

Shocking Canadian Cinema of the Seventies: An Interview with William Fruet

Xavier Mendik

The work of William Fruet is referenced in two submissions to the *Shockers* volume: it features centrally in Robin Griffiths' analysis of gender patterns in *Death Weekend* and is also referenced in my own entry on the within the wider controversies surrounding the Montreal-based production outlet Cinépix films. Therefore, it seems more than appropriate to include an interview with Fruet in the volume.

Born 1933 in Alberta, he remains one of the true pioneers of 1970s 'Canuxploitation' or Canadian cult cinema, as well as being an acclaimed auteur of more 'realist' national cinema entries. Having received formal film training at the Canadian Theatre School, Fruet first came to public attention as the writer of Donald Shebib's gritty drama *Goin' Down the Road* (1970). This feature film followed the fatalistic quest of two drifters moving from the Maritimes in an attempt to secure a brighter future in the changing Toronto landscape of the early 1970s. Fruet's incisive script features not only socio-economic allusions, but also an incisive gender commentary, which he would more fully explore in his own 1972 directorial debut *Wedding in White*. This compelling family drama featured an edgy performance from Carol Keane as a teenage girl who is molested by her brother's army friend, only to have to face the wider injustice of a conceited older patriarch (Donald Pleasance) who refuses to let the incident of rape ruin the family name.

Wedding in White garnered critical acclaim, even winning the Best Canadian Feature Film award for the year. However, when Fruet transposed a similar thematic of violent male conceit into the realms of genre cinema with *Death Weekend* (aka *The House by the Lake*) in

1976, the resulting film provoked controversy and condemnation. Made in collaboration with the prolific Canadian producers John Dunning and Andre Link through their outlet, Cinépix films, *Death Weekend* focused on a spirited heroine (Brenda Vaccaro), forced to use her intellect and physical prowess in order to outwit the brutal gang of thugs who invade her weekend retreat. Although the film's scenes of violence led to outrage at the time of its release, this notoriety obscured an intelligent drama from a director who continued to cast a forensic eye over wider social and sexual traumas with later cult entries that he created. For instance, *Search and Destroy* (1979) fused the topical themes of returning Vietnam troops with the vigilante narrative, creating a suspenseful thriller detailing a murder spree enacted against alienated army veterans.

With the 1980 production *Funeral Home*, Fruet adapted contemporary slasher film tactics to focus more fully on the horror of the ageing female body in a narrative that featured a killing spree undertaken by the owner of a former funeral parlor. While Fruet's 1982 film *Trapped* (aka *Baker County USA*) is often dismissed as one of the final and most derivative entries in the infamous tax shelter craze that dominated Canadian cinema during this period, the film exceeds both *Deliverance* (John Boorman, 1972), and the wider 'hicksploitation' template with which it is associated. Instead, *Trapped* offered some interesting observations on both the structures of maternal power and the sublimated racial conflicts that exist within rural communities. The film was also notable for drawing out a chilling performance from former Hollywood heavy Henry Silva, who was cast as the vengeful and duplicitous hillbilly clan leader Henry Chatwill. Fruet's ability to garner convincing performances from such iconic and often difficult film personalities was further confirmed by the later 1983 production of *Spasms*, which ranged cult actors Peter Fonda and Oliver Reed against a monstrously oversized snake with ESP capabilities.

The decline of the Canadian tax shelter system and the funding streams that it provided saw Fruet further diversify his productions as the 1980s progressed. For example, *Bedroom Eyes* (1984) paired the filmmaker with prolific Canadian producer Robert Lantos for an erotic thriller that unpacks the masochistic perils implicit in male voyeurism. Towards the end of the 1980s he turned to television, further evidencing his ability to adapt and a desire to generate more mainstream appeal. One of his most impressive achievements here was his teen anthology *Goosebumps*, which ran to 28 episodes between 1995 and 1998, and was itself the subject of a 2015 Hollywood remake.

