

An impressive pedigree:
Peter Weller in Christian Duguay's
SCREAMERS, based on a short
story by Philip J. Dick.



CANADIAN SCIENCE FICTION

Comes of Age

by Noah Cowan

Johnny Mnemonic and
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Robert Longo's *Johnny Mnemonic* and Christian Duguay's *Screamers* have put Canada firmly on the international hipster sci-fi map. Largish budgets and massive North American release strategies testify to their commercial importance. Culturally, their cult status is guaranteed by unusually impressive literary pedigrees and innovative special effects. And while shock-jock Hollywood schtick might drive their high octane action, both films also touch on profound philosophical and sociological issues—issues which just might find resonance in an English-Canadian "tradition" of borrowing from the very best of this provocative genre.

Johnny (played by the Beirut-born, Toronto-trained Keanu Reeves) of *Johnny Mnemonic*—his surname is a futuristic trope never uttered in the film—is an information courier of the next millennium. He transports huge chunks of digitized information using a special implant in his cerebral cortex. Johnny's life consists of painfully uploading data, flying first class in sharp suits, and hiring formidably expensive hookers when his "drop" has been made. However, tiring of this glamorously empty existence, Johnny takes one last job to pay for the implant to be removed. This will enable him to upload his childhood memories, all of which have been removed to make room for the chip.

Photo: Ale Perstein



Photo: this page, courtesy Alliance Communications

Keanu Reeves as JOHNNY MNEMONIC: A cautionary tale set in a dystopic future environment. It poses the question: what are the future sociological effects of current technological innovation?

This last run smells bad from the start. Goofy, amateur Asian nerds make him upload far more data than his implant can safely handle. They are snuffed before faxing the access code to their contacts in Newark, leaving Johnny trashing around the detritus of New Jersey, trying to get the stuff sucked out of his brain.

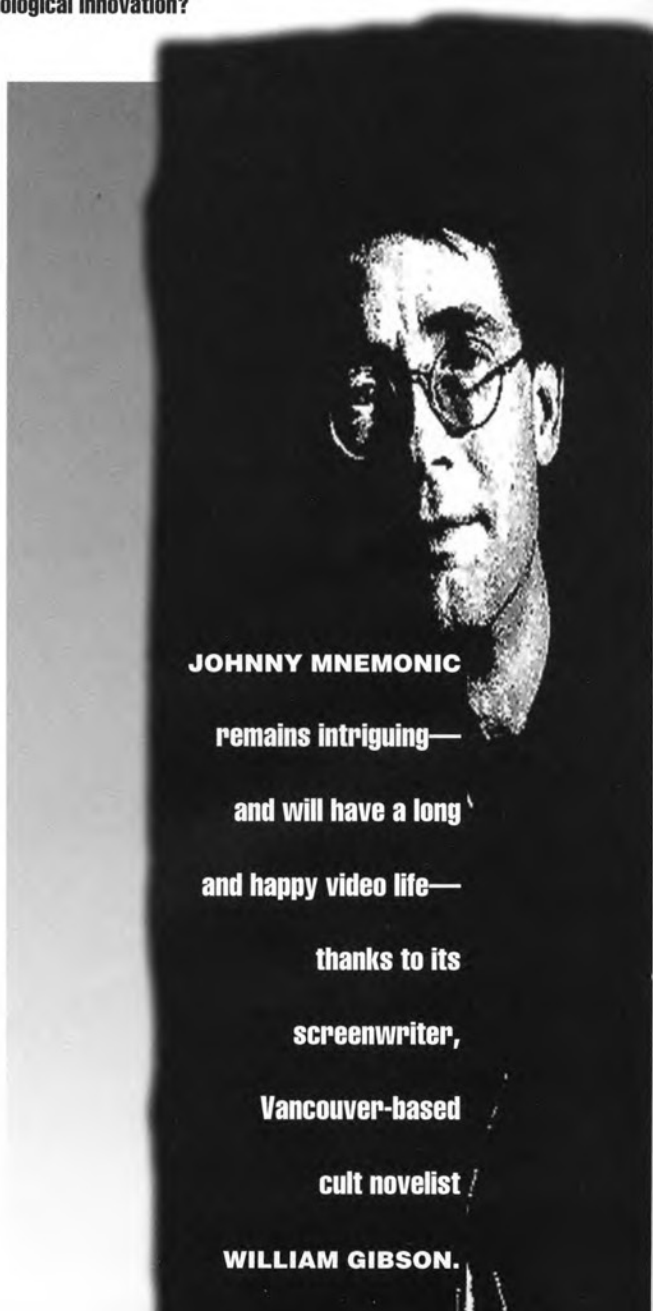
Money—and he has lots—can usually fix such things. Trouble is that Johnny's chip carries the cure to a new technology-induced disease called NAS (a kind of MS meets epilepsy) which affects millions. Pharmacom, the all-powerful multinational which developed the cure, wants to protect its profits and so intends to suppress the information. Johnny's clients are renegade scientists, once employed by Pharmacom, who stole the cure information and destroyed the company's computer network doing it. Pharmacom employs the Yakuza, Japan's legendary Mafia, to get the information back. An enigmatic local boss, Takahashi (Takeshi Kitano), is "spoken to" through his computer by a "ghost in the machine," which insists that the information in Johnny's head is extremely important. Takahashi hires an insane, robotically enhanced preacher (Dolph

