

## A PINEWOOD DIALOGUE WITH DAVID CRONENBERG

David Cronenberg made a stunning return to genre filmmaking with his 2005 film *A History of Violence*, a multilayered, deeply ambiguous, and darkly comic film about a family in a rural American town that is stunned by a shootout in the local diner. Evoking the best *film noir* of the 1950s, *A History of Violence* is as thematically rich and complex as Cronenberg's finest work. It also features his best collaboration with actors, including Viggo Mortensen, Maria Bello, and Ed Harris. Cronenberg spoke at the Museum for the first U.S. showing of the film, just after its premiere at the Toronto Film Festival.

### **A Pinewood Dialogue following a screening of *A History of Violence*, moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (September 13, 2005):**

**SCHWARTZ:** Please welcome David Cronenberg. (Applause) Welcome back, and congratulations.

The way that your film [*A History of Violence*] was described when it played at Cannes was as a "conventional" film—in a way your most conventional film. I think what you're doing is questioning conventions and playing around with conventions. How do you feel about that?

**CRONENBERG:** Yeah, the usual discussion is that this is mainstream. (Laughter) And I hope that it is. I mean, it's opening on September 23, and we'll find out if it's mainstream. That's the only test, really. But I must say that the characters are more recognizable than my usual characters. I usually start with characters who are extreme and marginal, and outsiders, maybe grotesque. Then my job is to seduce the audience into the movie. I try to get the audience into the movie, so that by the end of it, they have some empathy, some understanding for these characters, who at first they might not have felt any connection to. This movie is sort of the inside-out version of that. You start with characters who are very familiar, very recognizable, and—we'll put this in quotation marks—"accessible." This is the key. (Laughter) This is almost my most accessible movie, by the way, in case you didn't know. (Laughter) So, here, I draw you in. You are in already, because you recognize the characters. Perhaps you're interested in what happens to them. And then, gradually, you go to a sort of stranger,

darker place than you might have expected. In this way, it's kind of a reverse process from what I normally do.

So, I guess that's what people mean when they think of it as more "accessible" or "mainstream." I must mention, though, that *The Dead Zone*—that was twenty-plus years ago—was based on a Stephen King bestseller, and it, too, is set in a small American town, and involved family, and it even had a sheriff with a funny hat, as well. (Laughter) So there is a connection, I think, there. It's not really the first time that I've done something like that, in a way.

**SCHWARTZ:** And *The Brood* is a family film...

**CRONENBERG:** *The Brood* is a family film. (Laughter) And so is *Dead Ringers*. (Laughter)

**SCHWARTZ:** Let's talk about some of the scenes, to explore how you're dealing with violence in the film. One of the first acts of violence is the killing in the diner, where Tom performs his first act of heroism. When he first shoots one of the robbers, there was some applause in the audience. You elicit that response. But then you have that striking close-up of the mutilated head, and there's also a strangeness to it, and to the violence that we see—even though it's justified, it's still disturbing.

**CRONENBERG:** Yes. Of course, it's set up for us to know that these are two very, very bad guys, and therefore, that Tom is justified—as far as you can call it that—in killing them, because he's also defending himself and everybody in the diner. It's

true that with certain audiences, you get *big* applause for the shootings, killings and beatings up. (Laughter) Then, usually, they go a little silent when they see those—the nasty shots, because in a way I’m asking, “If you’re complicit in this violence, if you’re enjoying it, then can you also enjoy the aftermath?” Because the human body—the damage done to the human body—will be the same whether the violence visited on it is justified or not justified. So, it’s kind of a corrective, and kind of a question I’m asking the audience: can you really applaud both of those things? Or do you find some dissonance there, approving one, but not approving the other? And if so, that’s something to ask yourself.

**SCHWARTZ:** I think you raise the question of what’s inside all of us. One of the strongest moments to me was the reaction of the father, of Tom, after his son kills Ed Harris. Just the look, that shot, and that sort of strange look on his face...

**CRONENBERG:** Yeah, that’s Viggo being great, I have to say. Because there’s so much going on there. He’s appalled and he’s sort of proud. You don’t know whether he’s going to kill the kid, kiss him or what. That was a wonderful moment of Viggo.

**SCHWARTZ:** But so much of the film seems to be about that idea of just not knowing the people that you think you know so well, not really knowing what they’re all about.

**CRONENBERG:** Or not knowing yourself, not knowing what you are yourself. I really believe Tom when he says that he thought he killed Joey. He didn’t really expect that part of him to be alive anymore, and it still is.

**SCHWARTZ:** Yeah. It’s a film with many great performances, but it’s also a film about acting. It sort of suggests that we’re all acting all the time...