In the following interview William Fruet reflects on both the controversies that surrounded the release of *Death Weekend*, as well as how his wider output from this era can be situated within Canada's shocking decade of cinema.

Xavier Mendik: How would you introduce yourself as a film-maker?

William Fruet: I was the writer, not the co-writer of *Goin' Down the Road*, and I was the writer/director of *Wedding in White*, two early films from the seventies.

Why do you think both Goin' Down the Road and Wedding in White proved so significant to Canadian cinema culture during the 1970s?

We didn't have much film here before those two films came out. I think that probably one of the first commercial features we had was Ivan Reitman's *Cannibal Girls* [1973]. He made it all on his own, and he went to Cannes as I recall, and he outsold all of the Canadian product. That was a beginning. we could see that we could possibly have an industry. So there were some features being made, but they didn't reach any kind of notoriety that I know of. *Goin'*

Down the Road was a real breakthrough film, I guess a lot of people identified with it in some way. It was a Canadian story definitely.

How would you assess your contribution to the production of Goin' Down the Road?

Well, first of all I was the writer, I wrote the script, so it's my script. Don [Shebib] worked on the story, but he wasn't a co-writer. I think a lot of people could identify with that period of time. There were a lot of Maritimers coming here, and Don and I actually sat down and talked with them. We saw their living conditions, the kind of things they were going through. These were a lot of the same things I had gone through. From working in a bottling factory or bowling alley, just to get by and just to go to school. Because I had come from the west, which was just the same as coming from the Maritimes, as there was no film-making out west.

How do you think changes to 1970s funding structures impacted on the productions you were undertaking at that time?

Goin' Down the Road as you know was made with \$80,000 and reversal film, it was kind of a lark really! *Wedding in White* was made for \$250,000, so you can see what it is: its money. And we had a hard time getting that money. The Canadian Film Development Council (AKA Telefilm) had arrived, and we had a wonderful gentleman Michael Spencer at the time who was running it. He was a film man as I understand it, from the National Film Board. But he was in charge of things and he made the choices, and then it started, it really started. It was certainly Michael who was responsible for a lot of it I think.

Prior to the release of Death Weekend you were seen as one of the new lights in serious Canadian filmmaking. Do you think your involvement in Death Weekend damaged your reputation as a serious filmmaker?

Well (laughs), serious film-makers don't make a lot of money in Canada. I realised this fairly soon after I made *Wedding in White*. I got of great reviews, a lot to be proud of, and I was. But I didn't have people coming up to me saying they wanted to make a film like that again. So I decided that I could probably get a genre film going, or a horror film, as they were starting to come in, and that was *Death Weekend*.

How did you come to work with Cinépix on Death Weekend?

Well, Cinépix stepped in and acted as executive producers on *Wedding in White*, those were the conditions I got to get to make it. They were very good. They let me do my thing, and they never interfered at any time. So it was a very good experience working with them. I hadn't started out to make horror films, but I had to finally make the move. With *Death Weekend*, I had no money left, and it was an old script I had put aside. I got it together very quickly. Cinépix liked it, so I was able to pay the rent!

With Death Weekend you worked with Cinépix head John Dunning. What are your memories of this collaboration?

I didn't work a lot with John. It was actually Ivan Reitman who produced the film hand on hand with me. But the times that I did meet John, I found him a very humorous man. He saw a lot of fun in things.

What contribution did other Cinépix creatives such as Don Carmody and Jean La Fleur make to Death Weekend?

Well on that film, Don was a production manager, and as far as I remember he was always busy, which was a good sign! Jean LaFleur of course edited the film and I was very impressed because I had come out of editing and had done some drama. But I thought he was really good... and fast.



Real life road encounter as fiction: the original storyboards to *Death Weekend*

Death Weekend was apparently based on a real life incident you had faced. Can you say more about this motivation?

