

**JOHN ANDERSON**

**ON MOVIES**



**Sometimes An Epiphany Can Gross You Out**

**'S**ICK," WHEN it comes to cinema, is a pretty subjective term. What's your personal cup of ipecac? The madmen of Fredrick Wiseman's "Titicut Follies"? The

human mishaps of Tod Browning's "Freaks"? Dennis Rodman in "Double Team"?

There are certainly some pretty gruesome things in "Anaconda." "Paradise Road" is pure pain. And, personally, the sight of Sophie Marceau and Sean Bean torturing Tolstoy in "Anna Karenina" is as depraved a spectacle as I've seen all year.

It may be symptomatic of this *fin de siècle* season and its ante-millennial hysteria, but defining what constitutes aberrant entertainment is a tough call. One person's stimulating art film is another's full-frontal outrage. It's been said that this is a sick season for movies — and I don't think those who say it are referring to the seemingly endless fascination with Wes Craven's "Scream" (which was just given a "reopening." And deserves it.)

No, what we're driving at here — no "Crash" allusions intended — is "sick" as shorthand for the stuff of stomach-churning anxiety, visceral discomfort . . . and small epiphanies. The kind of movie you'd never take Mom to see — the kind of thing which, if you had any sense, could make you slap *yourself* in the face. But which may also be small gifts in decadent packages.

Certainly, "Crash" itself offers a peculiar menu of personal lifestyle choices, from scar fetishes and disembodied sex to the auto-erotic self-destruction — and cultural disintegration — it seems to be foreshadowing. "Lost Highway," David Lynch's latest hallucination, treats the head the way "Crash" treats the loins. But it, too, is quite successful affrontery.

On Friday, one of the classics of sick cinema, John Waters' "Pink Flamingos" reopened to celebrate its 25th birthday and spread its message of unorthodoxy and dog-poo. Let's hope, for the sake of civilization, that today's audiences don't find it dated.

But Waters has been Waters for a good many years, and along the way has exerted considerable influence not just on films but also on our general sensibility. He's made conventional what once was camp and movie humor into a far more fluid thing. Which is partly why it's tough to get a read on a movie like "Kissed." Not that there are many movies like "Kissed."

Opening this Friday, Lyn Stopkewich's necrophilia film (you may want to take the paper out of Mom's hands at this point) uses the almost hackneyed atmospherics of the low-budget campus romance ("Love and Other Catastrophes" jumps to mind) to tell her

Played by Molly Parker, the character's sexual obsessions are the male corpses that occupy the funeral home where she works. And her act — the violation of every law of God and man, one might have said at some earlier age — is treated as one more lifestyle choice.

My problem — which is considerably less critical than hers — is figuring out whether this woman is the subject of an ironic joke, or whether Stopkewich is merely using one of our few surviving taboos to make media hay. Which is not the problem I had with the movie of the year titled — you guessed it — "Sick."

An acutely disturbing film, Kirby Dick's "Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist" was shown at the New Directors / New Films series at the Museum of Modern Art. It is a documentary without distribution, and without much of a prayer of getting any. I hope it does. But if it doesn't, may it find perpetual circulation on the catherine wheel of the art house / college circuit.

Which it no doubt will, if only because it can generate the same kind of interest that attaches itself to the work of a Karen Finley or a Damien Hirst — an interest that connotes no judgment of the work itself, but of the sensationalistic qualities that draw audiences to art the way flames draw crowds to a car crash.

The subject of Dick's movie, Bob Flanagan, who died last year at the age of 43, was afflicted all of his life with cystic fibrosis. He was never expected to survive past early childhood and spent his time on Earth in constant pain. But just as in certain religious philosophies there exists the concept of embracing evil, Flanagan embraced that pain. It became his torment and his solace. It also became his palette, and his body became his canvas.

Dick uses the short film pieces made by Flanagan and his partner-dominatrix Sheree Rose — as well as taped performance pieces and museum installations that featured Flanagan's body — so his film has the ring of "reality." But, of course, it's movie reality; something "Sick" then sets out to demolish. The sadomasochistic acts we see are startling, of course, and freakishly entertaining and make us squirm. And then, we realize just how courageous Flanagan is. And his "art" becomes beautiful. Transcendent. And as we watch his death throes, the entire concept of passive entertainment and art and of watching movies shifts. We're embarrassed. And moved. And changed. And while that may be sick, it's the most a movie's done for me in a

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