

up from the under

by Peter Morris

An excerpt from the recently published *DAVID CRONENBERG: A DELICATE BALANCE*, a biography of David Cronenberg by Peter Morris, reprinted by permission of

ECW Press, Toronto. Watching David Cronenberg's first two short films today is to see

barely a sketch of the themes and styles of his later films. Both *Transfer* and *From the Drain* are one-note films for two performers, somewhat surrealist in tone but technically awkward. Both have the off-centre humour that we associate with Cronenberg. Both touch on issues of science:

Transfer is a dialogue between a psychiatrist and an obsessive former patient; *From the Drain* is a dialogue set in the future between two fully clothed men in a bathtub discussing biological mutations when a plant emerges from the drain and kills one of them. This later film contains elements of Emergent Evolutionism¹ and hints at a similar use of bathtub drains in *Shivers*. In *Transfer* there is perhaps a trace of comparable obsessive relationships that occur in later films such as *The Brood*.

If neither of these films is little more than a sketch for Cronenberg's later work, they do reflect their time and are similar to other student-made films. The sixties witnesses a boom in underground films, and, in Canada, many of them were made by university students. Fuelled by a contemporary passion for film, and in the (perhaps felicitous) absence of university film courses, students set about making their own independent films. These ranged in approach

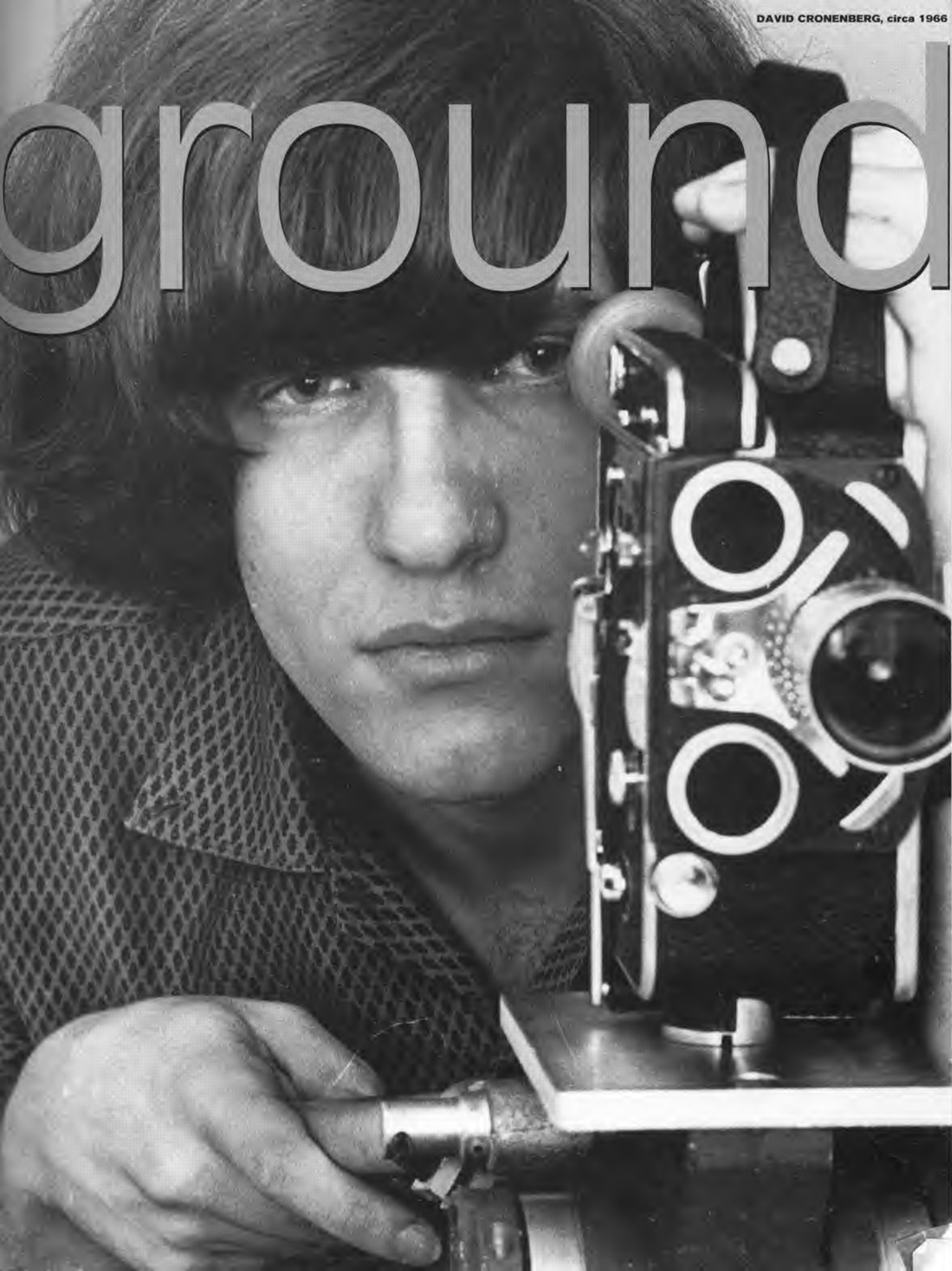
from straight narrative to experimental works inspired by the New York underground. Many of them focus on the lives and loves of young people. Others emphasized experimental imagery. Many broke sexual taboos and ran afoul of provincial censor boards. Some of the filmmakers involved went on to careers in film, and a few are now well-known names.