Well, I had started writing this a few years earlier, and then *Straw Dogs* came out. And I thought “oh-oh, this is very close” and so I just shelved it. And in desperation I later went back to it and ripped it down and changed a lot of things, but kept the essential thing of a woman surviving on her own. I guessed that it was time for a woman to crawl through the mud and survive through a gritty experience, just like men had been doing. I think *Lipstick*

(Lamont Johnson, 1976]) had also just come out, which was another film where a woman took it upon herself to settle a score, so that shift was coming. How this linked to the real life incident you brought up is that when I returned to finish the script for *Death Weekend*, I remembered an incident that had happened earlier in Alberta. A friend and I were driving way out in the countryside where you may not meet another cross-road for miles. And suddenly, along came this souped-up car beside us, and they started heaving beer bottles at us. So they were in front of us and we couldn't get around them. We finally did, my friend was a very good driver and he actually outdid them. But I remembered the incident. It was quite terrifying because we knew there were no other roads, and if we turn around they are only going come back, we are in the middle of no-where. And I thought, 'I like this, I am going to recreate this for the beginning of *Death Weekend*, but with a woman in the role.'

Cinépix was one of the most prolific proponents of the Canadian tax shelter system. How important was this funding scheme to productions like Death Weekend?

At the time it was a gift, we really needed that... even though it was really about tax shelter more than it was about film! People like me wouldn't have got an opportunity to make films without the fund. We didn't have producers that could find the kind of money to finance films without this type of support. People had to gather their resources together to go into production, and these little bits of money coming in started the whole thing for people to be able to make their films.

Coming after the critical acclaim of Wedding in White, it seemed a risky proposition to undertake Death Weekend.

This was my second film, and I was having a lot of fun I have to admit, compared to *Wedding in White* which is a very sombre thing. I was getting to play with all the bells and whistles,

lots of blood around, and I took advantage of it, I was learning a lot on this film too. And as far as the rape scenes went, if people notice I don't dwell on anything but their faces. There is a rape scene in *Wedding in White*, but it's only on faces. I am not trying to exploit rape. It's the result of rape and what causes rape with men. That was the only thing on my mind with that.

What are your memories of the critical reception of Death Weekend at the time of its release?

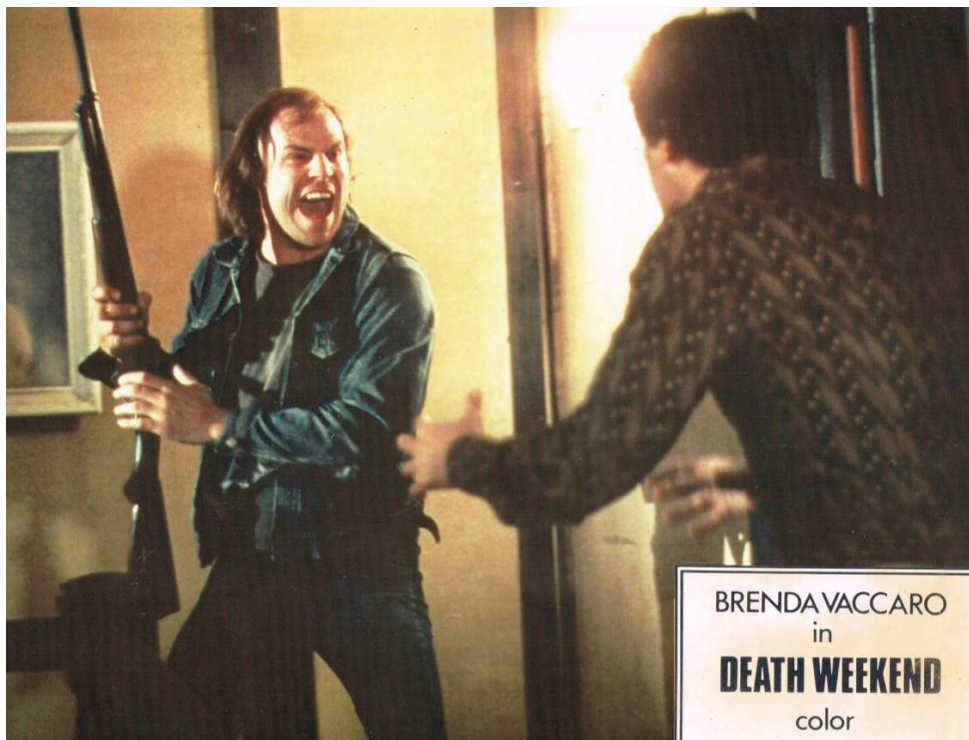
Well, I got a lot of flak for doing *Death Weekend* after doing *Wedding in White*. 'How could you?' they would say. My reply was 'To earn a living!'. I quickly turned to a genre film, though I didn't see it as a horror film at the time. I was accused of hating women. That was the analogy of some critic in Ottawa who runs the film libraries, which of course is ridiculous.



