

cineACTION

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Beyond the Narrative



**Crucifixion Films
Early Cronenberg
Bruce LaBruce
Realist Spy Films
Sofia Film Festival
Wadji Mouawad**

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BEYOND THE NARRATIVE

The papers in this issue of CineAction cover a wide range of themes and approaches, but what ties them together is that they all look beyond the filmic narrative; it's not the plot that counts here, but the various meanings, ideas and connections that can be teased out of films when an analytic is applied. Two of the papers deal with a fresh look at specific genres: "Love in the Time of Calvary" is Brian Walter's reading of crucifixion films from the unusual viewpoint of male-female relationships; Luis Garcia-Mainar investigates the Spy genre by separating out a sub-genre, the 'Realist' Spy film, which includes, along with the action, an emphasis on the impact of the professional spy's choice on their personal life. Two other papers focus on the horror genre as filtered through the singular vision of David Cronenberg at the beginning stages of his film career. Michael Pepe offers up an analysis of *Scanners* (1981) as a 'baby-boomer psychodrama' in "Lefties and Hippies and Yuppies, Oh My!". Allan MacInnis's piece offers a close study of three of Cronenberg's earliest films, *Shivers* (1975), *Rabid* (1977) and *The Brood* (1979), by opening up Robin Wood's sometimes scathing critiques of Cronenberg's work to see what can be said to hold true today. Robin's writings are invoked again in the piece by Amir Khan on *Winnebago Man* (2009), in order to consider the merits of documentary as both art and critique. May Telmissany's paper on the films of the Lebanese-born Canadian playwright and filmmaker Wajdi Mouawad and Jill Glessing's review of Allan Sekula and Noel Burch's *The Forgotten Space* (2010) look at ways in which these very different films explore and expose very serious social and political issues at both the macro and micro levels. While many were dazzled by the spectacular visuals and technical marvels of Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010), Andrew Winchur seeks beneath the appearance to find its ideological underpinnings which, he suggests, valorize late capitalism. This issue ends with two short reviews: one, by Jasmine McGowan, looks at a recently published book on Bruce LaBruce, one of the original members of this magazine's editorial collective (as Bryan Bruce); and the other by Alison Frank on Short Films screened at this year's Sofia International Film festival in Bulgaria.

—Susan Morrison



Lefties and Hippies and Yuppies, Oh My!

DAVID CRONENBERG'S *SCANNERS* REVISITED



By MICHAEL PEPE

Initial reactions to low budget horror films are often as visceral as the themes and imagery that the genre explores and exploits. By the time David Cronenberg's movie *Scanners* was released in early 1981, the filmmaker had already received a host of reviews that questioned the purpose, meaning and morality of his three previously released feature length horror films¹: *Shivers* (1975), *Rabid* (1976), and *The Brood* (1979). The criticism was particularly polarizing as it came at a time when the director was also considered Canada's most promising filmmaker. At a budget that was more than three times that of his previous film,² *Scanners* would receive broad U.S. distribution, some favorable notices, and lead to more ambitious projects. For this reason the movie is considered to be a pivotal one in Cronenberg's career, even though many also consider it to be of lesser thematic interest.

At its surface, *Scanners* is a comic-bookish, sci-fi, male-centric action/adventure fantasy, featuring predictable themes of world domination and good vs. evil; but like much of Cronenberg's work, the movie uses fantastic imagery and sardonic wit to tell a larger than life tale about the directions thirty-something baby-boomers are about to take as they are handed, or grab, the reins of power from the previous generation. The film accomplishes this through an allegorical representation of iconic imagery that wryly refers directly and indirectly to post 1960s political radicals, counterculture hippies, and the nascent development of the young urban professional. When viewed as an allegorical psychodrama, *Scanners* can be seen as an oblique reflection on what might happen when the counterculture becomes the dominant culture. Additionally, through the character of Cameron Vale, Cronenberg is also reflecting on



The banality of the mall is undermined by a scanner's attack on a shopper.

his own rapidly developing career as he makes the transition from the "baron of blood" to a filmmaker with an international reputation that holds critical cachet beyond the horror fanzine. The satirical tone of the film and its allegorical mission, whether conscious or not, is often shrouded by an exhibition of technical skill that reflects Cronenberg's desire to be treated as a serious director working in a popular genre.

