



Dedicated to the memory of Michael Lennick
1952 - 2014

CONTENTS

TRANSFER AND FROM THE DRAIN CREDITS 7 / 11

**TRANSFER: FROM BIG SCIENCE TO LITTLE FILMS -
EXTRACTS FROM CRONENBERG ON CRONENBERG (1992)
by David Cronenberg 15**

STEREO AND CRIMES OF THE FUTURE CREDITS 19 / 21

**EMBRYOS FOR VISCERAL VISION -
EXTRACTS FROM CRONENBERG ON CRONENBERG (1992)
by David Cronenberg 22**

**NON-SENSORY INFORMATION:
FOUR EARLY CRONENBERG FILMS (2015)
by Caelum Vatnsdal 35**

VIDEODROME CREDITS 47

**DEFINITELY NOT FOR PUBLIC CONSUMPTION:
VIDEODROME REPLAYED (2015)
by Justin Humphreys 48**

**NEW FLESH FOR OLD: THE TAX-SHELTER EXPERIMENTS -
EXTRACTS FROM CRONENBERG ON CRONENBERG (1992)
by David Cronenberg 56**

**CUTTING THE NEW FLESH: CENSORING *VIDEODROME* (2015)
by Brad Stevens.....76**

TIM LUCAS REMEMBERS MICHAEL LENNICK (2015) 80

ABOUT THE TRANSFERS 88





TRANSFER



1966

Writer, Director, Producer, Cameraman & Editor
DAVID CRONENBERG

Sound Recordists
MARGARET HINDSON & STEPHEN NOSKO

Starring
RAFE MACPHERSON
STEPHEN NOSKO
MORT RITTS

Colour

16mm

Budget \$300 CAD





FROM THE DRAIN



1967

Writer, Director, Producer, Cameraman & Editor
DAVID CRONENBERG

Sound Recordists
MARGARET HINDSON & STEPHEN NOSKO

Starring
MORT RITTS
STEPHEN NOSKO

Colour

16mm

Budget \$500 CAD







TRANSFER FROM BIG SCIENCE TO LITTLE FILMS

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.

Not long after Cronenberg had successfully situated his mind and body at the most conducive end of the University campus and curriculum, his creative juices instigated yet another of their unforeseen flows. They began tentatively to investigate an alternative to the notion of being an author. This alternative was film-making. These juices were all but uncontaminated by the condition known as cinephilia. Cronenberg was therefore not haunted by the spectres of great directors and classic movies – the inevitable inheritance of a generation of film-makers nurtured by the institution of film school. His intimidating influences were literary as opposed to cinematic. This initial, relatively pure 'reaction' to cinema is important to Cronenberg, considering his desire that his films should constitute their own genre.

There were no film courses at the University of Toronto in the early 1960s. They had courses for poetry, painting, dance, but not for film. At that point it wasn't a legitimate art or science. It was just entertainment — and you didn't have courses on TV or vaudeville. That's why it's hard now to reproduce the stunning effect that a film made by a fellow student had on me.

His name was David Sector. He had somehow hustled together a feature film called *Winter Kept Us Warm*, which is a quote from [T.S. Eliot's] *The Waste Land*. I heard he was making a film, and that was intriguing because it was completely unprecedented. And then the film appeared, and I was stunned. Shocked. Exhilarated. It was an unbelievable experience. This movie, which was a very sweet film, had my friends in it as actors. And it was in Toronto, at the University, and there were scenes and places that I walked past every day. It was thrilling. That won't happen to kids now, because they've got video cameras at home and everybody has made twelve films by the time they've reached puberty. But then it was unprecedented. I said, "I've got to try this!" That was the beginning of my awareness of film as something that I could do, something that I had access to. I had shot 8mm footage of car races — another of my many obsessions as a kid — but it never occurred to me to make a fiction film or anything like that.

As a child I had been a regular moviegoer, because there was no television in the late 1940s/early 1950s, and we were very late in getting a set. My father, being a book man who had owned a bookstore in the Depression (The Professor's Bookshop), was also very resistant to television. I had to go to friends to watch *Howdy Doody*. Then every Saturday afternoon there would be a migration down the streets, like a stream

of lemmings, going towards the College Moviehouse or the Pylon. We would go every weekend. And my parents would take me to see movies during the week. But it was just like the air you breathed. Nothing special.

Eventually I became aware of European film and saw that here was something different. But I was never a film enthusiast or a cinephile. I had friends who belonged to various film societies. They would drag me off to see those movies and they would be terrific — Fellini, Bergman, all those. But they were film-maniacs. I was just going along with them. That was never my 'in' to film-making. It really was this one moment when I saw *Winter Kept Us Warm* that did it for me.

It was the access. I had certainly seen movies that had affected me, but the same goes for books. I'd been driving in cars that had affected me. Someone takes you for a ride in a Ferrari, and your whole understanding of what a car can be changes. It doesn't mean you immediately feel you must become a car designer. The same with movies. It just didn't occur to me that you could make a movie. They came from somewhere else. Just like cars. I didn't realise that in England at that time, for example, people did build cars. Like the Lotus. Many wonderful cars started that way. But in Canada you didn't build cars and you didn't make movies. You didn't know anyone in the movie business. You might know someone whose father ran a used-car lot.

So now I was no longer just a consumer of movies. It was now grist for the mill. All those things I'd seen were now learning experiences in terms of making my own film. My approach to film-making was very pragmatic. I like to take things apart. So my first approach was very mechanical, to understand the technology. I looked in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* under 'Lens', 'Film', 'Camera' and 'E. Stop'. Things like that. I bought copies of *American Cinematographer* magazine. I couldn't understand the articles, but the ads showed pictures of stuff and I gradually began to get the idea: how you get the sound on to the film, how you edit both of them together. I didn't understand any of that.

The essence of creating anything is control and shaping, and you can't get control if you don't know how things work. That's how I felt about cars. You can't really drive them well unless you know what's going on. I've always found that fascinating. To take a car apart is to look into the brain of the people who designed it, and into the culture it came from. Ways of doing things and ways of dealing with the realities of metallurgy, combustion. For me it's immediately a philosophical enterprise to take something apart. It's not just monkey stuff.

I started to hang out with cameramen. There was a camera-rental place, Canadian Motion Picture Equipment Company. A woman called Janet Good owned it; a very feisty, foul-mouthed (in a most delightful way) Scottish babe, who would just sit behind her desk and tell you where the world was at. Cameramen would come in, they'd all drink gin together, take cameras apart, and they'd show me how to load an Arriflex. They would tell me stuff. Finally, when I was ready, I went out and shot my first film. I did everything. I recorded the sound, held the microphone and shot at the same time.

