". With that in mind, why have real friends when there are *The Sims*? The glowing screen is victorious–long live the New Flesh.

But *Videodrome* wasn't designed as a prophecy – it's a meditation on how video technology is altering and metastasizing our waking lives. Unlike Spectacular Optical and Toronto's censors, it doesn't purport to have the answers. And over three decades later, neither can we.

The author would like to thank Chris Rodley, whose excellent book* Cronenberg on Cronenberg *was indispensable in preparing this article. William Lesure helped invaluably. Other sources of information for this essay were David Cronenberg's taped introduction to a recent screening of* Videodrome *in Toronto and Mick Garris's* Fear on Film *roundtable discussion, which can be found on this release.

NEW FLESH FOR OLD:
THE TAX-SHELTER EXPERIMENTS (1992)

by David Cronenberg
edited by Chris Rodley

The following text is comprised of extracts from Cronenberg on Cronenberg, *first published in 1992 by Faber and Faber Limited. Re-printed by permission.*

Scanners was a breakthrough film for me, because it was number one on the *Variety* chart when it came out. This was a big deal for a low-budget Canadian horror film, which was basically the way it was perceived. True, it was a slow week, but that doesn't ever count. If you're number one, you're number one. A lot of people in Hollywood started to notice me then. The picture did make a dent. The important thing about getting offers was that I didn't have a film lawyer or an agent. I did have a divorce lawyer for a short period. I remember when Pierre David called me to see if I was interested in being involved in *Scanners II. I* wasn't, but said, "Am I going to get any money on the sequel based on my original characters and idea?" He said, "No. You didn't have a lawyer then."

Once you're represented by an agency and you have an agent in LA, and a lawyer, that really encourages people to send you stuff, because they know where to send it for one thing. Just a simple thing like an address for "this Canadian guy up there... I don't even know the city... see if you can find him... I can't". At one time Scorsese tried to find me in Toronto and was told I didn't exist! It wasn't until after *Videodrome* that I started to get serious offers.

The success of Scanners *helped to establish the Cronenberg sensibility with a public beyond the drive-in/exploitation audience. The fact that 'Cronenbergesque' now signified something specific in a quality commercial horror context possibly contributed to the full page ad in* Variety *at this time which announced 'David Cronenberg's Frankenstein'. The director elaborated for* Cinefantastique *in 1980: "Pierre David came up to me one day and said, 'Listen to this. Just listen, and tell me what you think.' And then he said, 'David Cronenberg's Frankenstein'. So I said, 'Sounds good to me. What about poor Mary Shelley?'"*

Even with the early Frankenstein proposition, Cronenberg was clear about how his own sensibility would interact with such established material. "It would be more a rethinking than a remake. For one thing, I'd try to retain Shelley's original concept of the creature being an intelligent, sensitive man. Not just a beast." Apparently Cronenberg also intended to rescue Frankenstein from his period-piece trappings, and contemporise the story.

The project never materialised. The fusion or splicing of 'Cronenberg' with established material was eventually, and inevitably, to happen later with his filming of Jeffrey Boam's adaptation of Stephen King's The Dead Zone, *his reworking of* The Fly *(part-written by Charles Edward Pogue) and, most recently and completely, the creation of his own version of William Burroughs's* Naked Lunch.

In the event, Videodrome *— a totally original work — was to be Cronenberg's next movie, his last under the Canadian tax-shelter system, and his third with the production grouping of Victor Solnicki, Pierre David and Claude Héroux — now called Filmplan II Inc. Less rushed than* Scanners, *it proved to be the director's most conceptually challenging work of the period. Never afraid to confront the uncomfortable aspects of an inner life, Cronenberg here turned the tables on his own film-making practice. Critics eager to spot his reactionary tendencies were rewarded with a story about the unpredictable and unpleasant effects of sexually violent imagery on Max Renn – a softcore sex-and-violence cable-station owner in Toronto. Perversely, Cronenberg had decided to investigate the very censorious notions to which his own work had fallen victim.*

Pierre David said, "Listen, tax-shelter money is everywhere. It's getting to be November when the money comes in because they need the tax write-off. We want to do another movie. What have you got?" I remember I rode my motorcycle to Montreal to meet him, because a Russian Satellite had come apart and they thought it might land in Canada. All flights had been cancelled. So I jumped on my bike, which Pierre thought was very eccentric. I said, "I've got these two ideas," and he chose *Videodrome.* It was just a concept, but he liked it. So I said, "I'll work it up." It sounded more like a thriller than anything else, and he liked what I said. But when I started writing it, and all of these other things started to leap out at me, I really thought Filmplan would reject it. It was so much more extreme than my premise had suggested. To my surprise, all three of them loved it. But Claude Héroux said that, if we shot it as it was written, it'd get a Triple X rating for sure. I told him that I'd written it in a more extreme fashion than I would want to see it on the screen *myself.*

It began life as something I'd written earlier, called *Network of Blood.* It was a very straightforward melodrama about a man who discovers a strange signal on television. That came from a lot of my own late-night television watching as a kid, and suddenly seeing signals come through. This was long before cable, when you had the old antenna that you could rotate. As certain strong stations went off the air, you got weaker signals that had been formerly masked coming through. Sometimes they were very strange and evocative; sometimes you were projecting your own meanings on them because you couldn't hear the sound properly. It was that experience that led me to posit a man who picks up a signal that's very bizarre, very extreme, very violent, very dangerous. He becomes obsessed with it, because of its content, tries to track it down, and gets involved in a whole mystery.

I was finding it difficult to write at home — because of kids and stuff — and rented a room in the same building downtown where my editor Ron Sanders had his. I just had a chair, a table and a typewriter. When I started to write that story, it suddenly started to shift. Max began to hallucinate, and impossible physical things started to happen to him. It went even further than in the movie; at a certain point he began to find that his life was not as he had thought: he was not who he'd thought he'd been. I had to pull back finally because it got so extreme it was too much for one film. The writing really did surprise me.

If you're going to do art, you have to explore certain aspects of your life without regard to a political position or stance. With *Videodrome* I wanted to posit the possibility that a man exposed to violent imagery would begin to hallucinate. I wanted to see what it would be like, in fact, if what the censors were saying would happen, did happen. What would it feel like? What would it lead to? But there is the suggestion that the technology involved in *Videodrome* is specifically designed to create violence in a person; we know that by the use of electrodes in certain areas of the brain you can trigger off a violent, fearful response without regard to other stimulants.

Cronenberg tried something new with Videodrome *that he has since reformulated for* Naked Lunch: *a movie which slips, unannounced, into the protagonist's hallucinations. However, unlike his fusion with Burroughs,* Videodrome *all but abandons a complex and fascinating conspiratorial plot some 40 minutes in, for a relentlessly first-person point of view – never to return. As Max begins to lose any sense of reality or the ability to control his situation, so the movie wilfully disintegrates along with its confused protagonist.*

Our own personal perception of reality is the only one we'll accept. Even if you're going mad, it's still your reality. But the same thing, seen from an outside perspective, is a person acting insane. The two ideas clicked together.

Something that's unresolved in *Videodrome* is Max's take on life; I feel it, but I'm not sure that everybody gets it. He hasn't reached a point in his life where he actually connects with melancholia. But I think it's there — down the line. Max never makes it that far in life; he's still at the stage where he's confident, glib and full of energy. The essence of him was that he is glib but is being forced to come to terms with some strange, difficult stuff that he's not prepared to deal with in a real way, a real emotional way. It has to get twisted into hallucination and strangeness for him even to begin to come to grips with it.

At the same time, I feel that Max ultimately manages to manipulate this new reality he finds himself in to seek his own equilibrium again. I think that's what would happen. People in prison camps, or people subjected to all kinds of psychological and physical torture are constantly trying to rebalance themselves. There is an innate balance that wants to be expressed.

Even though we don't look alike, Jimmy Woods's presence on the screen began to feel like a projection of me. It was exciting to find an actor who was my cinematic equal. I'd never really considered that as a possibility before. I'm very verbal and there are few American actors known for being verbal. It was nice to hear Jimmy do dialogue that I had written.

There's an undertone I intend to be there that implies he's not really sure of his own relationship to what he shows on television, how he relates to his own sexuality, and so on. Being a human being who's as sensitive to himself as anybody else, I suppose I have similarities to Max at that point, but then we start to diverge. That isn't to say that I haven't noticed that I'm attracted to images of sexual violence, and wonder what that means about myself, but I'm not Max.

Videodrome was different from *Scanners* because it was so strange. *Scanners* had a fairly straightforward sci-fi action plot — two rival groups and so on — but with *Videodrome* I was really breaking some new ground; I hadn't seen anything like it myself. I don't remember there being the same kind of pressure I had with *Scanners*. If we started shooting in November, then there were pressures. But if we started in September or October, probably there weren't. I don't remember and don't want to blame the tax-shelter rush again. But when we started to shoot, things started to change. I hadn't quite gotten the ending that I wanted. I'm happy with the ending we have, but there were other possibilities. It wasn't the kind of film where you just know when you've got it. It was slippery.

