

DAVID CRONENBERG

Canada's King of Horror
Enters The Science Fiction
World with

SCANNERS

BY SAM MARONIE

Some call his films morbid and offensive; others applaud them as gripping and inspired. While many critics tend to overlook director David Cronenberg (*Rabid*, *The Brood*), SF fans regard him as a rising star in the movie field and anxiously await his next releases.

Cronenberg has struck again—this time with *Scanners*, a \$4 million tale about artificially-induced telepathy and its sinister applications. The Canadian filmmaker served double duty in this production as both scripter and director—a situation which gave him great satisfaction.

"It went through so many changes," the soft-spoken Cronenberg says with a sigh. "But in many ways I was returning to a theme that I explored in an amateur film of mine called *Stereo*, which dealt with a similar premise. However, the subject seemed ready to be looked at again."

In many ways Cronenberg relies on his instincts or gut reactions when considering film properties. As with his other features, the idea for *Scanners* came from a form of "internal chemistry," rather than external stimuli such as magazine articles or other influences.

Getting Into SF

During the movie's lensing Cronenberg was very pleased to be working with Patrick McGoochan—an actor he holds in the highest esteem.

"He's really quite brilliant. I know a lot of people—myself included—have been waiting to see him in something science-fiction ever since he did *The Prisoner*," Cronenberg admits.

"McGoochan worked about three of the eight-week shooting schedule and he contributed a lot to developing his own character—which was difficult under the circumstances: I was writing the script during



Jennifer O'Neill—an innocent scanner caught up in a web of intrigue—acts, as Cronenberg directs.

filming, so a lot of the actors weren't quite sure what was going on all the time. But," Cronenberg hastens to add, "it doesn't look that way now that it's all put together."

Many of the director's admirers have pointed out that *Scanners* marks a switch from the horror genre to SF. Is this a conscious attempt to branch out into a new field?

"I've always been interested in SF—of a certain kind," Cronenberg says. "When I was a kid there were basically two types of SF magazines: *Astounding SF*, which later became *Analog*, and *Fantasy and Science Fiction*. I always preferred *F&SF* because *Astounding* was more oriented toward 'hardware' types of stories—stories without any emotions or feelings. Even in films, movies like *The Andromeda Strain* for example; when you see people standing around doing things with stainless-steel machinery—that doesn't turn me on.

"I think all my horror films have had very definite SF elements," he explains. "Now the elements have been shifted; there are certain aspects of horror in this picture but they are relatively minor when compared to the SF portions. There's a natural kind of balance."

Like his other works, *Scanners* explores Cronenberg's view of a form of medical science gone haywire. "It's an entertaining premise which takes the viewers from the real world as quickly as possible into a world of nightmare reality and dream logic, which is where I like to function."

Low-Budget Filming

Shivers (released in the United States as *They Came From Within*) was Cronenberg's first Canadian-produced feature. Next came *Rabid* and then *The Brood*. With each subsequent film there were larger budgets. While *Scanners* is the director's most expensive pro-



Director Cronenberg and a bewhiskered Patrick McGeehan take a break during shooting. McGeehan's performance excited Cronenberg.

ject, he still feels that money isn't everything.

"What the extra dollars buy you more than anything else is additional time. It buys you more time to work with the actors, more time to work with choreography on the set—camera angles, etc. More money also gives you more in terms of special-effects.

"But for me as a director it mainly represents having additional time to try things differently—to do something three more times when I'm not perfectly happy with doing it once. That's why I've shot more footage for *Scanners* than I have for anything else.

"This is only the second film for which I've had the luxury of actually having music specifically composed. The previous films used 'stock' [previously existing] music, which is a huge liability; each movie has a sort of uniqueness, and part of that uniqueness comes from the proper scoring."

Cronenberg emphasizes the importance of effective music plays in a picture's success. He expresses an unfulfilled desire to sit down with a composer and discuss types of music they could use to heighten dramatic effect, possibly creating a film score of the type that has never before existed.