**CRONENBERG:** Well, that role-playing is part of what it is to be human, really. It doesn’t take much to realize the many faces that you have, public and private, and different with your children, and different with strangers, and so on. And that’s the beginning of it. But yeah, that’s sort of a subliminal theme in the movie. That’s why I love the cheerleader scene, because (Laughter) it connects

so much to the tone of the movie, which really involves a lot of America’s mythology. There’s the western, the whole idea of the loner standing with a gun, against the bad guys, and protecting everybody. But there’s also high school. There’s a kind of obsession with high school in America, I find. That inability to ever get away from it, no matter how old you are. And the desire on their part to forge a past together. As she says, “We never got to be teenagers together,” so let’s play high-school cheerleader and football hero, or whatever. It has all kinds of tones and resonances. And of course, then it parallels the other sex scene that also involves role-playing.

**SCHWARTZ:** That scene is quite remarkable. It’s surprising and critical. Those sex scenes are critical to the narrative.

**CRONENBERG:** Yeah, and they weren’t in the original script I got, either. But I put them in there. (Laughter) Originally, that scene ended when she slaps him and says, “Fuck you, Joey.” And I said to the writer, Josh, “Josh, that’s not the end of the scene; that’s just the beginning of the scene.” The interesting thing, too, is that the only two sex scenes in the movie are between a married couple, a couple who’ve been married for twenty years and have two children. We don’t see that in movies very often. It’s as though once you’re married, nobody’s interested. But *I’m* interested, having been married thirty years. (Laughter) And they’re very revealing, of course. In a way, you could call this movie *Scenes from a Marriage*, it’s been suggested. (Laughter) It could go hand-in-hand with Bergman’s, I suppose. (Laughter) The American version and the Swedish version. (Laughter) How can you really examine the life of a couple married for twenty years without involving their sexuality somehow? If I want to know those characters, I have to know something about that. Sex is a moment when there’s so much vulnerability, psychologically and physically, and it’s so revealing—especially in this movie, where there’s a real shift in the relationship. That’s a wonderful place to see what is happening, what the dynamics are, going on under the surface between these two people. So, that’s why I wanted the parallel scenes.

**SCHWARTZ:** What was it like working with the actors on those scenes? Could you talk about the process?

**CRONENBERG:** It was fine for me. (Laughter) No, it was pretty brutal, because the scene afterwards, where Maria's in bed, and you can see the bruises on her back... Those weren't real bruises, but they were cover-ups of her real bruises, because she was really bruised after that. Those were real wooden stairs. In fact, at one point, I asked my stunt coordinator if he could give me some stunt pads for the actors. He laughed. He said that was the first time anybody's asked for stunt pads for a sex scene. (Laughter) Also, they had to do it many times in order to do the scene properly. So they were pretty battered, I must say—both of them—pretty bruised. And it's a scary scene. Those were scary—both of those scenes were scary for the actors, for all the reasons that real sex is scary. (Laughter)

**SCHWARTZ:** There was a lot of interest, and [the] suggestion—certainly, when the film played at Cannes—that this was a film about a view of America and American violence, which is a big concern these days. But of course, "history" also has to do with personal, as well as national, violence.

**CRONENBERG:** I'd say the title has about three levels of meaning. The first one is what we all know: when we read the paper and it says, "The suspect had a long history of violence." And that's the personal, criminal-record kind of level. In France, they don't use that phrase, so they didn't recognize that level. But then, there's the national level, where you're talking about the history of a country. And yes, they [French critics] were kind of interested to make that be only the U.S., and I had to mention that there's not a nation in the world that wasn't founded on violence of some kind—suppression of the original peoples, or taking possession of territories in war and so on. It's not unique to the U.S. Then there is the more universal level of just the human condition and the human animal in general. So, it has those levels of discussion going on. It's not an overtly political film, but there are some political resonances to be found.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** I came expecting a film about vulnerability. But in a lot of ways, I felt that there was a strong sense of power. How do you account for his [Tom/Joey's] invincibility in the face of all these odds? You're saying that it's a history of—it can be equated to violence on a societal scale. Does the

individual have power over people or self? Where does the power lie? I don't see the average American as someone that can be capable of what Tom does.

**CRONENBERG:** Why does he have to be the average American? (Laughter) I think you're imposing some judgments and expectations that are not there. So, I think, naturally, there's going to be a little problem. That's another story to tell. This story was interesting to me because the violence comes from within the family and from within a character who was supposedly safe. You can see that he's very sweet, very loving, and very protective. Then he calls on his past to protect his family, which... And then that does make him vulnerable to a visitation from people from his past. So, there are all kinds of vulnerabilities. But it's just not the kind you expected.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** It comes to the question of justified power—that society is created from a sense of authority having justified power. And I don't see Americans as having justified power. I don't see us being able to kill the bad guys.

**CRONENBERG:** Well, this movie is... This *does* tie in with that, but it's questioning it. It's not presenting it as a good thing, necessarily. There's that whole iconography in the western: the loner standing there with a gun, protecting his family and his land against the bad guys, taking the law into his own hands, taking the fate of people's lives into his own hands, and being applauded for it. The movie is not saying that that's a good thing, necessarily. It's saying that it's still going on. Some people have suggested this—seen in this the foreign policy of the Bush administration. It's all taken from the American western, that ideal of: when someone strikes against you, any retaliation is justified. So, those questions are being asked. It's not like I have all the answers to them. I don't. It's not a statement of an agenda, but it is raising all those questions.