The first extreme draft of Videodrome *had been enough to attract Oscar-winning (for* American Werewolf in London) *special-effects wizard Rick Baker. However, production began with a toned-down second draft, only two months' preparation time for Baker (he wanted six), fewer effects a reduced budget with which to achieve them – around Can. $500,000. Originally, the script contained scenes such as Max's and Nicki's faces melting in the passion of a kiss, dribbling down and across the floor, and up the leg of an onlooker, melting him.*

Alterations to the second draft were to continue throughout production until the last day of shooting, and beyond that into post-production. One alternative ending was a mutated transsexual orgy in the Videodrome chamber. After Max shoots himself (the last image in the final version), we might have seen Bianca O'Blivion (Sonja Smits), Max (James Woods) and Nicki Brand (Debbie Harry) sexually entwined, all in each other. "A happy ending? Well, my version of a happy ending – Boy meets Girl, with a clay wall maybe covered with blood. Freudian rebirth imagery, pure and simple." Max's imagined abdominal vagina was here to be matched by Nicki's and Bianca's newly found penises (á la Rabid). *Male and female mutated sex-organ appliances were designed, but Cronenberg decided to drop the scene altogether. Constant references in* Videodrome *to 'the New Flesh' may have been clarified by this vision: another, more inventive, satisfying fleshy existence waiting just on the other side of death.*

I ultimately felt that it wouldn't work. I'm pretty obstinate; I will not let go of the ending of a movie if I think it's right, just because of money. I would talk to the producers. This is the Canadian way. This is why we're different. Michael Cimino and I are the two sides of the North American coin. But I don't think it would have worked. It might have been laughable. Finally, I liked what we got; Max shooting himself was the right ending for the movie. And it's almost the same ending as *Dead Ringers, The Fly* and *The Dead Zone.* On each of those films there was a coda written that never ended up in the picture. I think *Videodrome* would have been exactly the same. It was not in the original script; it occurred to me as we were making the film.

It was an odd movie. The crew was really freaked out by it; most of them people I'd worked with many times. We had some ladies come in and take their clothes off, then we'd chain them to the Videodrome wall and beat them – not for real. One or two of them quite loved it. Most of them were extras, and had never had this kind of attention. But the weirdness of it actually excited a couple of them. One kept reappearing on set, very made-up, very dressed, and just floated around. It was strange; she was someone who'd been strangled and beaten in the scene. So it was undeniably freaky being on that set. It makes sense that it was; it was supposed to be.

I had to make speeches to the crew every once in a while, because at a certain point we were in disarray. I was indecisive at certain junctures as we got closer to the end. We would set up in a place to shoot and then I'd take it apart and go somewhere else. I was feeling my way through a difficult film. Despite the fact that I talk about liking to have a script together, it's not because I think that means you've solved every problem or understood your film. I was beginning to understand more of what was going on in the movie, and that what I originally thought would work wasn't going to. At one point on the Videodrome chamber set, I actually told the crew what was going on and what I was thinking, to reassure them things were in hand. They were wondering if I was falling apart, or under pressure because of something they didn't know about. I suppose the immediate thing crews think of is "Is this picture going to be cancelled tomorrow? Am I going to be out of work?"

A film like *Videodrome,* which deals specifically with sadomasochism, violence and torture, is naturally going to have a lot of nervous systems on edge. There was a woman politician in Canada who had pickets out on the streets of Ottawa. They finally got the picture removed from a theatre there because the owner just didn't want the hassle. That's fine. That's his right. But this woman was a politician, connected with a certain party in Canada, and had many particular axes to grind.

Adverse critical response to Videodrome *was not restricted to local politicians. Cronenberg's transgressions in the sexual-political arena have continued to antagonise certain audiences and critics. Nicki Brand, so named — presumably — because of her taste for burning her breast with lighted cigarettes, was merely the latest in a line of predominantly rapacious female creations. As with Cronenberg's obsession with the male/female opposition – in which female 'difference' can slip imperceptibly into 'the other' (and, in* Naked Lunch, *into the 'non-human') – his determination and desire to be free of politicised constraints and considerations in imagining his women, and their sexuality, will continue to offend.*

I'm male, and my fantasies and my unconscious are male. I think I give reasonable expression to the female part of me, but I still think that I'm basically a heterosexual male. If I let loose the social bonds to see what my sexuality is at its darkest and its most insane and its most amoral – not unmoral — if I'm going to get into scenes of bondage and torture, I'll show a female instead of a male.

I've talked about admiring *Naked Lunch.* One of the barriers to my being totally 100 per cent with William Burroughs is that Burroughs's general sexuality is homosexual. It's very obvious in what he writes that his dark fantasies happen to be sodomizing young boys as they're hanging. I can actually relate to that to quite an extent. I really understand what's going on. But if I were to fantasise something similar, it would be more like the parasite coming up the drain, and it would be attacking a woman, not a man. To say that's sexist is politicizing something that is not political. It's sexual, not sexist — that's just my sexual orientation. I have no reason to think that I have to give equal time to all sexual fantasies whether they're my own or not. Let those people make their own movies – leave me alone to make mine. I feel censored in a strange way, I feel that meanings are being twisted and imposed on me. And more than meanings — value judgements.

As a creator of characters, I believe I have the freedom to create a character who is not meant to represent all characters. I can create a woman as a character who does not represent all women. If I depict a character as a middle-class dumbo, why does this have to mean that I think all women are middle-class dumbos? There

are some women out there who are. Why can they not be characters in my film? If I show Debbie Harry as a character who burns her breast with a cigarette, does that mean that I'm suggesting that all women want to burn their breasts with cigarettes? That's juvenile. To give guidelines to the kind of characters you can create, and the kind of acts they can do... that's obscene, a Kafka hell.

It's very difficult to divine what's unconscious and what's conscious, but if you were to find by analysing my films, for example, that I'm afraid of women, unconsciously that is, I would say, "OK, so what? What's wrong with that?" If I am an example of the North American male, and my films are showing that I'm afraid of women, then that's something which could perhaps be discussed, perhaps even decried. But where do you really go from there?

I would never censor myself. To censor myself, to censor my fantasies, to censor my unconscious would devalue myself as a film-maker. It's like telling a surrealist not to dream. The way I portray women is much more complex than any ideological approach is going to uncover. The advertisement says that the image of a woman sitting on top of the car in a bathing suit is what a woman should aspire to. This is more insidious. A twelve-year-old girl who sees *Videodrome* might be very disturbed because she is attracted and repelled by the sexuality – an image of a woman burning herself springs to mind – and by the imagery. But that's different. There's no clear message in the film that a twelve-year-old would absorb about how she is to behave when she is mature. That's not the purpose of art — to tell us how we should live.

To me politics does not mean sexual politics. Politics has to do with power struggles, and parties and revolutions. People use the term sexual revolution in a metaphorical way. It's a semantic thing.

Videodrome *had attracted the interest of an American major studio at a very early stage, on the strength of its bizarre, provocative and contemporary themes. Its director had enjoyed some success with* Scanners, *and the new movie was to feature Debbie Harry, as well as James Woods. With the help of Pierre David, a Cronenberg movie finally stood to benefit from the kind of distribution muscle only a Hollywood major studio can flex – assuming they could properly market such a unique film as* Videodrome.

Pierre had started to make connections in Hollywood, and *Videodrome* was his entrée into studio film-making. He was a classic French-Canadian entrepreneur, but so unusual. For four days or months, he was the Minister of Education for some bizarre African state that had just become independent. He was going into the religious life at one time, ended up being the Quebec Cardinal's right-hand man, went to Africa and suddenly they didn't have anyone who could handle the Ministry of Education. Before that he was a disc jockey. Then he had radio stations, and then he got into film. Now he's in LA. He always wanted Hollywood, and was talking to Tom Mount — one of the longest-surviving entities at Universal — who was there with Hitchcock in his decline. He was a real politician, who survived many administrations and did some interesting things; one of them was to talk to Ned Tanen about *Videodrome.* At a certain point, while we were shooting, it definitely became a Universal picture.

I was dealing with Tom Mount, and then Verna Field, when we were having troubles with finishing the film. Verna was editor on *Jaws,* then became a famous editor and then post-production overseer of everything at Universal. I think it's amazing that Universal Pictures went with *Videodrome,* produced it and distributed it.

They approved the project on a one-page description and were co-investors; they didn't finance the entire film, so it's not technically my first studio film. But Pierre managed to find people who were receptive. In retrospect I realise how extraordinary and unusual it was: first, that they even partially financed it – they were one of the most conservative major studios – and second, that they allowed it to continue once they saw what it was becoming. And finally, that they should make good on their word and release it with a fair amount of enthusiasm. Generally, the system destroys pictures like *Videodrome* before they get to the public.

I remember Sid Scheinberg saying that he felt it had been a mistake to release the film wide; that it should have been handled as an art film, and been given slow, deliberate promotion using critical response to promote it. He was right. But he liked the picture. This is a man much vilified for the non-release of *Brazil.* But he did seem to have an empathy for this movie – even though, at one point, I heard that when he finally read the script he came running down the corridors saying, 'Is it too late to stop this picture?!' Once he saw it, I thought his response was sound and sympathetic.

We had a test screening in Boston. It was a disaster. This was one of my introductions to the way movies are made in Hollywood. The official test screening. I was suddenly locked into the machinery of Universal Pictures. So we're showing it at this particular theatre, and there were response cards. Scary, because I don't know what's going on; I know that there's politics in there somewhere, but I don't know how it works or who to talk to about it. Neither does Pierre.

When I cut, I'm very ruthless. I don't care how long it took to get a shot, it's just whether it works or not. I get bored with things, and tend to take out too much in my first cut. I think we went into that screening with a 75-minute version of *Videodrome* which was totally incomprehensible, however incomprehensible one might think it is now. I knew everything; I forgot the audience doesn't know until it's told. Classic mistake.

There was a transit strike in Boston that day, so we got about half the audience we wanted. I remember being shocked to see black ladies coming with their two-year-old kids, because it was a free movie and they didn't have a babysitter. One baby screamed all the way through. I realised that I was in trouble. They saw the movie; it had no music and no temporary track — I didn't know about temporary tracks. So there were all these audio holes in the movie, which is disturbing to people who don't know how movies are made. Complete disaster. I don't know if there was one card that said anything nice. Basically it was, "You're fucked." But everyone was very sweet. It was, "How can we help you make this better? Let's figure out what went wrong." Tom Mount was very blunt: "This is terrible and bad." But he never said the picture was lost. And with all these cards on the floor: "Listen to this one — 'I hated your fucking film.'" It was excruciating.

