

Videodrome

Insidious effects of high tech

Never let it be said that Canadian film director David Cronenberg, or fledgling American actress (*Roadie, Union City*), veteran 'new music' star Deborah Harry are anything less than punctual. It's five o'clock on a November evening in the Harbourfront offices of radio station CKEY, on the top floor of the *Toronto Star* building, and they're almost the only two people to be found in this labyrinth of bright blue and red corridors, plush carpeting, and mirrored wall. Somebody had said five o'clock, but the rest of the cast and crew of *Videodrome*, Cronenberg's newest film, are nowhere to be seen.

Canadian actress Jayne Eastwood is on the phone in one of the boardrooms, though. (This becomes an Event). And Deborah has some pills for David. (No, they're probably vitamins, everyone seems to be paranoid about catching a cold. I stifle a cough). Time passes. The Canadian film industry is late, as usual. Or perhaps, as recent articles suggest, it Does Not Exist.

But then actors and technicians begin to arrive, and with them about a million pounds of lighting, sound and camera equipment. Media munchkins are relegated to a downstairs corridor while everything is being set up. There is, after all, a film to be made.

Miracle of movie miracles, an hour or so later the wheels are in motion. Station CKEY is now station CRAM (hmmm), and dancing in the studio booth, playing the mike like a female Jagger, is Harry as pop psychologist Nickie Brand. Worried that she might have edged over into show business with her phone-in show, Nickie is certainly quite a show herself—part media guru and part prophet giving advice to some very troubled people.

Cronenberg's films are often full of troubled people and their bizarre problems. In *Videodrome* the problems begin with an underground TV show of the same name—full of scenes of real-life violence and sex—and the highly secret organization that uses the show as, you guessed it, "the ultimate weapon."

As usual, however, Cronenberg's talent (horror merchant or intellectual savant?) for quirky, undeniably entertaining storylines hints at some serious thematic concerns about the way "technology is altering everything about us, even our bodies," as the director puts it.

On this evening's shoot things would appear to be fairly normal. (No exploding heads, suction cup armpits, or parasites slithering out of people's throats—'effects' work has not yet begun), although the high-technology atmosphere of the station does lend a touch of unreality to the environment. So do all the journalists, media people and their accompanying crews of technicians, crowded into the CKEY newsroom. There is even an NFB film crew here to shoot a clip of on-location footage to represent the Canadian industry in a film that will be shipped to our embassies abroad. Appropriately, *Videodrome*, a film about the insidious effects of high-technology media in our lives, is attracting its fair



● A view of the media—tomorrow: James Woods, Deborah Harry photo: Rick Porter

share of attention from its real-life progenitors.

Paying little attention to the media circus is tall, lanky, American actor James Woods (most recently in *Ted Kottcheff's Captured*, and also *The Onion Field, Eyewitness and Holocaust*), as he stands in the stairwell entrance to the station, waiting for his cue. He's remarkably relaxed, typically sardonic. Someone asks him if he's on his mark. Woods replies that he tapes his mark to his shoe. "That way I never go wrong."

Nothing much seems likely to go wrong on this latest Filmplan International production by executive producers Pierre David and Victor Solnicki. Budgeted at six million dollars, and bought by Universal (who put up 50% of the money) for worldwide distribution, the *Videodrome* set would appear to be the epitome of industry professionalism. A case in point: just before the call to action on this latest shot, first assistant director John Board asks for a halt and runs over to change the paper under an extra's arm from a *Toronto Sun* to a

Toronto Star. One must remember, obviously, which newspaper building is the location for the evening.

Cronenberg himself is genuinely enthusiastic about the film. Rumors abound that the special effects being designed by industry wizard Rick Baker (*American Werewolf in London*) will be rather intriguing: a hand that takes the shape of a gun, a man who inserts a videocassette into his stomach, TV sets becoming fleshy, living things... But Cronenberg is quick to emphasize his enthusiasm for other areas of the project as well. "In terms of character, in terms of acting, I think it's my strongest film to this point. It's actually quite funny stuff, too, not even black humour particularly."

As for Debbie Harry, he says, "We just don't think of her as having anything to do with rock music at all. She's a gentle young actress handling a big role for the first time, and doing quite well. The technology of film is not known to her. She's learning a lot about the process from Jimmy (Woods). He's very generous



● The master himself, Allan Ginsberg

photo: Robin Kobryn

that way as an actor."

Everything in this corner of the Canadian film world, then, would seem to be unfolding as it should. Familiar Cronenberg art director Carol Speir and director of photography Mark Irwin are on board once again. Shooting began in and around Toronto on Oct. 27, and wraps on Dec. 20.

