

# David Cronenberg



VIDEODROME



Director and writer. Born: Toronto, 1943. If David Cronenberg did not exist, would we invent him? Could we invent him? Perhaps no Canadian filmmaker has had such a singular career path, navigating his way from the independent university filmmaking scene in the 1960s, to critically reviled commercial excrescences of the "tax shelter" era, to, more recently, the

well-heeled approval of international art house and festival circuits. Lauded as a late 20th century taboo-bashing genius by some, and loathed as a puritanical body-fearing reactionary by others, Cronenberg's emergence is without parallel in this country. Moreover, his decidedly idiosyncratic *oeuvre* also represents a challenge to the very critical paradigms and terms used to define Canadian film. Faced with phallic underarm growths spreading fatal diseases, exploding heads, videos slurped into human abdomens, men transformed into insects and talking typewriters, the critical problem persists: just how do we talk about the work of David Cronenberg?

Born in Toronto, Cronenberg attended the University of Toronto, earning a B.A. in literature. An enthusiastic reader of science fiction, Cronenberg the budding filmmaker eschewed the documentary realist tradition of his contemporaries, introducing unprecedented levels of fantasy into Canadian film. From his late 1960s experimental, austere sci-fi shorts, *Stereo* and



DEAD RINGERS

*Crimes of the Future*, Cronenberg plunged deep into bloody biological Babylon in a series of 1970s horror films. Fusing the genre's ample and flexible narrative conventions with his own ideas about desire and repression, the body and technology, Cronenberg developed a reputation, with *Shivers*, *Rabid*, and *The Brood*, as perhaps the most original, unflinching, no-holds-barred practitioner of the modern horror film. Along with confounding "tasteful" critical opinion in Canada, he also found himself to be a bankable genre auteur who could muster impressive budgets and still maintain a degree of artistic control.

From 1980 onwards, Cronenberg's distinctive and influential vision (can we imagine Atom Egoyan without David Cronenberg?) has explored, with increasing precision and restraint, themes of the paranormal, *Scanners* and *The Dead Zone*; the pervasiveness of visual media systems, *Videodrome*; the unsettling intersections of biology, technology and identity, *The Fly* and *Dead Ringers*; and most recently and most Canadian of all, the tortured psychologies of delusion, *Dead Ringers*, *Naked Lunch* and *M. Butterfly*. In addition to his remarkable cinematic career, Cronenberg has directed for television, several commercial spots for Ontario Hydro and Nike, and acted in his own films and others.



NAKED LUNCH

These days, Cronenberg no longer draws outrage from the middlebrow arbiters of "good taste." His films are equally disturbing but seldom as viscerally off-putting as his earlier work, or perhaps we've all been jaded by the mediated, image-saturated culture his work presaged. At its increasingly chilling best, however, Cronenberg's more recent work still tests the limits of critical and audience response in contemporary Canadian film culture.

His latest film, *Crash*, based on a novel by J.G. Ballard, was the controversial winner of a Special Jury Prize at this year's Cannes festival.

■ Tom McSorley

# TimeLines

## DISTINCTLY CANADIAN 100

### André Forcier

Director and writer. Born, Montreal, 1947. The vitality of the Quebec film scene depends on regular booster shots from a certifiable *enfant terrible*. Forcier, the *eminence grise* of iconoclasts, has been making loopy disrespectful human comedies for nearly 30 years. A typical Forcier picture is a topsyturvy mix of harsh realism and goofy fantasy, a poverty-stricken, intoxicating world of bars, rooming houses and boxing gyms. His portraits of people on the fringes include *Bar Salon, Au clair de la lune*, where a dreamy albino bum takes a walk in the sky, and *Une histoire inventée*, where a lusty actress gets followed through the streets by 40 adoring lovers. Forcier's most recent film, *Le vent du Wyoming*, celebrates cabaret acts, somnambulism and boxing; like all his work, it is poetic and absurd.