The young filmmaker also complains that with the unusual methods used to finance films nowadays, there are many loopholes and hidden costs which drain the budget. He cites factors like finance charges, insurance premiums and other expenses among the



Oliver Reed as a mad scientist attacked by his unholy creations. From an earlier Cronenberg film, *The Brood*—Gothic horror in a science-fiction setting.

chief culprits.

"In terms of what I had available to put on the screen, I did not have a solid \$4 million at my disposal," Cronenberg states. "There were still times I wanted to try things again,

but didn't have the money. But when you get into the \$30-40 million budgets, you better really have something amazing to justify that kind of cost!

"Raw creativity is much harder to come by



A master Yogi's heartbeat is sent racing by a scanner at McGooohan's instructions.

"Scanners": The Story

In a security-tight room of the Consec-corporation, a top-secret experiment is in progress. A Consec-controlled Scanner is demonstrating his mind-probe capabilities. Sitting opposite the Scanner is a volunteer. Their minds lock. A scan-tone fills the room. Suddenly, the Scanner begins to moan. His eyes glaze, his body stiffens. He begins to shake, uncontrollably and collapses on the floor. The audience watches stunned, as the Scanner dies in a terrifying manner. Security guards grab the volunteer and rush him from the room.

Consec has just lost its top Scanner agent. Somewhere, a rival Scanner faction exists, hostile to their program. This group must be found and terminated.

Later that night, the man responsible

for the Scanner's death is taken away under heavy armed guard. Three cars race through the city streets. Suddenly, the lead car veers out of control and crashes, bursting into flames. The others stop. The agent guarding the prisoner goes berserk and kills his companions. Then, he shoots himself. The prisoner, now alone, drives away into the night. He is the leader of the Scanner underground faction. His name is Revok (Michael Ironside).

With security broken and their program in jeopardy, Consec must find an outsider, another Scanner they can control and use.

A massive city-wide search is launched. The net closes on Cameron Vale (Stephen Lack), a 35-year-old derelict. Consec agents kidnap Vale and take him to Dr.

Paul Ruth (Patrick McGooohan), supervisor of Consec's Scanner program.

Vale is unaware of his Scanner powers. But, through Ruth's efforts, Vale is taught how to control his Scanner capabilities. Vale proves to be an apt pupil. Ruth is amazed. Vale is the best one yet. He has the potential to become the ultimate weapon.

Satisfied that Vale is dedicated to the Consec cause, Ruth sends him out to infiltrate the Scanner underground.

Vale's first lead brings him into contact with Benjamin Pierce (Robert Silverman), an avant-garde sculptor. Pierce's studio is a bizarre retreat in the country, a reflection of his anguished, twisted mind. As Vale questions Pierce, several men with shotguns seal off the estate. Then they attack. Pierce is blown away. His sculptures and studio are reduced to rubble. Vale, who has managed to survive the onslaught, turns his powers loose. The attackers are no match for Vale's mind-probe. One by one they drop their weapons and fall to the floor, screaming and dying in agony.

Vale leaves, stunned and shocked. He is just beginning to realize the overwhelming power he controls.

Before Pierce's death, Vale had learned about Tony Gaudi (Charles Shamata), leader of a rival Scanner group opposed to Revok.

Vale is carefully screened by the group and invited to attend a meeting of their Inner Circle. During the meeting, one of the group goes scan-crazy and attempts to kill Vale. The others lock minds and destroy him. Vale is taken from the meeting into a parked van where he meets the group's leader, Gaudi.

As they head back to the city, they are attacked. A wild chase ensues and Gaudi's van loses control and crashes. Gaudi is instantly killed. Vale and Kim (Jennifer O'Neill), another Scanner, manage to escape. . . Vale is now leader of Gaudi's group.

Someone is systematically trying to destroy all Scanners, but who?

than dollars and cents. With movies like *Star Trek* and *The Black Hole* you get the idea that [production] people get obsessed with the new technology of the space films and forget about what audiences are really there to see—not a differently designed spaceship—but new characters, plots, concepts that are truly fresh and exciting. You can't walk out and buy that kind of thing."