Lundgren) to hunt Johnny down. Johnny manages to escape several decapitation attempts and survives seizures brought on by data leakage. He is helped by an NAS-afflicted female bodyguard and an underground network of technological terrorists called LoTeks, who interrupt a variety of media broadcasts with anti-corporate rants and practical medical information regarding NAS. They are based in a Jersey fortress called Heaven, the site of the film's final confrontation. Eventually Johnny must "hack" his own brain in order to save himself and the cure. ("Hacking" here involves special equipment—visors, data gloves, etc.—to visualize all of the world's interconnected computer data. A "hacker" then literally breaks into the data "blocks," which are protected by "guards" and "viruses," as if one were picking a lock or battering down a door.) He does this with help of a Navy-enhanced, super-powerful dolphin.

The film, produced and released in Canada by the ever-growing media giant Alliance Communications, was neither a huge success at the box office nor among critics. Its complex plot and surfeit of improperly explained futuristic ideas may have scared people off, but, more

likely, the film failed to satisfy audiences on such basic levels as character, dialogue and performance. The austere Johnny, so uncomfortable in his own skin, is actually served well by Reeves's characteristically stilted delivery; sadly, everyone else is playing the material with high camp histrionics, creating a decidedly messy tone. The film also suffers badly from an implausible love interest, played out in the style of recent B-grade Hollywood action pictures.

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screenwriter, Vancouver-based cult novelist William Gibson. His internationally celebrated trilogy of books, *Necromancer*, *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, shifted for good the style and substance of science fiction away from the humanism of 1950s masters like Arthur C. Clarke and Ray Bradbury, to a dense, technology-laden nihilism, christened "cyberpunk." He is surely the most influential figure in recent sci-fi, and *Johnny Mnemonic* bears his futuristic concerns writ large.

Gibson's future world has a rigid class structure, in which today's widening gap between rich and poor becomes much more pronounced. The rich are those who control the handful of omnipotent multinationals (they are often not actually human, but rather digitally preserved entrepreneurial barons of our era) and their lackeys. Everyone else is poor, hungry and diseased. Both classes are driven by computer-based technology, which controls every aspect of their lives. Cybernetic alterations have compromised most bodies, making everyone, in some sense, artificial. Deadly corporate battles are fought on a highly sophisticated form of the Internet. Yet, some still resist technological oppression. Led by a warrior from the richest class (usually a corporate assassin or a "data cowboy" who becomes alienated from his colleagues over issues such as corporate greed), freedom fighters marshal the disenfranchised and receive help from unusual pre-technology spirits (like voodoo gods). Their victories are significant, but small; the brutal social system always remains intact.

Johnny Mnemonic uses this framework for its story, with two important variations. Johnny is never really convinced that he is doing something morally "right." Instead, he is driven, until a specious "deathbed" conversion, by the simple desire to get the leaking data out of his brain. His heroism is essentially passive. Also, unlike Gibson's books, the film uses disease as a central motivating factor for its

characters and makes it a class issue—poor people cannot afford the medicines that treat NAS. Its chilling suggestion of a profit-inspired cure cover-up mirrors the mushrooming conspiracy theories around cures for AIDS and vaccinations against HIV infection. This would seem logical territory for Gibson, whose trilogy was conceived before the full horror and unusually brutal class dynamics of AIDS were fully realized.

Screamers (a Canadian-Japanese-American production) comes to the screen with an equally impressive pedigree and its own slew of futuristic concerns. Based on a short story (*Second Variety*) by before-his-time (but currently much in vogue) novelist Philip K. Dick, and adapted by Miguel Tejada-Flores and Dan O'Bannon (who wrote the script for *Total Recall*, also from a Dick book, and *Alien*), the film has a more pronounced Hollywood flavour. Standard-issue "boo" scares and my-gun-is-bigger-than-yours machismo pop up from time to time, along with the dreaded (and omnipresent) soundtrack samples. But *Screamers* hangs together narratively much more cohesively than *Johnny Mnemonic* and is much easier for audiences to follow. Its performances, led by veteran Peter Weller, are uniformly strong and well matched; Montreal-based director Christian Duguay (*Scanners II* and *III* and the made-for-TV *Million Dollar Babies*) succeeds admirably in setting a consistent and intriguing tone.

