

“ANTIVIRAL” (TIFF Movie Review)

Written by Chris Alexander

Tuesday, 11 September 2012 14:23



Any film bearing the surname Cronenberg on its credit block will be of interest to FANGORIA, and ANTIVIRAL—which had its North American premiere at the current Toronto International Film Festival following its world premiere at Cannes this past summer—is indeed a Cronenberg joint. Specifically, it’s the first picture from David’s son Brandon. Does the apple fall far?

ANTIVIRAL stems from Cronenberg Jr.’s fantastic dystopian short film BROKEN TULIPS, expanding that minimovie’s bizarre concept of an alternative universe where celebrity obsession has reached such an apex that men and women will pay handsomely to be injected with the same viruses their heroes have publicly endured. In this revision, Caleb Landry Jones (also seen in the TIFF premiere BYZANTIUM) stars as Syd, a disease salesman for a corporate virus-fetish entity who smuggles various illnesses unlawfully after hours and sells them on the black market. Soon, Syd is embroiled in skullduggery when a beloved starlet (Sara Gadon, from Cronenberg *père*’s A DANGEROUS METHOD) succumbs to a virus apparently contracted in China (funny...in David’s recent COSMOPOLIS, the collapse of the dystopian environment rested on the unanticipated strength of the Chinese yuen...but that’s neither here nor there...). Our hero soon finds himself infected with her disease, all the better for a rival virus merchant to use his decay to appease the masses who feel cheated by the sudden loss of their tabloid queen.



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I have attempted here to articulate the plot, or rather loose chain of events, that make up the bulk of ANTIVIRAL, and have only touched on the surface. That's because the film is really an endless onslaught of ideas illustrated in a deadpan, sexless manner that may confuse and turn off many viewers. In fact the picture's biggest problem may be that it has too many ideas, too many threads and a central conceit that doesn't really have any point of audience entry. The world designed by Cronenberg is fascinating and bang-on in its extreme satire, yet not fully realized enough to give the drama any urgency.

The idea that people become obsessed with other people enough that they want to experience their designer discomfort is an amusing joke (and again, played brilliantly in the ambiguous short) but is a tenuous hook to hang a feature-length story on. How did this world develop? What rational reason would anyone have to vomit blood or develop rashes or sores? How does the commerce of this "industry" sustain itself? The idea is so opposite of any real human experience or desire that it's very difficult to engage with the film on any visceral level. We simply don't care about Syd, or any other character in the picture, because, well, there are no characters...only devices to move Cronenberg's ideas around.

Thankfully, the filmmaker gooses his alien world with some visually vile elements that sell the freak value. As the picture progresses, we're treated to close-ups of needles sticking into flesh, fake blood running like rivers over white walls (every inch of the picture is stark, blown-out white) and a truly memorable biomechanical climax that I personally won't soon forget. Jones as Syd is interesting to watch, with his ghost-pale skin, swollen lips and leering, Klaus Kinski-esque stare, and the fact that he growls his dialogue in corroded, low tones over an often music-free soundtrack makes him hypnotic. He does his best to sell Syd as a real person and almost gets away with it, though perhaps he's too young, too unformed to add the grit the character requires.

I respect ANTIVIRAL, but I can't say I liked it. But then again, I'm not sure it wants to be liked. In fact, I believe it's trying very hard to make you *not* like it. Cronenberg has a vision. I was on set, I've seen him direct and I can attest that he knew exactly what he wanted ANTIVIRAL to be, and I'm confident that every inch of image you see on screen is there 100 percent by design. And sure, his sci-fi/body-horror basics are inherited from his father, but Brandon's beat is a much different beast, one I'm looking forward to watching evolve. I only hope that next time, a little more humanity creeps into the frame. Even a virus has a soul, after all...



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