Canada's first action heroine? Brenda Vaccaro in *Death Weekend*

Despite the controversy surrounding its scenes of sexual violence, Death Weekend actually featured one of Canadian cinema's first action heroines. Would you agree?

I think it was. This girl had to think for herself. She had to do all of the things that you had only seen men doing up to this point. And that is what really clicked. I thought 'This is good, it's time.' And it was. The film was very successful. It's still a cult film today, and I still get the occasional phone call asking me who has the rights to *Death Weekend* as people want to remake it. So I feel good about that.



Phallic encounters: Masculine tensions in *Death Weekend*

Is the film more about masculine tensions than female victimhood?

Well, we cast her male co-star [Chuck Shamata] as a professional man who was deliberately taking her out there for a weekend of pleasure. She had misinterpreted the situation and didn't want to go along with this when she got out there. Then the bad guys arrived and it became a different story. So there certainly is a quality of male nervousness and masculinity being

shoved around. The men in the film are creating the conditions of victimisation, and end up featuring in this role more prominently.

At the time, it was seen as a very violent and shocking example of seventies Canadian cinema.

Most of the films I made at that time had a little more substance to them than just ‘slice and dice.’ There are some scenes of violence in *Death Weekend* that were seen as over the red line at the time. If you wanted to have a specific vision of a Canadian horror film that was the closest I had ever done. It was sort of a landmark film for the content. Like, you mention rape, you just don’t have rapes in film at that time. Leslie Halliwell, who every year put out a guide to films on tv and rated them, actually called *Death Weekend* pornography, but there’s certainly nothing pornographic about it. So things were quite a bit different then.

As well as being a controversial film, did Death Weekend prove to be a difficult shoot?

Well, we had an actress who didn’t want to be in it, after she got in it, that became a big problem. She had just been nominated for an Academy award and offered a series and she was asking herself ‘What am I doing in this film?’ It was hard squeezing a performance out of her after that, and we had to work around her a lot with a double. Fortunately, I had Ivan Reitman at the time acting as a producer on the set, and Ivan is a real filmmaker, he helped out a lot, we worked things out together.

Especially under its export title of The House by the Lake, many critics have submerged Death Weekend into the pre-existing rape and revenge cycle, initialised by Wes Craven’s Last House on the Left (1972). Did you draw any inspiration from these American home invasion narratives?

I didn't set out to make a film about home invasion particularly. I have never seen *The Last House on the Left*, I have heard that it is similar to my film, somewhat. No, my aim specifically was about the female. It was time to put the female out there and make her a hero, but in a realistic way. So I think *Death Weekend* and the films I was making in the seventies were not sort of copycatting some others. I think some of the home invasion films that were done were using a very specific kind of formula that had already been made a number of times before. These had been highly successful, so I could understand why they were doing that. But I don't think my films were following that formula, I felt mine had a good decent storyline so that it wasn't just an excuse to have a bloodbath!



Country encounters: tropes of rural depravity in *Death Weekend*

Death Weekend also explores themes of rural debasement, especially through both the antagonists and secondary characters. What interests you about the idea of rural depravity?

