

Yes, because I'm not into the occult and witchcraft, which a lot of fantasy is.

*How about your style? You seem more comfortable with the technology now...*

It takes a while. **Shivers**, first of all, I had no time...

*No money, either.*

No time is almost equivalent to no money. When people ask me what I get when I have a bigger budget, as I did with **Scanners**, I say more time: the time to experiment a little on the set, and the option to shoot something you know you're going to throw away and then shoot it again. **Scanners** is the first film in which I've actually shot new scenes written during editing, and redone the ending because I wasn't happy with the special effects. It's an incredible luxury to be able to say, "Wouldn't it be great to have a scene where Revok and Keller actually meet and you see them together?" We shot those scenes in Toronto, because the way the film had developed it wasn't obvious that we never had a scene where you saw them together — so their collusion was only verbal; and that isn't a good way to do things on film. That's the main reason my style is evolving, because there is a chance to experiment. Also, I've tried a lot of things in the past and know that they don't work, so I don't have to do them again.

*I was wondering why you move the camera as much as you do in **Scanners**, because **Shivers** and **Rabid** are very static films. Was that a time thing?*

The only film in which I really felt constrained not to move the camera was **Shivers**, because there wasn't a lot of time — unless the floor happened to be amenable to a dolly. I became paralyzed. A dolly shot became a big, big deal, and a crane shot was out of the question.

I went to the symposium with Bertolucci. His version of that was, in the sixties, when everyone was into Godard and the politics of "le travelling," you first had to ponder the *political* implications of the dolly shot. Now, he thinks it's a personal aesthetic question. I don't have a particular aesthetic of camera movement, it's a visceral thing.

*It seems to me that a lot of your style grows out of the corridors at York in **Stereo** and the **Starliner Apartments** in **Shivers**. You have a very tight frame.*

## Shivers

# ...Makes Your Flesh Creep!

by Robert MacMillan

The critics were too busy gagging over Cronenberg's early films to take them seriously. Now, with the success of **Scanners** they have finally recognized his talent. By penetrating the hideous surface of **Shivers (The Parasite Murders)** Robert MacMillan exposes the film's deeper meanings, to illustrate that there is, in fact, a method to Cronenberg's 'madness' — the themes of his gruesome stories are extensions of modern reality itself.

The plot of David Cronenberg's **Shivers** (also known as **The Parasite Murders** and **They Came From Within**) concerns a self-contained apartment complex (isolated from downtown Montreal on an island) that is invaded by a swarm of crawling parasites. The latter penetrate the bodies of apartment dwellers, endowing most residents with an insatiable lust. Doctor Emil Hobbes, the "creator" of these parasites, wants to restore contact between humanity and physical nature. Some persons die horribly in the ensuing violence. In one scene a young man, sick to the point of vomiting from the parasite inside his body, leans over a balcony railing and retches the blood-smeared creature out, watching as it plops onto the umbrella of an elderly woman far below. The old woman mutters, "poor birdie" while the real culprit squiggles across the ground to the environment from whence it came — an apartment block called Starliner.

All of the foregoing has allegedly embarrassed and frightened audiences and several reviewers. Toronto journalist Clyde Gilmour wrote: "I didn't hear any actual retching at the matinee I attended, but I nearly gagged despite what I had thought was old-pro immunity." Marshall Delaney devoted a scathing editorial to the subject of **Shivers** in *Saturday Night*. The movie was rejected by the pre-selection committee at the Canadian Film Awards, 1975 and last, but not least, the Town Council of Cambridge-shire, England, banned the picture.

So much for notoriety. Let's consider the meaning of **Shivers**: is it artistically successful and morally defensible or not? The fact that anyone who examines this movie must account for its contradictions merely complicates the issue. Most critics, in my opinion, have been thrown off course by trying to force a single meaning onto the narrative. **Shivers** does not pretend to be coherent. Rather it examines arcane or insoluble problems and invites affective, violently negative evaluations through its uncompromising viciousness. To perceive the extent of this hatred ex-

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After seeing *The Brood*, a friend of mine remarked that even your long shots are tightly framed; you never see anything in the frame that is irrelevant.

