

# ARTICLES

## Characterising *Rabid*

This essay attempts to show what a qualitative portrayal of a film might look like using the film *Rabid* (David Cronenberg, Canada, 1977) to exemplify. Although this type of portrayal will be possible for any film, and it is being proposed as a critical approach which could be used extensively, I had the sense that *Rabid* was an instance of a film where the approach would be particularly useful in accessing its aesthetic distinctiveness. There is little sustained commentary or analysis of the film (that I have found) although it is referred to, explicitly and implicitly, in the scholarly literature about its director David Cronenberg and about the horror film more generally. Much of this scholarship, while revealing about, for example, themes, tropes, contexts, and spectatorial engagement, mostly does not spend time specifying the film's range of qualities or when and how they occur. I hope therefore that attempting to fill this gap will conspicuously demonstrate the benefits of the approach.<sup>3</sup>

Assessing a film through a qualitative lens means not *prioritising* the customary perspectives through which we, including myself, assess films in academia: for example, the formal, the narratological, the thematic, the ideological, the cultural, the historical, the spectatorial, the theoretical, the philosophical, or even, simply, the presiding topic. These

perspectives *will* play a part in helping to reveal the qualities of *Rabid*, but it is not the intention to formulate or orientate the account around or towards them (or any one of them). Instead, the essay is *dedicated* to identifying qualities or, what we might ordinarily call, characteristics of a film. By 'quality' I mean a characteristic, property, or attribute, or a trait or feature of personality. I do not mean something that is straightforwardly good for although a quality may sometimes be a good feature of a film, it need not be (it will depend on expression, placement, and conjunction). Concomitantly, an aim of the essay is to characterise, and show the benefit of characterising, a task which, surprisingly, given what it might reveal about a work's nature or being, is rarely undertaken in film studies as an end in itself. As well as identifying characteristics, the essay will show how they are creatively generated from techniques, composition, narrative, performance style, and other aspects of the film's presentation. It will be especially interested in characterising *Rabid* by recognising how it invokes, combines, and particularises various genres and stylistic modes.<sup>4</sup>

The film concerns a young woman Rose (Marilyn Chambers) who is involved in a terrible near fatal motorbike accident. She is taken to the nearest hospital, a plastic surgery clinic, where Dr Keloid (Howard Ryschpan) performs an experimental skin graft operation which is the only way of saving her life. This operation is successful in keeping Rose alive, but at a cost: she now desperately needs human blood to survive. Rose is therefore compelled to attack other people with a protruding proboscis, a mutation that has developed in her arm pit because of the skin graft operation. The proboscis stabs her victims, extracting blood from them, leaving her temporarily satiated and leaving them infected with rabies. The rabies spreads around the population and becomes a national crisis.

The opening scene of *Rabid*, which is also the beginning of the credit sequence, is thirty seconds long, and precedes the catastrophic road accident. A woman is perched on the side of a motorbike seat, at a roadside, dressed in shiny black jacket and trousers. The camera is behind her, a few metres away.<sup>5</sup> It moves towards her, travels round her left-hand side, and shows her pulling on her black gloves. It comes to rest at

an angle to the side of her, far round enough to make her front and face visible (while the actor's name, Marilyn Chambers, appears in the open space beside her). Aside from adjusting her gloves, she sits quite stiffly upright with her head still,



looking out, tense, perhaps tightened by the cold. The camera also comes round enough to show some cars, buildings, trees, and grassy areas in the background, covered in clumps of icy snow, and to finally take in a man (Frank Moore) emerging



from the door of a red shack which might be a roadside café or a store or a small gasoline station. As he emerges, also in biker garb, she moves her head round a little, registering the noise of his exit, and the film cuts to show his head in close-up as he turns to look at her. The film then cuts back to its opening shot, viewing the woman once again from behind and at a distance. This now appears to be close to, or reflective of, the man's optical point of view. Another cut shows us her upper body close-up: she rubs her hands together for warmth, the cold wind ruffles her wavy blonde hair, her face is mildly apprehensive. And finally, the film cuts back to the face of the man who continues to look fondly across at her. All the way through the scene there is music on the soundtrack with a flute melody most prominent and violins and piano notes underneath. The scene finishes when it cuts, skipping some time, to a shot of them both on a motorbike, noisily roaring down a road, speeding towards the camera. The title of the film is displayed: *Rabid*.

This functional description of the film's opening does little to convey its qualitative aspect. The cinematographic 'look' is 1970s North American, on-location realism, apparently unenhanced, earthy, not glossy. The sky is off-white but not quite gloomy or bleak: it appears to be early morning or early evening but could be any grey time of the day. The location is unimpressive; although it is likely to be somewhere northern, it has a middle-of-nowhere wintry sparseness. The shack, with its ubiquitous red and white Coca-Cola painted facade and row of bulbs set into the porch roof, emitting yellow light, is devoid of specificity and interior life. This indistinct in-betweenness coupled with a woman made tremulous by the cold breeze creates an uneasy incipience. This tremulous quality is also within the texture of the music, the violins and piano producing a gently vibrating tremolo, beneath the melody. The melody itself, made by a flute, is plaintive and wistful; the singular minor notes are high in pitch, but not loud, creating an acute yet subdued lament, whilst they are also breathy and drawn-out, creating a regretful sigh.<sup>6</sup> As the camera deliberately comes around the woman, from behind, it has that secretly encroaching quality, familiar from horror films. However, synthesised with this atmosphere and this music it is not menacing. She is approached and singled out by the

camera, but in a premonitory rather than predatory way, and although the movement is eerie, it is ruefully portending rather than spectral.<sup>7</sup> Different components of the filmmaking combine to form amorphous atmospheric and mood related characteristics: the setting and the weather straightforwardly convey a brisk cold; when coupled with the music a wintry melancholy; and when coupled with the camera movement a chilly presaging.<sup>8</sup> The camera movement is also observational, and perhaps even respectful: it curves around her side placidly to introduce her, hence the appearance of the actor's name, and then stops short, slightly to the side, keeping a little distance as if it were wanting to pay attention to her rather than intrude. The camera might also be establishing an alignment with her solitary position, perhaps even an affinity, and when it returns to view her from behind, for a second time, it conjoins with the man's affectionate gaze. As well as reflecting this gaze, this shot resembles an album cover – 1970s rock-country perhaps – distilling, and abstracting, a representative image. As the woman sits alone, her feathered cut hair touched by natural forces, looked on from a distance by the camera and the man, she is distinguished and discrete.