While Cronenberg is basking in the luxuries of increased budgets and a wider distribution of his films—*Scanners* is being showcased by Avco-Embassy Pictures—the devoted artist holds fast in retaining his own individuality within the system. While often dealing with major studios means buckling to their wishes, Cronenberg has found no such hardships.

"I don't think I've sacrificed any of my

power or creativity," he states. "First and foremost you have to understand that *Scanners* was produced independently (through Canadian investors) and Avco is only involved in a distribution deal.

"They feel *Scanners* is going to go over really big; Avco wanted to distribute the movie when only little more than an outline even existed. Their attitude has been strictly supportive; they wanted the film to be good and they wanted me to be happy. Although I can imagine being in another kind of a situation where a major studio was financing a film and wanted their own producer around all the time—but that wasn't the case here."

One of "The New Breed"

Recognition and public acceptance have always figured largely in the movie industry

and the 37 year old Cronenberg finds himself placed in the "new breed" category of youthful fantasy filmmakers such as George Lucas, John Carpenter and Steven Spielberg. The Toronto-based artist is constantly sought after for interviews and is the subject of detailed career studies and other media attention; he's earned the titles "Canada's King of Horror," "The New Hitchcock" and other flatteries—which he frankly says he enjoys.

"It's always nice to get recognition," he laughs modestly. "That's the first thing you're always interested in, because only after that has been established do you start to worry about the details—like do you really have anything to do with Hitchcock?"

"In terms of continuing to make films, any kind of recognition you're afforded is very important; not only does it help you with the

public but also with the producers. When you go to them with a script and they've heard of you in any sort of a positive way, then they'll talk to you; but if they haven't, then it's hard to get in the door."

While he is modest about the compliments and praise, perhaps in many ways David Cronenberg is his own worst critic. No matter how much audiences enjoy his films and how many millions they gross for producers (*Rabid*, *Shivers* and *The Brood* are among the top moneymaking pictures in Canadian cinema history) he feels he has room for improvement.

"I hope I'm learning a little bit more with each film I complete; I really feel that I am. There comes a point where instead of going forward you're going in a sideways direction and exploring different areas, rather than making an advance. There's nothing particularly wrong with that situation, but I don't think I fall in that category yet."

Like Lucas, Carpenter and others in their group, Cronenberg has been a devout fantasy fan since childhood. He was weaned on horror and SF comics, SF magazines and, of course, lots of movies.

While he viewed Westerns and musicals as well as SF films, Cronenberg really can't point to any particular tales that obsessed or influenced his later cinema work. The director mentions a specific picture like *Forbidden Planet* with fondness, because of its imaginative concepts and the strong characterization of Robby the Robot.

Future Plans

Cronenberg feels he has avoided a pitfall that many of his colleagues risk falling into—becoming typed solely as a director of horror and SF movies. He has branched out in other subjects; *Fast Company*, a story about drag-racing, is one such example of his other interests.

As the man who has been dubbed "one of the most exciting and disturbing directors working on the North American continent..." by Britain's *Time Out* magazine, Cronenberg plans to stay a while longer in the realm of SF and fantasy. While he hasn't firmly committed himself to a new project now that *Scanners* is in release, the filmmaker is considering several potential scripts. One of the most likely candidates is his own version of the world's ultimate SF-chiller: *Frankenstein*.

"I'll probably end up doing it," he says. "I use the word 'probably' in the sense that I may find that I can't possibly bring anything fresh or new to the story—in which case I won't want to do it. But if I do, the story will be very different from anything ever seen before—completely unique from the Karloff treatment everyone is so familiar with."

Asked if he'd ever consider helming a megabudget SF-hardcore opus, Cronenberg responds with an emphatic "No."