It didn't take long before I dropped the techno part of it, though I still read the latest car magazines avidly to see what the latest developments are in cylinder combustion techniques. I'm not interested in the latest camera development. I'm very anti-techno. I've never shot in CinemaScope. I'm not interested. But I can't

understand a director who doesn't really understand what different lenses do. I've got to tell my cameraman what lens I want. He can't tell me. If you don't have some technological understanding of why that looks that way, you'll never understand that it can be different.

I could see what was going on with Stanley Kubrick at a certain point: an obsession with technology. I thought, "Why is there so much Steadicam in *The Shining*?" It didn't surprise me when I heard that the guy had been hired to do one day and stayed for nine months! It was a new toy. In *Barry Lyndon* it was the emphasis on being able to shoot candlelit scenes by true candlelight, and modifying stills camera lenses for use on a movie camera. But why? The illusion is fine! It's the illusion I want. The reality is totally irrelevant.

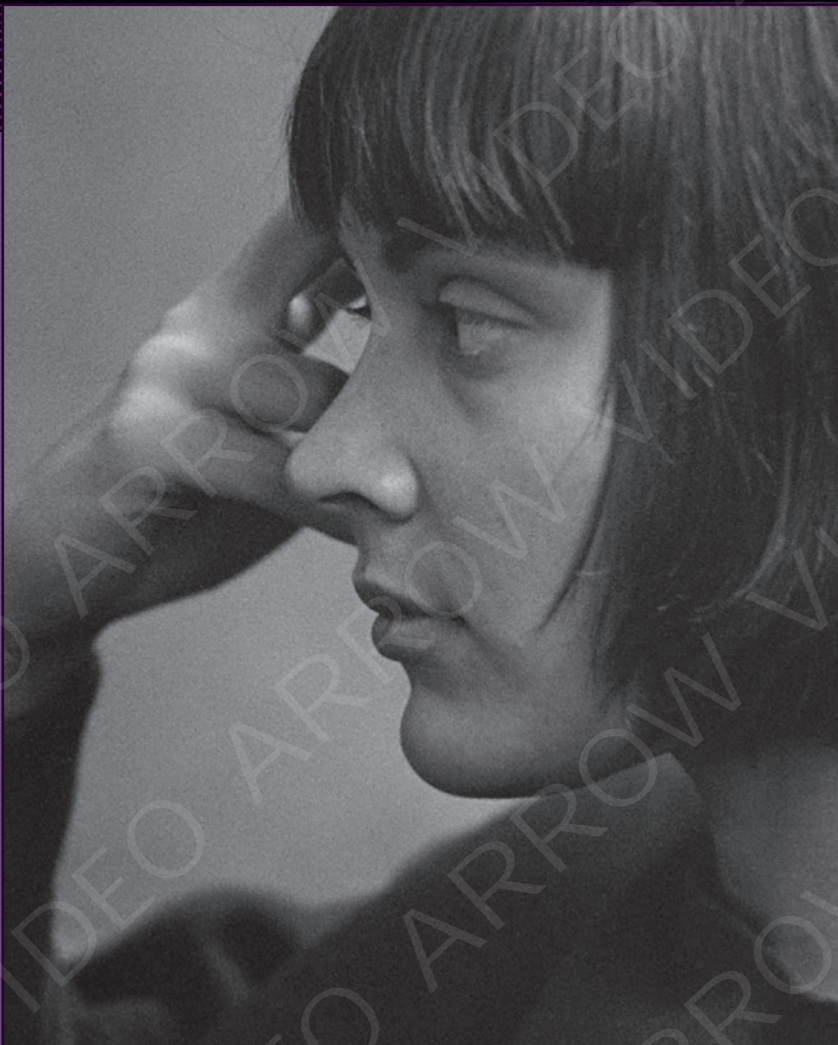
Yet, inevitably, when you do special effects it's always an invention. It's always a new experiment, because the context is always different. Even in *Dead Ringers* I was breaking some new ground in small ways with motion control. Not because I wanted to, but because I had to, and wanted to survive the experience.

It was very natural for me to write a script. By that time it was business as usual. The easy part. To realise the films was the hard part, the learning part. I've tried to suppress those films for many years. I guess they have an academic interest, but artistically they're so bad. I haven't seen them for twenty years. The last time I looked at them everything was wrong: the rhythms; the editing. I had no desire to re-edit them. They must stand as what they are.

Transfer was about a psychiatrist who is pursued by his patient wherever he goes, because the patient feels that their relationship is the only one he's ever had that meant anything to him. It's arty in that I tried visual dislocation. Most of it takes place in a snowy field, and they're eating on a table set up out in the field without any logical or realistic attempt to explain why. There is a surrealist element, which didn't quite match with the psychological humour. Technically it was pretty lumpy.

From the Drain is definitely more like a Samuel Beckett sketch. There are two guys sitting in an empty bathtub with their clothes on. They begin to talk, and the first line is "Do you come here often?" As they talk, you begin to realise that they're veterans of some bizarre war that you don't know anything about. It involves biological and chemical warfare. Finally, a plant comes out through the drain and strangles one of them. The other takes his shoes and throws them in a closet that is full of other people's shoes. So it's obvious that somewhere along the line there is a plot to get rid of all the veterans of that particular war so they won't talk about what they know. It was an evolution in the sense that I was becoming a little bit more technically adept and finding my way around the technology and the rhythms of editing.

It was tremendously exciting making them at the time. And then it becomes tremendously frustrating, because you're not able to get what you want. You don't have the facility. But then the impulse drives you on to the point where you can say that what's on screen is what you want to be there.



STEREO

1969

Writer, Director, Producer, Cameraman & Editor
DAVID CRONENBERG

Starring

RONALD MLODZIK
JACK MESSINGER
IAIN EWING
CLARA MAYER
PAUL MULHOLLAND
ARLENE MLODZIK
GLENN MCCAULEY

B&W

35mm

Budget \$3,500 CAD



CRIMES OF THE FUTURE

1969

Writer, Director, Producer, Cameraman & Editor
DAVID CRONENBERG

Starring

**RONALD MLODZIK
JON LIDOLT
TANIA ZOLTY
JACK MESSINGER
PAUL MULHOLLAND
WILLIAM HASLAM
WILLIAM POOLMAN
STEFAN CZERNECKI
RAY WOODLEY
KASPARS DZEGUZE
IAIN EWING**

**BRIAN LINEHAN
LELAND RICHARD
NORMAN SNIDER
STEPHEN ZEIFMAN
WILLIAM WINE
BRUCE MARTIN
DON OWEN
UDO KASEMETS
SHELDON COHEN
GEORGE GIBBINS
RAFE MACPHERSON
COUNT AUS VON BLICKE**

COLOUR 35mm Budget \$15,000 CAD



EMBRYOS FOR VISCERAL VISION

by David Cronenberg
edited by Chris Rodley

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My conceit was that my films would be, in the world of film-making, these emergent creatures that would be unprecedented and not able to have been predicted. You never did anything casually in those days!