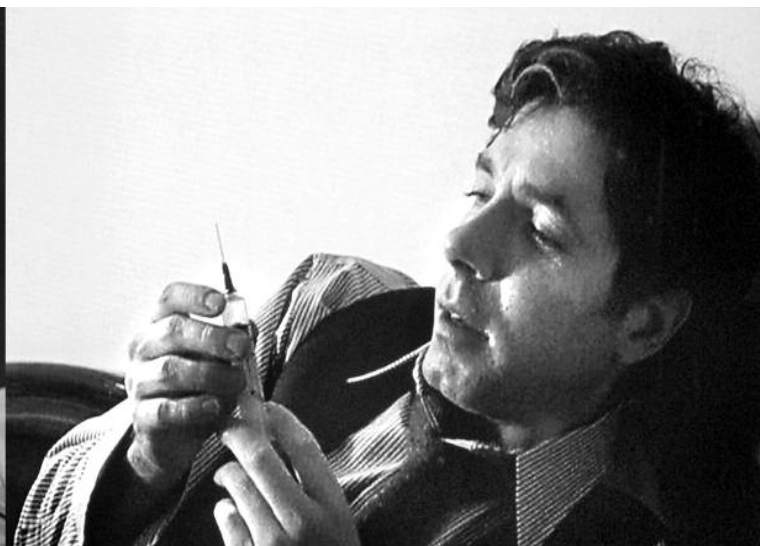
The plotline tells the story of a post-World War II "psychopharmacist", Dr. Paul Ruth/Patrick McGoohan, who markets a tranquilizer for pregnant woman called "Ephemerol". The drug has a side effect that causes women to give birth to "scanners"—psychically mutated babies that have telepathic abilities. ConSec, a large corporation with interests in "international security...weaponry and private armies", tries but fails to control the scanners. Now in their mid-thirties, two scanner camps have evolved. The first, an organized group of underground radicals led by Darryl Revok/Michael Ironside, part revolutionary working to bring the world of "normals to their knees", and part young upwardly mobile entrepreneur who is secretly marketing Ephemerol to a new generation of young mothers. The other camp, led by Kim Obrist/Jennifer O'Neill, is a group of meditating, spiritually connected scanners who are trying to find their place in the world of normals.

This incredibly intricate and somewhat convoluted narrative is populated by people with unlikely names that seem to sug-

gest something about the nature of their character: Keller is a *killer*, Revok *revokes* the authority of his father and wrecks *havoc* in the process, Vale has a metaphoric *veil* lifted from him that reveals his true identity and purpose, and so on. The convoluted plot and cartoonish characters are given credibility by the weight of Cronenberg's direction, a skill that was evident in his previous and equally fantastic films. Since then, Cronenberg has made a career of contextualizing phantasmagoric narratives featuring surrealistic imagery to tell contemporary stories that resonate with modern audiences.

In the opening shot of the film, Cameron Vale/Stephen Lack, described as an "unaffiliated" scanner by Dr. Ruth, is introduced as a stereotypical 1980s homeless man. Entering through a door marked "EMERGENCY EXIT ONLY", the unkempt Vale wanders through a shopping mall food-court making a meal of what others have left behind. Vale impossibly 'overhears' two older women talk about him in unflattering terms. "Can you believe it?" one asks. "They can let creatures like that in here." The comment may have well been made about Cronenberg's entry into the commercial film industry. During Cronenberg's early career, he was part of the Toronto independent filmmaking scene, drawing inspiration from New York underground filmmakers of the 60s³ at least as much as he did from his embrace of the horror genre. In addition to acerbic film reviews that led to a suspension of funding from

Cameron Vale gets the works: Drugs as prescriptive and transformational.





Dr. Paul Ruth/Patrick McGoochan, the mad scientist;
Benjamin Pierce/Robert Silverman, the bohemian artist

the Canadian Film Development Corporation,⁴ some attacks were personal. In his book of interviews with the filmmaker, Serge Grünberg reprints an article from a Toronto daily written by Cronenberg in the late seventies about how he was evicted from his apartment by “a Protestant spinster lady of 80” for making “pornography”.⁵ The landlady in question was referring to *Rabid*, which featured the porn star Marilyn Chambers.