I get a very strong visceral feel when I look through the camera. That's innate, not conscious. I suppose it has to do with my sense of control. When CinemaScope and split-screen came along — De Palma still talks about it — everyone said that you're going to let the audience make a choice of what they want to watch. I've never approached film that way. To me, it's an artifice, and to pretend that it's something else...The audience will of course be involved. A person's reaction to certain colours is very individual. I want to cut down variants in response, because I think there will be a lot of variants anyway. Perhaps framing tightly — I've never thought of it this way — is a means of control. Film is an abstraction. Each shot is not so much what you use as what you decide to exclude. You are abstracting something from its context and shooting only that.

It also has to do with close-ups and the human face — talking heads. **Scanners** is very much about heads, and very often talking heads. You know, children are fascinated by the human face. They reach out and touch it and are delighted by its every move. One of the most exciting things you can put on the screen is a talking head. When I have one and its doing great stuff and saying great stuff I stay on it.

Bertolucci said — and it explains a lot about how his films work — that he knows nothing about lighting, he leaves that for Vittorio (Storaro), but the one thing he keeps for himself is camera movement. To block a scene, he goes out on the set with his viewfinder and walks around. Then the actors come in and he tells them how to move. I find that incredible because I find it very difficult to gauge the size and interplay and depth of various actors. But it explains why sometimes his camera is going away from people just when you want to see their faces. It's a very possessive thing.

The way I work is to have the actors come out and we block the scene together. I think that if you write your own scripts you feel a little less threatened in terms of your auteurship. You're not afraid to allow the words to dictate everything in certain scenes.

I think that's the reason you find people who are afraid of talking heads. A director then feels that the scene belongs to the writer and the actors. To me, that's a very destructive insecurity.



Strange bedfellow...  
Alan Migicovsky's  
lumps are alive!

pressed by critics is to recognize the picture's audacity. In the following argument I shall try to illuminate certain aspects of the film, and illustrate the ways in which some critics may have misjudged it.

Reviewers have centered their attack on several factors: craftsmanship, morality, purpose, and meaning. First, the technology: some portions of the soundtrack, particularly the opening scenes (on the prints I have seen), are nearly inaudible. These scenes account for less than two percent of the narrative, hence the general reference by some critics to tackiness seems unwarranted. Possibly, they refer to pacing, to those narrative intervals wherein this movie, unlike its Hollywood counterparts, slows down so that nothing seems to transpire.

For example, the narrative begins with slides depicting the various social benefits of apartment living. These are shot in a non-beguiling fashion so that one can easily mistake satire for lack of enthusiasm. A follow-up sequence involving a security guard ("Never had it out of the holster"), is unimaginatively staged and several scenes of similar flatness occur throughout the picture. But is this a case of incompetence or of intentional tone or mood? Cinephiles who have seen Cronenberg's **Crimes Of The Future** (1969) may recognize this cool manner — a quietness or restraint, the employment of one-dimensional performers and the slow passage of events. In **Shivers** this "Canadian" reserve — a kind of camera shyness and quiet delivery of dialogue — contrasts oddly with the Hollywood brashness supplied by performers Joe Silver (Linsky) and Paul Hampton (Doctor Roger St. Luc). But this diversity of method contributes to the movie's textural richness. The flat scenes seem appropriate because they provide a vivid contrast to Cronenberg's very electric screenplay and they add to the picture's bizarre amorality.

Despite the aforementioned "tackiness," one can also point to a considerable measure of slickness in **Shivers**. Take, for example, the very convincing scene of Nick (Alan Migicovsky) watching several large parasites as they move and bulge *inside his body*. This sort of staging (most of it the work of Hollywood make-up man, Joe Blasco, is of swiss-watch precision. This syntax ("special effects") comes from the popular cinema and is more the *sum total* of its metaphysical technology than a story *about* some metaphysical experience. The sexual awakening of Betts (Barbara Steele), on the other hand, is expressed through a different sort of technical



To keep from being eaten alive, Joe Silver fights off the parasites.

expertise — in effect, precisely photographed body-language. Her bare feet walking on broken glass, blood stains on the bathroom floor, the slow motion semi-pirouette towards her female lover...all of these indicate her troubled identity. Her humanity is mysteriously questionable and viewers know that something humanly impossible has entered her vagina. Her remote personality coupled with parasite infestation invest her with an unrecognizable reality, to be precise, she is sexually aroused but no longer human.