It worth acknowledging the basic yet important point, illustrated by this opening, that one scene or sequence need not only have one characteristic. This preparatory scene has a host of characteristics: for example, uneasily incipient, tremulous, plaintive, rueful, respectful, distilling, and more (or one could say it has a tremulous quality, it has a plaintive quality and so on).<sup>9</sup> Even one feature, such as the movement of the camera, may have a few characteristics simultaneously. I emphasise this because we might be tempted to characterise too minimally, or reductively, accurately capturing something prevailing or supervening while overlooking variation. Indeed, the variety of characteristics exhibited in the opening, during only thirty seconds, across a similar tonal range, shows the qualitative density that can occur within a simple transitory scene. Parsing the characteristics is useful in instances such as the opening, where they are closely related, interlocking, and reinforcing, to discern the coherence.

Parsing is also useful in instances when characteristics are contrasting. For example, *Rabid* has proximate contrasting qualities which occur during Rose's moments of attack.

Shortly after Rose's operation, just after she first awakes, she is naked and shivering, and asks Lloyd (Roger Periard), a man who receives treatment at the clinic, to hold her. Although he expresses worry about the excessive intimacy ("this is really



weird"), he is unable to resist her urgent offer, and she sits up in bed, clings onto him, rocking to try to warm herself. She then grabs him even closer in a vice-like tightening at which point she stabs. This clasping of him is intensely forceful, yet it occurs within the context of a warming hug and, even more strikingly, it is followed, as they both fall back on the bed, by the fondling of his hair. Later, after attacking Dr Keloid in similar fashion in her hospital bed, Rose lovingly moves her hands through his hair while tearfully staring upwards. If her behaviour with Lloyd resembles a lover's post orgasmic appreciation, with Dr Keloid it resembles a mother with her precious child. Perhaps the strangest variation of all occurs in the barn before she attacks a cow. First, she pats it gently, with an almost childlike fascination, and then, after removing her coat, she more intently strokes its fur. She then drapes herself over the cow, her head resting on its back, her eyes closed,

in consoling preparation for the puncturing. In all these instances the hugging provides the ideal posture for the stab (because the proboscis is in the arm pit), but it also allows for the brutal invasions to take place during postures of affection. The hard, stabbing quality, breaking the surface, contrasts to a soft, stroking quality, moving tenderly across a surface.<sup>10</sup> And the swiftness of the attacks, short and sharp, contrast to the leisurely doting. Following Rose's ferocious attack on Judy (Terri Hanauer) in the jacuzzi there is a shot of her in repose, her head seemingly resting peacefully on the naked bleeding body of her victim, with the slow-motion presentation adding to the dreaminess. The film presents contrasting characteristics and fuses them, and this fusion, achieved by Rose transitioning instinctively, is fluently rendered, and disarmingly so. Surrounding the severe with, or couching it in, the sensitive acutely captures the dual state of Rose's being



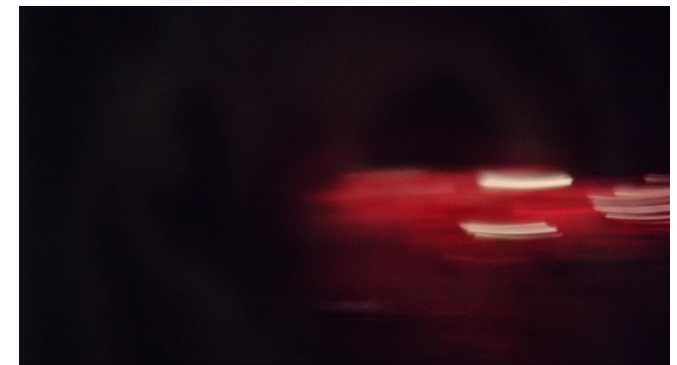
through the qualitative experience. And by modulating the damagingly freakish with the sympathetically commonplace, the film creates a disquieting poignancy which is more generally characteristic of it.<sup>11</sup>

The film also generates qualities by combining contrasting stylistic modes. When Rose prepares to embrace the cow in the barn, an electronic distorted screech agitates on the soundtrack with one brittle but echoing ping, like that of a radar, sounding at the exact moment of her lunging stab. This ping returns and repeats, in a pulsing manner, as she strokes the cow following the attack. The machine-made sounds inject an artificial disturbance into the on-location setting and other naturalistic aspects of the filmmaking reflecting Rose's injection of an artificial disturbance into the natural order.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, generic traits of surrealism are grafted onto the surrounding ingrained naturalistic presentation. The surrealism is sporadic and fugacious rather than pervasively constituting the film world or sequentially and prolifically generating irrational connection. Rose's mutation is first revealed when Dr Keloid examines her: he raises her arm to show the offending area, a gash surrounded by puckered skin, less a wound than a new, permanent bodily form. A hole should not be there, hence the surrealist aspect, like the hole in the hand where the ants emerge in *Un Chien Andalou* (Luis Buñuel, Fr, 1929). Furthermore, the allusions uncomfortably and confusingly comingle: the hole in the armpit alludes to the anus (puckered sphincter) and vagina (more slit than round) out of which, rather than into which, a hard penis rises and penetrates. Some of the components of this symbolism are patent, indeed embarrassingly reminiscent, and alongside the surrealistic mixing and transplanting, create a disconcerting exposure, and an indecent, shameless absurdity.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the shots of the proboscis are fugitive, and seemingly unattached, like footage indelicately inserted; they puncture the film (like Rose's victims), and give an underground, experimental-film quality to the surrealism.<sup>14</sup> In this respect, apparently dissimilar modes – the surrealism and the naturalism – have characteristics in common: they are both unfinished in some respect, unvarnished, rough, or raw. From a methodological point of view, one could be forgiven for *only* offering symbolic interpretations of the imagery because of its salience, but that



would not necessarily convey or highlight the qualities arising from the surrealistic affront within the naturalistic frame of reference. This would be an example of the qualitative being lost to the semantic.<sup>15</sup>

Although the film can be flagrant, in symbolism and action – there is the occasional manic, even cartoon, behaviour especially by the zombies – it is often balanced by some compensatory suppressive tendency.<sup>16</sup> Attitudinally, the provocation and absurdity of the image of the armpit is moderated by a clinical earnestness and a biological frankness (for example, through the close-up of the doctor's physical examination of the orifice). In the initial attacks, because the nature of Rose's mutation has not been established, it is not at all clear what is transpiring. Her underarm proboscis is only briefly shown, sometimes barely discernible: when she attacks the vagrant in the barn, there is only a split-second flash of some



glistening redness slicing through the darkness. Even when the actual act of penetration becomes more discernible, as when, in extreme close-up, we are very briefly shown the proboscis penetrating Dr Keloid's body, it is a momentary burst.