In a way, what you're asking for is the judgement of strangers when you make art of any kind. You're asking them to relate and respond to it. But the cards are brutal. I've always used them myself, ever since. So I went back to the editing room feeling bruised, and started putting stuff back in the picture to make it work. The politics are that the word of how the screening went will get back to the powers-that-be. If they think the film is going to be a disaster based on that, they'll cut back on their advertising budget and on the number of prints. I didn't realise the audience was going to kill me. Fortunately, it didn't break my heart. I got the chance to recut, and we never had another official screening, just lots of little ones.

They ended up releasing 900 prints, which is not massive: 1,100 or 1,200 were certainly not unknown then. But 900 was a lot for a movie like this. It played for a week and was gone. They spent the money on it, as much as they were supposed to. But it didn't reach anyone. It didn't reach the horror fans, and it didn't satisfy them when it did. It wasn't *Scanners*. Nor did it reach a more sophisticated audience that would be able to take the nastiness. And it didn't last long enough for any criticism to generate. It was just a down-the-middle strange campaign. *Scanners* had a very hardcore sell, which I wasn't crazy about, but I sure had to admit it worked. *Videodrome* wasn't an exploitation sell and it wasn't an art sell. I don't know what it was.

The formal adventurousness of Videodrome, *its narrative complexity and overt philosophical dimensions, and its graphic imagery perhaps all contributed — along with an over-optimistic release pattern — to the film's commercial failure. Luckily, Cronenberg had spent some time during* Videodrome's *post-production preparing his next movie,* The Dead Zone, *and was already shooting it when news of* Videodrome's *bad performance at the box office reached him. This may have helped a little to lessen the blow. Nonetheless, the director regarded* Videodrome *as his most powerful and ambitious achievement to date.*

I was devastated. It's almost like how do you deal with the inevitability of death. If death is inevitable, it means that everything that comes before is irrelevant and trivial and meaningless. Why should you be alive up to your death? You might as well die right now, or go to bed and eat ice cream. It's the same with having a film not reach the people you think might want to see it. It happens to everyone who makes more than one. When I hear that someone saw *Videodrome* on a bootleg tape in Cuba, I smile a big smile and say, "That's one more.

When I studied American literature, it really struck me how all the great American writers of the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth century died in despair. Whitman, Melville, Hawthorne, Poe: all died thinking that their work meant nothing, that they had achieved nothing, and that it was all meaningless. It sounded inevitable, because, on a cosmic level, that's absolutely true. It means nothing. I believe that. But you can't live your life on that level. You can make yourself crazy thinking that you cannot reproduce a film from any print of that film. Its physical essence is very fragile and tenuous. I can make myself crazy thinking "Where is the negative of *Videodrome* now?" I don't know.

So I guess it's the consolation of philosophy, ultimately. When you're face to face with someone who's seen the film and liked it and was affected by it, that's one you know. Maybe that's enough. That's the minimum. There's got to be one. I think it was the Eskimos, or some Indian tribe, who had One, Two and Many as their number system. "I know many enemy are coming?" "Many!" It could have been three; it could have been fifty. It's dangerous creating art. Burroughs talks about how writing is dangerous. I know exactly what he means. So, you go on. Hopefully by the time your film is released, you're involved with the next one. Which is exactly what happened with *Videodrome.*

To this day, Cronenberg is outraged about certain cuts made in Videodrome, *requested not by the MPAA, but by Universal Pictures themselves. Head of production Bob Rehme took particular exception to the film's 'fake' piece of Japanese softcore pornography – 'Samurai Dreams' in which a geisha lifts a doll to reveal a well-sculptured ebony dildo beneath. Because it was a studio picture, Filmplan were contractually obliged to ensure that* Videodrome *was passed for mainstream distribution. Cronenberg had already met with the*

MPAA's Richard Heffner to discuss various trims and dissolves, in order that the film be granted an R at opposed to X certificate, and reached amicable agreement. For Rehme to add his own cuts, particularly to scenes with which the MPAA had no problem, is regarded by the director as 'the worst betrayal. I wanted support from him. I wanted his help. I don't forgive him for that. I'm as anguished right now as I was then. It hasn't diminished with time.' The scene was trimmed, resulting in the usual jarring cut.

Considering the nature of his practice, Cronenberg may appear to have suffered remarkably little at the hands of the censors – The Brood *and* Videodrome *being particular casualties. However, his rage at their intervention, on nearly every level, is part of a more considered campaigning spirit against the entire notion of censorship as it is presently constituted and carried out by those officially charged with such responsibility. On the censorship issues Cronenberg has become united with his own critics, and – as a self-confessed apolitical director – been driven to political action.*

When I had to deal with the Toronto Censor Board over *The Brood,* the experience was so unexpectedly personal and intimate, it really shocked me; pain, anguish, the sense of humiliation, degradation, violation. Now I do have a conditioned reflex! I can only explain the feeling by analogy. You send your beautiful kid to school and he comes back with one hand missing. Just a bandaged stump. You phone the school and they say that they really thought, all things considered, the child would be more socially acceptable without that hand, which was a rather naughty hand. Everyone was better off with it removed. It was for everyone's good. That's exactly how it felt to me.

Censors tend to do what only psychotics do: they confuse reality with illusion. People worry about the effect on children of two thousand acts of murder on TV every half hour. You have to point out that they have seen a representation of murder. They have not seen murder. It's the real stumbling-block.
Charles Manson found a message in a Beatles song that told him what he must do and why he must kill. Suppressing everything one might think of as potentially dangerous, explosive or provocative would not prevent a true psychotic from finding something that will trigger his own particular psychosis. For those of us who are normal, and who understand the difference between reality and fantasy, play, illusion – as most children readily do – there is enough distance and balance. It's innate.

Censors don't understand how human beings work, and they don't understand the creative process. They don't even understand the social function of art and expression through art. You might say they don't have to and you could be right. If you believe that censorship is a noble office, then you don't have to understand anything. You just have to understand censorship.

It's an endless struggle between those who are basically fearful and mistrustful of human nature – and they have ample proof that their version of humanity is right – and those who feel that a truly free society is possible, somewhere. It's conceivable that in the near future there won't be anything approaching a free society anywhere. That's more than possible. Which is why I resist, in the small way I can, any attempts in Canada to increase censorship. I've had responses here, like one from Margaret Atwood, who said she felt that literature should be uncensored but that films should be. Given that she's a writer and not a film-maker, that did upset me. Of course, the reason is that film is more potent and more accessible. I find that very Canadian: what's regarded as impotent can be allowed freedom; what's potent must be harnessed and mutilated.

Videodrome's *narrative about a man's exposure to violent imagery via video cassette and broadcast signals, and its effect on his sense of reality, could not have been more prophetic; in 1984, three years after its release, Britain introduced the Video Recordings Bill. Initially fuelled by the quality press's concern about certain 'unpleasant' films freely available only on video – particularly the then infamous* Driller Killer, SS Experiment Camp *and* I Spit on Your Grave *— the equally infamous, but undefined, 'video nasty' suddenly came into being. In reality, though usually violent, these were simply low-budget independent films, crossing many genres and coming from many countries. Some had been in existence for years. They were 'unleashed'* en masse *by virtue of home-video technology and new world markets made possible by its popularity, particularly in Britain (30 per cent of homes had video recorders at this time, compared to only 19 per cent in America).*

The horror genre, which had witnessed a renaissance in the 1970s, now became almost illegitimate. Although the so-called 'video nasty' clearly observed no generic bounds, it was the horror movie which was to suffer most – flesh-eating zombies a particular target for potential prosecution. With the Video Recordings Bill, Britain became the first country to censor and classify videos for viewing in the home, on the broad justification that children could be watching.

Any person who is a control freak must certainly find video the most threatening technological development ever. There's freedom to record, to change, to edit, to freeze-frame and look again, to exchange tapes. The video cassette is freedom of the image. It doesn't surprise me at all that censors should shift their focus from the cinema to what's happening in the home, because it's where there should be no censorship whatsoever. You can read *Naked Lunch* to your children over breakfast if you like. It's a strange reversal of what you would think is appropriate. We are in a wave of reaction and fear; control of imagery and dialogue is a manifestation of that.

Having children has assured me that there is a built-in resistance to exposure to things which might actually be damaging. The only problem is when adults drag a kid to a movie and the kid can't get away and doesn't want to be exposed. But I've found with my own kids that they literally put their hands over their eyes in order not to see something they can't take. At the same time, they do have a definite desire to test themselves, to take themselves to the limit in terms of what's scary or disturbing. I think that's natural and normal. When things are left to evolve naturally and not interfered with by social structures, they work. Most of the studies on child psychology point out that the things that disturb children are often very different from the things that disturb adults. Adults sometimes don't even consider the things that scare children most, like scenes of separation of a child from its parents.

People really have to examine themselves and their attitude towards society. If you believe that an individual is a responsible human being — he has the right to vote, to join the army and kill—then you have to accept that that person is also likely to be able to raise a child. If you take the paternalistic, elitist view, which is that everybody is an idiot and a dangerous hooligan and must therefore be controlled, channelled, structured and imprisoned, that's a whole other thing. Then you say, 'We are the only ones who understand how things should be run. We are the only ones who are fit to protect the children of this country. Even their parents are not, and no amount of education will help that.' Then you start with bannings, censorings and restrictions.