The first such student film was made in 1962 at L'Université de Montréal. The feature length *Seul ou avec d'autres* was directed by Denys Arcand and Denis Héroux and involved many who, like the directors, were to play leading roles in the developing Quebec cinema. At the University of British Columbia in 1963, Larry Kent, a fourth-year student, made the feature *The Bitter Ash* for \$5,000 and launched the film on campus screenings across the country. Although screenings at UBC and McGill University were sold out, the film thereafter ran into censorship difficulties

because of a seminude sex scene. Screenings at McMaster and Carleton universities were halted by university officials, and the print was later seized by the Ontario Censor Board. However, the receipts from the screenings enabled Kent to finance a second feature, *Sweet Substitute*, in 1964. The film won critical praise, was shown at several festivals, and had a theatrical release. Kent went on to make several more stylized, expressionistic features.

In Ontario, student film activity was centred at the University of Toronto and McMaster University (though artists in London, including Jack Chambers and Greg Curnoe, also began making films in the mid-sixties). First was David Secter, a fourth-year English student at the University of Toronto, who began filming a feature, *Winter Kept Us Warm*, late in 1964. Secter had written a scathing review of *The Bitter Ash* for the *Toronto Daily Star* but was undoubtedly inspired by Kent's example to make a

ground



narrative feature film on a low budget. Initial financing was provided by the student council, and the cast and crew were all students. Although shooting was completed by the summer of 1965, editing was delayed because of lack of funds, and the film was only completed in 1965 after it was invited to the Commonwealth Film Festival. It was subsequently selected for several other festivals and received a warm critical reception. Its story about a short but intense friendship between two male students was given added bite by implying a homosexual attraction between the two. In retrospect, its appeal lies as much in its honest, unpretentious approach as in its authentic sense of campus life in the mid-sixties. Sectar made one more (unsuccessful) feature the following year before dropping out of filmmaking.

By late 1966, film activity in Toronto and Hamilton was reaching unprecedented levels. At McMaster University, regular screenings of underground films began in 1965, and the McMaster Film Board was created. Those involved included Peter Rowe, Ivan Reitman, and founder John Hofsess, a "drop-in" non-student. Others involved included future comedian, Eugene Levy, and Dan Goldberg, who would be sound supervisor for *Shivers* and later a Hollywood screenwriter. Hofsess, somewhat older

than the others, was undoubtedly the inspirational voice. He also wrote a five-part series of articles, "Revolution in Canadian Film," for the University of Toronto student newspaper that undoubtedly influenced developments there. Hofsess directed *Redpath 25* in 1966, a true underground film with psychedelic, sensuous images, split screen, and a sexual theme. He followed it a year later with a sequel, *Black Zero*, in which Cronenberg appears briefly in a nude scene. The two films comprised *Palace of Pleasure*, in which two images were simultaneously projected on a single screen. Peter Rowe began an active film and theatre career with a 1967 underground film, *Buffalo Airport Visions*, and continued with a feature film in 1970, *The Neon Palace*, a nostalgic tribute to the popular culture of the fifties and sixties. Ivan Reitman, now a well-established Hollywood producer and director of films such as *Ghostbusters*, *Legal Eagles* and *Twins*, also began his career in 1967 with the McMaster Film Board by directing short films. He later produced and directed several low-budget features in Canada and was Cronenberg's producer for *Shivers*.