Stereo was financed by Film House. I wrote to the Canada Council for a grant to make a film: to live on, if not to finance it. They didn't have a film category, even in the late 1960s. I had to do it as a writer. So I invented this whole Nabokovian novel that I was going to write, did a specimen chapter plus a plot outline, and got three notables to back me. Eventually I received Can. \$3,500, which was a fortune to me at the time, to write this novel. So I immediately started to make *Stereo*. The next year, the Canada Council started a cinema category. They were very responsive. I used their money to establish credit at Film House and then got seriously into debt and couldn't pay them until about fifteen years later. But I did pay them! Ivan Reitman had been in the same situation, but paid them sooner! He was more successful.

Crimes of the Future was financially supported by the Canadian Film Development Corporation (CFDC) to the tune of about Can. \$15,000. It was maybe the first and last experimental film they put money into. They were looking for their own mandate, and were supposed to help develop the Canadian film industry. But nobody knew what that meant. So I slipped in under the wire. I was knocking on the door before there was a door.

My general background as a would-be writer made me isolationist. I suppose it's a very Canadian thing to do. But I felt very private about the work I was doing, and the projects I was thinking of were just not communicable to anyone else. It never occurred to me to get help other than from a few friends; the actors were also friends and acquaintances. They were not professional actors.

There was something about the medium of film that just fitted my temperament like a glove. I'd made several attempts at writing novels, and was just beginning to feel that I didn't have the proper temperament to do it; the long isolation and obsessive introspection. And, when I did write, I was possessed by Nabokov and Burroughs. One of the things I had trouble with as a writer was getting out of their clutches. I couldn't find my own voice. But when I wrote for film, I was totally liberated.





I had no influences whatsoever. I don't mean that in an arrogant way, but in a very tangible way for me. I didn't feel the hand of someone on my shoulder, like Hitchcock's on Brian De Palma. There was not one film-maker who was so almost me that I couldn't get to the real me. An important element in my decision to go into film was because it did come relatively easily. I'm sure that was one of the reasons I wrote *Orgy of the Blood Parasites* (*Shivers*). It just sprang up. There was some other momentum there, when I was writing for the screen, that wasn't there in the novel. That was exhilarating.

Interestingly, both *Crimes of the Future* and *Stereo* were influenced by Ron Mlodzik, a very elegant gay scholar, an intellectual who was studying at Massey College. He played the lead character in both of them. When I showed *Stereo* in Montreal, after a screening a young man came up to me and started to proposition me. I told him I was flattered that he should want me to go to bed with him just because he liked my movie, but I wasn't gay. He was shocked. He was sure after seeing *Stereo* that I was. I attributed that to the translation of Ron Mlodzik's presence in *Stereo* and *Crimes of the Future*. How that translates to the other films I'm not sure. It's still very illuminating about my own sensibility though, simply because I chose to use Ron as lead player in those films. How directly that connects with my own sexuality or not, it certainly connects very directly to my aesthetic sense of his space, and his medieval gay sensibility, which I like a lot. His Catholicism was very medieval, and so was his sense of style.

One of the things you have to deal with when you're directing is space; how you show what, when, and how much of it. That translates technically into what size of lens you use, and what kind of camera move you employ, how far back you are, and what size close-ups you use. Since I was a very pure film-maker at the time, I suppose that was one reason those considerations were more strikingly apparent in those films. It is pure film-making in that sense: concerned with space and time and images and rhythm and how they relate to certain kinds of sounds and silences, which is something that you're totally afraid to do in commercial films. You would never have a completely dead soundtrack. But I had no fear at the time.

Toronto in the 1950s had a certain kind of stifling order. This was the Eisenhower era, which masked something very delicious, which turned out to be partially chaos but also just raw energy. There was a lot of sexual energy being repressed in society then. The massive architecture suggests order and calm and eternity, when in fact the poor human beings who have to live inside that society are afflicted with many things that don't have much to do with those concepts. I think I was trying to come to terms with the balance between the two.

I tend to view chaos as a private rather than social endeavour. That's undoubtedly because I was born and raised in Canada. The chaos that most appeals to me is very private and very personal. You have these little pockets of private and personal chaos brewing in the interstices in the structure of society, which likes to stress its order and control, and that's the collision you see.

I'm not particularly insecure or paranoid, but I always thought I would much more likely be put in jail for my art than for my Jewishness. A friend who saw *Videodrome* said he really liked it and added, "You know, someday they're going to lock you up," and walked away. That did not help. I suppose underneath I always had a feeling that my existence as a member of standing of the community was in grave jeopardy for whatever reason. It's as though society had suddenly discovered what I really am, what is really going on inside, and wants to destroy it.



My role in *Stereo* was as Dr. Luther Stringfellow, the absentee scientist who actually set up the experiment, because, in a sense, I had set up an experiment. In *Crimes of the Future* I am Antoine Rouge, the absentee mentor who has died and who is reincarnated as a little girl.

I used sound to make the experience of the films more like something you're watching and hearing. In *Crimes* I used a second soundtrack other than the voice-over, made up of deep-sea creatures, dolphins, shrimp. The sound of water is very much present. In a sense the soundtrack was meant to be Darwin's voyage of the *Beagle*. I thought of it as an underwater ballet. I wanted to create the feeling that you were watching aliens from another planet. There is a science-fiction element, but not as explicit as the genre demands.

There's a lot of satirical, academic stuff in both films, partly because I was still at university. I loved the academic life; film screwed that all up. I didn't write a script for *Stereo*; it was being invented as it was made. The voice-over was written afterwards. It was partly my own strange feelings about the academic life and the life of psychology. I never studied it, but I had friends who did; that attempt to somehow control, by understanding, very subtle and complex things. Maybe impossible, and also funny, but worthwhile trying. And sociology: the way it tries to trap phenomena with words.

One of the things you want to do with any kind of art is to find out what you're thinking about, what is important to you, what disturbs you. Some people go to confession or talk to close friends on the phone to do the same thing. And of course, your dreams are important. I've never approached mine in any methodological or psychoanalytic way, but I recognise that they're interesting – a version of my own reality. I have to pay attention to that. That's another way you let yourself know what you're thinking about. You have to subvert your psyche sometimes to know what's really going on.