Cronenberg is not always in agreement with his own critics in his censorship concerns. The feminist movement has understandably found some sympathy for what might otherwise be regarded simply as the censorious impulse, where it has been applied to films which seem to relish violence against women. However, as in the case of the documentary Not a Love Story – A Film About Pornography *(later changed in Britain to* A Film Against Pornography), *the women film-makers were unable to have their movie distributed uncut in Ontario; this despite the assertion by Mary Brown – then head of the Censor Board for Ontario – that she was a feminist. It is now commonplace for the British Board of Film Classification (which continues to censor as well as classify) to discuss its actions against certain films conveniently within a feminist discourse, somewhat belatedly appropriated.*

It becomes complex when it gets mixed up with the women's movement. You find great splits there between those who think censorship is necessary and those who still believe in total free expression. An image of a man whipping a woman, for instance. It must come out of a film, whether the movie is set up in such a way that the audience understands this is just play between two lovers who've been together for forty years and have twenty kids. That wouldn't matter. The image has to go. So censors become image police: they don't care what the context of the image is; it's only the image itself. The belief is that an image can kill. Literally. It's like *Scanners:* if thoughts can kill, images can kill. So the very suggestion of sadomasochism, for instance, will somehow trigger off masses of psychotics out there to do things they would never have done had they not been exposed to that image. That's why film classification, as opposed to censorship, is legitimate; when it's a suggestion rather than a law. But then, no one is particularly more qualified to be a classifier than anyone else, which is the problem with censorship. How can someone who is my age, my contemporary, see a film and say that I cannot see the film? I don't understand that.

CUTTING THE NEW FLESH:
CENSORING *VIDEODROME* (2015)

by Brad Stevens

Although the package you are now holding contains *Videodrome*'s first uncut UK release (aside from a hard-to-find laserdisc), David Cronenberg's film never had any problems with the BBFC, who happily passed whatever version was submitted to them over the years. Indeed, chief censor James Ferman appears to have been an admirer of Cronenberg's work, and even believed it reflected his own worldview. In the Channel 4 documentary *Long Live the New Flesh: The Films of David Cronenberg* (1987), Ferman claims: "The interesting thing about *Videodrome* is that it really puts the case against 'video nasties'. That is, in fact, the subject of the film. And a thoughtful viewing of *Videodrome* would simply confirm the campaigns that were run by several newspapers against 'video nasties', and most of what was said in parliament. The film totally acknowledges the dangers of sadistic videos."

Nevertheless, *Videodrome*'s journey into UK distribution was hardly a smooth one. The film was made in 1982, while debates concerning the negative effects of screen violence were taking place, and many detractors accused Cronenberg of indulging in an orgy of violent and sexual imagery, stripped of narrative justification (accusations which would be repeated when Cronenberg released his adaptation of J. G. Ballard's *Crash* in 1996). The film had initially been cut by America's MPAA in order to qualify for an R-rating. The cuts were as follows:

1. During the screening of 'Samurai Dreams', a shot of a dildo being revealed was shortened. In the unrated version, the dildo is fully visible. Cronenberg was reportedly ordered to make this cut by Universal executive Bob Rehme.

2. The first shot of Videodrome on the television set in Harlan's workroom was slightly truncated, eliminating a glimpse of pubic hair. Shots of a female victim being strangled on the Videodrome set during this sequence were also removed.

3. The shot that begins the next sequence in Harlan's workroom (immediately after Max's appearance on *The Rena King Show*) originally began with a graphic shot of a woman being whipped on the Videodrome set. The R-rated version eliminates this shot, replacing it with a less explicit take.

4. The scene in which Max pierces Nicki Brand's ears suffered several cuts: Max moving a needle along Nicki's body and her cry of "God!" was eliminated; the shot of the needle being pulled out of her left ear was shortened; a close-up of Nicki's right ear being pierced was removed. As the camera pulls back at the end of this sequence to reveal Max and Nicki making love on the Videodrome set, the middle of the shot has been truncated by means of a dissolve.

5. The shot of Max shooting one of his business partners in the head was slightly shortened.

6. Barry Convex's death lost a single shot of Convex's insides erupting. The penultimate shot of Convex was shortened.

The version distributed to UK cinemas in 1983 was this R-rated cut. Due to the controversy that had attended its US screenings, Universal washed their hands of the film, licensing it to Palace Pictures. I clearly recall seeing this print on its first release, and noting how odd it was that the Universal logo, complete with the introductory notes of Howard Shore's ominous score, preceded the Palace logo (with its own aural accompaniment), the opening credits and score resuming after this jarring interruption.

In the US, Cronenberg's unrated director's cut made its debut when the film was issued on VHS by MCA-Universal. The UK, however, was entering a period in which videos would face more censorship than theatrical releases. *Videodrome* initially appeared on video in the UK in 1984, at the height of the 'video nasties' panic but before the passing of the Video Recordings Act, which obliged distributors to submit works intended for viewing in the home to the UK's state censor, the BBFC. Although their transfer was taken from the already-truncated R-rated edition, CIC, Universal's British video distributor, insisted on making a few additional cuts, presumably to avoid having *Videodrome* appear on the DPP's list of banned titles. These cuts were as follows:

1. Nicki asking Max to cut her with his knife, and revealing the scars on her shoulders.

2. All shots of Max piercing Nicki's ears.

3. Nicki burning her breast with a cigarette.

4. The shot of Max shooting one of his business partners in the head, already shortened by the MPAA, was completely eliminated.

5. The eruptive death of Barry Convex.

The R-rated edition, with these five cuts restored, was passed for video release by the BBFC in 1990. Universal subsequently distributed this version on DVD and Blu-ray. Also in existence is a variant specially prepared for American network television which eliminates all the sex, violence and swearing, but restores a surprising amount of material Cronenberg decided not to use in his director's cut. The most interesting of these is a scene which substitutes for one in the theatrical version showing Max receiving a phone call from an unidentified male, who says "Barry Convex would like to talk to you about Videodrome. I've got a car downstairs for you," then entering the limo waiting outside his apartment and watching a recorded message from Convex. In the TV version, Max instead receives a call from Nicki ("It's not what you think. It's not what anyone has ever thought before."), who, in a striking anticipation of Skype, simultaneously appears on the television in his room (a shot from this scene figured prominently among the publicity stills). After Max hangs up, Nicki's televised image is replaced by that of Brian O'Blivion, who says: "When they reached the point where physics became philosophy, they asked me to help them. Now they've reached the point where philosophy becomes flesh, and they need you." When Max subsequently enters the limo, Nicki

is waiting in the back seat, and provides him with much the same information during the drive as Convex does in the theatrical version. The difference here is a crucial one; in the TV version, the events leading up to Max's meeting with Convex are clearly hallucinations, whereas the theatrical cut holds out the possibility that their encounter may be genuine. Curiously, Dennis Etchison's novelization (written under the pseudonym 'Jack Martin'), includes the phone call from Nicki and the televised appearance of O'Blivion, but corresponds with the theatrical variant's presentation of the limo scene... except that Nicki appears on the TV screen after Convex has delivered his message.

Other additions to the TV version include more dialogue between Max and the Japanese businessmen, an extension to the scene in which Max talks to his partners, Max responding to Nicki's "Want to try a few things?" by saying "You might have to stay on radio if it gets out of hand," more of Max's initial conversation with Masha, Max being shown into a cubicle at the Cathode Ray Mission, Max imagining himself interviewing Brian O'Blivion on television, Max trying on glasses, more dialogue during Max's conversation with Convex, Max catching a window reflection of himself wearing the Videodrome helmet, Bianca O'Blivion holding a video cassette labelled 'Videodrome', Max arriving at the Spectacular Optical trade show in a taxi, and some additional shots of Max approaching and entering the ship at the end. Fascinating as much of this material certainly is, it was eliminated from the final cut by David Cronenberg, and does not belong in a definitive assembly of the film.

Brad Stevens is the author of* Monte Hellman: His Life and Films *(McFarland, 2003) and* Abel Ferrara: The Moral Vision *(FAB Press, 2004). His 'Bradlands' column appears regularly on* Sight & Sound*'s website and his first two novels,* The Hunt *and its sequel* A Caution to Rattlesnakes*, were published in 2014 (Vamptasy).

TIM LUCAS REMEMBERS MICHAEL LENNICK (2015)