Meanwhile, back on set, someone is telling James Woods that he looks like James Dean. He's probably heard that one before, but only the audience of *Videodrome* will know for sure.

John P. McKinnon ●

VIDEODROME scr. David Cronenberg d. Cronenberg d.'s personal ass't Richard Zywickiewicz 1st, 2nd a.d. John Board, Libby Bowden 3rd a.d. Rocco Gismondy ed Ron Sanders 1st, 2nd asst. ed. Elaine Foreman, Michael Rea cont. Gillian Richardson prod. assts. Richard Spiegelman, Howard Rothschild art d. Carol Speir 1st and 2nd art d. Barbara Dunphy, Tom Coulter art d. trainee Jo-Ann Landenheim video co-ord. Michael Lennick 1st asst. video Lee Wilson 2nd asst. video Rob Meckler d.o.p./oper. Mark Irwin 1st asst./focus Robin Miller 2nd asst./clapper/loader James Crowe stills Rick Porter set dresser Angelo Stea 1st and 2nd asst. set dres. Enrico Campana, Gareth Wilson 3rd set dresser Gary Jack prop master Peter Lauterman asst. props Greg Pelchat cost. des. Delphine White asst. des. Eileen Kennedy ward. master Arthur Rowsell ward. asst. Maureen Gurney ward. trainee Denise Woodley head make-up Shonag Jabour hair stylist Tom Booth sd. Bryan Day boom Michael Lacroix gaffer Joek Brandis key grip Maris Jansons best key grip David Hynes grip Brian Daniels best boy Scotty Allen const. man. Bill Harman exec. p. Pierre David, Victor Solnicki p. Claude Héroux asst. p. Larry Nesip p. co-ord. Roger Héroux p. man. Gwen Iveson asst. p. man. Janet Cuddy prod. sec. Angela Gruenthal exec. p.'s sec. Ellen Rosen, Monik Nantel p.'s sec. Monique Légaré loc. man. David Coatsworth head carp. Alexander Russell asst. head carp. Joe Curtin carp's Kirk Cheney, Alan Sharpe, Robert Sher, John Bankson labourer Charles Martin head painter Nick Kosonic scenic painter Janet Cormack, Reet Puhm painters Simon Harwood, Elaine Cohen, Bill Gibson transp. coord. Don Baldassarra head driver Randy Jones drivers John Vander Pas, Al Kosonic, Isidore Mussalim, David Chud casting (principal actors) Walker/Bowen, Clare Walker extras Peter Lavender comptroller Serge Major asst. compt. Gilles Léonard tech. advisor Denise Di Novi prod. acc't Lacia Kornylp asst. acc't Rachelle Charron book-keeper Maureen Fitzgerald receipt. Bonnie Gold unit pub. Jill Spitz, Suzanne Daningburg L.P. James Wood and Deborah Harry, Sonia Smits, Peter Dvorsky, Lynne Gorman, Les Carlson, Julie Khaner, Reiner Schwarz, David Bolt, Jack Creley, Lally Cadeau, Henry Gomez, Harvey Chao, Kay Hawtrey, David Tsubouchi, Robin McCulloch, Sam Malkin, Ronald Reece.

Poetry in Motion

In pursuit of the Muse

Scattered across the table is an amazing collection of full ashtrays, half-full cups of coffee, and masses of paper; notes scribbled on the back of other notes, lists of people to phone, and xeroxed copies of glowing reviews. No, this is not the set of a film about a young artist, although it could well be. It was once the kitchen table of the house that Ron Mann has been living in, and it is now the center of an incredible flurry of artistic activity.

The 23-year-old Toronto filmmaker has only recently made his feature film debut with a 90-minute documentary about four jazz musicians entitled *Imagine the Sound*. The film, which was shown at the Festival of Festivals, was nominated as one of the five most popular films. It went on to win the Silver Hugo at the Chicago Film Festival for best documentary and has already

been sold to television in England and Germany.

Ron Mann's latest project, which has taken over his kitchen table as well as the rest of his life, is a non-narrative, 90-minute documentary being shot under the working title *Poetry in Motion*. Mann explained, "In *Imagine the Sound*, Cecil Taylor talks about how music is everything you do. In a similar manner I'm trying in this film to show people that poetry is everywhere. It's not dead, boring, or static. It's very much alive, and it has come to encompass various other art forms from music and theatre to dance and visual arts."