It is therefore the rapid insertion of the proboscis into the montage, rather than into the body, which conjures the piercing quality (along with the inference). The attacks are forceful and fierce, often accompanied by screamingly insistent music, but they are not prolonged. They are abrupt, snatched, with an impulse to then subdue (all that calm stroking).

Similarly, the use of blood, throughout the incidents involving Rose, is circumscribed. It is shown gathering around and dripping down her elbow after attacking Lloyd. Or dripping from behind the ear of a truck driver and down his neck, shown in such a way to emphasise its negligibility: just about visible to us in a wide medium shot, but missed by the policeman, and for a while by the truck driver himself until he senses a wound. Even the pooling of the blood in the hot tub, after a frenzied tussle, is a small patch, under the surface of the water, leaking blurrily into the side of the shot.

After Rose attacks the man in the adult cinema, and has left the building, the camera returns inside to pan along the row of seats, finding the victim with his head collapsed. The camera continues panning down through the dark to his hand, lit by the cinema screen, with one bored hole in the fleshy part of the thumb, and a line of blood, about an inch in length, trickling from it. The neat puncture wound and its trickle appear more contained and minimal, even somewhat anti-climactic, after the camera's drawn-out approach (its movement perhaps emphasising the need to seek out the wound, rather than build up to it). Although Rose's intent is literally blood thirsty, the presentation is far from blood soaked, with blood used indicatively rather than expansively; its presence is specific, rather than spattered or splattered, in keeping with the precise piercing nature of the attacks.<sup>17</sup> This is partly enabled by the blood sucking being enacted by a hidden proboscis in an

armpit rather than the time-honoured biting mouth, smeared with blood, emerging from a victim's neck.<sup>18</sup> Blood often emerges as a discharge to mark the completion of the attack and the end of a scene, and because it is associated with her satisfaction, it has a pleasurable quality of relief and closure. The line that drips down the lateral side of Rose's elbow, vivid and glistening, is a distilled external representation of the fresh blood now running through her veins and the moment of bliss immediately after shooting-up.<sup>19</sup>

The film assaults but then seems to want to suck back its horror – like the proboscis sucking its blood and then retracting into its cavity – to carry on as if everything had gone back to normal. This is also characteristic of its presentation of the wider world. The handling of the pandemic becomes part of the film's background, happening around the characters, normalised within the urban activity and the mundanely municipal (which itself has a little too easily taken on the appearance of a futuristic, dystopian policing regime). There is clearly a national emergency, and stress and dismay, but this is not a going plot concern for the film and the documentation of it is unaffected (albeit coldly unpleasant). Although Hart and Murray (Joe Silver) are trying to comprehend and survive the situation, this does not become a motivating narrative focus with, for example, protagonists discussing and deploying strategies to defeat the problem, as in a disaster movie, and the film ends with the crisis ongoing. As the crisis is absorbed into the everyday, the film's most brutal example of workaday indifference occurs in the closing moments. Rose is found by 'refuse' collectors in white hazmat suits and gas masks, in a dark, disused parking lot amongst leaves and bags of waste. She is yet another dead body littering the streets which must be cleared away. Her disposal is shown in slow motion and accompanied by a gruff electric noise containing a heartbeat, both creating a grave, inhuman distortion. The film shows her lying face up in the disposal unit, eyes open, her right arm outstretched through rigor mortis, glaringly and mordantly exposing the *other* arm pit as if to stress the unseen. As Rose is rolled over, face buried, to be subsumed into the waste of the unit, her individualised story disappears into the anonymous surrounding structures. The collector's jump onto the back of the unit before it drives away from the still camera,



receding into the world, is an indication of the ongoing routine behaviours of waste disposal, cruelly and ironically set against the finality of the film – the credits are rolling – and the counteracting sense of significance. In a bleak mirroring



of the opening scene, with the same music playing, Rose is singled out, but only for the viewer, like the sleigh amongst all the antique artifacts at the end of *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, US, 1940). This is the film's own version of the convention of a concluding irony where a privileged viewpoint is offered to the viewer while it, and its significance, is hidden from others in the film. The closing moment is therefore assertive and assimilating, the terminal epitome of a characteristic tension across the film.

The film uses the unveil-veil and the burst-calm fluctuation of serial killer horror to create a sombre empathy. The concealing impulse is in keeping with the adolescent-style secrecy adopted by Rose in response to her mistreatment. Rose vomits violently after taking blood from the cow (revealing she can only survive on human blood), but she does so by reaching behind the cow, into the darkness, away from the

camera. This is as if she wanted, even in a barn with no company, to avoid embarrassment and the film wanted, even in a horror film which might gleefully have made this visible, to avoid the gross-out opportunity. When late in the film, Rose is finally discovered by Hart, sitting over the body of her girlfriend, seconds after attacking her, she first raises her arm to her mouth in shock and then, on realising that this gesture has revealed the proboscis in her armpit, quickly moves to cover it. Until this point, Rose's attacks have gone without notice by the other characters, hidden by the escalating consequences of the rabies, enhancing their secret status. Rose is like a child caught in the act, scrambling to hide the evidence, and she looks up at her fiancé with shame, her eyes betraying the sense that he will be deeply disappointed with her. It appears more important to the film to conceive of the attack, which it does not show, in terms of Rose's shame and disappointment, and



her infantilisation, rather than conceiving of it in terms of, say, the disgusting, the nasty, the creepy, the shocking, or the suspenseful (or any other stock characteristics of horror). The film's relative discretion, in respect to the horror moments related to Rose, sympathetically echoes its protagonist's character, or her character in relation to her endeavours. The sheepish aspect to the presentation, as if rushing to cover up, reflects Rose's half-understood need to be surreptitious.