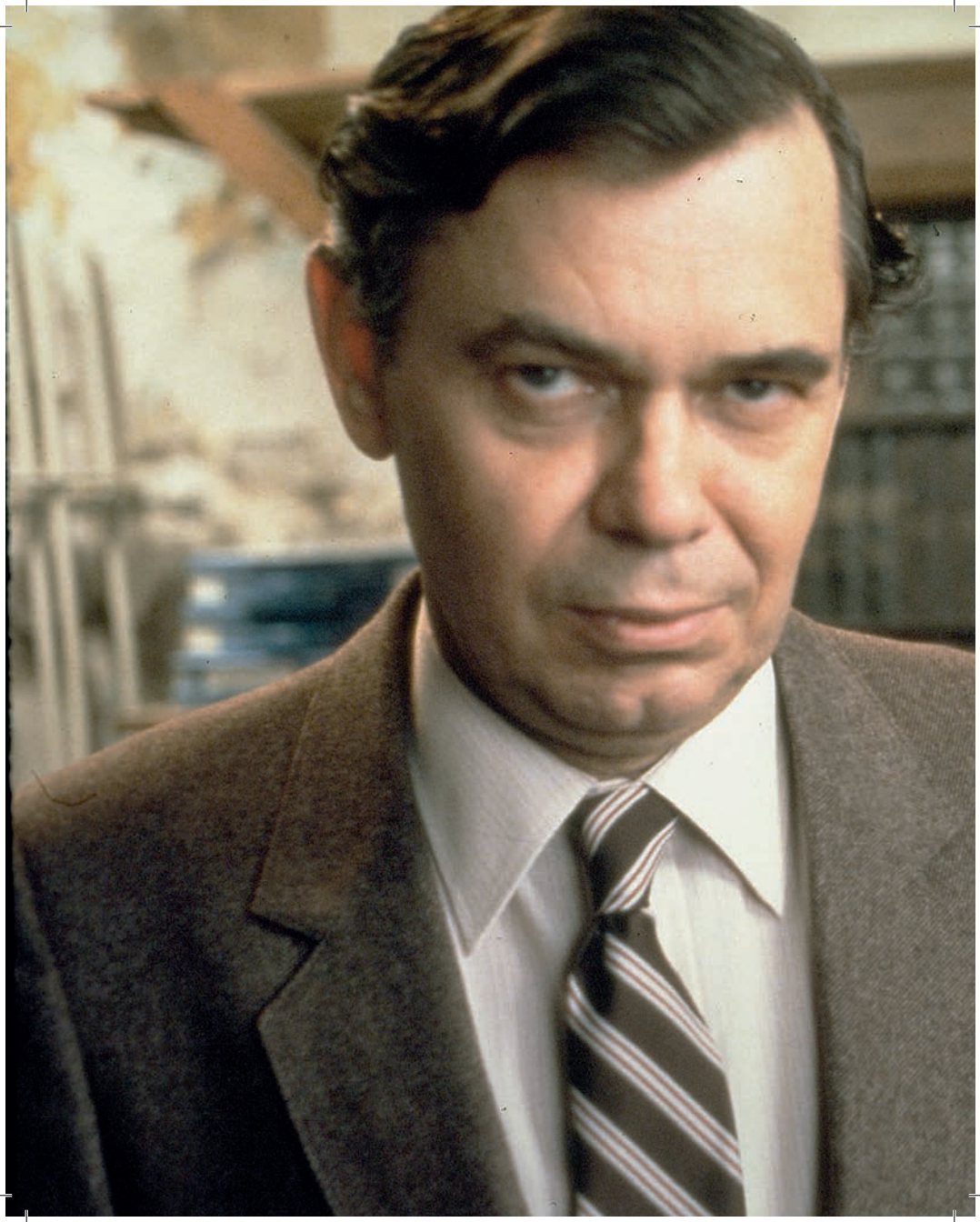
Michael Lennick was the creative genius behind Videodrome*'s special video effects and his documentary on that subject,* Forging the New Flesh*, can be found on the disc accompanying this book. During the planning stages, which happened to be the month's leading up to Michael's early passing, it was clear that he would be invaluable in helping to shape this release and how great his importance to* Videodrome *was. This book is dedicated to his memory and here his long-time friend, Tim Lucas, shares his memories of the man.* -ed.

I first met Michael Lennick on the Toronto set of *Videodrome* in December 1981. He was the video supervisor on "the show," as he called it, and he immediately endeared himself to me over the rest of crew by saying "Did you know that you have my dream job?" He was an ardent reader of *Cinefantastique*, for whom I was covering the filming, but I was still impressed that someone who was actually working on a film crew saw me as special for what I was doing there. For the next 33 years, Michael and I remained in constant touch – even when we weren't, if you know what I mean; he was the closest thing to a brother I have known in this life.

A lot of what I needed to know in life, in order to become me, came directly from Michael.

I've now been writing about movies on different home video media for more than 30 years, but when I first set foot on *Videodrome*'s makeshift soundstage – an abandoned elementary school building situated at the corner of Adelaide and Bathurst streets – I didn't know a thing about home video. After the movie's wrap party the following March, Michael invited me back to his apartment where we sat up till dawn as he regaled me with instant access to endless little snippets of wonderment – trailers for classic horror and science fiction movies, short films (like his own award-winning *Star Wars* homage, *Space Movie*), and one or two things I had summoned from vague memory which he then proceeded to magically produce from thin air – like the pilot episode of *Supercar*, which he showed me on 3/4" cassette. To say that evening changed my life would be an understatement. Suffice to say, from that point onward, I called him Mikey and he called me Timmy.

Michael shared his video duties on *Videodrome* with Lee Wilson, but in a larger sense, he was truly responsible for the video in *Videodrome* – not just as the video effects supervisor, but as a chief muse of the video milieu that permeated Cronenberg's prophetic, screwy masterpiece. David had been a fan of Michael's *The All-Night Show* for Toronto's CFMT-TV, a free-form broadcast in which Chuck the Security Guard (Chas Lawther) seized control of the station and showed all manner of odds and ends of a weird and fantastic nature to his audience of night owls, stoners and insomniacs. David's writing flowed best late at night, after his kids were put to bed, and he once told Michael that he had hammered out the script for *Scanners* while *The All-Night Show* played in the background, running episodes of *The Outer Limits* – which



may explain why I've always noticed a kinship between *scanners* and "The Children of Spider County." *Videodrome*'s Harlan (so winningly portrayed by Peter Dvorsky) is a barbed conflation of Chuck the Security Guard and Michael himself, using Max Renn's Civic TV to harvest miscellaneous pirated programming from the airwaves. David also gave the character the name of Michael's favourite writer, Harlan Ellison. (Incidentally, Harlan Ellison was one of the speakers at Michael's memorial service – as Fate would have it, Brian O'Blivion-style, via Skype.)

Michael also introduced me to sushi and Cuban cigars; he gave me my only opportunities to play a Moog synthesizer (for which I had no aptitude) and a Theremin (for which I had extraordinary aptitude); his life partners Tralf, Larry, and Artie got me past my longtime fear of dogs; and, back in the year 2000, he enabled me to make the leap into recording audio commentaries for DVD and Blu-ray. When I received an invitation from Image Entertainment to do commentaries for two Mario Bava films, I had no way of recording my talks, so Michael invited my wife Donna and I to visit him and his wife Shirley at their cottage in Bala (about an hour outside Toronto), and leave the rest to him. We had many important things to do during that trip – like watching sunsets, talking under the stars, and synching the Stargate sequence of Kubrick's *2001* to Pink Floyd's 'Echoes' – so we didn't get around to the recording until the last day of the trip. This was pre-digital, but he brainstormed a most serviceable set-up that involved him camcording silent VHS playback from his home TV screen, with a live audio signal being recorded from my clip-on mic. He sat behind me throughout the sessions, like a psychiatrist, so that I could feel freer to speak – and he would periodically pause everything to correct the occasional stumble or to suggest that I drink some water. He also taught me, during that visit, how to deconstruct a variety on in-camera visual effects shots – how to recognise matte shots, glass shots, forced perspective, all of which became invaluable reference in terms of writing *Mario Bava – All the Colors of the Dark*, and immediately useful to those first commentaries.

Michael's great love was outer space. His birth in 1952 was perfectly coincidental to the rise of the space program and he never missed a televised space launch, even long after they had ceased to draw audiences, even after the major networks stopped carrying them. He loved *Men into Space*, *Forbidden Planet*, *The War of the Worlds* (whose special effects he got to recreate as the effects designer of the 1990s Paramount teleseries), *First Spaceship on Venus*, et al... and his defining moment was attending the Toronto premiere of *2001: A Space Odyssey* in 1968. He reckoned that he saw the film at least a dozen times before Kubrick issued his mandate to theater owners that 17 minutes be cut from their prints. Michael wrote original scripts and dreamed of telling his stories onscreen, but his love of space and science won out over fantasy; he ended up producing, writing, directing, shooting, editing and narrating what are basically the most essential extent documentaries on the subject of the US space program and its antecedents, some of which were stand-alone projects (*The Highest Step in the World*, 2001, *Dr. Teller's Very Large Bomb*, 2007) and others so epic in scope they became miniseries like *The Science of Fiction* (1997) and the 13-hour *Rocket Science* (2003). He also took great, avuncular pleasure in sharing his enthusiasm for the science fiction film genre, as he did in documentary materials he had produced for the Criterion Collection releases of *Robinson Crusoe on Mars*, *Videodrome* and *Scanners*.

That *Scanners* project was fortuitous. It allowed Michael to spend much of his last year reconnecting with and interviewing people like Rick Baker, Mark Irwin, Chris Walas and Stephan Dupuis, and also Gary Zeller, all of whom he had known from the early Cronenberg days of their careers. As it happens, Gary Zeller

unexpectedly died before the *Scanners* disc was released, and this seemed to set the tone for the months left to come. My last communications with Michael, on Facebook, were about the untimely passing of Michael's friends and colleagues Reiner Schwarz and Linda Griffiths, who, as Michael would, died at 61 years of age. "Too young," we agreed.

In October 2014, in the midst of preparing a new documentary project called *The Children of Pearl Harbor*, Michael inexplicably lost his balance a couple of times while walking his dogs; he later began to complain of headaches and fatigue. Then, one day, he collapsed at home and was taken to hospital, in great pain, where a coma was medically induced. After a few weeks of diminishing returns, with no hope left, he was lovingly removed from life support on November 7th, 2014.

Michael's wife Shirley later told me that Michael's death had been caused by an aggressive form of brain cancer. As I absorbed this information over the following days, it occurred to me that Michael had succumbed to the very thing that prolonged exposure to the Videodrome signal was said to induce. I kept this eureka to myself at first, sensing that it might be in bad taste, but as in many things Cronenbergian, the ugliness led to something beautiful. As I later wrote in his eulogy, I know what Michael would have to say about this strange symmetry, now that he is one with the mysteries of space that always absorbed him. I can hear it in his own voice:

"The Universe is a poem, Timmy – didn't you know that?"

SOMATECHNICS: A *VIDEODROME* CRITICAL ROUNDTABLE (2022)

by Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, Cerise Howard, Josh Nelson and Emma Westwood

Almost forty years have passed since David Cronenberg first unleashed *Videodrome* upon unsuspecting audiences – time enough for us to have learned to live in that very strange new world. Or so we'd like to believe. With its images of bodies reshaped by technology, tele-hallucinations, a healthy spattering of S&M and the finest cohort of character names (Max Renn, Nicki Brand, Barry Convex and Brian O'Blivion) ever committed to celluloid, the film left an indelible mark – or perhaps more appropriately, an open wound – upon the cinematic imagination. And though the film's collective of CRT televisions and video cassettes might seem like artefacts of a forgotten civilisation to modern day viewers more familiar with sleekly designed, wall-encompassing screens, the message of *Videodrome* has only grown more relevant in the years that followed. The pervasive and perverse possibilities of media – which at the time seemed more like a satirical rebuke on the part of the director to accusations of the 'harm' his films had wrought – now reads as prophecy, of a world consumed by images, a world not unlike our own.