British reviewers who emphasize the comic ingredients in this movie fail to suggest its crude vulgarity and downright nastiness: Nick retching a parasite onto his wife's pillow while he and she prepare to make love, the thin rope line of blood down a wall and across the laundromat floor, the parasite that crawls up an elderly woman's walking stick, or the sexually aroused man crushing a cherry pastry into his mouth. Conversely, those Canadian critics who saw only violence in the picture, missed the humor. To cite only the obvious instances: Steele's parodic lesbianism while she lounges on a double bed with Susan Petrie, the frequent "medical" lighting that equates food with disease or cleanliness with fear (one example: the eerie glowing light from an open refrigerator door in a dark room). One might mention the "turned-on" canines, the cross-cutting between strangulation and electric toothbrushing, between breakfasting and acid-burning violence, or the suggested parallelism between a dill pickle held by Rollo Linsky (Joe Silver) and the similarly shaped parasites, or even the scene of Nick talking to his parasites.

This comedy/horror ambivalence is introduced in the opening scenes of the narrative. After a short prologue, *Shivers* begins with two simultaneous morning scenes that are intercut, perhaps inexplicably. Both scenes have the character of what one might call slapstick comedy-terror, and their inexplicable relationship to one another — established through deliberate intercutting — seems all the more unsettling. In one, a middle-aged man chases and wrestles with a teenage girl wearing a private-school uniform. In the other, a young couple prepare for the day ahead. The wife busies herself in the kitchen while the camera draws the viewer's attention to hubby's abdominal discomfort and coughing. By this time, one has seen the older man break into the school girl's room, prevent her from escaping through another door, then strangle her and tape her mouth. Obviously a

*With more time and money, do you have more control? Have you been able to do what you wanted to do within schedule and budget limitations?*

I have been. I've been lucky, because I've worked with strong producers. Basically, people trusted me, and we've always been able to argue things out, so that when it finally hit the screen, I've been able to say, 'I'm responsible for that.'

But I've never been as involved with the distribution of a film as I am with *Scanners*. Avco-Embassy thinks that *Scanners* will be the biggest moneymaker they've had, and they're behaving accordingly. Bob Rehme of Avco was with New World when they had *Rabid* and he's wanted another of my films since then. They bought *Scanners* in first draft. They sent me the results of sneak previews, asked me what I thought of the ad campaigns. I think it has to do with the fact that I've endured for all these years and have finally begun to develop a following in the States.

*I think it's been so slow in the States because you seem to have suffered from both bad reviews and spotty distribution.*

Especially with *The Brood*. I was most disappointed with the way *The Brood* was handled in the States. That's one reason we didn't go with New World for *Scanners*.

*You've suffered from some of the worst reviews — I put off seeing *Shivers* for a long time after the Marshall Delaney (Robert Fulford) review. How do you react to that sort of criticism?*

Unfortunately, *Saturday Night* has the kind of readership that makes it difficult for you to get financing for your next film. Fulford sounded as if he'd be happy if I never made another film. That he thought it was repulsive, that he hated it, fine; but to say that this person should be responsible for closing down the Canadian film industry, that to me was irresponsible, hysterical, and nuts.

You get to the point where you like the critics who like your work and dislike the critics who don't. It's not objective but it is emotionally objective. It serves a survival function — why be a masochist? It's different when someone who likes your stuff thinks your latest work isn't very good. In a way, that hurts more than someone who's always hated your work. But when you make a movie, you're

exposed to literally hundreds of people who tell you what they think. A critic just becomes one more person who's seen your movie and who may or may not be very intelligent, or knowledgeable, or respected, and that helps ease the pain. The difference is that critics write, and are published, and are read — and that's as it should be. But it's really annoying when it keeps someone from seeing the film who would have liked it. That drives you crazy.