In this context, Cameron Vale can be viewed as Cronenberg’s alter ego: an outsider who like the filmmaker may be perceived as coarse, naïve, and even a little perverse, but has a vision, or at least an alternate narrative to offer. As the film progresses, Vale evolves from a dysfunctional homeless man to a catalyst for social transformation. Like his character, Cronenberg is in the process of navigating the possibilities that are presented to him as his career evolves from a maker of cult films to a director of movies that may have broader mass appeal. The psychodrama that unfolds in *Scanners* places Vale outside all of the existing social groups that he investigates and provides the allegorical connection to the 60s terrain by presenting the scanner groups as an approximation or externalization of real-life 60s/70s subculture. Vale’s exploration of those groups is a search for an identity, conducted in much the same way an adolescent searches for identity through social cohesion. Throughout the film, Cronenberg uses a variety of techniques to portray Vale as an overgrown adolescent who is uncomfortable in his skin, vulnerable in his inability to hide his naiveté, and prone to demonstrate bouts of rage.

The women in the mall express the discomfort at having to witness the degradation of homelessness while contemptuously imagining that Vale is flirting with them. He punishes one of the women, old enough to be his mother, by telepathically delivering a seizure. The mall Muzak overlaps with and is finally replaced by Howard Shore’s dissonant soundtrack. The safe banality of the shopping mall and the consumerism endemic to middle class values are undermined by Vale’s attack. Intergenerational war and the subversion of middle-class values and institutions are underlying themes in *Scanners* and are represented as part of the 60s legacy the thirty-something scanners have as their formative background. Near the end of the film, Kim Obrist, leader of the humane sect of scanners, protects herself by making a young ConSec security guard, clad in a militaristic uniform, hallucinate that he is pointing his automatic weapon at his mother. Riddled by guilt, the guard is brought to tears and collapses. The sequence is humorous, poignant,

creepy, and poetic in its expression of the film’s central metaphor: that unbridled ambition, the failure to confront ethical dilemmas and accept personal responsibilities, will inevitably lead to social cannibalism and intra/intergenerational warfare. The imagery also reiterates, at this late point of the narrative, the deep distrust of an imperious corporation with more than a fleeting connection to the military.

Captured at the mall by ConSec security and brought to Dr. Ruth, Vale, the “derelict”, the “piece of human junk” according to Ruth, is about to be reborn. In contrast to his homeless garb, Vale is now dressed in white from head to toe, the image of purity, a blank canvas. Because of his inability to focus his telepathic powers, Vale is driven senseless by the internal chatter of the people who are wordlessly ushered into a loft by Ruth. Convulsively fighting against the restraints that bind him to the bed, Vale looks like a junkie going cold turkey. Dr. Ruth injects him with Ephemerol. The very drug that made him a scanner is the thing he needs in order to keep the voices “without lips” under control. Drug references are prevalent throughout *Scanners* and are part of the 60s imagery that informs its narrative trajectory. When the artist Benjamin Pierce/Robert Silverman is introduced, his demeanor suggests he is a recreational drug user. Pierce is slouched in an armchair perched in the loft space of his barn-house studio. Doing nothing in particular, he barely moves and lazily slurs in response to Vale’s entrance, “Why don’t you leave me alone?” When Vale tells Pierce he needs his help, Pierce laughs maniacally, presumably at the absurdity that he—the slacker, the stoner, the hapless artist—would be capable of helping anybody with anything. It’s not until Vale mentions Revok that Pierce is startled out of his chair and gives Vale a closer look. Much like the hookah-smoking Caterpillar in *Alice in Wonderland*, Pierce asks, “Who are you?”—a question often asked of Vale directly or implicitly throughout the film. In addition to whatever drug references can be attached to the scene via allusions to popular culture, the question is yet another way in which Vale is framed as a figure, much like Alice, who is on a journey that will transform him from a child to adult. The use of Ephemerol is an important ingredient in that transformation. There are numerous close shots of hypodermic syringes ingesting and expelling liquid. After his encounter with Pierce, Vale heads back to his hotel and with an air of desperation picks up a package from the hotel clerk that contains Ephemerol. In the privacy of his room, Vale ‘shoots up’. Within moments the sweats stop and the voices

without lips emanating through the walls are silenced, allowing Vale to sleep.