The Body Corporate

Alexandra Heller-Nicholas is a film critic who has published nine books on cult/horror/exploitation film with an emphasis on gender politics, including *1000 Women in Horror, 1895–2018* and *Rape-Revenge Films: A Critical Study*.

Cerise Howard is a critic, a co-curator of the Melbourne Cinémathèque, a former Artistic Director of the Czech and Slovak Film Festival of Australia, a studio leader at RMIT University and the bassist for Queen Kong and The HOMOsapiens, a punk, performance art, queer rock band.

Josh Nelson is a film scholar whose (un)healthy obsession with the films of David Cronenberg began as a child, evolved through his academic writing and teaching and culminated in an impromptu 33,000 km round trip journey to meet the director in 2013. Josh has yet to fully recover.

Emma Westwood is a film critic and commentator who entered an official relationship with David Cronenberg when she chose to write a monograph on his remake of *The Fly*. She loves monsters and her next 'marriage' is a book on *The Bride of Frankenstein*.

The Arena

Discussing the broader filmography of David Cronenberg in relation to "genre" is hardly reinventing the critical wheel, but because it's perhaps so obvious a starting place, do we risk losing sight of

what he has done with genre on a more experimental, almost elastic level across his career? And how does *Videodrome* fit into that specifically?

JN: For me, one of the defining characteristics of Cronenberg's cinema – especially across the first decade or so of his career – is the particular talent he has for fusing the visceral pleasures of genre cinema (scientific experimentation and mutation, parasitic terrors, telepathic head explosions etc.) with an intellectual rigour atypical of conventional popular cinema. *Videodrome* exemplifies this signature approach. How many other SF or horror films from the era feature McLuhanesque phrases like "the television screen has become the retina of the mind's eye"? It takes real skill to pull off lines of dialogue like that without disengaging your audience. I'm still not convinced that Cronenberg gets enough kudos for his writing chops. There's a satirical wit that underlies his more metaphysical ruminations. And that's evident here in the way that *Videodrome* also serves as a self-reflexive critique of Cronenberg's filmmaking and the reputation he'd garnered through the conservative backlash against him. We can see that quite clearly in the scene where Masha attempts to warn Max off 'Videodrome' and she tells him, "It has a philosophy and that is what makes it dangerous". That's pure Cronenberg, tongue firmly in cheek, offering a retort to those accusations against him and his work: the genre filmmaker as subversive artist.

AHN: I love that you mention this scene, because the highbrow/lowbrow tension in Cronenberg's oeuvre that I find so addictive and intoxicating is really being teased out in such a playful way here through these very ideas. You see this playfulness across his films, even when they are at their heaviest and most tonally diverse – I think for myself, at least, the "genre-y" element of Cronenberg's work is where he gets the most playful, and maybe because I'm a genre kid at heart, I love how that can simultaneously work at times both in tandem with, and in opposition to, precisely these more highbrow, "arty" ideas that get him played at major international film festivals to fancy bitches with expensive shoes.

EW: He really moves through the 'subs' of genre in a highly fluid, confident and accomplished manner. You see sci-fi (obviously), horror (sure) and more specifically body horror, of which he's seen as the master by many, but often he's not credited for the subtleties of other genre forms that play out in his work. With *Videodrome*, I feel it's the Chandleresque detective story that really comes to the fore. As Max Renn, James Woods plays the role like a hardboiled private dick (yep, interesting choice of language given the porn underpinnings of the film), even though his character isn't officially a detective, as such. But, in being drawn into V*ideodrome* – and, in many ways, being seduced by the *Videodrome* registered ™ Nicki Brand created just for him – he finds himself in the role of private eye. What he doesn't initially realise is that he's actually investigating himself; he is the final destination, similar to Harrison Ford's Deckard in *Blade Runner*, which bears a number of similarities to *Videodrome* while managing to produce a film of an entirely different flavour. Look at *The Fly* (1986) too – horror (tick), sci-fi (tick), body horror (tick) but also romance, and romance in the truest sense of the word. While sex is something Cronenberg frequently explores, especially in terms of kink, he rarely strays into romantic territory. But anyone who claims *The Fly* is *not* a love story has a heart of stone.

CH: Emma, I'm totally there for a reading of *Videodrome* as a surrealist gumshoe flick. Is there any greater obscure femme fatale object of desire in the cinema than Debbie Harry's Nicki Brand? Oh, and isn't it also a comedy – at least some of the time? I mean: Brian O'Blivion – *his name is Brian O'Blivion!* Hilairs.

JN: Yes! It's wickedly funny. The scene with James Woods trying on the oversized eyewear. For some reason that moment kills me every time.

CH: It's also of a horror sub-genre that is little made these days – the practical effects horror flick. Not to say that latex and corn syrup splatter are entirely a thing of the past, but the era of *Videodrome*'s production – those golden 80s – were their heyday, and no film from that period could be said to better benefit from incorporating them than *Videodrome*. In fact, I'll take that further and state that *Videodrome* flatly wouldn't work without old school special effects. So much of its queasy affectiveness is a function of its haptic qualities; Max Renn has to not just be seen to be, but be *felt* to be reaching deep within his surprising new abdominal gash as he fists himself with incandescent carnal bewilderment. And that just wouldn't be felt by the audience if they couldn't appreciate Woods physically palpating something materially on his person when those scenes were shot. That's the real movie magic right there, folks!

'Sex' and 'death' and 'Cronenberg' are hardly strangers to each other when we think about the director's films. What, in your mind as you revisit *Videodrome*, stands out the most immediately when it comes to these three elements?

JN: Cronenberg's fascination with the human body in its twin capacities for sex and death long predates the exalted cries of "Long live the New Flesh!" that we hear throughout *Videodrome*. You only need to remember that scene in *Shivers* where Lynn Lowry relates a dream to Paul Hampton's character, where she tells him that "old flesh is erotic flesh" and "that even dying is an act of eroticism" to see how sex and death are fused in his earliest work. Cronenberg talks a lot about the idea of modern – or maybe postmodern – sex and sexual relations as being divorced from a strictly reproductive function. Sex takes on all these other meanings in his films. It becomes imbued with transformative potential, extending and redefining human agency, desire, and pleasure, and so often in a proximity to death. It also struck me recently – I'm not sure how I hadn't noticed this before now – the way the visual composition of Max and Nicki spooning while the TV is playing torture snuff behind them and their sex acts are escalating in intensity, is echoed throughout *Crash* (1996) with Spader and Unger's characters, especially at the end of the film after another near-fatal accident. *Crash* and *Videodrome* are such perfect bedfellows (pun intended) in that regard. The car crash, like the exposure to the "Videodrome" signal, both seem to function as a kind of fertilising and erotically charged, event, a catalyst for physical and psychological transformation. For me, these ideas are intimately bound up in the "New Flesh" that Cronenberg lends a name to in this film – a concept relevant to so much of his work. He seems to be gesturing towards a possible evolutionary shift in subjectivity, imagining a self that seeks to transcend the limits of the flesh, and of a pleasure beyond death.

EW: I come away from watching *Videodrome* with a sense that sex, death and Cronenberg are inseparable in many ways, and sometimes they're the same thing – like the way the French use a term for orgasm that translates as 'little death'. For Deborah Harry's character sex *is* death, and something she flirts with constantly as part of her hyper-aroused sexual self until she crosses that threshold and actually dies as part of the sex act. However, I think there's another element at play in *Videodrome* – and at play across Cronenberg's whole oeuvre, to be honest – and it's an essential element in Cronenberg's fundamental examination of the mortal mind-body continuum: birth. It may be couched in terms of rebirth in *Videodrome* (i.e. long live the new flesh) but we cease to be if we're not born. We need to remember that Cronenberg is a card-carrying atheist, which flagrantly informs every element of his work, so there's a visceral carnality to his exploration of the flesh that sits in the here and now – from birth to death – and then there's nothing; no supernaturality, no spirituality. It gives his films an urgency because they're about the limbic aspects of the human experience, rather than allowing us to rest on the possibility of a higher being or some greater meaning to our existence. He makes us accountable to ourselves.

AHN: Revisiting *Videodrome* so soon after seeing his (at the time of writing) most recent film *Crimes of the Future* (2022) I was struck quite powerfully by these shared distinctions of "old sex" and "new sex".

There is, of course, a lot of ways that these two films feed (pun intended) into each other, but the thing that distinguishes old sex and new sex on a really fundamental level to me is how it incorporates notions of bodily trauma, if not actual, straight up violence – it may not be "sex and death" but it is absolutely "sex and an awareness of our own corporeal fragility". The second may not roll off the tongue as easily – and a lot of critics have written about this far more extensively, of course – but I do think it is one of the key factors that lie at the heart of what makes Cronenberg's films so goddamned in-your-face Cronenbergian (that, and the fact that they were made by a guy called Cronenberg).

CH: I haven't seen *Crimes of the Future* yet but I'm not wanting for other Cronenberg films obsessed with sex and death, and intersections and interplay of the two, to reflect upon. My mind immediately turns to *eXistenZ* (1999), which still feels like it's considered *Videodrome*'s goofy kid brother and, as such, is underestimated, and poor Pikul's poxy bio-port – his portal into the film's narrative and game engine rooms proper, something that needn't have been sexualised… but of course, it's a Cronenberg film, and he's not one to blithely bestow a new orifice upon a character without maximally milking its eroto-horrific death drive potentiality for squirmy gross-out laffs and shudders now, is he? Invagination, thy name is Cronenberg! I mean – really, was anyone *really* surprised when, come 1988, he premiered a film with twin gynaecologists as its protagonists? Not least after essaying just such a role on-screen himself in a fun wee cameo in *The Fly*…

Which brings me back to a point of Emma's – we can't talk of birth, rebirth and Cronenberg without acknowledgement that, with his late wife Carolyn Zeifman, he spawned a filmmaker son in Brandon who demonstrably shares many of his father's cinemato-pathogeno-venereal preoccupations – bless him! – and who will in all likelihood survive him… Long live the new Cronenberg!