Trying to hold on to their sanity, Stephen Lack and Jennifer O'Neill in **Scanners**

*I've always been intrigued by the names in your films — you seem to have a gift for them — the Institute for Psychoplasmatism in **The Brood**, Ephemerol in **Scanners**...*

They're very important to me; if I read a script and the names are John Smith and Mary Brown, I automatically start to lose interest. If you are creating an artifice, every part of that artifice contributes to the whole. You can't just say 'Give them any names, the names don't matter,' because the names do matter. Often, a character doesn't come into sharp focus for me until I've found his name. Ephemerol, for instance, just came to me. Part of it was Demerol, and part of it was ephemera, and part of it, though it's spelled differently, is effeminate, a female feel to it, 'cause it's a drug for pregnant ladies. It just sort of felt really right.

murder scene, yet the motivation is unclear: why *this* man and *that* girl? What could she possibly have done to deserve this end? One's conjectures are abruptly short-circuited by the other obtrusive sequence. Husband Nick examines his stomach (close-up in a mirror). One person has been inexplicably murdered, another seems mysteriously ill. As the narrative progresses, horror is continually undercut by comedy: one consequently fails to learn very much about the old man and why he acts as he does, and Nick remains a disturbing, malevolent young man without biographical or psychological flesh.

Reviewers in several countries have responded with revulsion and anger to **Shivers'** morbid and tasteless character. It is, I assume, intentionally tasteless much in the manner of **Pink Flamingos** (1974), **Texas Chainsaw Massacre** (1974), and **L'eau chaude, L'eau froide** (1976). But then taste is not a prerequisite of art — a fact established in ancient history and reaffirmed by **Les Fauves**, **Der Blaue Reiter**, and the surrealists, to mention a few modern manifestations. The legless man in **Los Olvidados** (1950) is not tasteful, nor is the chicken-woman in the last scene of **Freaks** (1932), yet they serve a moral and intellectually enlightening end. John Hofsess' distinction (*Maclean's* October 6, 1975) between sensationalism and "shallow" sensationalism underlines this point. **Shivers'** sensationalism, as he suggests, may be intellectually provocative rather than shallow.

One reviewer described the movie as a mere "succession of crude shocks." In fact, the narrative unfolds in a direction from crude to *more complex* shocks: for example, the pushing and shoving strangulation in early scenes with Hobbes and his teenage mistress/patient precede the scene of an elderly lady ("I'm hungry...I'm hungry for love"), who rapes a much younger man; and that precedes a sequence of the same man who punches another to the floor so that a mother can crawl on top of the victim while her female child mounts for a kiss, thereby delivering a parasite to his mouth. Similarly, sexual references increase in number and variety as the story develops. Even the parasitical "disease" undergoes transformation: at first, simply mysterious, it gradually assumes additional medical, then sexual, and eventually socio-psychological characteristics. Perhaps no consistent reading may be made of this, a fact noted by two British critics. But must one regard structural complexity of this sort as mistaken, inept or as incoherent? Perhaps **Shivers** lacks a rational premise; nonetheless, it contains a serious point of view and one that grows out of its structure.

Many reviewers assume that **Shivers** is merely a device for terrifying people and therefore hate it. Granted, some critics may have been terrified, but no evidence has emerged to demonstrate the effect of this picture upon audiences. Given the primitive state of audience-sociology, any number of hypotheses are possible. Let's try the following for example: the creature-parasites are fascinating through their peculiar motivation. On the one hand, these "aphrodisiacs" succeed in transmitting sexual feelings from one human to another and consequently seem purposive. Moreover, they have the capacity to hide, to crawl, to leap into the air, and to maim. Yet, to say that they can "think" seems like stretching it; perhaps because they are so visually unlike "conscious" beings. One reviewer's reference to self-propelled calves' liver demonstrates my point: liver is familiar, but can it really take over a city? In other words, does this movie actually terrify audiences, or rather, feed on the individual viewer's speculative fancies?