Hofsess also turned to feature filmmaking in 1969 when he wrote and directed the ambitious *The Columbus of Sex*, based on *My Secret Life*, a novel (or

sexual memoir?) written by an anonymous Victorian author. The producers were Reitman and Goldberg. Hofsess's aim was to make a liberating film about sexuality in a visual, sensuous style. At its first screening (a private one at McMaster), the film was seized by police, and Hofsess, Reitman, and Goldberg were charged with making and exhibiting an obscene film. At their trial, Hofsess was acquitted on a technicality; Reitman and Goldberg were found guilty but fined only a token amount and placed on probation. However, by then Reitman had sold the rights to a U.S. distributor who added new footage and reedited it for release as *My Secret Life*. The original film (which, like *Palace of Pleasure*, was dual projection) has never been shown in public. But as one of those who saw it at a private screening, I can testify that it was a lusciously beautiful, sophisticated, almost meditative work. Although replete with erotic imagery, it was totally unexploitative. Had it been released, it would have been one of the highlights of the period of underground filmmaking.

Film activity at the University of Toronto in the mid-sixties was no less prolific, even though fewer career filmmakers emerged from the liveliness. Screenings of underground films began in 1965, and a film production club was

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left, DAVID SECTER's *Winter Kept Us Warm*;
right, LARRY KENT's *Sweet Substitute*

set up. In the summer of 1966, Bob Fothergill, Sam Gupta, and Glenn McCauley made their first short films.

It was to this atmosphere of cinematic ferment that Cronenberg returned from Europe. He recalls that it was Sexter's feature, *Winter Kept Us Warm*, that most impressed him, but it is impossible that he was unaware of the swirl of film activity in the region that was about to peak when he returned. What struck him about Sexter's film was not that he knew the director (he didn't) but that it featured actors who were his friends. (They included Janet Amos, Iain Ewing, Joy Teperman, Henry Tarvainen, and Jack Messenger, all of whom went on to various careers in the arts and two of whom appeared in Cronenberg's films.) It also featured scenes and places that he recognized. Until then, he had thought of film as something inaccessible, coming from elsewhere. Suddenly, filmmaking seemed a real possibility. As he told Beard and Handling², "And it takes someone your own age or someone close to you to suddenly say, 'My God, I can do this - it's exciting.' And that's exactly what happened." The underground cinema offered him a way to bypass the Hollywood system and even to ignore the absence of any equivalent in Canada. It was unprecedented and liberating. It suggested, as he said to Rodley³, that

"you didn't have to carry someone else's [film] cans around for twenty years" before making your own film. "That was the beginning of my awareness of film as something that I could do, something that I had access to."

When he discovered film, David Cronenberg felt liberated from the literary influences that had stultified his novel-writing ambitions. He became aware, he told Rodley, that "There was something about the medium of film that just fitted my temperament like a glove." Characteristically, given his well-established pre-occupation with figuring out how things work, he began with the technical aspects of filmmaking. He felt that writing a script would be the easy part. So he began reading encyclopedias and *American Cinematographer* magazine in order to understand the workings of cameras, lenses, sound recording, and the editing process. He also began hanging around the Canadian Motion Picture Equipment Company, a camera-rental service. There he learned from professional cinematographers and, not least, from Janet Good, the company's feisty head. She was not only Cronenberg's first support but also a friend to many young filmmakers, allowing them to defer equipment-rental payments, sometimes even forgoing them entirely.

Cronenberg wrote a script for two per-

formers and, in January 1966, set about filming *Transfer*. He did his own 16mm colour cinematography and editing; two friends played the roles of psychiatrist and patient while others (including Margaret Hindson, his future wife) handled the sound recording. In the manner of numerous underground films, it was a surrealist-influenced tale. In it a patient obsessed by his psychiatrist pursues him everywhere because he feels that the relationship is the only significant one he has had. Much of the film shows the two characters eating at a table in the middle of a snowy field with no explanation offered as to why they are there. Again in the manner of other underground films, it avoids straight narrative and plays with visual dislocations. Seen today, it is no more than what it was: a first attempt. Hindsight, however, might also point to the quirky psychological humour and to the anticipation of other obsessive relationships that occur in Cronenberg's later films.

On 4 November 1966, Glen McCauley organized a screening of student underground films at the University of Toronto, bringing together films from McMaster and York universities as well as the University of Toronto. Following that screening, at which many of the filmmakers met for the first time, Cronenberg and several other filmmakers decided to create the Film-Makers Co-operative of Canada (later renamed, and still active as, the Canadian Film-Makers' Distribution Centre) modelled on the Film-Makers' Co-operative in New York. Its first directors were Bob Fothergill and Iain Ewing, another student filmmaker who had worked with David Sexter and made the first of many independent films in 1967. The new film cooperative, however, did not become the primary centre of film activity but evolved mainly into a nonprofit distribution outlet. Instead, it was a commercial distribution company, Film Canada, and its associated theatre, Cinecity, that became the focal points for underground cinema.