Technology is, of course, a crucial fascination within this film and Cronenberg's work more broadly, and yet watching it 40 years after its initial release, the specifics of the media tech in question here - videotapes, terrestrial television broadcasting, old school big-bastard cathode ray tube televisions, etc - are obviously extremely of their time. What, however, has endured on this front? What transcends the mechanical specificities of technology of its time of production? And how does that relate or intersect to you with Cronenberg's broader focus on the body, the somatic, the corporeal?

EW: I'm not sure whether it's just me but, while the specific tech of *Videodrome* may be outdated, it now serves as a wonderful stylistic, almost fetishistic, affectation when watching the film in the decades since its release; obviously something that Cronenberg could not have anticipated (or maybe he did?) but something that works beautifully, regardless. Cronenberg even uses cathode ray televisions as part of performance art in his most recent film, *Crimes of the Future*, so I think the 'artiness' of old tech is not lost on him now. The fact that technology turns organic in *Videodrome* – VHS tapes throb, television screens warp and guns literally attach to hands to make 'handguns' – speaks to us in different ways in the 21st century, especially given the prevalence of haptics and our desire to constantly tether ourselves to devices and exist in alternate realities. Advances in medicine mean we can even have monitorable technology implanted within us now to control our bodily functions, which sheds a whole different light on Renn's tummy 'dentata'. *Videodrome* is startlingly prophetic in its depiction of our consumption of media and technology, how that can take on Orwellian 'Big Brother' proportions (Barry Convex and Spectacular Optical) and, possibly most frighteningly, McLuhan's 'the medium is the message' adage given the rise of the Zuckerberg Meta-verse. As is observed of Max Renn, "He is the video word made flesh."

JN: Far more than when I first saw *Videodrome* in that now distant world of the 1980s, Bianca O'Blivion's line to Max about her father that "public life on television was more real than private life in the flesh" seems

to encapsulate our contemporary existence. The media, the medium of the screen, is longer the sole domain of stars, it now belongs to anyone with a smartphone.

AHN: I was thinking the same thing, through a kind of Warholian "famous for fifteen minutes" lens.

JN: Is this the future Brian O'Blivion prophesied? Are we the world of "derelicts patched back into the world's mixing board", where the old flesh has given way to images of self-styled celebrities and would-be influencers. *Videodrome* seems to anticipate the capacity of modern technology to make stars of us all – even if the film's analogue instrumentation seems outdated by current standards. But putting that aside, and viewed strictly as a metaphor for our relationship to technology, *Videodrome* remains far more astute than most if not all of its modern day cinematic successors. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the film's ending. Has there ever been a more perfect visualisation of Baudrillard, where the simulation precedes the real? Max watches his own suicide on TV before repeating the act in 'real life' moments later. Cronenberg prophesies a world – one that has increasingly come to resemble our own – where simulated bodies have usurped a higher reality, rendering our flesh bodies irrelevant if not obsolete.

AHN: It's fascinating to me revisiting this film so many years after it was made, to see what a crucial element boredom plays in *Videodrome* when it comes to technology, and how that is tied so explicitly to sex. Both Nicki and Max hunger for something new – it's not just because they are horny (although yes, they are horny), but that this horniness is tethered so closely to advances in technology. Again, there's those echoes of *Crimes of the Future* – faster, harder, better, bigger – and that holds true whether it's tech or fucking.

CH: I think there's only one area where we're the lesser today in our engagement with *Videodrome* and that's its analogue 80s tech. And for all that we four remain enamoured of physical media – and surely anyone reading this is similarly disposed – there is no longer that very particular frisson to relish produced by the insertion of a *Videodrome* cassette into a VHS player, or of its post-viewing ejection. Certainly, a 4K *Videodrome* will categorically be a superior aesthetic presentation of the film on screen, but for those of us fortunate to be "of a certain age", the charged, imprinted muscle memory of that directly haptic – rather than haptic-via-transmission – engagement with the film is no longer reproducible, in the same way. *Ringu* (1998) can't hope to scare the bejeesus out of you half so much if viewed circa 2022 streaming on your laptop in bed. Gawd – this feels rather churlish to have brought up, having been invited to contribute to a roundtable attached to an epochal release of this most Cronenbergian of all films in glorious 4K. Ummm… long live the new VHS?

The privileging within *Videodrome* of Debbie Harry's star presence is clearly something that was very deliberately amplified in the film, both in terms of a very specific kind of sexuality and also what may be best described perhaps as a kind of technologised or mediated aura. What are your thoughts on this, and can you perhaps bounce this off some of the ways other "star" bodies are employed in Cronenberg's work (i.e. Marilyn Chambers, etc.)?

AHN: As she noted many times throughout the 70s and 80s herself, Debbie Harry was synonymous with Blondie – but by the time *Videodrome* came out, the band had already split up the year before in 1982. Even the year before that, though, this darker side of her work was made perhaps nowhere more explicit than in the cover art of her 1981 solo album *KooKoo* which had that amazing artwork by H.R. Giger showing her face – that famous, famous face! – with enormous skewers through it. It's interesting to think of *Videodrome* in relation to that album cover in particular, actually; the idea of the malleable, corporeal, corruptible flesh of the idealised woman superstar. Harry's performance in this film is one of those classic "I can't imagine this

film with anyone else in this role" moments for me; in many ways, I think she's much more essential to the energy of this film than James Woods. (Although maybe that's with the benefit of hindsight, seeing that he has turned out to be a bit of a pissbaby but she's still amazing?)

EW: Alex, I love that you mentioned Deborah Harry's *KooKoo* album. It's produced by my Music Godfathers, Nile Rodgers and Bernard Edwards, so seeing that inclusion really tickled my fancy.

AHN: Look at the cover art of that record and then the spikes that come out of Max's pistol and drive into his arm – it's so fucking Giger! There's no way that's a coincidence. Again, however, I am sure this is something that has been discussed elsewhere (it feels hard at times to come up with anything original about Cronenberg at this point, which may be why he keeps provoking us with new films!).

JN: Just going back to my earlier point about the way that *Videodrome* imagines the ability of modern technology to make stars of us all. I probably need to add here that very few of us 'derelicts' – even with all the world's technology at our fingertips – could ever conjure the aura of stardom that we see on show throughout Cronenberg's filmography. Is it a coincidence that the director has extracted what are arguably career-best performances from so many of his leading actors? Harry and Woods in *Videodrome*, Goldblum and Davis in *The Fly*, Irons in *Dead Ringers* (1988), Weller in *Naked Lunch* (1991), Spader, Unger and Koteas in *Crash*, Law in *eXistenZ*, Mortensen in – well, flip a coin between *A History of Violence* (2005) and *Eastern Promises* (2007) – I could go on but you get the gist. There's something about the way he employs bodies-on-screen (the scene of Goldblum showing off his enhanced physical abilities to a terrified Davis in *The Fly* is a perfect example) and then there's his actors' willingness to go beyond in their roles – could you imagine Woods agreeing to penetrate himself with a hand-gun nowadays? – that lead to these indelible and transformative (for both actor and audience alike) portrayals. Cronenberg's actors frequently inhabit characters that, once seen, are not easily forgotten. That's real star power!

CH: It's clear that actors will go out on a limb – sometimes quite literally – in doing Cronenberg's bidding before his unflinching kino-eye – one on quite a different transhumanist mission to that espoused by that term's coiner and publicist back in the day, Dziga Vertov. Even Keira Knightley, who risked (and received) ridicule for her jutting jaw's supremely committed performance in *A Dangerous Method* (2011). Even Keira Knightley!

Gotta agree with Josh – few are the 'derelicts' who can hope to summon or transmit any smidgeon of star wattage left to our own (Apple or Android) devices. And of those who should rise to become 'influencers' across the panoply of media platforms we routinely and desultorily doomscroll and platform-surf across these days, it's a precious few who even begin to approach the supreme level of ineffable, come-hither-to-be-devoured/assimilated star quality embodied by Deborah Harry in the *'Drome*. So precious a few that no names spring to mind! Though perhaps I'm not of quite the right generation to be wowed by a persona boasting a squidzillion Instagram followers, if there's not a revolutionary body horror flick and a glittering recording career (and a pierce-tastic Giger record cover!) to hitch that fame-of-sorts to.

Why has Videodrome endured?

JN: Even if we put to one side Cronenberg's prophetic knack for imagining contemporary human-machine interactions, so much of *Videodrome* leaves a lasting impression: the undulating television replete with veins, Renn's abdominal "cavity", Nicki's voice as she commands "come to me"… These sights and sounds take up residence in our minds – to paraphrase O'Blivion – like an uncontrollable tumour. It's partly why I think this film has achieved a kind of rarefied status, not only within the realm of genre cinema but Cronenberg's oeuvre more specifically. I suspect that *Videodrome*'s longevity also has to do with the

fact that by incorporating so many of the director's signature preoccupations (body/technology fusions, the erotics of death, nefarious corporations, paranoia and the shifting boundaries of reality) that the film forever consolidated what it means whenever someone uses the term "Cronenbergian". Truly the video word made flesh.

AHN: *Videodrome* endures because it's smart and sick on the surface, and like the best of Cronenberg's work (and – if I may add somewhat provocatively – even the worst of it) there's a provocation built into that which transcends horseshit edgelord fuckery for its own sake. A lot of filmmakers (I won't name names) really obviously get a hard-on for that "can you take it?" approach to screen violence, but Cronenberg with *Videodrome* is doing something far different; it's so self-reflexive, as Josh has noted, it's like holding a mirror up against a mirror and getting caught in this visceral *mise en abyme* that has the curious effect of demanding you, the audience, attempt critical thinking on some level – any level.