True to the spirit of the opening scene, the film is mostly interested in, and most interesting when, attending to Rose and her vicinity. Although it is interspersed with scenes of Canada being taken over by rabid zombies, they have the status of surrounding interludes.<sup>20</sup> Unlike the virus, the film mostly does not spread as it proceeds, and it is intensive rather than expansive. It does not desert her and move on, as it might have done, once her initiating purpose in the narrative is complete. On

the contrary, as the origin of the virus, everything comes back to Rose and is channelled through her. The film has a centripetal character, a character enhanced precisely by its resistance to centrifugal pulls. In generic terms the film stays closer to the solitary and estranged features of the vampire genre than it does to the roaming or multiplying features of the zombie genre or the disaster movie genre. The film's low budget also encourages localisation and restriction. The concentration on Rose's lonely experience, enhanced by not venturing too far for too long into the far-reaching, catastrophic consequences, happening somewhere out there, enhances the film's intimate character while also expressing dislocation.

This sympathetic alignment with Rose's afflicted experience brings *Rabid* close to the perspective often adopted by another genre: the female melodrama in particular the 'melodrama of the unknown woman.'<sup>21</sup> This genre can be added

to the list of film categories to which the film is related: primarily, the horror sub-genres – vampire, zombie, body – but also medical drama, dystopian sci-fi, disaster movie, 1970s gloomy-naturalism, avant-garde surrealism, and grindhouse B-movie. The effect of categories, such as genre, on a film's character is analogous to the genetic and environmental influence on the makeup of a person or animal. A film's character is partly formed from internalising features of extrinsic categories, and the combinations and configurations that may arise are various. Switching analogy, the quantities of, and balance between, each ingredient in the recipe that makes up a film will be crucial to its flavour and consistency (and hence to any qualitative assessment). A criticism that could be legitimately levelled at *Rabid* is that the vampire aspect and the zombie aspect are not mixing well, even though the two genres are related, and this leads to inconsistency, a clash of tastes. The vampire aspect concerning Rose is finessed, but this is hampered by the zombie aspect which is coarse. A counter argument might be that the zombie aspect operates functionally as a backdrop to further focus and frame the narrative around Rose (and hence the ingredients *are* in balance despite a certain disharmony in the flavour sensation). The zombies are not the focus as they would be in a dedicated zombie film; the film isn't interested in the zombie as a figure in and of itself (for example, enacting reflections on humanity as do the films of George Romero). They are the marauding public manifestation of a dreadful contagion becoming more widespread, and thus set-off Rose's behaviour which is clandestine and singular.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the film uses the device of blunt contrast at the traumatic moment of the story's inception when the noisy family in the van crash into Rose. The crude and stereotypical crashes into the refined and individualised, with the former further highlighting the latter, and with the effect exacerbated by the predictable and deterministic cross cutting between approaching van and motorbike. Late on in the film, in a shopping mall, a young man notices Rose and approaches to hit on her. After sitting next to her for a few moments, he gets up to get a light. He walks away from Rose and approaches a zombie who attacks him. Although the attack is shown in closeup, the film shows his walk away within a wide shot that also includes Rose



sitting on the bench, and it returns to this shot a couple more times. The moment is structured in terms of *her*: her viewing of it and, as the police officer runs past her, the action happening around and beyond her. Her correct posture,



remaining upright, twisting around on the spot as the police officer rushes to intervene, makes her the pivotal figure. Her reaction hints at some inchoate realisation of her own part in a crisis, but mostly registers dismay and bewilderment, as if what was happening was indeed *beyond* her. As the violence and mayhem escalates, its grossness only further emphasises the contrast with her restraint. Exiting the mall slightly against the grain of the panicking, fleeing crowds, there is a classic gag-like quality to the construction of the scene with the anonymous cause of the chaos leaving the scene in plain sight, but unnoticed. Rose has unwittingly found herself in a rogue zombie film; it is one she helped to make, but where she does not belong, watching the action as if she were not in it. Somewhat paradoxically, therefore, the zombie related disorder further concentrates *Rabid* by demarcating the qualities of its kernel.

The most important genre that affects the film's character, in terms of distinctly marking it out, is that of hard-core pornography (specifically 1970s American porno-chic). And yet it is the least obvious aspect partly because, although the film has a relationship to the genre which affects its behaviour, it does not resemble that genre, and it is not an instance of it, even a marginal instance. The film is tied to the genre most securely by the presence of its lead actor Marilyn Chambers who was a prominent pornographic film star in 1970s. She would unavoidably bring characteristics associated with her star persona, but the significance goes beyond indefinite nods, or winks. Whether a conscious strategy or not, the film draws on and is meaningfully infused with the association throughout, and the qualitative consequences of this thrust in the film are unexpectedly productive. When Hart kisses Rose after her operation he does so tenderly on her lips,





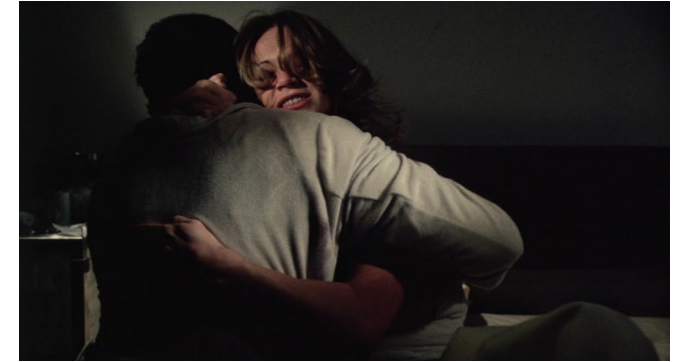
and the soft sensuality contrasts to the hard sexual action to which Chambers is accustomed (soft and hard again). There are sleeping beauty connotations as the woman is brought back to life from a state of dormant lovelessness. This cannot lift the curse on her though and if one standard critique of the pornographic genre is that it objectifies women, rather than granting them subjectivity, then Chambers once again takes on the role of someone with lost personhood. Nevertheless, Rose's sickness is also the condition of possibility for a revenge fantasy on her pornographic existence. This takes a similar form to a rape-revenge narrative – another horror movie sub-genre the film incorporates – where Rose/Chambers' proboscis grants her the power of the phallus and the serially penetrated becomes the serial penetrator. And during penetration she transmits a disease which leads to the visible deterioration of the body (prescient for a 1977 film). Crucially, the revenge trajectory is unannounced within the fiction and is not explicitly the driver of the narrative. Because of the unavoidable physiological impulses of Rose's condition, the vampiric aspect camouflages the revenge aspect.<sup>23</sup> Allusive meaning often has a beguiling quality because of its placement in the artistic entity, and this is true of the pornographic allusions in *Rabid*. While I believe these allusions are well-formed and well-developed in the film, and therefore not nebulous or latent, they are implicit and tacit, and situated such that their reception, and their acknowledgement, cannot be taken for granted. That the appreciation of this allusive dimension might for some people be partly dependent on, or enhanced by, the knowledge or even the experience, itself covert, of the



external context concerning Chambers – more likely in the 1970s than now – enhances the there-not-there quality.