On a distant mining planet, war continues between the Alliance, a federation of mine workers, and its massive former multinational/multi-planetary boss, The New Economic Block (NEB). The Alliance looks to be winning the war after its scientists create a perfect weapon—a self-replicating killing machine programmed to kill all enemy life forms. The year is 2078—about 50 years after the information in Johnny's brain cures NAS—and the machines, left to replicate in the harsh planet scrub, have evolved into several



Roy Dupuis in *SCREAMERS*

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Photos: top and left, Abe Perle; bottom, Peter Dinklage

Many of our most celebrated auteurs have promiscuously deployed science fiction conventions in their films.



Photo courtesy of Ego Arts Films

Atom Egoyan's *SPEAKING PARTS*: Not really science fiction, rather a *Brave New World* without drugs.

different forms and now seek the destruction of all human life forms. They are known as "screamers" because of the high-pitched whine they emit just before attacking.

Colonel Hendricksson (Weller) is an Alliance outpost commander. Betrayed by his own political leaders and disgusted with the atrocities of war, he wants to negotiate a separate peace with

the NEB's decimated forces. With a young trooper, he sets out across the dangerous scrub turf, ever wary of screamer surveillance. They first encounter David, a boy orphaned by the war, in an abandoned mine. He joins them. Approaching the NEB bunker, a shot rings out, killing the boy. But David's corpse is all machine; he is the first mutation of the screamers, all the better to be taken into human confidence.

Louis Del Grande loses his head in David Cronenberg's *SCANNERS*: Cronenberg seems to have inspired—or is at least a fellow traveller of—Longo and Duguay in many important respects.



Photo courtesy of David Cronenberg

At the bunker Hendricksson discovers only three survivors—two soldiers and a female smuggler. After several close calls, they return to camp, only to find it overrun by little Davids. As they seek solutions for a final escape—I don't want to give it all away—the party of five is betrayed from within.

Like *Johnny Mnemonic*, *Screamers* reflects the concerns of its visionary author. Dick is the connecting figure between the Bradbury/Clarke and Gibson generations. He takes insights about man and machine blurring together—think of HAL in Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey*—and dwells on the epistemological impact. When machines, which have been part of our every waking action, exhibit signs of consciousness, we can no longer rely on simple metaphysical rules for distinguishing things from human beings. Dick sees the new rules premised on a sense of deception: i.e., how can non-humans most successfully mimic or ensnare "real" humans? *Blade Runner*, adapted from Dick's masterpiece *Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep?*, adds another layer to this question: what happens when machines wish or choose to be human? The film also makes Dick's obsession with perception all the more explicit

with its own obsession with eyes, either as sites of destruction for humans, or self-incrimination for the android replicants.

This is a profound philosophical project. It is also one which Gibson eschews. Perhaps this is because his books are closer in time to ours, but also, perhaps, because the variation in life forms that can participate in his wired society—from brains in a vat to memory chips stored in a mainframe to, well, dolphins—means that "us vs. them" distinctions are much harder to construct. It is true that humans who choose to have massive cybergenic overhauls in *Johnny Mnemonic* are treated with some contempt; yet, virtually everyone has something machine-like inside them. This transforms the debate from Dick's insistence on an absolute cleavage between classes of things—"humans" and "machines"—to a Gibsonian fashion crime, like too much plastic surgery.

The two films also differ significantly on deep political levels. *Screamers* has a rather pronounced retro-Republican streak. Its strong 1950's-style military hero is the first sign and its rather forced "trade union vs. corporate entity" polarity seems to come from another era. (Can we imagine a future where trade unions raise their own army?) More disturbing, however, are two neo-conservative devices. The screamers routinely take the form of traditional "liberal" icons of distress—abandoned children, pitifully wounded seeking help, crying women. Once the ruse is discovered, these creatures are blasted into oblivion with really big guns. Punishment, anyone? In *Johnny Mnemonic*, Gibson and director Robert Longo consistently embrace a far more pluralistic agenda, as they consistently privilege the multi-ethnic/sexual/whatever society of the LoTeks. (This is not, by the way, true of all Dick adaptations, despite *Total Recall*'s overt—and much discussed—misogyny. *Blade Runner*, particularly in light of its giddy ending, can easily be read as a celebration of miscegenation and tolerance.)

The screamers are frequently compared to a "plague." The epigraph that begins the film states: "Every revolution eats its own children." Stick "sexual" in there and rather unpleasant readings of the film as blame-the-victim AIDS paranoia crop up. Not so with *Johnny Mnemonic* and its corporate cover-up thesis.