EW: As with any great storytelling, *Videodrome* is a film that really pops in the writing; it's an exquisite piece of narrative cinema that is so intensely rich that you can read it in so many ways with each viewing, and yet it's also highly watchable – not impenetrable. As I think we've all revealed in this roundtable, the passage of time means it can also be interpreted in different ways as we, as a society, change, which imbues it with an enduring quality, like the gift that keeps on giving. I feel that *Videodrome* has also come to be defined by the lensing of Mark Irwin, who worked solidly with Cronenberg from *Fast Company* (1979) until he turned to Peter Suschitzky for *Dead Ringers*. It's a happy accident (cinema was only shot on film in the early 80s), but I prefer Cronenberg's somewhat clinical subject matter when it's presented on film, rather than shot digitally, because the depth and grain of celluloid works as a lovely counterpoint. I was lucky to talk to Irwin and he confessed to having learnt his craft working in porn, which put him in a perfect position to understand the mechanics of *Videodrome*. We had a laugh because Canadians and Australians (like me) refer to cinematographers as 'DoPs', *not* 'DPs'. If you think about it, DP means something different when you're working in porn!

CH: I think there are echoes/re-runs of *Videodrome* in so many other films to have arrived at a cult-canonical status – whether through direct influence or by their makers tuning into some of the same frequencies as had Cronenberg – that cinephiles who develop a taste for the outré, for intelligent and provocative sci-fi and body horror, for films exploring technophilia or technophobia, or who simply possess bent senses of humour (the delicious dark comedy in Cronenberg's films is too rarely celebrated) will inevitably beat a path there at some point. Folks might come to it via a gobsmacked viewing of Shinya Tsukamoto's *Tetsuo* films, for example, gleaning from the commentariat that Cronenberg was formative in the development of Tsukamoto's tastes and obsessions, and want to trace that back – that journey will certainly take in a lengthy truck stop at *Videodrome*. J-horror classics *Ringu* and *Pulse* (2001) carry no small amount of *Videodrome* in their DNA too – mind you, this influence on Japanese cinema is surely a two-way street. I don't know if Cronenberg has ever spoken of this, but *Videodrome* likely carried a certain amount of *pinku eiga* eroto-torture porn in its memetic make-up in the first place, no?

JN: I think you're spot on. There's that perhaps quite deliberate reference to Japanese-inspired pornography at the beginning of the film. It's where he gives us that great line about it not being "tacky enough" to turn the guy on. "Too much class. Bad for sex." See? Comedy!

CH: Olivier Assayas' *Demonlover* (2002) is also surely *Videodrome*-inspired and Julia Ducournau must count it – and *Crash* of course, and much Cronenbergiana besides – as seminal influences upon *Titane* (2021). Less clear is whether Jan Švankmajer was acquainted with *Videodrome* before making *Conspirators of Pleasure* (1996); certainly, it contains perverse parallels aplenty. At any rate, to be introduced to any of these wonderful films – well, wonderful but for *Demonlover*, which I never warmed to – is to surely know, or soon get to know, *Videodrome* too. The mark of a true classic being the company it keeps!

ABOUT THE RESTORATION

Videodrome is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with mono sound. The film is presented in both its unrated director's cut and original theatrical cut versions and has been exclusively restored by Arrow Films.

The original 35mm camera negative was scanned in 4K 16-bit resolution at Company 3, Burbank. Additional intermediate film elements were sourced for the Director's Cut sections. The film was restored in 4K and graded in HDR10 and Dolby Vision at Silver Salt Restoration, London.

The audio mix was remastered by NBC Universal.

This restoration of *Videodrome* has been approved by director David Cronenberg.

Restoration supervised by James White and James Pearcey, Arrow Films.

Silver Salt Restoration:
Anthony Badger, Mark Bonnici, Simon Edwards, Raymond King

Company 3:
David Morales, Heidi Tebo

NBC Universal:
Peter Schade, Tim Naderski, Jefferson Root, Cassandra Moore

All original materials supplied for this restoration were made available by NBC Universal.
Special thanks to David Cronenberg for his generous participation on this project.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Original 2015 Release

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Francesco Simeoni**
Production Assistants **Liane Cunje, Louise Buckler**
QC and Proofing **Anthony Nield, Nora Mehenni**
Subtitling **day for night***
Artist **Gilles Vranckx**
Design **Jack Pemberton**

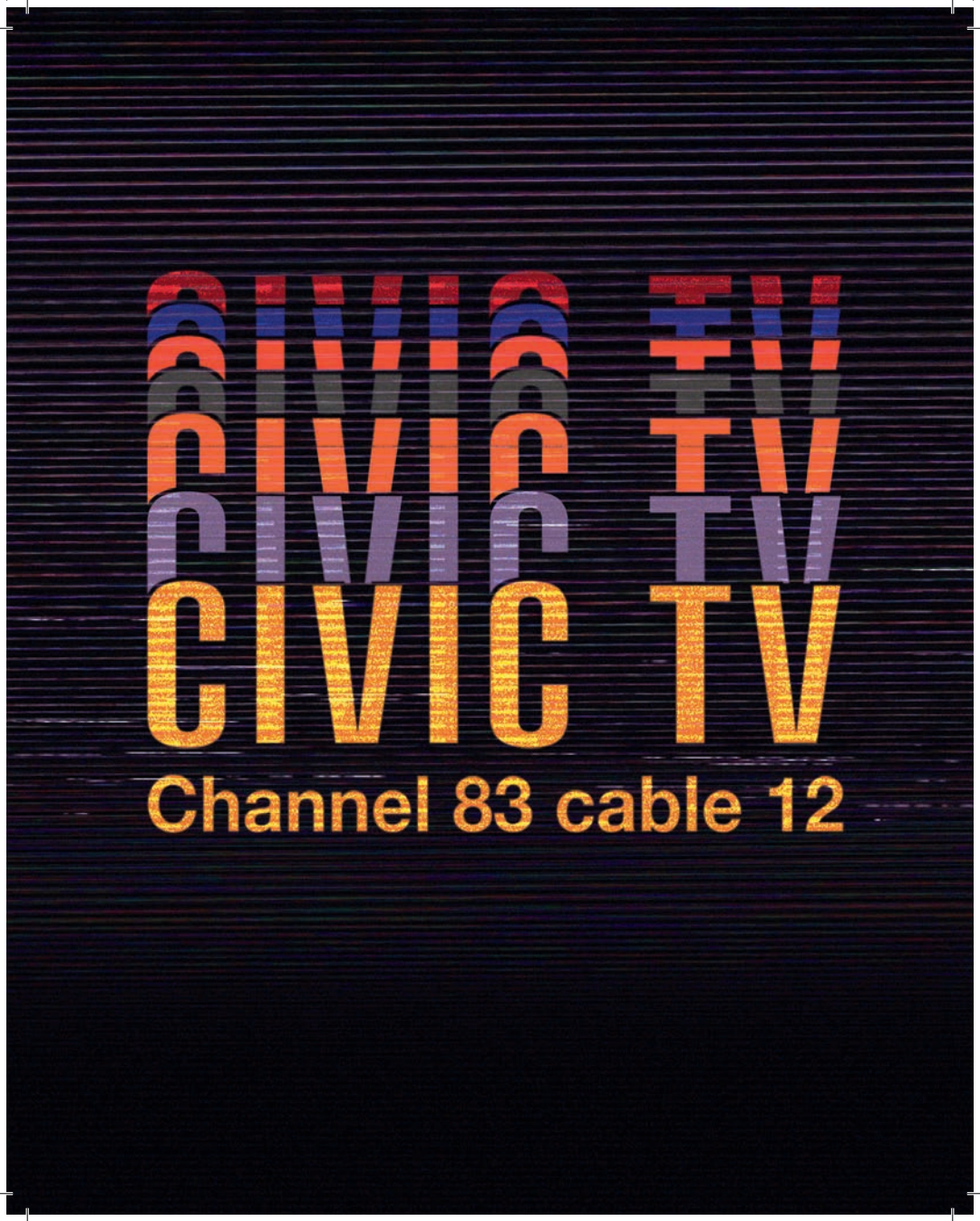
2022 4K Ultra HD Release

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Michael Mackenzie**
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**
Technical Producer **James White**
QC **Geoff De'arth**
Production Coordinator **Leila El-Khalifi Hall**
Production Assistant **Samuel Thiery**
Disc Mastering **Fidelity in Motion / David Mackenzie**
Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**
Design **Obviously Creative**

SPECIAL THANKS

Very special thanks to David Cronenberg and Lisa Mahal for their valuable assistance on this project.

Alex Agran, Dean Allen, Tom Barrett, Cinémathèque Québécoise, Daniel Bird, Michael Brooke, Paul Buck, The Criterion Collection, Brad Deane, Walter Donohue, Patrick Duchesne, Faber & Faber, Michael Felsher, Stephen Ford, Sylvia Frank, Mick Garris, Dale Gervais, Paul Gordon, Shirley Gulliford, Tina Louise Harvey, Michael Hochhaus, Hollywood Classics, Justin Humphreys, Graham Jones, Nick Freand Jones, Lee Kline, James Kwiatkowski, Samuel La France, Sonali Joshi, Marie-Pierre Lassard, Alistair Leach, Michael Lennick, Libraries and Archives Canada, Donna Lucas, Tim Lucas, Pamela Mollica, Kim Newman, Michel Plaxton, Chris Rodley, Edwin Samuelson, Brad Stevens, Karen Stetler, Fumiko Takagi, Melanie Tebb, Jennifer Rome, Technicolor, Tiff Bell Lightbox, Toronto International Film Festival, Transit Audio Services Ltd., Universal Pictures, Jesse Wente, Winnie Wong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