Previously, Ruth lies to Vale, telling him that scanners are a mysterious “freak of nature”. Ruth takes no responsibility or credit for creating scanners through the Ephemeral campaign, a not too subtle reference to the Thalidomide and DES scandals. Ruth, no matter how benevolent he may seem, is ultimately portrayed as part of that generation that, due to ambition, self-interest, misguided priorities, and loss of idealism, are not to be trusted. During the interrogation scene near the end of the film, once again Dr. Ruth convincingly lies to Vale, and perhaps himself, by telling him that he has nothing to hide when in fact he hides what is most important: that Vale and Revok are brothers and that he, Ruth, is their father. What Vale does learn is that Ruth founded Biocarbon Amalgamate, the company that developed Ephemeral, and sold it to ConSec in 1942—the war years.

In addition to the Thalidomide/DES controversies, there is an implicit association made here between what Dr. Ruth has done

and the ethical dilemmas faced by the scientific community that gave birth to the Manhattan Project and more broadly, the military-industrial complex. “Do you know what that lab [Biocarbon Amalgamate] does?” asks Vale. “They make some sort of chemical weaponry among other things,” Ruth says dismissively and without a trace of guilt or irony for what he has wrought. Once again Ruth takes no responsibility for his creations: chemical, biological or corporate. Ruth is able to work at ConSec because he has sold out—he has compromised his integrity and morality for a “genial working relationship” with his corporate sponsor. For Ruth’s generation drugs are prescriptive: they are pharmaceuticals manufactured by corporations, dispensed by doctors, and used to cure, control and conquer, and as a byproduct, may be responsible for the creation of monstrosities or other forms of disability. For the scanner generation, drugs are represented as a source of self-control that leads to power. Ephemeral is a backfired form of control (a sedative for mom) that ultimately serves as a catalyst that leads

Michael Ironside as Darryl Revok, leader of the scanner underground





Kim Obrist/Jennifer O'Neill's outfit gives her the appearance of wearing a neck brace.

to transformation and eventually, transcendence.

If Ruth represents the generation allied with the military-industrial complex, the scanners are characterized as its privileged descendants who, feeling jaded and victimized by its goals, values and aspirations, reject the prevailing institutions by developing a counterculture and an armed resistance. In this way, the individual scanners have more of a connection with the Weather Underground or Students for a Democratic Society, than with a grown-up version of the children in *Village of the Damned* (1960). Like the scanner generation, the Weather Underground represents a threat from within (the children of the military-industrial complex) whose goal is to disrupt the status quo; whereas the children in *Village of the Damned* represent an external threat (the children of aliens) often allegorized as cold-war paranoia.

Responsible for both his sons' psychic disability/gift from which he has built a reputation and successful profession, Ruth is portrayed as a modern day Dr. Frankenstein. There are several exterior shots establishing his 'castle' as the deteriorating, abandoned commercial building where Vale is debriefed and trained. Sitting on the edge of his bed, still dressed in white, feet dangling inches from the floor, Vale looks like a fearful adolescent scared of taking on the responsibilities of adulthood. Ephemerol has enabled him to hear his own voice, making him feel exposed but liberating him from his previously wretched state. Vale is set up as a kind of missing link about to embark on a journey of self-discovery that will enable him to serve as a synthesis between the two existing scanner camps.

Big brother Darryl Revok's introduction is in sharp contrast to Vale's and also introduces an array of 'yuppie-culture' imagery that will follow. No derelict, Revok is a three-piece suit seated in ConSec's audience of financial and political VIPs. Using his scanning powers he has infiltrated ConSec's security with the sole purpose of assassinating ConSec's (Ruth's) last scanner who is portrayed as a flunky, a corporate tool. Revok has volunteered to be scanned by the flunky. In a sensational scene that has garnered much attention, Revok uses his scanning powers to detonate the head of the lackey scanner. ConSec security concludes that Revok is a scanner assassin and in a nicely constructed action sequence, several security men die trying to subdue Revok who escapes.