Film Canada had been founded by Willem Poolman, a flamboyant, gay, Dutch-born entrepreneur and former lawyer with a passionate interest in non-Hollywood films. It specialized in distributing art films from Europe, Quebec, and English Canada as well as underground films from the U.S.A. After meeting with John Hofsess of the McMaster Film Board, Poolman became a dedicated supporter of the burgeoning local underground scene. He helped to

Because the underground cinema emphasized the personal approach, he never felt isolated



finance numerous independent films as well as the rental of space for the new film cooperative. More significantly, he proved the focal point for most of the independent filmmaking in the region.

Although Film Canada had the distribution rights to many non-mainstream films, there were few theatres in which to show them because of the control by the Odeon and Famous Players theatre chains. Poolman leased a former post-office building at the corner of Yonge and Charles streets and converted it into Cinecity, a well-equipped film theatre that included facilities for independent filmmakers. During its five-year life, it became the Mecca for the Toronto film community. Regular presentations of commercial art films were interspersed with screenings of underground films. Cronenberg recalls that Poolman and Cinecity "had a very long and profound influence on all of us." Cronenberg was a familiar member of the audience, and he was one of those invited to private screenings of films that Poolman was previewing in order to decide whether to buy them. As he told William Beard and Piers Handling, "It...made us feel like insiders as opposed to outsiders. And when you start to feel that you are an insider it helps with your sense of power.

You feel you can actually do something rather than be just a spectator."

By far the most exciting event at Cinecity was Cinethon, a marathon festival of underground films programmed by Fothergill. Underground films were screened nonstop from the evening of Thursday 15 June until midnight 17 June 1967. Many of the leading lights of American underground cinema were present to introduce their films, and virtually every available local film was screened. Cronenberg recalls it as "a great event" in his life. He told Beard and Handling, "I remember emerging to have croissants and coffee in the morning and saying, 'This is art!' At about five in the morning the sun was just coming up, and we came out for a break and went back into the theatre for another four hours of films. My film was shown amongst all the others." Although, he also recalled, without getting a particularly good response.

Cinecity continued regular film screenings until 1971, when Poolman's company ran into financial difficulties. It was taken over by Budge Crawley (of Crawley Films), who discarded all the underground films. The demise of Cinecity marked the end of a brief but exciting period in Toronto filmmaking.

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ambitions



From the Drain

Its former home now houses a Wendy's franchise outlet.

Meanwhile, Cronenberg had made another short film. Shot in the summer of 1966, with Cronenberg again handling the 16mm camera and editing, *From the Drain*, like its predecessor, has two characters and a restricted setting: in this case, a bathtub. Two fully clothed men sit in the dry tub discussing what seems to be a bizarre, futuristic war involving biological and chemical weapons that caused mutations. A plant comes out of the drain and strangles one of the men. The other takes the man's shoes and throws them in a closet already full of shoes. As Cronenberg described it to Beard and Handling, "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." That conclusion is more evident in the telling

than in the seeing, but as a film it was more technically adept than *Transfer*, marked by zany, black humour – and, of course, a sense of Emergent Evolutionism in its plant mutations. Sometimes it seems that there are more ideas in the film than can be comfortably contained in its fourteen-minute length. Cronenberg thinks of it as having been influenced by Samuel Beckett. However, it seems more comparable to the kind of sketch soon to be associated with *Monty Python's Flying Circus*.

Cronenberg remarked to Rodley that he found making these two short films "tremendously exciting" as well as "tremendously frustrating, because you're not able to get what you want." He had worked on them as essentially personal projects and was to continue this approach on his next two films. Because the underground cinema emphasized the personal approach, he never felt isolated. In fact, he felt very much a part of the emerging film community. "I remember summer nights," he told Rodley, "you'd stroll through various sections of town that were hippified and you'd find people screening films on sheets strung up on store fronts, and people sitting on the sidewalk watching. It was very exciting. Your film could be one of those, and you were part of it."

Cronenberg had also increasingly lost interest in academic studies, as had others in his milieu. He dropped out of honours English and graduated in 1967 with a general B.A. He was to spend the following months determining his next step ●

NOTES: ¹A variation of basic Darwinian evolutionary theory, it argues that evolution was not always a continuous, gradual process. Leaps could occur (and have been observed) in such a way that biological novelties emerged. Because these "emergent events" were genuinely novel they could not be predicted, only observed after the fact. Emergent Evolutionism conditioned much of Cronenberg's early work.

²From THE SHAPE OF RAGE: THE FILMS OF DAVID CRONENBERG edited by Piers Handling.

³From CRONENBERG ON CRONENBERG edited by Chris Rodley.

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