I think of both *Stereo* and *Crimes of the Future* as perhaps happening underwater. There is definitely a sense of looking into an aquarium. At certain times in *Stereo*, the motion becomes stop-motion, not slow motion – it's multiple-frame printing with each frame printed five times – and then you get that jerky slow motion. At these times, the voice-over is neutral and announcerish as it reports on what is observed. The two always come together, as if someone were observing something under a microscope and had deliberately lowered the temperature so that whatever creature was there would move more slowly and be more amenable to observation.

I wanted to create a novel mode of interrelation. There is no speech, but we know there is a kind of speech in gesture. Every community has a whole unspoken dictionary, and I wanted to invent one of my own. I had seriously thought of having the people in the film speak a tongue I had invented, but it's very tricky to avoid making it ridiculous. I tried to get the alienness of culture involved in the film in subtle ways. One of them was to have that balletic sense of movement.

I also needed the correct fish for my aquarium. Hence Ron Mlodzik. He is capable of portraying an incredibly exotic, strange creature who is not quite earthly and, in terms of the gesture and the sexuality he projects, disquieting to an audience. He's the odd man out. He is the one who, in strange ways, goes underground; the one who may dabble in guerrilla warfare, but even there is not quite engaged.





In both films there is this idea of a man-made, man-controlled environment short-circuiting the concept of evolution. Survival of the fittest doesn't work anymore. But the institutions aren't evil. They are almost noble in that they are an attempt by human beings, however crazy, to try and structure and control their own fate. On the other hand, they may be the cause of their own destruction.

I still wasn't thinking in career terms. *Stereo* and *Crimes of the Future* are not films one builds a career on, not in the sense of being a professional who earns a living making films. And making films that way was kind of lonely. But I really did start to feel that I had something to offer. I thought, "There's something here and I'm really going to explore this." At that point, everything else became irrelevant. I ceased to do university and I ceased to think in terms of writing fiction. I was making longer films — about 65 minutes — so I was edging towards the mainstream.

A French critic for *Le Monde* saw those films and wrote some very nice things about them. He was shocked to meet me in Paris years later to review *Scanners* and said, "I was convinced after you made those films that you would never make another." And he was right, in that they were a complete little pair of films — one was in a sense a sequel to the other. For me there was nowhere to go from there. I had to experiment and try that approach in order to grow. But they proved to be a dead end for me.

I often wonder what it's like to be a cell in a body. Just one cell in skin or in a brain or an eye. What is the experience of that cell? It has an independent existence, and yet it seems to be part of something that doesn't depend on it, and that has an existence quite separate from it. When you think of colonies of ants or bees, they aren't physically joined the way an organism made up of cells is, but it's the same thing. They have an independent existence, an independent history. But they are part of a whole that is composed of them.

That's what fascinates me about institutions. An institution is really like an organism, a multi-celled animal in which the people are the cells. The very word 'corporation' means body. An incorporation of people into one body. That's how the Romans thought of it. Five people would incorporate and become a sixth body, subject to the same laws as they would as individuals. I connect this with the concept of a human body, in which the cells change regularly. They live and die their own lives, and yet the overall flow of the existence of the body as an individual seems to be consistent. How does that work? It's very mysterious.

People are fascinated by little sections of the CIA, which might be said to develop independent of the body of the CIA. It's like a tumour or a liver or a spleen that decides it will have its own independent existence. It still needs to share the common blood that flows through all the organs, but the spleen wants to go off and do a few things. It'll come back. It has to. But it wants to have its own adventures. That's fascinating to me. I don't think of it as a threat. It's only a real threat if all your organs decide to go off in different directions. At a certain point the chaos equals destruction. But at the same time the potential for adventure and creative difference is exciting.

In *Crimes of the Future* I talk about a world in which there are no women. Men have to absorb the femaleness that is gone from the planet. It can't just cease to exist because women aren't around. It starts to bring out their own femaleness more, because that duality and balance is necessary. The ultimate version would be



that a man should die and re-emerge as a woman and be completely aware of his former life as a man. In a strange way this would be a very physical fusion of those two halves of himself. That's what *Crimes of the Future* is about. Ivan Reitman once told me it could have been a great commercial success if I'd done the movie straight.

William Burroughs doesn't just say that men and women are different species, he says they're different species with different wills and purposes. That's where you arrive at the struggle between the sexes. I think Burroughs really touches a nerve there. The attempt to make men and women not different — little girls and boys are exactly the same, it's only social pressure, influence and environmental factors that makes them go separate ways — just doesn't work. Anyone who has kids knows that. There is a femaleness and a maleness. We each partake of both in different proportions. But Burroughs is talking about something else: will and purpose.

If you think of a female will, a universal will, and a male will and purpose in life, that's beyond the bisexual question. A man can be bisexual, but he's still a man. The same for a woman. They still have different wills that knock against each other, are perhaps in conflict. If we inhabited different planets, we would see the female planet go entirely one way and the male another. Maybe that's why we're on the same planet, because either extreme might be worse. I think Burroughs's comments are illuminating. Maybe they're a bit too cosmic to deal with in daily life, but you hear it reflected in all the hideous clichés of songs: "you can't live with 'em, and you can't live without 'em."

Burroughs was fascinated when I told him about a species of butterfly where the male and female are so different it took forty years before lepidopterists realised. They couldn't find the male of one species and the female of another. But they were the same species. One was huge and brightly coloured and the other was tiny and black. They didn't look like they belonged together. When Burroughs talks about men and women being different species, it does have some resonance in other forms of life. But there are also hermaphrodite versions of this butterfly. They are totally bizarre. One half is huge and bright and the other half — split right down the middle of the body — is small and dark. I can't imagine it being able to fly. There's no balance whatsoever.





NON-SENSORY INFORMATION: FOUR EARLY CRONENBERG FILMS

by Caelum Vatnsdal

When I was in my early teens, I visited Canada's capitol city of Ottawa and made a little pilgrimage to the National Archives. I'd heard they had copies of, and might even be willing to show, the very earliest work of David Cronenberg, then and now my favourite filmmaker. Of course at that time, the mid-1980s, it was impossible to see them any other way, save perhaps a retrospective festival going for the really deep cuts. No such festival ever came through Winnipeg, though.

Cronenberg first flickered onto my radar when the exploding head from *Scanners* (1981) became a hotly debated topic on the nightly news across Canada by virtue of its violently un-Canadian audaciousness. The director who'd conceived it was at once praised for his daring and condemned for his vulgarity, and you could tell that pundits on both sides were a little afraid of him. The exploding head, meanwhile, was shown over and over again, and Cronenberg instantly became my hero. My devotion rapidly matured into a need to see everything else this director had ever made, no matter how early or uncharacteristic it appeared to be. So I went to the Archives, and within a few moments of arriving found myself installed in a small white room containing a chair, a table, a television, a pro-grade video player, and four video tapes: altogether a very Cronenbergian situation. I checked my belly, but there was no slit, not yet.