By and large, reviewers have ignored the story's clever use of setting. The narrative examines questions of urban environmental determinism, the ways in which social space and individual human anatomies parallel one another. The parasite headed for Betts' vagina emerges from the round orifice of her bathtub drain. And another slug is found by children in the anatomical slit, or mouth, of a common mailbox. The satirical thrust of this seems unmistakable. A crude psychoanalytical interpretation might deal

with the problem of egress and entry within self-enclosed apartment spaces. The real joke however is more obvious, poking fun at contemporary architecture that is based on social-blockage principles.

A parallel situation was described in Buñuel's *El Angel Exterminador* (1962). Members of the Mexican bourgeoisie are inexplicably trapped in an apartment during a dinner party — although the doors are wide open, they remain rooted to the spot. Society quickly breaks down due to its internal contradictions and, without food and social amenities, these rich socialites are reduced quickly to savages — that which they may have always been. In *Shivers* the apartment-dwellers are trapped by their privacy, in effect isolated from their sensual (bodily) responses, and, in addition, socially separated from Montreal by their oppressive architectural setting. With its own shops, recreation facilities, and private medical clinic, Starliner Tower is a kind of hospital — indeed the clinic may serve as metaphor for the whole environment. Then, without warning, the parasitic disease passes from resident to resident as if providing the missing linkage in this society. Suddenly, one's stranger-neighbors become one's closest friends albeit through excessive and parodic sexual connection. The clinic doctor (St. Luc), as hero, is placed in the comical position of racing to stamp out or halt this increasing neighborliness, some of it tending toward uncontrollable violence. More precisely, one only *assumes* the doctor to be hero. In reality, given his previous inattention to social alienation in the building, he serves as the villain of the piece.

Several reviewers have referred, sometimes angrily, to plagiarism in this picture, as if plagiarism were some kind of cinematic crime and not the life-blood of cinema history, as, in fact, it is. In any event, *Shivers*' "plagiaristic" analogies with *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers* (1956) and *Night Of The Living Dead* (1968), work for the picture rather than against it. (See: Richard Combs, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, March 1976). Both the Siegel and Romero movies employ the stock device of setting a bizarre event within a relatively normal environment. Conversely, *Starliner*'s milieu (first indicated by a smothering promotional voice over the credits) is sexually and socially abnormal.

Far from borrowing the undigested conventions of other movies, Cronenberg has turned them around. In a peculiar fashion, the parasites represent the intrusion of "norms" into a world of deviant behavior. As the narrative ends, the parasites have all but disappeared. Where did they go? Were they merely images of self-reference created by the performers in this adventure? Writer-director Cronenberg seems ambivalent with respect to the pain/pleasure dialectic he has created. In this regard, Christian Viviani (*Positif*, July/August 1975) claimed that *Shivers* was a subtle parable of sexual taboos. The movie is opposed to the quasi-Freudian pop psychology of Norman O. Brown, but it does not take, as some critics suggest, a hateful position toward sexuality. Rather, sexuality seems like a metaphor for human nature — frightening because it is unfathomable.

A British National Film Theatre brochure of 1977 describes *Shivers* as "agreeably unsettling" with a "nicely subversive humor." But the implied comparison with *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers* does not hold. Cronenberg's picture undertakes more than the undermining of middle-class security; it examines disease and related fears that cross class-differences and class conflict. This is not black humor, but a peculiarly glossy humor — closer to scientific investigation than to satire, or to the humanist context of satire. *Shivers* raises questions about the nature of the universe. Given their anthropocentric view of truth, the humanist critics were bound to be angry.

□



Not moonmen, but technicians in a chemical plant where a powerful mind-altering drug is made

*All your films, it seems to me, are essentially Frankenstein movies.*

Yes. That's one of the reasons I thought I would do Frankenstein. I realized that of the three or four archetypal horror stories — Frankenstein, Dracula, perhaps Jeckyll and Hyde — I was really closest to Frankenstein. It's the return of what's been created, and also the father/son, man/god connection between those things.

*Also, your monsters are so fouled up by what's been done to them...I'm thinking especially of Rose in *Rabid*, who can't even believe she's a monster. I've always*