



**“Things are out of human control. They are in the control of fate and happenstance. And unless we understand what is going on, right to the most extreme edge, we don’t even have a prayer of controlling it. We’re just fumbling in the dark.” David Cronenberg**

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# Cliffhanger: Cronenberg Canadian Cultural Consciousness

By Geoff Pevere

**Cronenberg has made us come to him. Like the Rockies, Neil Young or Mordecai Richler, he's made himself impossible to ignore.**

Living in this peculiar confederation, it's increasingly satisfying to observe the slow but certain ascension of David Cronenberg to the status of full-blown Canadian cultural institution—to see him in the polite, lofty company of Pierre Berton, Peter Gzowski, or Maureen Forrester. For this is a country of supremely timid and conservative cultural inclinations, which tends to favour longevity over vitality, and casts its more indelicate cultural voices into permanent exile from the mainstream. It's the other Canadian Shield.

So how did Cronenberg, purveyor of stridently discomforting spectacles, who began by making viral gore-fests for Ivan Reitman (the future director of *Meatballs* and *Ghostbusters*), make his way up those granite heights? And how, in God's name, does he stay there?

His cultural status, which doubtlessly will be reinforced by the imminent release of his austere, quietly devastating adaptation of David H. Hwang's stage play, *M. Butterfly*, is all the more remarkable because such little compromise on his part has made it possible. Cronenberg has made us come to him. Like the Rockies, Neil Young or Mordecai Richler, he's made himself impossible to ignore. In the process, he's also made a subsequent generation of uncompromising, independent Canadian *cinéastes* possible. Just try to imagine Atom Egoyan, Guy Maddin, Bruce McDonald or David Wellington without David Cronenberg.

Unlike a Richler or a Norman Jewison, who pursued the faster track to

Canadian stardom by striking it big elsewhere before coming home, or an Arcand, whose profound talents have enjoyed the nurturing benefits of protective and supportive provincial cultural tradition, Hogtown homeboy Cronenberg has stayed put, weathered the inevitable Anglo-Canadian middlebrow campaigns of denigration and dismissal (like Robert Fulford's famous knuckle-headed attack on *Shivers* in September 1975's *Saturday Night* magazine, titled "You Should Know How Bad This Film Is, After All You Paid For It"), and through the sheer dint of the force of his artistic personality, refused to be budged from his slim foothold on the Canadian imagination. Like his work or not, it is commanding, unignorable, and unflinchingly sharp in its articulation.