I popped the tape marked *Transfer* into the absurdly complicated VCR: may as well start at the beginning. Three hours later, I was trudging back up Wellington Street, pondering. They were the first art films I'd ever seen, and they'd baffled me utterly. But they were not made for 14-year-olds; they were made for intelligent but undemanding *avant-garde* audiences of college age. This seems a mighty specific demographic to shoot for, but in and around the University of Toronto in the late 1960s, representatives were in no short supply.

The movies were not made for 14-year-olds, little more were they made for 44-year-olds. They're adolescent works, undeniably, but remarkable ones at any age. While they admittedly speak to a sensibility more broadly discovered in the twenty year-old, they document both a filmmaker learning his craft and an artist finding his subject, and any Cronenberg fan should not feel duty-bound to watch them, but privileged.

In 1966 Cronenberg, keen-minded and omnivorous in his interests, was a student at the University of Toronto. He was dissatisfied with his science courses and turning toward literature. He'd enjoyed movies for many years, but lacked the reverent mania for them found in Martin Scorsese or John Landis, or many other directors of that generation. Still, he watched and was captivated by the great waves of foreign film running through the local cinemas – Federico Fellini, Ingmar Bergman, Akira Kurosawa, Jean-Luc Godard,

the usual suspects – and when he saw a film called *Winter Kept Us Warm* (1965), made by David Sexter in and around the U of T campus, he was stunned by its implications. If a local guy like Sexter had made a movie, Cronenberg realised, then, he could too. The latent filmmaker put aside his literary ambitions and began hanging around a local equipment house, where he befriended its materlateral, gin-swilling owner, Janet Good, and learned as much as he could about building, loading and running 16 and 35 millimetre movie cameras from the gearheads who also frequented the place.

Cronenberg had in fact shot film before, though strictly smaller-gauge stuff. His first experience with a movie camera had come on August 13, 1960, when young Dave, aged 17 and clutching his new 8mm camera, went to the Harewood Acres speed circuit in Southern Ontario to shoot an amateur race held by the Sports Car Club of Toronto. He was filming as CBC television producer Ted Pope's Triumph TR3 was tapped from behind by another car, went out of control, and rolled over three times. Pope's vehicle was not outfitted with roll bars, nor was there anywhere for him to duck down; he was killed on the spot. "And *this* was my first footage," Cronenberg told an interviewer many years later, shaking his head in disbelief at the memory.

With this experience under his belt, and Good's boozy counsel, and his own precocious confidence and rabid autodidacticism, Cronenberg felt he could handle making a movie of his own. The experimental film era, meanwhile, was in full flower. Various international New Waves had demonstrated that newer, more portable equipment could be used by almost anyone to make a film, and the results were screened on university campuses across North America.

It was tremendously exciting to Cronenberg, and he wanted in. He conceived of an idea and wrote a short script expanding on it, and then in January of 1966, in a snowy field somewhere near Toronto, Cronenberg shot his first movie, *Transfer*. Presaging *What About Bob?* (Frank Oz, 1991) by over twenty years, it's the story of a vacationing psychiatrist dogged for further therapy by his most persistent patient, and finally harrowed to the point of acquiescence. The avant-garde aspect is provided mainly by the location: a snowy, desolate field dressed here and there with furniture. Along with the poor sound recording and chilly-looking actors, this setting also helps give the film a particularly Canadian aura.

Further evidence that *Transfer* is a student film comes with its first shot: a man pouring a glass of grape Crush and then brushing his teeth with it. This stands as Cronenberg's first fiction-film shot, and though never again would he compose so antic an image, it bolsters his assertion that all his pictures are fundamentally comedies. There is insect imagery in the dialogue ("You came to me, a dark butterfly, probing, gently probing") and some forbidding architecture in the background, making it, ultimately, all of a piece with Cronenberg's oeuvre. As a bonus, you can faintly hear the tyro director calling "Cut!" at the tail of the final shot.

From the Drain, shot in July of 1966, moved the action indoors, allowing Cronenberg to play around with lighting for the first time; as evidenced by the one extant production photo, this meant pointing two undiffused 300-watt lights directly at the action. The action, however, is limited: two men, one of them Mort Ritts from *Transfer*, the other Cronenberg's friend Stephen Nosko, sit in a bathtub in a dim and cramped bathroom, which may or may not be part of the Disabled War Veterans' Recreation Centre. Nosko, a veteran of "The War", has some form of PTSD and a deathly, soon-to-be-validated fear of tendrils. Ritts, who

affects an outrageous camp act for some reason, pretends to be a fellow veteran and grouches about his tub-mate before revealing that he himself is the centre's Recreation Director, and the patient his special case. Cronenberg's very first special effects scene, a stop-motion drain tendril, interrupts this cosy scenario and spells doom for the nerdy veteran. "It's obvious," Cronenberg told interviewers William Beard and Piers Handling, overstating the case slightly, "that somewhere along the line there is a plot to get rid of these veterans so they won't talk about what they know."

From the Drain, like *Transfer*, displays a profound fear of psychiatry and a mistrust of analysis, and implies a wish on the part of its director never to be analysed himself. It's no real surprise that Cronenberg tried for years to suppress the films. "I guess they have an academic interest," he admitted to Chris Rodley, "but artistically they're so bad." Cronenberg is hardly the world's most committed censor, however, and his wormy little progeny have long escaped their creators' orifice.

But anyway they aren't bad, just early; and Cronenberg certainly was not at the time dispirited by his work. In fact he was charged up and excited by the public screenings, at which his films ran amongst dozens of others just like them. Even a notice in the *Globe & Mail* which accused him of stealing *Transfer* from Mike Nichols and Elaine May, was not enough to get him down. ("It was nice to be compared with them," he said.) The thrill of showing work to a crowd, an intoxicating feeling for any filmmaker, energised Cronenberg's filmmaking ambitions, and he began preparing something longer and much more complicated.

The first thing he decided on was moving to a larger canvas and shooting the movie on 35mm stock instead of the 16 he'd been working with. The problem here was that he couldn't afford to do both that and to record synchronised sound. The natural solution was to populate his story with telepaths who never had to open their mouths. (As a lay student of biology, Cronenberg is nothing if not adaptable.) He wrote reams of narration made entirely of mock-technical buzzwords, then, through the late summer and fall of 1968, filmed his friends and various U of T theatre people wandering around the campus. His primarily subject was an "elegant gay scholar", Ron Mlodzik, a fascinating, spacey creature whose otherworldliness is let down only by his given name. (He should be called, perhaps, Fettenbaum Mlodzik.)

