

**The Shape of Rage: The Films of David Cronenberg** edited by Piers Handling (Toronto, General Publishing, 1983)

In the film, **They Came From Within**, directed by David Cronenberg, slug-like parasites get loose in a Toronto suburb apartment complex and attack the occupants. The effect of the parasite attack is to release the victims' libido and to turn people into desiring bodies. Significantly, what's most chronicled in the film is not the attack by the parasite monsters but the consequences of the attack in the way the libido comes pouring out. Eventually, it is the human victims who appear to be the real monsters as, in the film's view, they give in all too easily and willingly to forces that had been lying in wait just beneath their socialized veneer. In such a representation, **They Came From Within** suggest that the interest of the contemporary horror film lies not so much in the immediate shock effect it has been imputed to have, but rather in the ways it taps into deeper fears, the ways it connects up to tensions and contradictions of contemporary everyday life—in this specific case, the ambivalences of a society caught between sexual liberation and sexual repression. Far from being simply an escapist genre that depicts the shock of things that go bump in the night, the horror film is a central form of contemporary mass culture, modelling and providing symptomatic social representations.

Interestingly, some of the most significant works in the study and production of horror has come out of Canada. For example, the 1979 Festival of Festivals in Toronto was devoted to an overall examination of the horror genre and led to an extremely valuable anthology, **The American Nightmare: Essays on the Contemporary Horror Film**. Centered on the work of Toronto film scholar Robin Wood, the anthology reads the horror film as social form, a particular vision and version of contemporary life with ideological functions, political effects, cultural reverberations. Wood, for example, suggests that the basic formula for the horror film is "Normality is menaced by a monster" and argues that this seemingly simple formula actually enables us to understand the different ideological emplacements of various horror films. Thus, one can discuss a film's ideology in terms of its image of normality, of the monster, of the forms of menace, and ultimately of the ways that the "normal" world chooses to deal with "menace." To take one example from the anthology, Tony Williams applies Wood's formula to the street-crime film, **Assault on Precinct 13**, to suggest how the film's utilization of horror iconography in its chronicling of a street gang attack on a police station gives minority groups the same connotations as the monster in the traditional horror films: an absolute Otherness so separate from the realm of the human that communication is impossible and destruction seems the ultimate necessity.

This Canadian interest in horror seems not accidental for the theme of normality menaced by a monster implies that a central feature of the horror genre is its investigation of questions of marginality, of dominance and hegemony and of the alternatives to hegemony, the forces that exist in the margins, beyond or in opposition to dominant culture. At some level, indeed, the theme of Canadian horror is repeated in the production history behind the films as commercial Canadian filmmakers try to break into the world market and find frequently that the only way to do so is to work in genres that will work in America, that will play across the margins.

Alongside this critical study of horror, as equally important a development in the Canadian investment in the horror genre has been the film-work of David Cronenberg, and if the 1979 Festival of Festivals was an overall examination of horror, the 1983 festival included a special Cronenberg event. Cronenberg's films in particular have as their subject the life of marginal figures, from the outcast telekinetic superhumans of **Scanners** to the rabid heroine of **Rabid** to the telepathic loser of **The Dead Zone**. These figures wander through two wastelands that seem themselves to have a thematic tie to meanings of contemporary Canada. On the one hand, nature as a vast wasteland: Cronenberg's films present the great outdoors as a bleak, virtually scorched land, closing off any Rousseauistic solution to contemporary ills. On the other hand, the films also suggest that the modern city, the sleek glass and concrete gleam of cities like Toronto with its snazzy shopping malls, has also become a place of waste-where to be accepted into the mainstream can only mean that one has turned into a zombie of sorts. Cronenberg's films thus play on notions of belonging and of inclusion and exclusion. The films develop to a large degree out of a cynicism in which even the positive saviour figures in classic horror—the doctors and scientists who know authoritatively how to deal with monstrosity—now become sources of monstrosity themselves: for example, in **They Came From Within**, it is a mad scientist who is responsible for the parasite onslaught and the young hero-doctor is finally defeated by the monstrosity.

**The Shape of Rage: The Films of David Cronenberg** is a valuable extended look at the films that Cronenberg has directed. Most important, but for a few exceptions, the book avoids the kind of auteurist approach to direction that has too long plagued film studies and which sees the director as a kind of Romantic individual, a lone hero who through special insight, willed artistry, whatever, takes the resistant material of commercial film and gifts it with his or her (but usually his) personal vision. To be sure, while some of this notion of Cronenberg as special figure, a profound Artiste, does creep through in the book, for the most part the essays impressively manage to treat Cronenberg as a force within forces, within the social situation. The essays study Cronenberg as a genre director, as a Canadian director, as a respondent to the modern social world. Thus, to take