The attack, which happens early in the film, sets up the allegorical link of the scanner underground with the radical left. The attack was a 'blow against the empire', a direct and violent challenge to corporate authority. Following this debacle, there is a corporate reshuffling at ConSec and Braedon Keller/Lawrence Dane, who we later find out is working for Revok, is hired as the new head of security. Eight men, including Dr. Ruth, sit around a conference table as Keller unsuccessfully argues to kill ConSec's scanner program. In contrast to the conservatively dressed board of directors, the bearded, tieless Dr. Ruth, self-assuredly slouched in his chair, confidently argues that the program must be kept alive to fight the "scanner underground" that has decimated the ConSec program. Ruth proposes to send out Vale as a spy to infiltrate the underground and, using language that appeals to the CEO at the board meeting, "eliminate the competition". Ruth as

his stance and appearance implies, feels he is above the restraints imposed by the corporation. Like the bohemian artist Benjamin Pierce, the mad scientist has his own, often delusional, sense of autonomy from larger forces. In this regard the exterior establishing shots of Ruth's decrepit lab are an ironic counterpoint to the exterior shots of ConSec's unblemished corporate tower.

Meanwhile back at the decrepit lab, Dr. Ruth indoctrinates Vale by telling him the truth, but not the whole truth. Vale is shown a 16mm film of Revok, whom he does not yet know is his older brother, being interviewed at a mental institution in 1967. Revok has drilled a hole into the center of his forehead. In a disjointed fashion he describes the 'bad trip' logic of painting an eye on the patch that covers the wound. Identifying with the 16mm psychodrama he's just witnessed, Vale is profoundly disturbed. "That's me, isn't it?" Vale asks. The Revok film is an illustration of both ConSec's failure to keep the scanners under control, and the danger presented by the latter's rage (See Figure 5). In *Artist as the Monster*, William Beard suggests the 16mm film may be a reference to Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960) because the father has access to and may have filmed the son's 'treatment'⁶. The black and white footage of the institutionalized Revok is also reminiscent of Fred Wiseman's 1967 *Titicut Follies*, a disquieting documentary about a Massachusetts asylum for the criminally insane. The film is a portrait of men who live outside the realm of the normal, and the doctors and security guards that try to keep them under control. The Revok film also evokes the glut of wild footage easily accessible on the internet, that documents the use of LSD, THC and other mind altering drugs used by the US, Canadian, and other governments to experiment on soldiers for nefarious purposes, including its use as a potential weapon. All these allusions are perfectly in keeping with the conspiratorial intrigue that is part of the narrative scope of *Scanners*.

An asylum for the criminally insane is mentioned again when the scanner-artist Benjamin Pierce is first introduced. Pierce, who at age ten tried to kill his family, was eventually "[rehabilitated] through art" and released. Dr. Ruth wants Vale to get information from Pierce about Revok's radical underground. The idea of the artist living in his head is literalized during Vale's visit to the artist's secluded rural studio. Pierce and Vale talk inside a huge sculptured head created by the artist while four of Revok's assassins approach. Vale, trying to fulfill the mission he was set out to do by Dr. Ruth is also in search of, or trying to create, his own identity. He tells Pierce "I'm one of you". Pierce doesn't understand or care what Vale means and avoids him by exiting the sculptured head where he is gunned-down by Revok's soldiers.

The arrival of Revok's assassins uses iconography steeped in the zeitgeist of radical 60s groups. The four denim clad assassins, one white female, one black male and two white males, pile out of a black van, toting weapons. As they are blasting away at Pierce, whom they are apparently trying to silence to prevent Vale from getting access to Revok, they look like (wanted) poster-children for the Symbionese Liberation Army. The FBI bank holdup images of Patty Hearst and Donald DeFreeze appear to be either deliberate or unconscious models for Cronenberg's scanner underground soldiers. From the safety of Pierce's sculptured head, Vale demonstrates scanner prowess by telepathically incapacitating the assassins. Too late to save Pierce, Vale exits the smashed sculptured metaphorical head and uses his scanning powers to telepathically enter Pierce's actual head to retrieve his dying thoughts—a modern twist on

the trope of a character's dying words leading to the next plot point. Vale's scan leads him to Kim Obrist, the leader of the other scanner camp.

Prior to this scene we have already witnessed Vale's scanning prowess in a sequence that explores another popular 60s icon: the yogi master. Dr. Ruth matches yogi master Dieter Tauntz/Fred Doederlein to serve as Vale's "psychic sparring partner". Tauntz is supposed to be able to control his heart rate and alpha wave rhythm. Vale enters the scene like a boxer entering the ring in a fight movie. Ruth, playing the part of the coach, removes Vale's coat as if it were a boxer's satin robe. Still wearing white, Vale sits opposite his opponent who is sitting in the lotus position. Barefooted, crossed legs, eyes closed, the yogi is a portrait of self-control. Tauntz (taunts!) is unable to control anything. He shudders, shakes, whimpers, and then begs for Vale to stop his scan. Trying to prevent a homicide, Ruth is ready to inject Vale with Ephemerol when Vale rises to his feet and prevents Ruth's intervention. Vale looks down at his father graphically and metaphorically. In a display of rebellion and power, Vale, the enfant terrible, has rendered the yogi master impotent while demonstrating complete control through self-restraint at just the right moment. The father no longer has control of the son—either of them.