**Shivers, 1975**

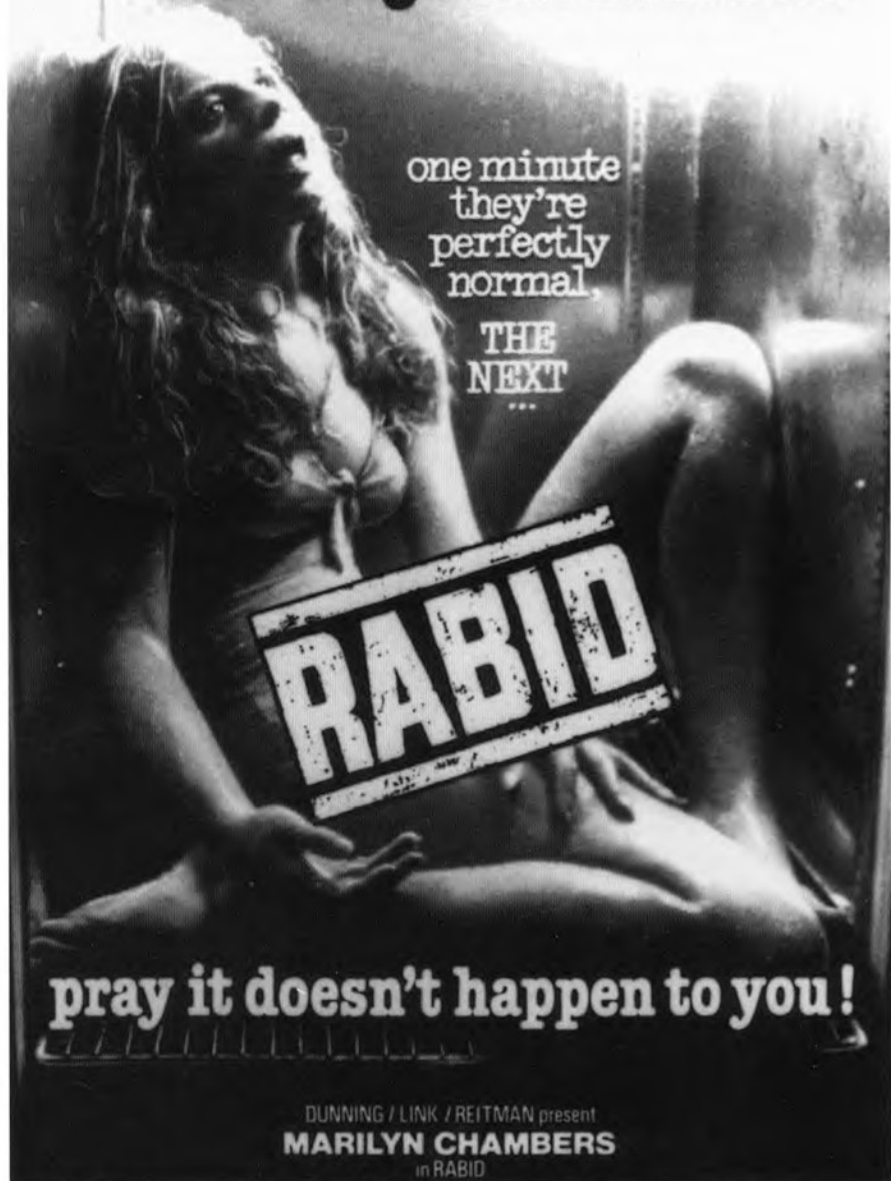


When one traces the trajectory of Cronenberg's evolution both as an artist and a cultural figure—a career which now spans more than two decades, eleven features and countless shorts, commercials and tv dramas—one becomes increasingly struck by two immutable facts: the incremental but unceasing maturity of an artistic personality as forceful and distinct as any making movies anywhere; and the distinctly un-Canadian manner in which that personality has asserted itself within the frontal lobes of our national consciousness.

In the first instance, there is the refinement of certain thematic and aesthetic predilections that allow a surprisingly straight line to be drawn from the gross-out, viral hysteria of *Shivers* (1975), to the solipsistic, romantic melancholia of *M. Butterfly*. In the second instance, there is the almost unprecedented ascension of Cronenberg from the cultural ghetto customarily demeaned or ignored by the hermetic, enormously self-protective business of the Canadian cultural establishment. After all, this guy started out in *horror* movies.

Not that there's anything wrong with horror, of course. As critic and scholar Robin Wood (ironically, one of Cronenberg's most persistent and rigorous detractors) has demonstrated irrefutably, horror movies constitute one of the richest generic forums for the playing out of a society's deepest anxieties and fears. It's just that such forms so rarely get celebrated here.

**You can't trust your mother  
...your best friend  
...the neighbour next door**



Possibly because of our historic affinity to Anglo-European ideas of cultural value, or possibly because of our history of economic inequality which has made the production of mass culture in this country such a precarious enterprise, Canada's culture brokers have clung to strictly middlebrow cultural forms as the bellwethers of worthy expression. Even though many Canadians have made a significant contributions in the realms of comics, rock 'n' roll, and horror movies, their contributions have gone largely unmarked. Not a small part of the abiding vitality of American popular culture comes from the synergistic interdependency of the myth of populism and the perennial force of popular culture to reify the myth; Canadian culture continues to invest most of its validating energy in things like fiction, poetry, theatre, and ballet. In other words, PBS culture for Them is national culture for Us. Said Cronenberg, from the depths of the Reagan Era: "It's certainly true that Americans, if nothing else, have moved, even wrongheadedly. In Canada, we'd rather stand still."

It's worth noting that Cronenberg may be the only significant director still working to emerge from the Canadian film industry's most concentrated industrial campaign to make Hollywood-like movies. While the Capital Cost Allowance (CCA) boom, which built toward a peak in the years between 1976 and 1980, stimulated an unprecedented amount of domestic production, it also virtually wiped out the fragile auteurist movement that had been the hallmark of Canadian production during the late sixties and early seventies. Practically all the directors of that earlier period, including Don Shebib, Don Owen, Allan King, Paul Almond, Claude Jutra and Peter

**Rabid, 1976**

Pearson, found themselves either under the prevailing tendency to make generic knock-offs with low-watt American stars like Lee Majors or George Kennedy, or moved to tv. As the CCA was based on a 100 per cent writeoff for people investing in projects that met the slippery requirements for productions designated as sufficiently "Canadian," the ensuing industrial stampede was geared entirely to quick returns on ostensibly sure-fire commercial projects. Ironically, the only era where most of our funding and production apparatuses were geared toward commercial production based on the

Hollywood model was an unmitigated box office disaster.

However, *Shivers* was both acceptable to American distributors and a low-level box office smash. Same thing with *Rabid*, Cronenberg's second feature, made in 1976. Both were written and directed by Cronenberg (whose early films, *Stereo* and *Crimes of the Future*, were highly stylized, experimental dramas); both were produced by Ivan Reitman, whose CCA spoils would ensure his future in Hollywood as a reliable purveyor of high-concept hits; and both were no-holds-barred exercises

in splattery, sf-based horror.

While Cronenberg has claimed that he had no conscious desire to make horror movies, the choice was, in retrospect, profoundly prescient. It corresponded with one of the genre's richest periods, when people like George Romero (*Night of the Living Dead*), Tobe Hooper (*Texas Chainsaw Massacre*), Wes Craven (*The Hills Have Eyes*) and Larry Cohen (*It's Alive*) were, on bargain-basement budgets, redefining the horror film in more intensely psychological and political terms. And despite the habitual domestic drubbing the filmmaker would experience at the hands of our cultural guard dogs, horror may be the only American commercial genre whose conventions meshed so neatly with the prevailing preoccupations of Canadian movies. So, whether the decision to work in horror was deliberate or not, it opened a commercially viable avenue for Cronenberg to commence a body of work that is not only formally consistent, it plumbs the depths of some strikingly Canadian themes and concerns. Looking back from the perspective of *M. Butterfly*, it is now easy to understand why Cronenberg, unlike such other CCA-era successes as Reitman and Bob Clark (*Murder By Decree*, *Porky's*) didn't hightail it for Hollywood. He had work to do that could only resonate right here.