### 1927

#### Events:

- A fire in the Laurier Palace theatre in Montreal results in the death of 76 children. The Catholic church in Quebec demands (and gets) a ban on children under 16 from attending cinemas.
- In the U.K., a Film Bill passes in Westminster which calls for 25 per cent of all films exhibited in Britain to be British-made by 1935. A British film is defined as one "made by British subjects in a studio in the British Empire."

### 1928

#### Events:

- *Carry on Sergeant!* premieres in Toronto. Shot at the Trenton studios, with an eye to the British market, it is the most costly film (\$500,000) in the history of Canadian silent cinema. It fails miserably at the box office.

### FILMS

*Carry On Sergeant!*  
(Bruce Bairnsfather)

### 1929

#### Events:

- Mary Pickford wins the Best Actress Oscar for her performance in *Coquette*, at the second annual Academy Awards ceremony.

### 1930

#### Events:

- Zukor acquires, through his holding company Paramount Publix, direct control of FPCC, thereby making the company 100 per cent American owned; FPCC owns one-third of all the theatres in Canada.
- Prime Minister Bennett appoints Commissioner Peter White to investigate over 100 complaints against American film interests operating in Canada under the Federal Combines Investigation Act.
- Montreal-born Norma Shearer wins the Best Actress Oscar for *The Divorcee*, while her brother Douglas

wins the first ever Oscar for Sound Recording. It is the only time in motion picture history that a brother and sister win Oscars at the same ceremony. Douglas, who established MGM's sound department would go on to win 11 more Oscars for sound recording.

### 1931

#### Events:

- Peter White releases his report and concludes that FPCC is a combine "detrimental to the Public Interest." The provinces of Ontario, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia take FPCC and the American distribution cartel to court in Ontario.
- Ontario passes a British Film Quota Act, but never enforces its provisions.
- Canadian comedian Marie Dressler, a veteran of the vaudeville stage and in movies since 1914, wins an Oscar for her performance in *Min and Bill*.

### 1932

#### Events:

- After a lengthy trial, FPCC and the other defendants are found not guilty on three counts of conspiracy and combination. A decision against the U.S. cartel would have been an historic turning point for the future of filmmaking in Canada, but it wasn't meant to be.
- The Ontario Board of Censors imposes a newsreel quota and insists on the inclusion of a percentage of Canadian and British footage. This quota exists for as long as newsreels are shown in the province.
- Gordon Sparling directs his first theatrical short in the *Canadian Cameo* series for ASN.

### 1933

#### Events:

- Fay Wray, from Cardston, Alberta, stars opposite the most famous monster in movie history, and finds cinematic immortality screaming atop the Empire State Building in *King Kong*.

calling doing summer jobs at the NFB. In the late 1950s, he moved to New York to work on such films as the Oscar-nominated *Roofops of New York*. Returning to Canada for Expo 67, Ferguson designed and directed *Polar Life*, a multi-screen installation, which was one of the fair's biggest hits. The success of that film led to Ferguson's creation of IMAX in 1968 with Roman Kroitor and Robert Kerr. His *North of Superior* defined the IMAX style: breathtaking scenes of nature captured in a swooping, epic manner.

### Glenn Ford

Actor. Born Gwyllyn Samuel Newton, Quebec City, 1916. This unprepossessing figure with a crew cut and shy grin was a Hollywood leading man for 40 years, starring in over 80 films. His credits range from Fritz Lang's classic noir thriller *The Big Heat* to the relaxed comedy of Daniel Mann's *The Teahouse of the August Moon* opposite Marlon Brando. Ford specialized in well-meaning, ordinary men, who were tough when the chips were down. He made his name in *Gilda*, opposite Rita Hayworth, and is best remembered for his charming/tough roles in Richard Brooks's *The Blackboard Jungle*, Frank Capra's *A Pocketful of Miracles* and Vincente Minnelli's *The Courtship of Eddie's Father*.