"I cannot see spending three years of my life wrapped up in something involving a lot of opticals and technological trickery; that's not where the real creativity is. Don't misunderstand me—I'm always happy to see



Inside of Biocarbon Amalgamate, workers synthesize the scanner drug, Ephemerol.

"SCANNERS" CONTEST 100 WINNERS!

SCAN-A-GRAMS

STARLOG magazine, in conjunction with Avco-Embassy Pictures, is giving away 75 *Scanners* T-shirts and 50 special *Scanners* viewers. These are promotional items produced in limited quantities—they are not available in any store and are guaranteed collectors' items.

All you have to do to win is unscramble the words listed below in the left column. Then write the correct word or words on the blank spaces to the right of each. (Each of the correct word or words is connected with our *Scanners* coverage in this issue. If you run into a problem, a diligent search will provide the missing words.) Some of the blanks are boxed. Put all of the boxed letters together, unscramble them, and you will be able to fill in the blanks at the bottom with the key *Scanners* phrase.

You may cut the contest page out of this issue or use a facsimile. All entries should be mailed to STARLOG "SCANNERS" CONTEST, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, NY, 10016. The deadline for all entries to reach our office is February 6, 1981. At that point, all entries will be put in a hopper. The first 25 drawn with the correct answers will receive a *Scanners* T-shirt and a *Scanners* viewer. The next 50 winners will receive a T-shirt and the last 25 winners will receive a viewer. (Please mark small, medium or large somewhere on your entry and make sure your return address is clearly printed on the envelope.)

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Scan Phrase

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Revok's henchman shoots up a scanner/artist's studio, and its owner as well.

those films and I respect the people who make them—but that's not where the appeal is for me."

Boom or Bust

What does appeal to the talented writer-director is to keep on making movies. Does Cronenberg fear that the current SF movie boom period will come to an abrupt end and hurt these possibilities?

"I'm always asked that question after I finish a picture, because there always seems to be a 'boom' period going on. When a person thinks in terms of movies that have earned spectacular grosses each year, for the past 20 to 30 years there has been at least one horror or SF film ranked in the top four or five moneymakers."

Cronenberg's track record is extremely impressive. His first film, *Shivers*, was made on a small budget and grossed over \$3 million. The next one, *Rabid*, cost \$500,000 and earned more than \$7 million. And while *The Brood* was more expensive, it still returned a healthy profit. Studio executives love those kinds of figures.

"The reason these pictures make money so consistently is that they compose a genre which is the most stable and constant attraction movie people know of; they're staple items.

"Trucker films have come and gone, as have biker pictures; even Westerns have had

their problems lately at the box-office. But fantasy films are extremely basic entertainment and strongly appeal to the audience's imagination."

Certainly David Cronenberg has created many imaginative situations in *Scanners* and his other features. Although he doesn't exactly view himself as a "message" director, Cronenberg states that his chief aim is to give movie-goers a good time.

"I don't see filmmaking as me going out there singing and dancing and then hope that people like it. When I put together a picture I do something that I would like to see on film, and assume my audience will also be excited.

"I think that the films made by the more cynical producers don't usually work for real movie-lovers. Some of the men in power have no affection at all for SF or horror; they put together a film very mechanically and then hope it will work.

"The audience is in my mind at all times, so I try to make things clear; I never try to make things deliberately ambivalent or cloudy. I want my audience to be *with* the picture and not condescend to them or try to pull a 'fast one.' I like to say: I'm going to show you something incredible and you're going to believe it's for real!" ★

For more news on *Scanners* and its director David Cronenberg see FANGORIA #10 (on sale now) and FUTURE LIFE #25 (see subscription information elsewhere in this issue).

IMPORTANT REMINDER

If you are entering the *Scanners* contest, remember: You must have all 10 of the "scan-a-grams" correct, as well as the "Scan Phrase." And yes, the phrase is mentioned *twice* in this issue. Also remember to include your shirt size (S, M, L) and *print* your return address clearly (don't forget your zip code)—if we don't have your full, correct address, we can't send you your prize. Good luck!

—H.Z.