In October Allen Ginsberg, backed by a local rock band called the CeeDees, was filmed at a benefit concert for Amnesty International at University of Toronto's Trinity College. The interview footage of a dark-suited Ginsberg shot in an empty locker room contrasts and complements his impassioned political punk performance. Filmed in his house, Canadian poet Irving Layton, ensconced in an easy chair, reflects on the role of the poet as social commentator and the "religious metaphysical quality" of Canadian poetry. A group known as the Toronto Street Poets are shot hustling their books to pedestrians in the Yonge and Bloor area, while wearing sandwich boards exclaiming "Not Irving Layton," "No Name Poet," and "Extremely Unpopular Poet." John Giorno, founder and head of the New York-based Dial-a-Poem Collective, was shot in performance at the Ritz in Manhattan, as was the grand old man himself, William S. Burroughs. Filmmaker Emile de Antonio conducted the interview footage with his long-time friend John Cage in Cage's Sixth Avenue loft while he (Cage) was busy baking bread.

There is a spontaneous element in the shooting of this film that could easily appear chaotic to conventional filmmakers. Mann explained his most recent shoot with Canadian poet and musician Ted Milton: "We went down to Innis College to shoot in the auditorium, thinking that it would be empty. After a few minutes of shooting there was a crowd of two hundred students waiting outside for a film class lecture to begin. So, with Professor Bart Testa's permission, they all filed in and got a great demonstration of spontaneous moviemaking."

On December 27, Ron Mann, Gary Topp, and Gary Cormier, presented a night of poetry performances in Toronto, with John Giorno, Anne Waldman, Michael McClure, Robert Creeley, Jim Carroll, Christopher Dewdney and Jayne Cortez. Footage was shot during the performances, and on the 28th and 29th shooting continued at Toronto's Jarvis Studios, where there was greater control over the lighting and camera work than there is possible during the live performances. Set designer Sandy Kybartas collaborated with the poets to create sets specifically suited to the style and content of the poetry. Anne Waldman interviewed the poets at various Toronto locations ranging from the lakeshore to the zoo.

Some of the *Poetry in Motion* crew, such as cameraman Robert Fresco, soundman David Joliat, and researcher and assistant - to - the - director David Segal, worked with Ron previously on *Imagine the Sound*. Emile de Antonio and John Giorno acted as creative consultants, and Peter Wintonic will be editing the film.

Although the film's original budget of \$200,000 has been reduced to \$160,000 there still remain a few unsold units.

"It's been a real struggle financially," Mann said, "the economy is lousy. The change in the tax law has made it even more difficult and a lot of potential investors can't recognize poetry as a commercially viable subject. I've taken out a bank loan to cover some of our immediate costs. I'm determined to make this film despite the obstacles because I believe in the artistic, historic, and political importance of documenting this art form."

The principal photography was finished by the end of the year, while pick up shooting in New York and San Francisco is expected to be over by the end of January. Editing, which may take four to six months to complete, will take place in Toronto at Film House.

There is no question that Ron Mann will have managed to get historically important footage of numerous major

poets. What remains to be seen is whether or not the incredibly varied personal and artistic statements of these artists can be edited into a cohesive, informative, and entertaining 90-minute film.

Post-script :

Ratch Wallace has joined the crew as production manager. The full ashtrays and half-full cups of cold coffee are still there, but the masses of paper have started to get sorted into neat piles and someone has even remembered to water the plants.

Camelia Frieberg

POETRY IN MOTION p. Ron Mann d. Mann d.o.p. Robert Fresco consult. Emile De Antonio ed. David Joliat ed. Peter Wintonic poets: John Cage, William Burroughs, Allan Ginsberg, Irving Layton, John Giorno, Michael McClure, Phillip Walen, Ann Waldman, John Cooper Clarke, Bob Woodward, Diane Prima.



● Doubling as director and DOP, Joe Sutherland makes film roll photo: Hugh McLean

Freeloading Shooting on a shoestring

The MTV studio on Toronto's Lakeshore Boulevard is alive with activity. A lighting man repositions an unwieldy stand, the sound man rewinds tape, while other crew members and actors negotiate the particulars of the next scene to be shot. The details behind this scenario, however, are not quite so typical. It is late Sunday night, and the lines of exhaustion that trace the faces of those working do so on a crew who seem uncommonly young to be manning a professional shoot.

In fact, the film in progress is a professional student film, aptly entitled *Freeloading*, and many of the people on set are students from the Ontario College of Art (OAC). The mechanics of this unusual shoot have been orchestrated by director and DOP Joe Sutherland, who has had the idea for the film in mind for a number of years. Touting the project as a feature film (the first student venture ever to be shot on 35 mm), a preliminary press release gives only scanty details about the plot: it is based on the history of the NBS newsroom. Sutherland elaborates that the inspiration came from his experience as a

cinematographer for the CBC years ago, although he hastens to explain that his script is totally fictional, a not inappropriate addendum as the story deals with "news as creative news."