For Cronenberg, what the generic parameters of the melded science fiction and horror genres allowed was an intensive examination of the vulnerability of the individual within social systems



Top, John Lone; below, Jeremy Irons in *M. Butterfly*, 1993

where power is exerted, and personal expression muted, by institutions. Persistently the films offer the grim spectacle of people being subjected to grotesque forms of scientific or political tampering by such supposedly state-sanctioned institutions as hospitals, clinics, government departments, and corporations. Individualism itself, is offered as a pliable entity, and there is no Cronenberg film where that last bastion of personal autonomy, one's sense of personal identity, isn't shown to be as open to plundering as an unlocked car in a bad neighbourhood. Cronenberg's sense of horror resides less in the monstrous forms a vulnerable and violated ego may take (like the red-hooded killer dwarves in *The Brood*), than the fact that those egos are so easily molested in the first

place. Authority, wherever it is seen to exist, is seen to exist malevolently. I suppose this is why the charges of misogyny which have plagued the filmmaker persistently throughout his career have always seemed to miss some fundamental points. The menace Cronenberg unleashes is usually set in motion by scientific or corporate acts motivated by ego or greed. The manner in which so much of the unleashed terror manifests itself in fearsome displays of female sexuality (particularly in *Shivers*, *Rabid*, *The Brood* and *Videodrome*) can be directly identified as the subjective impressions of deluded male minds. Nearly all Cronenberg's movies have been about vulnerable and confused men being set upon by visceral manifestations of the things they, as vulnerable and confused men, are most likely to fear most—women running amok.

Besides, if there is another demonstration of Cronenberg's systematic maturation and refinement as an artist and an intellectual, it is the persistent and thoughtful manner in which his films have grown on precisely this point. By the time one reaches *Dead Zone* (1983), and particularly *The Fly* (1986), there can be no confusion between the protagonist's fears about women and sexuality and the films'. Increasingly, Cronenberg will present his women characters as victims of male perceptual distortion, as impressions twisted by minds under siege. Nowhere has this been more explicit than in the post-*Fly* films, and nowhere has it been more central to the drama itself than in *M. Butterfly*, which is not only Cronenberg's first completely *sf*/horror-free movie, it is his most systematic and emotionally wrenching examination of the consequences of misperception.

Adapted by David H. Hwang and Cronenberg from Hwang's play, *M. Butterfly* is about the tragic limits of perception itself, and the extent to which perceptions are circumscribed by cultural, political and sexual forces. Based on the bizarre Boursicot affair of the mid-

1980s, it tells the story of a French diplomat in Beijing, Rene Gallimard (Jeremy Irons), who falls in love with a male Beijing Opera performer (John Lone), who the smitten diplomat is convinced is a woman. So smitten, that he is willing to scuttle his marriage, his profession and eventually his freedom to keep the affair alive. Arrested for passing state documents to the Chinese through his lover, who finally reveals himself as a man in a French court, the Gallimard character is explicitly interpreted by Cronenberg as a victim of his own perceptual arrogance and blindness, as the emissary of an outmoded imperial ideology. Such perceptions, fraudulent as they finally are, are the stuff on which empires are built—empires of thought, politics, culture, even sexuality itself. In the short term, nothing bolsters power more than a potent blend of arrogance and ignorance. Says the man another man thinks is a woman, "Only a man knows how a woman is supposed to act."

*M. Butterfly* represents what is easily Cronenberg's most subtle but sharply observed account of the complex forces (chemical and cultural) which define sexual attraction and romantic love. It is also his most heart-wrenching expression of the theme which ties his work with one of the driving thematic currents of the Canadian cinema: the terrifying loneliness and vulnerability of the individual, and the sheer solipsistic futility of trying to shrug off the strait-jacket of subjective experience. Horror films, given their institutionalized concern with vulnerability and isolation, and their persistent reenactment of the violation of psychological autonomy by unseen and unknowable forces, may be the commercial genre that most directly reflects a "Canadian" world view. The mystery isn't that this former horror filmmaker has become one of the most eloquent and troubling representatives of the Canadian experience, it's that the horror movie hasn't become the domestic equivalent of the American

western. But then again, such truly may be the ironic thing about this immutable, impervious shield that is Canada's cultural self-image. The monstrous force of its own denial may be necessary to make demons like David Cronenberg possible.

*"I'm not the kind of person who makes*

**Judy Davis and Peter Weller in *Naked Lunch*, 1991**



*himself special by saying that I'm outside. I think it actually is a part of everyone's life. It's like Sartre's *La nausée*—something is there ready to hit you. But if it doesn't hit you, than it doesn't exist. But the moment it hits you, it's overwhelming, and you never quite recover."* David Cronenberg •

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