Led to Kim Obrist's group of 'new age' scanners by the dying Ben Pierce, Vale is introduced to a sect of scanners that Dr. Ruth never told him about. Obrist's headquarters is an urban building with lots of homey, modest rooms—the type of space that was not uncommon during the 70s that housed meeting places for practitioners of Transcendental Meditation and other consciousness raising groups. Vale is greeted by a fellow thirty-something who closes his eyes, raises his right hand, and scans him. At one point during his scan he opens his eyes and flashes a brief smile that suggests a mix of incredulity, restrained respect, and amusement at Vale's naiveté. This sequence is an example of how Cronenberg has elicited nuanced performances throughout the film, from even marginal characters. Vale is led to the room where he meets Obrist for the first time. "He's for real" is how he is introduced to Obrist. She is kneeling before a couch, her back to the camera, while she comforts a man who is clearly in emotional distress. As she turns to face Vale, the high turtle-neck sweater wrapped in a scarf—an outfit she wears for the rest of the movie—gives her the appearance of a person wearing a neck brace. In the final scene of the movie Revok describes her and the group she leads as "Obrist and her band of cripples". Revok is depicted as a monster with muscle; Obrist and her group are represented as enlightened but, like the yogi master, completely impotent.

Vale participates in a group scan. Unlike the previous depictions of being scanned- which caused nausea, nosebleeds and of course the infamous exploding head—this group-scan is portrayed as pro-social, interactive, and personal. Sitting in a circle on the floor they commune with each other using the voices without lips. During an audio montage that includes phrases like, "scan together and our minds begin to flow into each other.... beautiful and frightening.... frightening to lose yourself, to lose yourself to the group self, to lose your will to the group will," the camera circles around the group, image dissolving from participant to participant, suggesting their connectedness. Presumably this camp controls their disability/gift through "group scans" not drugs. Here, scanning is a method of expanding consciousness as opposed to consolidating power.



Scanner synthesis: Cameron Vale loses his body but wins the scanner war.

Two of Revok's soldiers carrying weapons concealed in guitar cases, force their way into the room and blast away at the oblivious revelers. Several are killed before they awake from the group meditation and set the assassins aflame. Five of Obrist's band, including Vale, flee the building and drive away in a beat-up yellow van with the words "SCHOOL BUS" faded away on its hood. By putting the scanner occupants into a school bus, we are being prompted to view this sect of spiritually connected scanners as vulnerable innocents, school children that in the face of Revok's aggressive tactics have as much chance as Dieter Tauntz had against Vale. In contrast to the yellow school bus, the black van filled with Revok soldiers is ominous. It pulls alongside the other vehicle; louver windows open revealing weapons that fire on the occupants of the school bus. The out-of-control school bus smashes into a record store, another icon of youthful innocence and impotent rebellion, shattering glass and demolishing racks of vinyl LPs.

Surrounded by smashed records, posters of pop stars, and an RSO logo that spontaneously combusts,⁷ Vale and Obrist escape to the basement of the record store with one of Revok's soldiers in pursuit. Obrist believes the battle between the two scanner camps is over and declares Revok the winner, "We were the dream, and he's the nightmare." When Vale suggests that he and Obrist can "destroy Revok together", Obrist mocks the newbie: "You? You're barely human." Head bowed in shame, Vale reacts like a little boy who's been rejected by a parent. Hurt and forlorn by the cutting comment, the unaffiliated scanner with only a marginal connection to ConSec, via Dr. Ruth, is viewed as incredibly naïve and lacking a meaningful identity. In spite of his seeming shortcomings, Vale subdues the scanner assassin who presents him with a liquid-filled medical vial emblazoned with the Biocarbon Amalgamate logo, which leads us to the next plot point. With the introduction of Obrist's group, the status quo represented by ConSec and its allegorical equivalent (the military-industrial complex) is rejected by Vale (intergenerational conflict), and an allegorical connection is made between the divisive dissension, infighting and betrayal within the ranks of the scanners with that of the new left (intra-generational conflict).