The budget is almost non-existent on this film, with production manager Bob Wertheimer and other crew members scrounging about town for individuals willing to donate locations to the impecunious venture. The latter have included Varsity Stadium, restaurants, the Toronto Fire Academy, and the King City Airport, whose owner obligingly provided a pilot and wreckage for one of the scenes.

The 150 members of the crew and cast are all working for deferred wages to be paid before producer fees in the event that the film is distributed.

Professional reaction to the shoot has not been positive. Bobby Wertheimer, a veteran A.D., has borne a fair degree of criticism for his participation in *Freeloading*, and judges that his financial position will not be terrific by shoot's end (mid-November). But he takes considerable pride in the proficiency of work done by the student crew, pointing to production reports, a rigorously enforced promptness, and a professionalism that might match a film set anywhere. Ian Dobson at City Hall, who handled the location permits, countered, saying that he had received only compliments on the condition work-sites had been left in. (Those with professional experience working on the

film include Chris Terry, director, Fraser McAninch, producer and Derret Lee, publicist.)

To get the project to the shooting stage took either a miracle of sheer inventiveness, unmitigated gall or a combination of both. What little money there was, went into striking an extraordinary deal with Panavision for equipment and buying up short ends of raw stock and 1/4 inch tape. There was no room for error with one-take-only allotted to most scenes. But Wertheimer points to the record of waste and extravagance that have recently marked the Canadian film industry's flirtation with investor support.

"How many thousands of dollars have been wasted in discussion?" he demands. "And how many are shooting now? How many cameras are rolling?"

If the amount of thrift exercised on the film is noteworthy, so is the loyalty director Sutherland has inspired among his student crew. All who were interviewed about his/her role on set were enthusiastic about the knowledge garnered from their experience. And as shooting progressed, more professionals were showing up on-set, some to watch, others such as cinematographer Joe Seckeresh to donate something of their own valuable expertise.

Although he has worked professionally for a number of years, Sutherland is making this film as a fourth year student of OCA. He freely admits that he does not think the head of the college has a clear grasp of the scope of the project that he (Sutherland) has undertaken, but neither is there any financial support from the college. The students are all participating to help realize a dream, or as some put it, "... to help Joe out..." Transportation manager Richard Quinland was mock-grateful for the difficulties that had come up on the shoot, for he gained experience from dealing with the real world, rather than the insular academic environment.

Incredibly difficult as the shooting schedule was, all of the students agreed with Quinland about the value of this practical experience. There are, those critics who would argue that Sutherland has scavenged the services of a group of young people, who because of their lack of experience do not know better, but the loyalty he has inspired from them does not appear to be the type that is easily shaken. And if the film makes it through post-production to distribution, their until now naïve faith will have been amply justified.

Freeloading is currently undergoing processing at Medallion Labs.

Patricia Michael

FREELoading p.c. Freeloading Productions p. Fraser McAninch d. Joseph Sutherland, Chris Terry cam. sc. Joseph Sutherland 1st a.d. Dave Pamplin man. Bob Wertheimer wardrobe sup. Connie Buck wardrobe Shea Keohane, Michele Lyle art dept. Kim Brandes, Sheila Anderson sc. sup. Tannis Baker gaffer Hugh McLean sd. mix. Reynald Trudel transport Richard Quinland boom Brad Ruelles make-up Gary A. Boisver, Pat Barnett p.a. Andy Chown grip Ian Bresolin 1st asst. cam. Ron Hewitt clapper Roger Stafeckis stills Hugh McLean l.p. Richard Comar. Bill (Duke) Edwards, Arnie Hardt, Shelby Gregory, Peter Kaye, Tom Macdonald, Susan Hart, Glen Wilkins, Dave Lyle, Bill Durst, Lionel Rumm, Ellie Taylor, John Ladell, Jean (Hawk) Hurtubise, Tony Mason, Ann Barber, Natalie Kusmyrn, Howard Rock, Cameron Brown, Susan Seshadri, Simon Craig, Frank Scott, Steve Cyncora, Joe Crozier, Jeff Flock, Shirley Gillette, Gary Robbins, Sam Johnny, Patricia Sam, Tiger, Joe Grosso, Norm Mackay, Derek Patalia, Steve Evans, Bill Dawe, Blaine Berdan, Evelyn De Laurentis and Marc Dassas.