These characters were based upon real characters that I had seen out in the country. Living in an old street car and drinking all day. I actually went out there with somebody who would

look after this gentleman's property, just like in the movie. And he would bring them a big gallon of alcohol mixed with juniper berry or something that would make it taste like gin. And they would get just smashed out of their heads, just like the moonshine drinkers down South. There pretty much the same kind of characters. This was again a recollection of several years earlier.

At the tail-end of the tax shelter craze you made the killer snake film Spasms with celebrated cinematographer Mark Irwin. What are your memories of working with on this production?

Well, he did a great job shooting it, and I bring that out because it basically because this was a low budget movie, but it had a big production look to it, and a lot of that was Mark's contribution. I worked with Mark on three films and I can't say enough good things about him, he made up for my shortcomings if you will.

You also worked with Mark Irwin on Trapped (aka Baker County USA), which very much functions as a Canadian version of Deliverance.

Yes, it just so happens that it was shot exactly where *Deliverance* was. There were actually characters that were in *Deliverance* that were also in our film. We actually built a town within a little trailer camp in the area. Friday night would be the big church occasion and all the women would get into their prom dresses that they had saved for all the years, and you would see them all walking off in a group going to church that night. We were right in the heart of it! And it did represent what I had earlier seen in Ontario when I first came here to go to school. And I referred to it earlier, the characters in *Death Weekend*, the country folk were very close to the people you see in *Trapped*.

Beyond the issue of rural folk, another point of comparison between Death Weekend and Trapped resides in its representations of female power. I am thinking of the pivotal figure of Miriam Chatwill (Barbara Gordon) in Trapped, who acts as a female corrective to the debased male power represented in the film.

Well, that was the script, and I had a very powerful actress and I think what she represented was quite normal for that situation. She had power, she was a sister of the leader. She performed it just as it was written, she was a strong woman in the community. It made for good drama too. I thought there were some very good performances in a film that wasn't much to begin with.

Having worked so prominently in the Canadian tax shelter system, what features do you think led to its decline?

I don't even know when the tax shelter ended, but that money was being funded into construction. That drew a lot of the film finance away. I lost a film because of that. It looked like we were going to go into production and the money raiser suddenly turned around and said 'Oh no, its now real estate. We can make much more money with real estate'. Again, a lot of it was all about the tax shelter business, what was going on. As a result, I switched to television quite early on because it gave me a more organised life, and I enjoyed doing it too. I just wanted to shoot stories.

How should we view the contribution that Cinépix made to Canadian cinema culture?

I think they made a big, big contribution. I think we owe a big debt to Cinépix because it was a leader, it took chances, and a lot of people got an opportunity from them. They made their films very cheaply, but they were people giving people an opportunity. Again a lot of the subject matter was questioned too, but it was a start. It was the start for.. well, for David

Cronenberg. I am a great student of Mr Cronenberg, I think he is brilliant, the material he's come up with. But in those days when we first started up with Cinépix, I saw some critics try to crucify him and never should have. This is film!

How do you think contemporary Canadian genre films differ from those made during the seventies?

Today I am seeing horror films advertised on television, but they have a lot of texture and lighting to them. Everything is done on a much larger scale. In those days, it was more just 'Get it out, get done fast, don't fool around with it because there's no time and no money to do it.' So I guess realism was the most convenient way to make our point in those stories.

Do you have any final thoughts on the significance of Canada's contribution to shocking seventies cinema?

Well, the seventies were a very special time, no question about it, and I was so fortunate to be a part of it. A lot of important things happened in cinema, it wasn't just horror films, they were predominant because of the budgets we could shoot those kind of things with. The genre has opened up to women now here in Canada and there are a lot of female directors. We have made a lot of strides since the seventies, and I think that some of our cinema now is second to none. It's definitely Canadian, but I am happy it stands out that way.

The interview data provided above was derived from the 2020 documentary production *The Quiet Revolution: State, Society and the Canadian Horror Film*. The production and promotional materials from *Death Weekend* are courtesy of the Cinépix Inc estate.