

The dangers of thumb wrestling.

Antiviral

★★★★☆ Out 8 February Like father, like son...

IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO DISCUSS debuting writer/director Brandon Cronenberg without mentioning his dad, not just because Cronenberg senior is a genius, but because Cronenberg Jr refuses to fall too far from the tree. Set in a world so addicted to celebrity culture that even the rich and famous' diseases are collector's items, it introduces virus salesman Syd March, played with queasy intensity by rising star Caleb Landry Jones.

Working for the Lucas Clinic, March wears the same clothes every day (like *The Fly*'s Seth Brundle) and peddles the cold sores of starlets such as Hannah Geist (a Cronenberg name if ever there was one, played by *Cosmopolis*' Sarah Gadon). He also gets high off his own supply, leading him into the shady outreaches of corporate espionage (see *Videodrome*).

Like his father, Brandon has a knack for simultaneously making a complex idea easy to grasp, and taking it to the nth degree. Part dealer, part vampire, March's work involves harvesting desirable viruses which he sells in black-market "cell gardens", essentially back-room butchers (like *eXistenZ*) growing colourless steaks from famous people's DNA, a memorably disgusting creation. As TV news reports spew out celebrity "upskirt" shots and

a Greek chorus of March's colleagues ponder Geist's vaginal deformities (*Dead Ringers*), it's a future both ridiculous and frighteningly conceivable.

If anything, Cronenberg Jr has a more controlled aesthetic than his dad did as a young filmmaker, matching Karim Hussain's surgical cinematography with EC Woodley's discordant score, and setting pivotal scenes in blinding white labs spattered with red-black blood.

Although the second act loses steam, with Malcolm McDowell serving up some English ham (like Oliver Reed in *The Brood* and Patrick McGoohan in *Scanners*), the ending fulfils all the awful promises of the premise, suggesting a passing of the torch, rather than empty pastiche. Long live the new flesh, indeed. **Matt Glasby**

THE VERDICT Accomplished filmmaking from a sci-fi auteur to watch. Not perfect, but if this is Brandon Cronenberg's *Shivers*, we can't wait to see *The Fly*.

› **Certificate** TBC **Director** Brandon Cronenberg **Starring** Caleb Landry Jones, Sarah Gadon, Malcolm McDowell **Screenplay** Brandon Cronenberg **Distributor** Momentum **Running time** 108 mins

SEE THIS IF YOU LIKED...

THE KING OF COMEDY 1983
 Another slant on what happens when fandom goes too far.

STRANGE DAYS 1995
 Kathryn Bigelow's sci-thriller probes the limits of vicarious experience.

COSMOPOLIS 2012
 Different Cronenberg, same Sarah Gadon, similar sense of lingering oddness.

For full reviews of these films visit totalfilm.com/cinema_reviews

TALKING POINT

Cronenberg took inspiration from a bout of lurgy. "I had the flu and I was obsessing over it," he reveals. "The physicality of illness, that there was something in my body that came from someone else."