The story takes place in the improbably-monikered Canadian Institute for Erotic Enquiry, where psychics are undergoing testing at the hands of a Dr. Luther Stringfellow. (Stringfellow is only the first in a long series of Cronenbergian scientist-Gods with synthetic-sounding names and a notable lack of laboratory ethics.) After many silent stretches and striking monochrome images, and shots of Mlodzik wearing a cape and wrinkling his nose at things, *Stereo* (1969), like the later *Shivers* (1975), features a descent (ascension?) into polysexual bacchanal. The narration (there are three narrators, all effective, but of whom Mlodzik gives the most confident readings) delivers a baffling stream of theories; and finally the monologues, summoning an aptitude that extends beyond diegetic boundaries, conclude that it will be quite a while before any conclusions can be reached from this information.

The film provides a key disclosure: input received telepathically has more impact than things apprehended by the usual set of senses. Otherwise it's mainly gobbledygook, but is visually compelling the whole way through. An empath hangs upside down in a doorway, silhouetted and crowned in her own long hair; bodies lie naked and splayed in concrete bunkers; Mlodzik twirls an umbrella in the sun or peeks down a pit-like



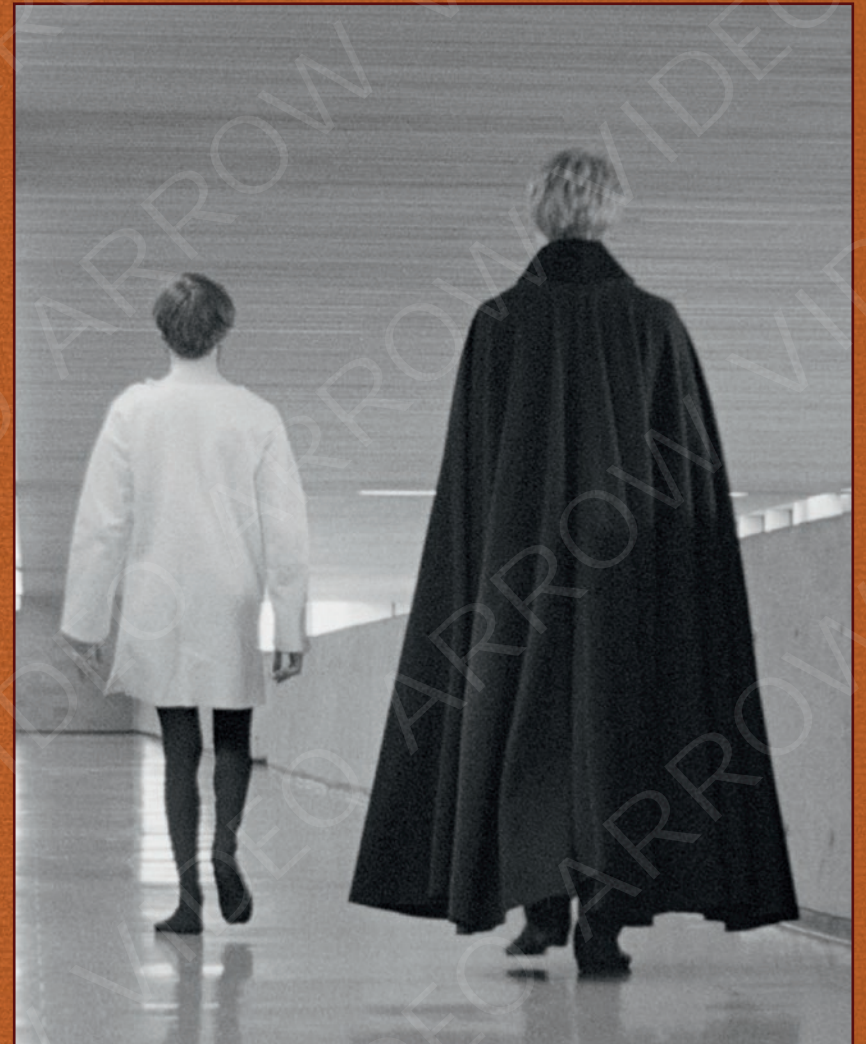
stairwell. As had been the case with the shorts, Cronenberg was his own cinematographer, not realizing the position was usually held by someone other than the director. But between *From the Drain* and *Stereo*, his camerawork improved dramatically. It wasn't just the move from 16 to 35, but a great leap forward in framing and lighting sophistication. Influence had clearly been taken from Kubrick (another director easily qualified to act as his own DP), and it fit the film perfectly.

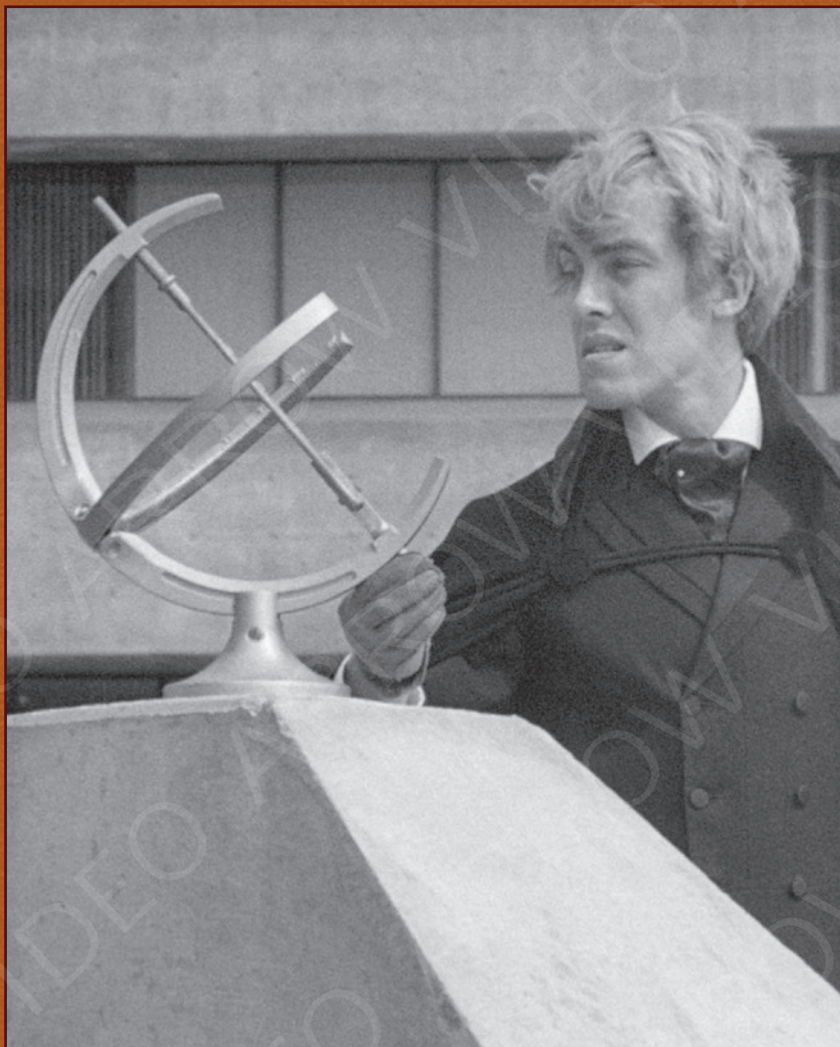
In June of 1969, the 63-minute *Stereo* premiered at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, only a few weeks after the grand new building was opened. It was a prestigious screening (and no doubt a bewildered audience), but did not augur any popular success to come. In the fall of 1969, Toronto's cavernous Uptown Cinema closed while its owner, Nat Taylor (who had produced Canada's first horror movie, *The Mask* [1961], a decade earlier) created one of the world's first multiplexes by dividing it into five smaller venues. The rear part of the theatre became the Backstage 1 & 2, and the word in Toronto film circles was that these two smaller cinemas would show art films. Sometime after the theatre's Christmas Day re-opening, Cronenberg took *Stereo* down and ran it for the manager, but after a minute had gone by with no sound apparently forthcoming, the manager walked out.