At this point in the film, allusions to the 60s/70s radical and mind/body/spirit counterculture are replaced with suggestions of 'yuppie culture'. Revok the revolutionary becomes Revok the yuppie. Revok is portrayed as a usurper. He is not being hand-

ed the proverbial baton by the older generation whose corporate culture he will adopt. Revok and his group snatch power through a coup d'état. They take control of all that has already been put in place by ConSec, including their computer program. Vale infiltrates Biocarbon Amalgamate where the sterile corporate environment is literalized. Workers at Biocarbon wear HAZMAT suits not to prevent themselves from being contaminated, but to prevent themselves from contaminating the production of Ephemerol that is being mass-produced and shipped out in huge hygienic stainless steel truck tankers. Surrounded by workers and middle management toddies, Revok is clearly in charge.

When first trying to connect with Revok though Benjamin Pierce earlier in the movie, Vale visits an art gallery where Pierce's work is on display and the milieu of the young urban professional is introduced into the narrative. "I'm interested in buying this piece for my apartment in Paris," says Vale. No longer dressed in the garb of the homeless, or the pristine white of the recovering addict, Vale is dressed in suit and tie and wears a thick gold bracelet for the wine and cheese event. Obrist, in black formalwear, sports a sequined choker in anticipation of the turtleneck 'brace' that will follow. When Vale finally does meet Obrist in person at the safe house, he's dressed in fashionable working class plaid and denim. In this way, wardrobe plays an important role in how the viewer may interpret the alliance, or association of the various characters.

A series of deceptions and plotline contortions drive the story to the film's conclusion: pregnant women are, once again, being treated with Ephemerol and are about to give birth to a new generation of scanners that Revok will presumably command. With the help and encouragement of Dr. Ruth, who is partially redeemed by his actions just before Keller murders him as per Revok's instructions, Vale immobilizes ConSec by using a phone connection and his scanning powers to hack into and destroy ConSec's computers along with its data. *Scanners* was released at that point in time when personal computers were just making their appearance and here they are already being hacked into on a massive scale. The military-industrial complex may have developed the computer, but it belongs to the generation of scanners.

Revok incapacitates Vale and Obrist and takes them to his prototypical yuppie office at Biocarbon where the final showdown will take place. The office is spacious with tiled floors,

leather chairs, a credenza, overstuffed couches, a desk with marblesque blotter and pen holder, the corporate logo is mounted on brick-face and white paneled walls. There are lots of plants and various *objets d'art*, one of which is used as the opening salvo in the war between the brothers. Shirtsleeves rolled, tie loosened, vest undone, Revok is drinking what looks like a scotch on ice; think Jerry Rubin, the post-Youth International Party stockbroker. In this final sequence all is revealed to Vale and the viewer: the family relationships, Ruth's role in creating scanners, and Revok's efforts to recruit his "kid brother" to the cause of building "an empire so brilliant, so glorious, we'll be the envy of the whole planet". Before long it becomes clear that the brothers are never going to align forces and the ensuing good vs. evil battle follows.

At the end of the brothers' very bloody scanner fight, Kim Obrist awakes from an adjoining room. Entering the main office she finds a body—not unlike one of Benjamin Pierce's creations—lying burnt beyond recognition on the floor, its arms spread as in a crucifixion stance. Knowledge has transformed Cameron Vale from a confused, transformational Alice—like figure to an enlightened Christ-like figure. The scanner battle has forced the brothers to transcend the body by destroying the body— at least one of them. Kim senses Cameron's presence, and then hears his voice coming from Revok who is curled up in a corner. "It's me Kim. Cameron. I'm here. We've won." The final shot is an extreme close up of Revok's face 'wearing' Vale's stark blue eyes. The scar on Revok's forehead is gone. A synthesis between the brothers and presumably between the two scanner camps has occurred.