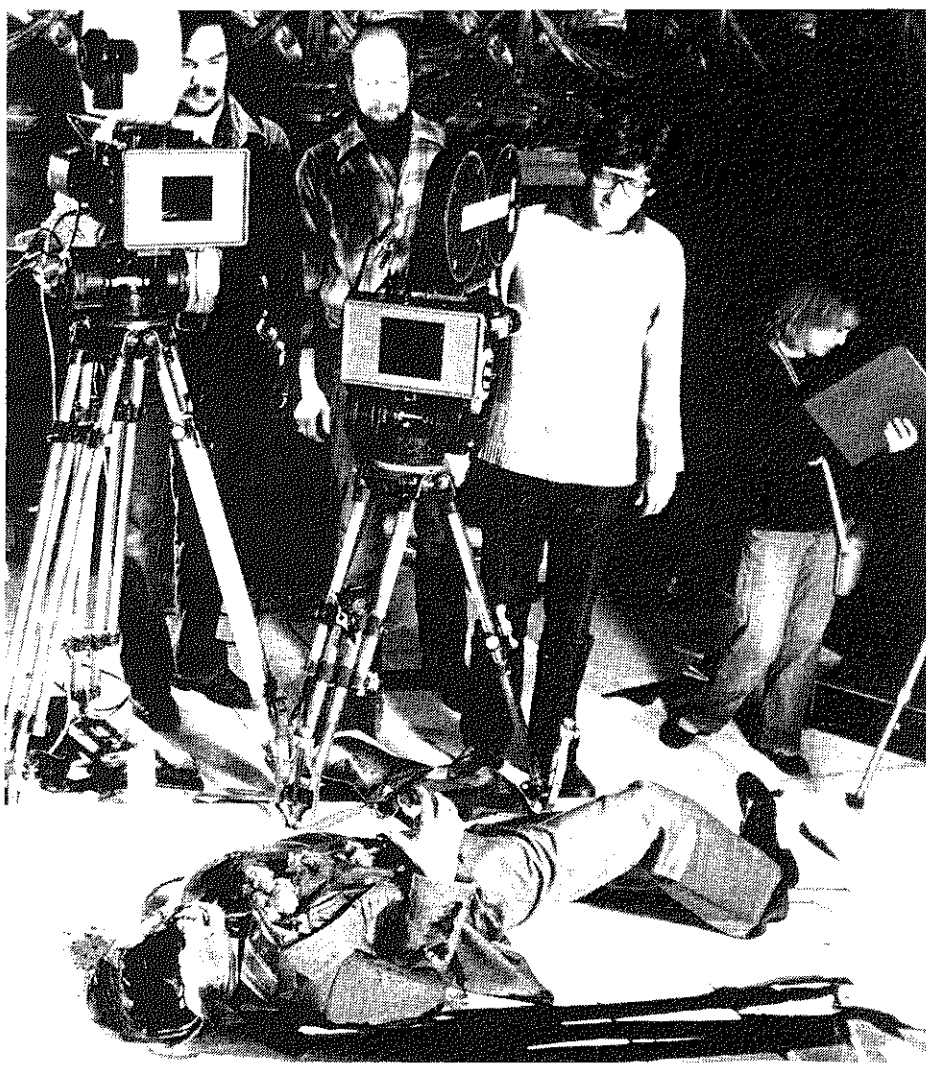


photo: David Cronenberg Productions Ltd.

one example, the one essay in the book that is especially critical of Cronenberg, Robin Wood's "Cronenberg: A Dissenting View," is critical not so much of Cronenberg the individual but of the ways that individual so well repeats many of the dominant sexual ideologies of the day, such as the repulsion from anything that dominance views as aberration. Wood's essay well demonstrates the need to understand thematic analysis apart from evaluation; that is, while Wood is not at all in disagreement with the notion, expressed in many of the other essays in the book, that the films stand as thematic statements, he suggests that the mere presence or complexification of a theme does not in itself establish value.

Rather, one has to judge the political worth of the theme. In the case of Cronenberg, for example, Wood argues the recurrence of nihilist themes that portray an irrevocable rot of civilization in which, the films dangerously imply, women can only be unfortunate victims (for example, **Rabid**, with its unwitting heroine turned into a monster by science) or quasi-demonic threat (as in **They Came From Within** which pictures lesbianism as one of the ultimate marks of parasite possession). Wood's move from aesthetic to political criteria for the evaluation of art is a useful qualification of the tendency in some of the other essays to assume that meaningfulness and aesthetic richness are automatic sources of value. Indeed, overall, the best moments in the collection are those that eschew aesthetic evaluation and turn instead to an historical study of the place of the films: for example, the production history that William Beard provides in "The Visceral Mind: The Major Films of David Cronenberg" and that runs against Beard's dominant desire to treat Cronenberg as heavy thinker, or the social history that Piers Handling hints at in "A Canadian Cronenberg" when he suggests ways in which Cronenberg films replay recurrent Canadian themes and concerns. Against these critical insertions of

the film director into interlocking contexts, the extended interview with Cronenberg that closes the book only confirms the fact that artists have no more than a partial view of their work, and indeed frequently seem proud of their own partiality: for example, defining the politics of a film as arising solely from the artist's intention to be political, Cronenberg insistently denies that his films are political, a declaration that the rest of the book would well seem to belie.

Yet this sort of disagreement suggest one major limitation of the book—namely, its ignorance of form and style as forces in the production of meaning (and, even, of meanings that might run against the univocal expression of a dominant theme)—for it is precisely formal analysis that might allow sharp specification of the films' political investments. Thus, where Wood's declaration that **They Came From Within** is reactionary about sexuality, and Cronenberg's declaration that the film is ambivalent about sexuality stand as two irreconcilable assertions, stylistic analysis could search for ways in which camera placements, editing logic, etc., all imply certain ideological points-of-view. Unfortunately, the book includes very little analysis of the look of the films—of the ways, for example, that they work in and perhaps against dominant conventions of narrative and image-production. This disinterest in a politics of form has as one consequence to construct an image of Cronenberg as heavy thinker for whom the choice of film as a medium is either indifferent or arbitrary.

Nonetheless, to wish for more analysis of style may ultimately be to suggest that the arguments of **The Shape of Rage** need to be both appreciated and developed. Filled with polemic, the book is a worthy addition to any library on mass culture and everyday life.

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