Cronenberg didn't let this bother him because he was already deep into production on another short feature, *Crimes of the Future*. Again he was shooting on 35mm, but this time in colour: the better to show off the nail polish worn by some of the almost exclusively male cast members. Ron Mlodzik starred again, this time as "Adrian Tri-pod," the director of the House of Skin. Tripod wanders a modernist buildingscape, sporadically murmuring a report on the state of society following a cosmetics-related pandemic unleashed by the mad dermatologist Antoine Rouge; he visits organizations complementary to his own (the Institute for Neo-Venereal Disease, the Oceanic Podiatry Group); and occasionally pauses to lick his glasses, or dispassionately observe a man hunting goldfish with a croquet mallet. At one point he unexpectedly encounters a hoser dressed in jeans and a plaid shirt, in case we've forgotten this is a Canadian movie. Cronenberg again sacrificed synchronised sound, but this time gussied up his audio track with electronic bleeps, percussive clunks and chirping birds. The end result ran the same awkward length as *Stereo*: 63 minutes.

Viewed with Cronenberg's subsequent work in mind, *Crimes of the Future* is a totipotent catalogue of Greatest Hits to come: a protean blob with gills and webbed feet, but also startlingly recognizable features. Disease with a purpose, self-willed transformation, the body bio-politic, the flowing goo and the poured-concrete Toronto architecture, it's all there. This was ideation as art, and, according to Ivan Reitman, would have been a commercial hit had Cronenberg resisted his fancier inclinations and played it as a straight science-fiction thriller. (He more or less did that later on with *Scanners*, and proved Reitman correct.)

These two mid-length films did little for the emergent filmmaker's career, but this seems to have been part of the plan. His production company name, after all, was Emergent Films, indicating he well knew where he was situated in the larger scheme of film production, and that, whatever reception these renegade works faced, he had future crimes planned. It would be five long and often frustrating years before he managed the big step forward he'd been striving for since he'd first picked up a camera, and the going would be slow for a while after that. But in the dozen years between *Crimes of the Future* and his first studio release, *Videodrome* (1983), David Cronenberg would make a profound impression on Canadian film and on genre





cinema, and would manage to make an adjective of his own name. Cronenbergian, though to dullards merely a synonym for weird, would come to mean something you couldn't describe, but you sure knew when you saw it.

My own reaction to this concentration of prelapsarian Cronenbergia was to return home and make a movie of my own, *Life of Pain*, in which a bespectacled teenager wanders a poured-concrete landscape, mumbles impenetrable cod-philosophy on the soundtrack, and, yes, licks the inside of his glasses. That the intellectual mopishness of *Crimes of the Future* rather than the exploding heads of *Scanners* or *Videodrome* was the aspect of my cinematic hero I chose to emulate says less about me than about the strange reservoir Cronenberg tapped into so early in his filmmaking. It represented primal, immutable truths, not about society or biology or what it means to be human, or anyway not just about those things, but about the necessary, often humiliating, stations along the road to artistic maturity.

Art filmmaking of such devotional purity may have seemed to me merely something that had to be got over before progressing to the real business of sex parasites and armpit vampires, and maybe it was that way for Cronenberg too. But deep down there was much more. In an interview published in *Rolling Stone* around the time *Naked Lunch* (1991) was released, Cronenberg described his *modus operandi* as "really just [doing] whatever the fuck I want". With *Transfer*, *From the Drain*, *Stereo* and *Crimes of the Future*, long before he had any industry capital to spend, or an audience, or a budget, or a reason beyond chutzpah to award himself the possessory credit 'A David Cronenberg Film' (as he did on both the mid-length pictures), Cronenberg was already doing whatever the fuck he wanted, and that, in the end, might be the greatest lesson these movies have to offer.

Caelum Vatnsdal is a filmmaker and writer from Winnipeg, and is the author of They Came from Within: A History of Canadian Horror Cinema.



VIDEODROME



1983

Writer & Director
DAVID CRONENBERG

Producer
CLAUDE HÉROUX

Executive Producers
PIERRE DAVID
VICTOR SOLNICKI

Music
HOWARD SHORE

Cinematography
MARK IRWIN

Editor
RONALD SANDERS

Art Direction
CAROL SPIER

Special Make up Effects
RICK BAKER

Special Video Effects
MICHAEL LENNICK

Starring
JAMES WOODS
as Max Renn

SONJA SMITS
as Bianca O'Blivion

DEBORAH HARRY
as Nicki Brand

PETER DVORSKY
as Harlan

LES CARLSON
as Barry Convex

JACK CRELEY
as Brian O'Blivion

COLOUR

35MM

BUDGET \$5,952,000 CAD (ESTIMATED)



DEFINITELY NOT FOR PUBLIC CONSUMPTION: VIDEODROME REPLAYED

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, 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*.

