



## Film Review: Antiviral

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Written and directed by Brandon Cronenberg, son of legendary director David Cronenberg, *Antiviral* presents itself as an extended criticism of a celebrity obsessed culture in the near-future. It's also a highly cerebral piece of body horror that hit this critic right where he lives.

Despite an enigmatic and gore splattered trailer, *Antiviral* focuses on making the viewer the agent of their own horror. Up until the final scene, there's little that could be called excessive by Pap' Cronenberg's standards. The story of Syd March (Caleb Landry Jones), a sales consultant in the business of selling celebrity infections to obsessive fans, rarely moves beyond the visual realm of syringes and medical blood taking.

Pound for pound, there are more gruesome things in an average episode of *The Walking Dead* than there are in *Antiviral*. Yet I still found myself utterly disturbed by the concepts that the movie plays with. Modern medicine gives humanity an exact knowledge of how frail life can be, yet the film revels in the exchange of *haute* bodily fluids as an avenue to intentional sickness. Could there be a better benchmark for a decadent culture? Moreover, where David Cronenberg shocked his audience with images – recall Jude Law's lizard-gun in *eXistenZ* – Brandon Cronenberg manipulates ideas, leaving the audience to shudder at the implications of what they are seeing on screen.

*Antiviral's* core conceit on obsessive fans is simple enough to parse but potentially contentious. After all, this is a movie that imagines a world where people pay to be injected with the *herpes simplex* of a superstar as a means of feeling closer to the object of their blind affection. Even Malcolm McDowell's character, a stoic German physician, opines on the spiritual connection he feels to certain luminaries because of their cloned skin grafts woven into his forearm. Body modification isn't even the most compulsive thing that *Antiviral* imagines fans doing in search of oneness with their idols.



The second act presents butcher shops where celebrity steaks are grown and sold. The cell steaks offer further testimony to Mr. Cronenberg's ability to subvert perceptual norms. On a visual level, watching Syd eat the cultured meat of another human is no different than watching a person eat a pork chop. Big deal, it's a slice of white meat. It is the conceptual leap to connect the mundane image on screen with an act of cannibalistic consumption that charges *Antiviral's* ability to disturb.

At the same time, I wonder if *Antiviral's* social commentary might be mistaken for the director looking down his nose at the audience. The depiction of fans as a slavish hive mind, hell bent for leather on feeling "connected" to people they've never met, could be quite the affront to the type of person who willingly pays for a photo-op with a star.

Scathing as the editorial may be, it does enable a headlong dive into the fan's role within a discussion on modern intellectual property rights. When Syd is revealed to be selling celebrity infections on the black market, it is specifically identified within the language of piracy. Legitimate A-list bio-matter is similarly couched in terms of copy protection and digital rights management. It's somewhat disappointing that the script goes to the trouble of setting up this metaphor without ever delivering a knock-out blow therein. However, its inclusion ponders upon our world while propping up the film's dominant discourse that celebrities are commodities, not people. For Syd's employers, famous folk are product lines to be meted out in controlled doses. In the eyes of the pirates and fans, celebrities are a thing that they have a right to access.

And on that note, we return to my only real criticism of *Antiviral*. It would be very easy to make a case for *Antiviral's* takeaway message as a resounding middle finger to obsessive fans in defense of the "hard" life of being a famous. Taking such a tack presumes that Mr. Cronenberg and his team were content to be part of a half-baked, ersatz-Brechtian attempt at alienating the audience. Instead, I think it best to view *Antiviral* as an exaggerated reflection on the current meta-relationship between celebrities and their fans. The film testifies to the dangers of fan culture's lunatic fringe becoming a mainstream voice while simultaneously speculating on what the gatekeepers of the A-list will do to profit from said metamorphosis.