#### Glenn Ford with Ida Lupino in *Lust For Gold*.



## Michael J. Fox

Actor. Born, Edmonton, 1961. After appearing in Disney's first PG-rated film, *Midnight Madness*, Fox was cast as the irrepressible yuppie-in-training in the highly successful TV sitcom, *Family Ties*, for which he won three consecutive Emmys. He transferred easily to film when he was asked to replace Eric Stoltz in Robert Zemeckis's *Back to the Future* and its two sequels. Fox's attempts at serious drama like *Casualties of War* and *Bright Lights, Big City* didn't meet with equal success and he has wisely chosen to stay with the light comedy of *The Hard Way* and *The American President*.

## Roger Frappier

Producer and director. Born, St-Joseph-de-Sorel, Quebec, 1945. Frappier worked in all areas of the film business from critic to TV commercial director until he found his true vocation as a hands-on producer. While at the NFB in the early 1980s, he assembled a group of writer-directors who collaborated on developing edgy, urban dramas. The script for Deny Arcand's *Le déclin de l'empire américain* emerged from the process Frappier had set in motion. With that film's phenomenal success, Frappier has become acknowledged as one of the top producers of feature films in Quebec. His other films include Yves Simoneau's *Pouvoir intime*, Arcand's masterpiece, *Jésus de Montréal* and Jean-Claude Lauzon's *Un zoo, la nuit*.

## Sidney J. Furie

Director. Born, Toronto, 1933. Once described by British film critic Leslie Halliwell as the "Canadian director with a restless camera," Sidney J. Furie began his career as a writer for CBC-TV. He directed two stylish, prescient teen-age rebellion films at the end of the 1950s, *A Dangerous Age* and *A Cool Sound From Hell*. With no infrastructure in place to make feature films in English-Canada, Furie sought cinematic employment in England, where he directed *The Young Ones* and *The Ipcress File* with Michael Caine. Later, perhaps inevitably, he moved to

Hollywood, where he made a number of films both stylish and insubstantial, including *The Lady Sings the Blues*, *Gable and Lombard* and *Iron Eagle*.

## Jacques Godbout

Writer and director. Born, Montreal, 1933. When Godbout joined the NFB in 1958 as a dialogue writer, he was already a published poet, an aspiring novelist, and had worked in Ethiopia teaching literature. He quickly rose to directorial status at the Board, collaborating notably with French documentarian Jean Rouch, and rising to head of French production. In 1966, *YUL 871* established his reputation as a stylish filmmaker and this highly acclaimed film, together with the 1971 musical comedy *IXE-13*, allowed Godbout to bring his unique literary flair to cinema. A provocative critic and commentator on québécois, English-Canadian and global culture, Godbout's output has been prolific in literature and film. He has written over a dozen books and directed more than 20 films, including the insightful *Alias Will James* in 1988, and the novel, *The Golden Galarneaus*, 1995.