*Rabid* is a type of horror film which has a similar serial structure to a pornographic film, with set-piece scenes of horror (instead of sex), at regular intervals throughout, varied by personnel, placement, orchestration, and transgression.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, some of Rose's horror scenes plainly mimic sex scenes. When she insists that Lloyd hug her on her hospital bed this insistency mirrors an eager invitation to sex, playing off the sexual voraciousness associated with Chambers. Sat in a lotus like position, she squeezes him aggressively and behaves as if she is experiencing an orgasm, groaning with sharp intakes of breath, clutching him firmly in place until fully satisfied. As they fall back into a reclining position, her body is still spasming, albeit more muted, and she settles into the post-coital stroking of his hair.<sup>25</sup> The sex/orgasmic analogy can be straightforwardly recognised, interpreted, and mapped (as I have done), but the reason for it, and situating of it, within a clinical context of sickness and a withholding about Rose's changed physicality, means the analogy has a disorienting quality. There is, once again, an incongruous transplanting as if Chambers' sexual persona had been mysteriously drawn into this environment from the unconscious and the repressed.<sup>26</sup>

The link to actual pornography through the star provides these sorts of unexpected qualitative dimensions. In the barn scene, that high tingling note at the moment of her lunging stab substitutes for the penetration that is not shown. However, when the proboscis *is* shown during the attacks, it



is often in extreme, non-situated, and extracted close-ups, in some ways evoking, while distorting, in a hallucinogenic way, pornographic film syntax. One of the few times it is shown situated, albeit small and indistinct, is in the moment I have already discussed when Hart catches Rose just after stabbing her girlfriend. As the door opens, the viewer and Hart may see the red proboscis sticking out of her arm pit, and she rushes to cover it up, as if concealing her private parts. The film shows this most unembarrassed type of performer in distress at being exposed.

Throughout the film, Chambers' non-actorly manner or her ostensible lack of actorly technique gives a Bressonian 'model', undemonstrative, even unformed, quality to her performance. In the beginning of the shopping mall sequence, when the man first approaches Rose, he says, "Mind if I sit down," to which she replies, "I don't mind". She delivers the



reply softly and reticently, and shrugs nonchalantly, as if she is not very bothered either way. She's not going to stop him sitting there if he wants to (she puts the emphasis on the "I" rather than the "don't" which might express more enthusiasm). Her line is amusingly ironic because we know that she desperately needs the close company of men to feed upon and survive – so she certainly doesn't mind – but she exhibits no eagerness or strategic seductiveness. The amusement is extended by the implication that she only needs to be not hostile or refusing; an unruffled neutrality will be enough for the man's desirous behaviour to take its natural course. Her quiescent behavioural qualities are crucial to the meanings and tone of this moment, and in general Chambers' performance style is ideally suggestive of a sub-zombified state whilst also offering a 'realistic' rendition of the unsophisticated, North American young everywoman, or the 1970s

incarnation of the modestly beautiful, desirable yet unassuming, 'girl next door'.

At the same time, within an apparently unformed performance, Chambers produces complicating inflections. When she is questioned and inspected by Dr Keloid in her hospital bed, shortly before embracing him, she declares she is not in pain, and lies very still, only her mouth moving, which draws attention to, and intensifies, the ostensibly contradictory tears running down her face. Although her voice here has an ingenuous girlish texture, it also has a deliberate imperturbable insistence ("I feel strong, I feel very strong" she says). Overall, Chambers' guileless performance has just enough situational ease, and unaffected, unobtrusive finessing to avoid appearing stilted and the combination of these qualities is crucial in maintaining the film's strain of pathos. In *Rabid* we have the pornographic star who is nevertheless not, in mainstream terms, a star, nor a practised actor, and thus the film can draw on antithetical characteristics: innocent and experienced, ingenu and worldly, amateur and professional, anonymous and recognisable, gauche and seductive, soft and hard, human and dehumanised.<sup>27</sup>

These antithetical suspensions relate to a pattern of inversion. One of David Cronenberg's well known concerns is troubling what we consider to be inside and outside the human body and this is true of *Rabid* where the phallus emerges from inside the body, an external organ reconceived as an internal one, and its transparent surface enables us to see, albeit momentarily, the streaming blood, extracted from outside, travelling inside.<sup>28</sup> The scene with the most inverted character is arguably the one where Rose visits an adult cinema and where the genre of pornographic film is literally present. In this scene the film makes the most of resituating its lead actor in the form of a reversal as Chambers is shown watching pornography rather than performing in it; she is in front of the screen rather than behind it. Here the inside/outside inversion occurs on a more structural level by troubling what is inside and outside the body of the film: Chambers is normally inside a pornographic film, not outside it (watching). The film never shows what is on the screen, only the activity in the audience, and although the soundtrack of the film being screened can be heard, it is oddly talky, devoid



of the staple moans and groans, removing the last vestige of arousal that the film might provide. The film's strict censoring of the pornography and its inflexible attention to the audience, especially Rose, underlines the turnaround and altered perspective.<sup>29</sup>

The turnaround also has a drily humorous quality. Rose/Chambers has no doubt sensed, from her former, or alternative, life that this will be an ideal location to prey on men. And when a man, her future victim in the cinema, moves over to her she says, "I like seeing these movies, but men always bother me", a fittingly contorted in-joke. Indeed, in addition to the humour being dry, it could also be characterised as wry: twisted, askew, and warped (all characteristics of the scene). We do not see the attack on the man, only the aftermath, and the film cuts to outside the cinema's entrance, where Rose leaves with a breezy

contentment, as if she were a liberated independent woman attending an adult cinema, enjoying a film on her own terms, and departing unselfconsciously. The bravura quality to her behaviour is boldly enhanced by her wearing a large thick fur coat whilst it also carries different connotations: those of the 1970s 'Happy Hooker' wandering the red neon lit streets, visiting the adult cinema for a quick trick. And to be sure the punter's pleasure is brief indeed! As well as dry and wry, the humour can also be characterised as contrary and sly, and perhaps even arch in its knowing mischievousness. Yet at the same time, the perverse amusements are recessive, naturalised by the seedy realism and dampened by loneliness, displacement, and victimisation (with Rose's walk to the cinema accompanied by those downbeat and plaintive musical strains). Moreover, any superiority the humour might produce is nullified by the film's

sincere attachments to its main character, its transmutations, and its grindhouse world.<sup>30</sup>