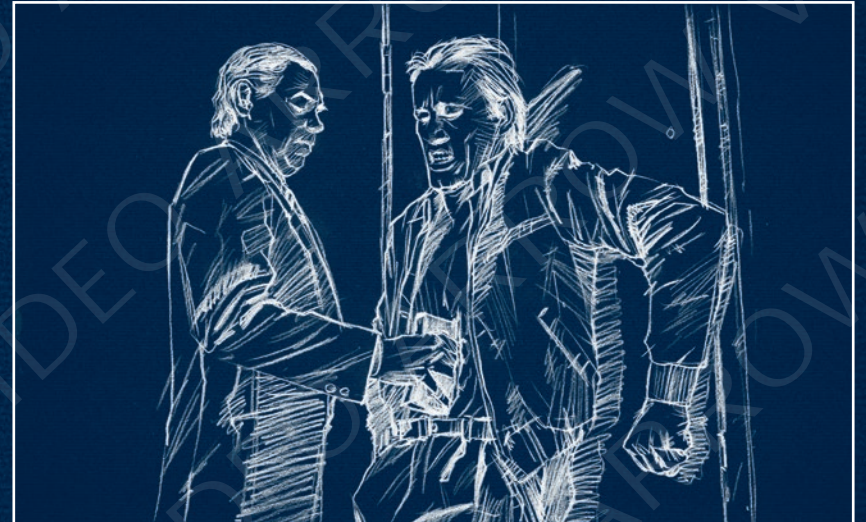
In many ways, *Videodrome* was one of the last holdovers of 1970s cinema's dark riskiness, with its visceral violence, political paranoia, and seedy, downbeat tone. But the film is deeply rooted in the '80s, as distinctly of its era as Nicki Brand's sweater/headband ensemble, dotted with artifacts like 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 democratized 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 invaluable. 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

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 'Cronobergesque' 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 (à 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 dumbbo, why does this have to mean that I think all women are middle-class dumbbos? 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 filmmaker, 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

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.

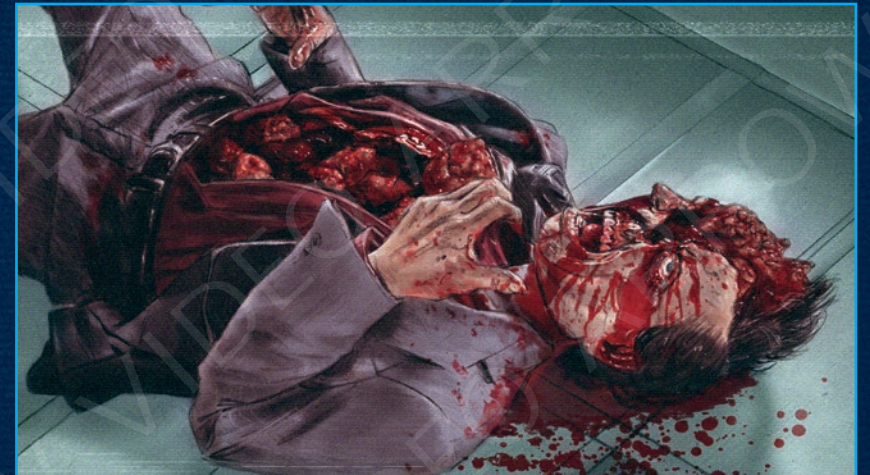
5. The eruptive death of Barry Convex.

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

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 DVD and Blu-ray 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 of 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?"

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ABOUT THE TRANSFERS

Transfer and *From the Drain* were remastered by the Toronto International Film Festival/Bell Lightbox in Toronto, Canada for the David Cronenberg exhibition *Evolution* in 2013. These were delivered to Arrow Films as High Definition digital files.

Stereo is a new digital transfer created in 2K resolution on a Lasergraphics film scanner from a 35mm composite fine-grain at Metropolis Post in New York. Digital Vision's Phoenix was used for small dirt, debris, scratches, grain, and noise management, while Pixel Farm's PFClean was used for flicker.

The original monaural soundtrack was remastered at 24-bit from an optical soundtrack print. Clicks, thumps, hiss, hum, and crackle were manually removed using Pro Tools HD, AudioCube's integrated workstation, and iZotope RX 3.

This work was carried out by the Criterion Collection.

Transfer Supervisor and Colourist Lee Kline

Crimes of the Future has been exclusively restored for this release by Arrow Films and has been approved by David Cronenberg. The original 35mm camera negative was scanned in 4K resolution on a Digital Film Technology Scanity by Libraries and Archives Canada. The film was graded on the Baselight grading system at Deluxe Restoration, London. Thousands of instances of dirt, debris and light scratches were removed through a combination of digital restoration tools.

The original mono soundtrack was transferred from the magnetic reels by Libraries and Archives Canada and was restored and conformed at Deluxe Restoration, London.

Some instances of wear and damage remain on the picture and soundtrack, in keeping with the condition of the original materials.

Restoration Supervisor James White, Arrow Films

Film Scanning Libraries and Archives Canada

Audio Transfer Transit Audio Services Ltd, Ontario
Restoration services by Deluxe Restoration, London:

Film Grading Stephen Bearman

Restoration Supervision Tom Barrett, Clayton Baker

Restoration Technicians Debi Bataller, Dave Burt, Lisa Copson, & Tom Wiltshire

Restoration Department Managers Mark Bonnici, Graham Jones



Videodrome was restored by the Criterion Collection and supervised by cinematographer Mark Irwin and approved by director David Cronenberg. This high-definition digital transfer was created on a Spirit Datacine from a 35mm interpositive. Thousands of instances of dirt debris, scratches, splices, warps, jitter, and flicker were manually removed using MTI's DRS system and Pixel Farm's PFClean system, while Digital Vision's DVNR system was used for small dirt, grain, and noise reduction.

The monaural soundtrack was remastered at 24-bit from the 35mm magnetic tracks. Clicks, thumps, hiss, and hum were manually removed using Pro Tools HD. Crackle was attenuated using Audio Cube's integrated workstation.

Telecine Supervisor Maria Pazzola

Telecine Colourist Gregg Garvin/Modern Videofilm, Los Angeles





PRODUCTION CREDITS

Discs and Booklet Produced by Francesco Simeoni
Technical Producer James White
Production Assistants Liane Cunje, Louise Buckler
QC and Proofing Anthony Nield, Nora Mehenni
Blu-ray and DVD Mastering David Mackenzie
Subtitling day for night*
Artist Gilles Vranckx
Design Jack Pemberton

SPECIAL THANKS

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

Dean Allen, Alex Agran, Tom Barrett, Cinematheque Quebec, 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, 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, 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 Wentz, Winnie Wong

FURTHER VIEWING

David Cronenberg's earlier works *Shivers* and *Rabid* are available now from Arrow Video.

RECOMMENDED READING

Extracts from *Cronenberg on Cronenberg* (Chris Rodley, ed) are re-produced here in part. For the complete text and Cronenberg's further discussion of his filmography, Rodley's incisive investigation into the filmmaker's work is highly recommended. Published by Faber & Faber, 1992. ISBN 0-571-19137-1



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