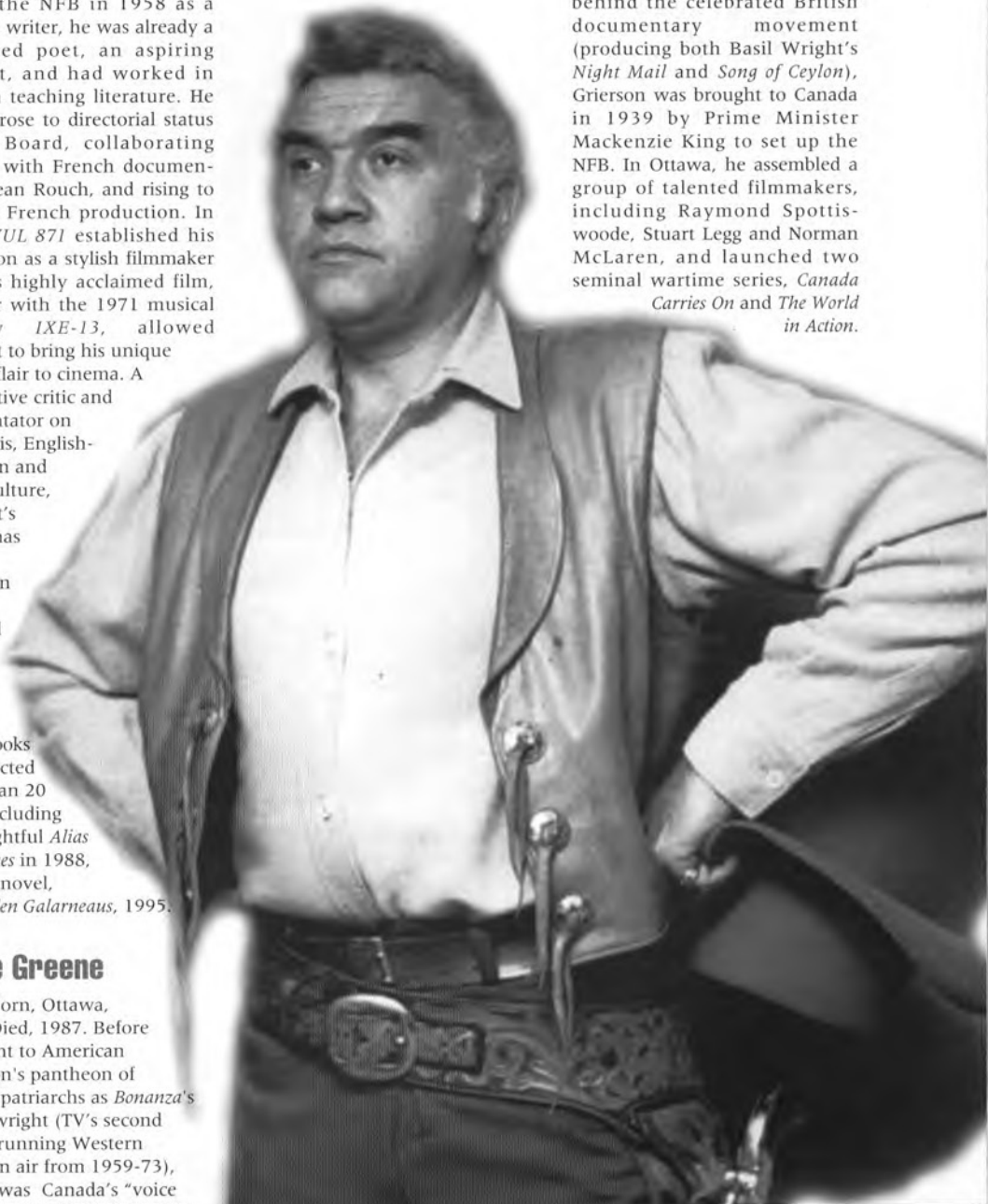
## Lorne Greene

Actor. Born, Ottawa, 1915. Died, 1987. Before his ascent to American television's pantheon of pioneer patriarchs as *Bonanza's* Pa Cartwright (TV's second longest running Western series, on air from 1959-73), Greene was Canada's "voice of god" itself. After graduating from Queen's University, Greene began in radio and his rich basso profundo soon became the voice of choice in countless WWII newsreels and documentaries for the NFB. Moving to the

United States in the 1950s, Greene appeared on television, on Broadway, and on screen in mostly forgettable Hollywood fare. Late in his career, as if to rise to the heavens again, Greene starred as Captain Starbuck in the moderately successful sci-fi TV series, *Battlestar Galactica*.

## John Grierson

Producer and administrator. Born, Deanston, Scotland, 1898. Died, 1972. While never officially a Canadian by birth or citizenship, Grierson is the single most important figure in the development of a Canadian film culture. The creative force behind the celebrated British documentary movement (producing both Basil Wright's *Night Mail* and *Song of Ceylon*), Grierson was brought to Canada in 1939 by Prime Minister Mackenzie King to set up the NFB. In Ottawa, he assembled a group of talented filmmakers, including Raymond Spottiswoode, Stuart Legg and Norman McLaren, and launched two seminal wartime series, *Canada Carries On* and *The World in Action*.



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