Such qualities relate specifically to matters of tone, or humour in the wider sense, the film's temper. Ascertaining proportion and interrelation where there is tonal mix is difficult and sets a challenge for characterisation. (For example, is a scene primarily, partially, or slightly humorous, where does the humour lie, and what is its nature?) It is challenging because the process is slippery with prominence shifting with perspective and mood during different viewings. It is also challenging because the elements can be stubbornly enmeshed. Matters are further complicated when the tonal character is created, as in this case, by extrinsic reference. In *Rabid*, through the presence of Chambers, the pornographic association is deep in its being. Therefore, although the film creates a variety of precise referential allusion, which *can* appear definite, there is also

in operation, what could be called, intertextual affect, a sub-conscious presence, drawing on external association, which is not explicit or specific. Moreover, because the film can rely on the association, and does not need to instigate the analogous regime itself, it can be true to its B-movie antecedents and be efficient, unencumbered, and unpretentious. Overall, in terms of genre, generic personae, and stylistic modes, the film is inclusive without appearing cluttered or cleverly referential; alchemic without asserting its imaginativeness; and reconceiving without evidently partaking in any innovative revisionism or intellectual reflexivity.<sup>31</sup>

These are further characteristics to add to the list of the many that have been discovered over the course of investigating the film: for example, transpositional derangement taking place within an environment of disquieting poignancy, sombre empathy, and dislocated intimacy. And then there are the contrasting characteristics – hard and soft, fierce and subdued, assertive and assimilative, coarse and finessed, surreal and naturalistic – and those arising from the various ways they relate. In addition, there are those brought about by the generic amalgam especially those, direct and indirect, that the Chambers' persona brings to the mix. Different film features contribute to the construction of character ranging from local ones like a shot or a camera movement to more extensive ones like a pattern or a structure. The characterising enterprise may address a film in different ways, but in this version of the enterprise I have ranged across film and characteristics. Some of my appraisal may be mistaken, need refining, or supplementing, but I hope the purpose has been clear. In principle, a thoroughgoing characterisation offers a varied, detailed, and embracing portrayal of a film, reflecting and respecting its personality, in a way that is often difficult to achieve by way of our customary channels of inquiry.

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<sup>1</sup> Researching the film, I found that the scholarly literature, which was mostly about the horror film more generally, tended to have two main emphases. One was a concern with themes and tropes, for example, abjection, death-drive, the human/non-human intersection, or representation of cultural anxieties and sociological change. The second was a concern with spectatorial engagement and response, for example, effects and affects, suspense structure, or psychological/psychoanalytical attachments (gendered or otherwise). This literature sometimes offers insights and interpretations which help to characterise *Rabid*, so I have extracted these for the notes, and where possible extended them into a more qualitative realm. As these notes largely form a parallel commentary, if preferred, so as not to break the flow of the main text, they can be read together at the end. Although largely unrelated to the discourse around *Rabid*, it should be acknowledged that contemporary work on affect in the horror film has offered a qualitative type of approach mainly focusing on sensation qualities (accompanied once again by an interest in spectatorial matters). See 'In Search of a Film's Character' (Clayton and Klevan 2025) in this issue for more preliminary context concerning a qualitative approach.

<sup>2</sup> Although it is hoped that the proposed approach will be demonstrated largely through the act of characterising the film there will also be some overt methodological highlighting along the way (especially in the first part of the essay).

<sup>3</sup> Some production credits appear, by her side, on the right side of the screen.

- <sup>4</sup> The instruments sound as if they are produced by a synthesiser. This music is repeated through the film, and is a theme or leitmotif associated with Rose.
- <sup>5</sup> This is in keeping with the film rooting its horror in the consequences of the technological, medical, and biological (and the human occupation with them) rather than the supernatural.
- <sup>6</sup> Pam Cook describes Cronenberg as 'one of the great melancholics of modern cinema'. Cited in Creed (2000:99).
- <sup>7</sup> Some of these characteristics are distinct to the opening and some reoccur across the film. Also worth noting, just in case, I am not meaning to imply that the characteristics identified are unique to the film, for example 'portending' camera movements do appear in horror films; the interest rather is identifying them in *this* manifestation and configuration.
- <sup>8</sup> Murray Smith writes that the 'contrast between the "hard" and "soft" animates almost all of Cronenberg's work' (2000: 75).
- <sup>9</sup> This is an example of a generative chain: the merging of characteristics, for example soft and hard, creates more characteristics, for example 'disquieting poignancy'.
- <sup>10</sup> An oscillating and agitating piano, first surging in speed and volume, then fading, is also introduced, and is also probably electronic in origin. The film uses an electronic soundtrack in many parts of the film and although not unusual in horror films and other genres of the 1970s it has its own purpose. One is to evoke underlying forces or energies. The trembling effect reflects an unstable tremor and unnatural breach in the film's world while the recurrence of the sound of a heartbeat corresponds to the infected blood pumping around the film. Moreover, neither simply adds unnerving suspense. Regarding the matter of suspense, although Rose's attacks are presented as dramatic bursts, the film seems to be largely uninterested in creating tension around them. It is fascinated, rather than excited, by the form the attacks take and their contribution to a formal seriality.
- <sup>11</sup> Mary B. Campbell writes of the 'transference and confusion of sexual characteristics, resulting in ominous parodies of the Androgyne... [Cronenberg] is tapping into another set of conventional images: the hermaphroditic and androgynous bodies of the grotesque tradition, with its graftings and fusions of species, its imaginary organs and proliferation of bodies and body parts. But, as he does with his exploitation of alchemical images and ideas, [he...] sidesteps the joyful, or at least playful, impulse of the tradition he invokes. The physiological freedoms of his bodies (liberated and liberating in the grotesque canon) signal a return to chaos, just as their sexual license does' (1984: 313–314). Note here how Campbell not only recognises the tradition, and its 'conventional images', but also the qualitative shift from 'playful' and 'liberating' to 'ominous[ly] parodic' and chaotic.