In summary, Cronenberg has used a vast array of iconic imagery throughout *Scanners* to create an allegorical psychodrama placing representations of broad political, social, economic and cultural forces in conflict with each other. The allegorical message of the film is that the violence of a radical underground (Revok's group), the passive naiveté of an isolated, disengaged counterculture (Obrist's group) and the status quo of the imperious corporation (ConSec) are all rejected in favor of some undefined synthesis of the three. What the end result of that synthesis is we'll never know. The allegory embedded in *Scanners* does not predict outcomes; it explores contemporary relationships. This is why, like many of Cronenberg's films, *Scanners* ends with a strong sense of narrative closure that is paradoxically equal to its open-ended ambiguity.

While many of Cronenberg's films may be described as fanciful and fantastic, the stories are always based on attributes connected to the real world and so can easily be seen as allegories, parables, or other types of cautionary tales that are sometimes seen as prescient. Some have commented on how *Shivers* and *Rabid* anticipated AIDS, or at least allegorized sexually transmitted diseases. The explanation of the surgical procedure that forms the premise of *Rabid* may have sounded like total gibberish in 1976 when the film was made, but today, its connection to stem cell research, a procedure that was a decade or two away from being actualized, is an easy one to make. On the commentary track of the *Rabid* DVD, Cronenberg talks about how the artist has antennae "that pick up signals that other people either suppress or are not aware of... It's not exactly prophecy but it is a kind of sensitivity [that the artist has] about the way things are going socially and biologically and environmentally and so on".⁸

Whether the baby-boomer psychodrama that plays out in *Scanners* was conscious or not, it immediately comes to the

foreground with each viewing of the movie. It has often been noted that because of a variety of production issues, Cronenberg was writing the script for *Scanners* while the movie was being shot. While the rushed production schedule may have caused some narrative hiccups, perhaps it also allowed for an unfiltered flow of zeitgeist to the artist's "antennae", especially as it relates to the development of his own career as reflected through the character of Cameron Vale. Elsewhere on the commentary track, Cronenberg ruminates about his identification with his characters—in this case the Marilyn Chambers character—who are outsiders: "People who by circumstances are forced to become outsiders, not necessarily by nature but by circumstances beyond their control, in some ways it's always been to me the archetype of the artist who becomes a kind of creature, becomes a monster, becomes an outsider because of his perceptions, because of what he feels driven to do by his art."⁹

The journey of Vale the outsider is very much a deliberation on how Cronenberg, the outsider, with an affinity for independent underground cinema, hailed and vilified as the King of Veneer Horror, will adapt to the pressure to conform to the demands of an industry that pays handsomely for a large audience and punishes decisively for an empty theater. Alternating between films with subject matter that have niche appeal (*Naked Lunch* [1991], *Crash* [1996], *Spider* [2002]) and a mass, or at least a broader market (*The Fly* [1986], *History of Violence* [2005]), seems to be how Cronenberg, like many filmmakers, navigates the dichotomy of cinema as art (counterculture) and cinema as industry (dominant culture). But thirty plus years after the release of *Scanners*, Cronenberg still seems to be making the movies he wants to make. By this measure, the Vale/Revok amalgam curled up in the corner asserting, "We've won," may be a mirrored image of Cronenberg holding onto his cake while getting to eat it too.

Notes

- 1 Michael Grant, ed., *The Modern Fantastic: The Films of David Cronenberg* (Westport: Praeger, 2000), 37-39.
- 2 Piers Handling, ed., *The Shape of Rage: The Films of David Cronenberg* (New York: Zoetrope, 1983), 31, 39.
- 3 Serge Grünberg, *David Cronenberg: Interviews With Serge Grünberg* (London: Plexus, 2006), 14.
- 4 Grant, *The Modern Fantastic*, 22.
- 5 Grünberg, *David Cronenberg*, 15.
- 6 William Beard, *The Artist as Monster: The Cinema of David Cronenberg* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 112.
- 7 Cronenberg seems to take pleasure in having the assassin stand before a three dimensional RSO mascot as it bursts into flames. RSO (the Robert Stigwood Organization) was a highly successful independent record label that ventured into film production finding wild success with *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) and *Grease* (1978), and followed up with the abysmal failure of the indescribably awful *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1978). According to *The Internet Movie Database* (www.imdb.com/title/tt0081455/trivia), RSO paid for product placement in *Scanners* and then went out of business. Setting the RSO logo up in flames is a good example of Cronenberg's wry, often unappreciated sense of humor.
- 8 *Rabid*, DVD, Directed by David Cronenberg. (1977; Toronto, Canada: Somerville House) 2004.
- 9 Ibid.