Yet for all these rather fundamental differences, the two films share a great deal in common. Both are cautionary tales set in dystopic future environments; both have much to say about the continuing debates surrounding technology, which have come to dominate the intellectual currents of recent sci-fi on screen; and both contain the quintessential figure of the genre, the compromised cowboy loner. Oddly enough, Weller and Reeves aim for, more or less, the same tone—calculating, smart, jaded and not inclined to give a shit—much like Keir Dullea, the stone-faced Mission Commander Bowman in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Actually, the endings of both films recall the penultimate scenes of *2001*. Johnny, out of control in cyberspace, looks suspiciously like Bowman exposed to HAL's death ride; Hendricksson, profoundly isolated and impotent at the end of *Screamers*, recalls Bowman's blank expression as HAL's last death throes signal their mutual ends.

The consistent use of *outré* production design marries both films all the more firmly to recent key Hollywood films in the same sub-genre. (I think this cleavage between dystopic, cyberpunk sci-fi and lighter stuff like *Star Wars* and the *Star Trek* movies is a pretty obvious one. Some may disagree.) However, a number of concerns set these films apart from mainstream Hollywood, concerns which feel decidedly more Canadian. Possible films in this genre would include Tibor Tackas's *The Gate*, *The Gate II: Trespassers*, Michael Anderson's *Millennium* and others which posit other worlds and possible futures. Yet, none of these films seems actually to participate in the debates which seem so essential to the whole sci-fi enterprise; the fierce battles, at

first literary and now cinematic, over the 19th century axioms laid down (or some might say compiled) by H.G. Wells, and since supplemented and expanded by countless others. These axioms demand that science fiction addresses at least one crucial question: What are the future sociological effects of current technological innovation?

Nonetheless, many of our most celebrated *auteurs* have promiscuously deployed science fiction conventions in films addressing other questions. Atom Egoyan's *Speaking Parts*' otherworldly atmosphere positions Canada as a Brave New World without the drugs. Egoyan's clinical environment—a most telling critical cliché to describe his world—is not futuristic, however. It's rather the quite literal present, albeit a chillingly subjective one for its emotionally lyposucked populace. Things suck right now, posits Egoyan; we (and his cinematic characters) just haven't clued in. The argument is also true of David Cronenberg's most sci-fi-like films, *Videodrome* and *Scanners*. Lots of kooky stuff happens to all involved. The films include out-of-control technology, rife parapsychology, alternate realities galore, and many more gestures to the language of science fiction. Yet, these "abnormalities"—as the essays on Cronenberg's films collected in the book *The Shape Of Rage* (edited by Piers Handling) make clear—are explicitly inscribed in the existing world, either representing the collective id and other Freudian constructs or, like Egoyan, as subjective realities.

Yet, Cronenberg seems to have inspired—or is at least a fellow traveller of—Longo and Duguay in many important respects. Return to our heroes. Hendricksson and Johnny are loners, content to live in isolation, and only forced to negotiate with the outside world once betrayed by the systems that created them. This radical passivity comes up again and again in our recent cinema. Think again of Egoyan's adjuster, who makes a career out of being passive; or Cameron Vale in *Scanners*. Segregated utterly from



Photo courtesy of David Cronenberg

James Woods in *VIDEODROME*: His actions are controlled by hostile, invasive forces.

society because of his parapsychological "ability," Vale allows himself to be controlled and trained by a psychiatrist, who eventually betrays him. Even when the full extent of the betrayal is made clear to him, Vale still must be cornered by his evil brother before taking action. So too with Max Renn in *Videodrome*, whose free will is gone after about 30 minutes of the film, his actions controlled by hostile, invasive forces. In contrast, Hollywood sci-fi heroes tend to be driven by a "mission"—think of Decker in *Blade Runner* or Logan in *Logan's Run*—or by a "cause" discovered along the escape route—Sarah Connor in *The Terminator* films or Doug Quaid in *Total Recall*.

Cronenberg's films also shatter the inviolability of the human body. The last third of *Videodrome* features Renn's body synthesized with various forms of technology. But Cronenberg still strives to preserve Dick's human/non-human distinction. With his technological implants, Renn is not really human, but rather a tool of others; equally, we are meant to associate his technologically corrupted body with his hallucinatory (read "not real") states. When he is in a waking state, his body remains inviolate. Cronenberg anticipates notions of technology as a virus. The videodrome brain tumour, prompted by S&M porn and transmitted by moral zealots, sometimes feels like the Divine Judgment of *Screamers*. But in *Videodrome*, rewiring the homeless while killing them, the tumour seems more like NAS. Most important though, is Cronenberg's suggestion of a purely digital life form at the very end of *Videodrome*—"The New Flesh." While it is unclear what the evolutionary mechanism for this life form might be—and, frankly, I doubt if Cronenberg cares; speculation about future life forms is really not his project—it shares undeniable characteristics with the Gibsonian "ghost in the machine" and seemingly infinite replication with the screamers.

This quest to define a new metaphysical state of being—an emphatically impassive one at that—may well speak volumes in a country still unsure of (and unable to define) its essential attributes. ■