- <sup>12</sup> Ernest Mathijs labels it a 'penis-like proboscis' (38). The proboscis itself has a metallic spike which emerges from the tip and creates the initial insertion. It appears for a split second in the attack on Dr Keloid, barely visible unless one steps through frame by frame. Only quite late in the film, during the attack in the adult cinema, is it more clearly noticeable. Although the spike fits as a continuation of an impaling and injecting protrusion, it is not made of living matter and therefore is fundamentally incompatible. This is another example of a fleeting, glinting surrealism.
- <sup>13</sup> Mathijs, highlighting trends and contexts, writes about 'a tendency towards realism' in the horror films of this period and contrasts it to the traditionally 'fantastic horror film' (2008: 42). He also later mentions, discussing the reception of *Rabid*, that in time it became 'almost regarded as underground avant-garde' (50). In an essay on the place of Cronenberg's films in film culture, Ian Conrich notes the 'rawness' of *Rabid* and links this to the low-budget manifestation of the body-horror: 'Dr Keloid's accidental development of a blood-hungry, armpit residing, protruding organ...[is] what Tom Hutchinson describes as "of the penny-dreadful kind"' (2000: 36–37). Meredyth Cole refers amusingly to the 'opening in the armpit that looks like an anus but could also be a low-budget vagina' (2017; my emphasis).
- <sup>14</sup> The cartoon aspects are infrequent, and although in one way they stick out for being crude, in another way they recede for offering less of interest. Later in the essay, I try to give an account of how the zombie moments may play their part in a scheme. Nevertheless, some aspects are arguably character flaws. It is worth investigating consistency or coherence of a film's character, as one might for any aspect of a film's style.
- <sup>15</sup> This contrasts with how Barbara Creed characterises 'the modern horror film' which 'often "plays" with its audience, saturating it with scenes of blood and gore' (1996: 46). The presentation of blood in *Rabid* is not characterised by saturation.
- <sup>16</sup> Strangely, however, as if nodding to the traditional gestures of a vampire, and in another disorientating transposition, Rose does occasionally have blood around her mouth (for example after vomiting from the cow's blood). Before entering the adult cinema, seemingly needing to make herself presentable, she wipes her mouth as if she were conscious of having blood on it (even though no blood is visible).
- <sup>17</sup> It is not unusual for some horror movies to strategically and conspicuously withhold, or to be more implicit than explicit, while sometimes giving the impression that they are more consistently explicit than they are. Even in films which are relatively explicit, one of the genre's fascinations is how extreme and transgressive events and imagery are regulated. The genre takes a matter that is intrinsic to all films, the relationship between what is shown and what is not shown, and makes it a more manifest concern, often confronting the viewer with it. This confrontation is intertwined with, and often as qualitatively interesting as, the confrontation afforded by the extremity itself.
- <sup>18</sup> Cole makes the case for *Rabid* exhibiting a 'Canadiana' (to rhyme with, while contrasting to, Americana) (2017). Cole, a Canadian herself and writing in a spirit of recognition, states, 'Canada is naturally the headland of the continent. The fears Cronenberg teases to the surface are as icy and cerebral as you would expect from someone ensconced in the North.' She characterises the 'Canadiana' personality as 'humbleness overriding an inherent menace' where the 'crux of Cronenberg's Canadian vision...[is] the uncanny aspect of people who are only slightly different from you, almost imperceptibly so'. Corresponding, Rose might be 'an especially Canadian killer... (seemingly) innocuous and invisibly menacing'.
- <sup>19</sup> The melodrama of the unknown woman genre is conceived by Stanley Cavell (1996) in relation to a handful of Hollywood films from the late 1930s and 1940s: *Stella Dallas* (1937), *Now, Voyager* (1942), *Gaslight* (1944), and the film from which the genre takes its name, *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948). The films are sympathetically aligned to a distinct female protagonist who finds herself separated from the ideological norms and expectations of their gender and culture. These unknown women are undeservedly unrecognised and unacknowledged, and this can lead to aberrant and exaggerated behaviour by them (which carries positive as well as negative ramifications). I am suggesting Rose is, among many other things, a variation on the figure of the 'unknown woman' in a horror context. See also note below regarding Linda Williams' work.
- <sup>20</sup> I am grateful to Lucy Fife Donaldson for helping me draw out these contrasts.
- <sup>21</sup> I am not assuming that all female pornographic film actors want or need, to take revenge, or feel they should, simply that *Rabid* entertains the possibility. In this regard, Rose is related to the 'female victim-hero' that Carol Clover, in her study of gender in the horror film, discovers in slasher and rape-revenge films. *Rabid*, which she only mentions tangentially in passing, reinterprets and resituates Clover's figure which 'combine[s] the function of suffering victim and avenging hero' ([1992] 2015:17). She also notes that the 'female victim-hero' has some phallic tool like a knife, chainsaw, or power drill. She immediately adds in parentheses that 'the hero part [is] always understood as implying some degree of monstrosity'. In *Rabid*, the 'phallic tool' is fulfilled by the proboscis and the 'monstrosity' aspect is made explicit while the rape-revenge aspect is not. Another monstrous figure to which Rose is related is the 'monstrous-feminine', formulated by Barbara Creed: a manifestation of men's fear of women and their bodies with their 'object' peculiarities such as menstruation (1993). From such a fearful perspective, Rose's extraction of blood from others, with life-draining consequences, flowing into an orifice resembling genitalia rather than out of it, is a nightmarish reversal. Equally, from a fearless (or heroically avenging) perspective, it can be envisaged as a fantasy of compensation. See also endnote below on the 'two-sex model'.
- <sup>22</sup> Linda Williams compares the sex scenes in feature-length pornography to the musical numbers in the genre of the musical. She writes, 'To a great extent, in fact, the hard-core feature film is a kind of musical, with sexual number taking the place of musical number' ([1989] 1999:124).
- <sup>23</sup> Williams in her essay 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess' links horror, female melodrama, and pornography as 'sensational body genres' where we see 'the spectacle of the body caught in the grip of intense sensation and emotion...The body spectacle is featured most sensationally in pornography's portrayal of orgasm, in horror's portrayal of violence and terror, and melodrama's portrayal of weeping' (1991: 4). The gender aspect is important: '[I]n each of these genres the bodies of women...have functioned as the primary *embodiments* of pleasure, fear, and pain.' The female melodrama commonly concerns the woman's role as wife, mother, or abandoned lover (roles which result in all manner of loss), but also sometimes 'a woman "afflicted" with a deadly or debilitating disease' (4). All of Williams' 'sensational body genres' contain 'ecstatic excesses' or 'bodily ecstasies' which 'could be said to share a quality of uncontrollable convulsion or spasm – of the body' and each 'hinges on the spectacle of a "sexually saturated" female body' (4,6). In a moment such as this, Chambers' pornographic persona enhances the sexual saturation. Williams identifies similarities across the three different genres, but *Rabid*, which she does not mention, is a remarkable conglomeration of those similarities in just the *one* film. In the scene where Rose attacks Dr. Keloid she orgasms, terrorises, and weeps. As both Williams' essay and mine refer to the same constellation of genres, it is a useful opportunity to note methodological contrast. Williams' essay contains vivid and illuminating characterisations of common generic features largely, although not exclusively, in the service of a wider, more theoretical argument (spectatorial identifications especially regarding gender). The concern with spectator response contrasts to the approach taken here as does the emphasis on characterising broad similarities across films rather than simultaneously characterising the specific film through differences (in, for example, personnel, presentation, execution, relation, emphasis).
- <sup>24</sup> On one occasion, this transplanting arguably collapses into the ludicrous. The attack in the jacuzzi is set-up like a lesbian sex scene in a pornographic film: "do you mind if I get in with you", Rose's says seductively with a grin, "I've been lying in bed so long, my body aches all over". Rose is at her most conventionally sinister and villainous, and the film is at its most obviously suggestive, perfunctory, and parodic. (Might it be because this is Rose's only attack on a woman which is shown by the film – as distinct from the attack on her girlfriend which takes place off-screen – and its aberrance has caused problems for

coherence?) Nevertheless, aside from those comedy-horror films where the ludicrous is intrinsic, one aspect of even non-comic horror, like *Rabid*, is a courting or skirting of it to test boundaries (of propriety, of the body, of categories and so on).

- 25 For a short while, simultaneously with her career in hard-core pornography, Chambers was the face on the box of Ivory Snow laundry detergent (an image that is available to view on the internet). Therefore, antithetical extremes were already part of the Marilyn Chambers' persona: clean and dirty. 'Unknown actors' is one of the key features of the low budget horror of the 1970s identified by Robin Wood for which he takes *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) to be exemplary. Chambers complicates this with her known-unknown status. The other relevant characteristics he cites are 'low budget', 'raw, unpolished', 'non-bourgeois exploitation', 'Bad Taste', 'The Monster', which becomes 'indigenously [North] American', and 'traditional values negated' ([1986] 2003:79). All these are indeed basic features of *Rabid*.
- 26 Regarding inversion, Clover contrasts 'sexual difference as we officially know it – the "two-sex" model, which construes male and female as "opposite" or essentially different from another' and which is a 'relatively modern construction' with the conception of 'an earlier world which construed the sexes as inside versus outside versions of a single genital/reproductive system.' She continues, 'It is not that the male body has a penis, a female body a vagina, and the one-sex body both. It is that penis and vagina are one and the same organ; if one happens to extrude and the other one to intrude (in an inside-out and upward extending fashion), they are physiologically identical [...]. So too body fluids: the genital fluid that in the coolness of the female is normally red and manifest as menses becomes, in the greater heat of the male, whitish and manifest as semen (and female orgasm, understood as analogous to male ejaculation, was thought necessary for conception).' Clover wittily adds however, 'Needless to say, the "one-sex" in question was essentially male, women being "inverted, and less perfect, men", possessed of "exactly the same organs but in exactly the wrong places"' (13–14). Clover concludes, 'Stories of werewolves, vampires and other undead, and possession (by incubus, succubus, dybbuk, Satan) are stories that stem from the one-sex era, and for all their updating, they still carry with them, a premodern sense of sexual difference. Horror may in fact be the premier repository of one-sex reasoning of our time' (15). *Rabid* plays with the 'one-sex' conception in the form of bodily inversions, intrusions, and extrusions, where the 'penis and vagina are one and the same organ', albeit transposed to the armpit, and where the woman gains rather than loses blood ('menses') at the same time as ejaculating a rabid fluid.
- 27 The film is not beyond its own pornographic or sexploitation inclinations, showing its lead actress topless on a few occasions, with one moment at least, when Rose searches for clothes in a wardrobe,

difficult to justify as part of the story or scheme. In a cold turkey type scene Rose, desperate for sustenance, twists and squirms in a foetal position on the toilet floor of the apartment. She is wearing panties and a skimpy wet white t-shirt which sticks to her breasts making them visible. This is what we now consider to be an over-familiar form of costume for the beautiful young woman in horror films, tantalising eroticised *and* under threat, a perfect combination for juvenile male amusement. On the other hand, however, if this scene is considered within a context of reconceiving the public consumption of Chambers' sexualised body, complicating the titillating pleasure with the repelling abject, then it could be characterised differently: the established pornographic pleasures around the availability of her body are evoked but arguably hampered and even circumvented. Nor is the pain Rose exhibits necessarily playing into sado-masochistic pleasures, partly because it is internal rather than external (a pain within the body): Rose is not simply experiencing pain or being subjected to pain by another, she is very sick.

- 28 Clover celebrates 'a kind of kinky creativity' in low-budget horror films of this era (20). She favourably contrasts them to more mainstream films for although they were 'harsh and awkward [... they] said it all, and in flatter terms, and on a shoestring' (20). I like the way 'flatter' here is used as a praiseworthy characteristic, as distinct from dull and lifeless, redeeming the uninflected or 'awkward' amateurishness which is also a characteristic of the films. Flat here may also refer to a pared-back presentation (despite violent episodes) which contrasts to a film which is elaborately, fulsomely, and expensively shaped. It may also relate to the relative reticence, muting, and modesty I have detected in *Rabid*.
- 29 Films can, of course, be referentially allusive in all sorts of ways. To provide one starkly contrasting example, referential allusion in *Rabid* is not colourfully, slickly, and boisterously extrovert in the way it can be in Quentin Tarantino's films. This film's referential allusions are embedded in, and subdued by, its naturalism and pessimism. Relatedly, Tarantino's film style often has the quality of loquaciousness, like many of his films' characters, whereas Cronenberg's style is more tight-lipped.