**SCHWARTZ:** And—just to throw this in—one of the key elements of the film is the father-son relationship. Seeing how the son is trying to work this out, watching his father and trying to figure it out for himself.

**CRONENBERG:** Yeah, so you can see that the son is actually a pretty good politician at first. He

manages to use his wit, his intelligence, and his sense of humor to avoid a violent confrontation the first time, with this bully. Then he sees that his father has attained some celebrity by his acts of violence. And you wonder then, is it just a genetic thing? People think: like father, like son; the kid also has the violence in him. Or is it really a cultural thing? Does he like the idea of his father being out there and killing? And therefore, the next time he has to deal with this bully, he opts for violence, when in fact he perhaps could still talk his way out of it.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** I was wondering, when you were thinking about this film, whether you gave any thought to showing how Tom made his transformation, and how he re-birthed himself or was reborn.

**CRONENBERG:** No, I think that would be a whole other movie, I suppose. But it's an interesting one. How did Tom become born again? (Laughter) Of course, he does say born again, not just born. (Laughter) And that has its own reverberations. But it does interest me. This really could play on a double bill with *Spider*, my last movie. Because they're both about what I think is the way identity works—that there is, of course, a genetic component; but I don't think we're given our identities genetically. I think a lot of it is will; it's what we will ourselves to become. So, we absorb things, we reject other things. I think it takes a lot of creative will to create and then to sustain, day after day, an identity that's consistent. I'm always interested in that effort. And in this movie, we have a man who's actually been very successful in doing it. We don't know exactly what he did, but he's been Tom for twenty years, pretty much. If he got hit by a bus before the bad guys came to town, he would've been buried as Tom Stall, and that would've been the end of it. Everybody would've mourned him and they would've thought he was a good man. So, he was pretty successful at it. *Spider* is the other side of it. He's [Dennis/"Spider"] a man who cannot maintain an identity for any length of time. It keeps disintegrating on him, falling apart. But [in] both movies, there's the question of family, and the intrusion of the past into the present, and how that either helps to maintain identity or to destroy it. So they are connected. But as I say, what he did out in the desert, as he says, killing Joey and becoming Tom, innocently... (Laughter)

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** You've been interested in the idea of disease in your films, and this film suggests that violence is a kind of disease.

**CRONENBERG:** When I'm thinking about doing a movie, I really try to forget all my other movies. I don't connect them. I just don't think about them. I don't think about the connections or anything else, because I know they'll just take care of themselves, anyway. I don't worry about them. For this movie, I was thinking, Okay, I don't like to impose things from outside the film onto the film. For example, in terms of how I depict the violence in this film, I wasn't drawing on some theory of cinematic violence and how that should work and where the violence in the cinema should go or not go. I really went into the movie, to the characters and said, "Where did these characters learn to be violent?" (Laughter) It is branching out. Where did they learn it? What does it mean to the characters? What is violence to them? Is it sadistically pleasurable? Does it have an aesthetic? Is it a macho thing? Is it a martial-arts thing?

The answer I came up with is what you find with Joey and his brother, when he says, "We're brothers, what did you think would happen?" And Joey says, "I thought that business would come first." So, it's business. It's something that Joey had to learn on the streets of Philly, given where he grew up and given who his brother was. But he's not necessarily a violent man. I think that, the way that Viggo and I were playing him, I would say that he didn't have a violent temper. That's one of the reasons that he managed to not ever have it show itself in twenty years. He never slapped his wife around; he never beat the kids. When he slaps Jack, you could see by the look on Jack's face it's the first time he's ever been hit by his father. And to me, that's the most violent act in the movie. So, in this case, I'm saying that violence is—it's innate in humans in general, but in Tom in particular; in Joey. Maybe Joey was, in fact, a relatively gentle person—maybe he was much more like Tom, and in another environment, he would've been Tom right from the beginning. That's sort of the way we played it.

The sort of viral idea of violence is not really—I don't think it is addressed that way. Other than to say that, as I said, the kid sees that violence can get you something good. And I don't know if you

want to call that viral, but it's certainly a cultural approbation of violence, and therefore it can beget more violence.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** I just want to make a comment about the very last scene, when he comes home from Philly and he sits down at the table. I got a sense that the violence is not going to end now, because the Pandora's box has been opened, and that the retribution for what went on in Philly is not going to stop in Philly; it's going to follow the family back to Indiana. I was just wondering if that was sort of a function of what was going on in those looks between the two actors [in the last scene]—that there is no more peace in that household.

**CRONENBERG:** There are a few ways to look at it. The sex-on-the-stairs scene actually has a positive—a very positive—aspect, in the sense that somehow Edie finds the Joey part both attractive and repulsive. She's attracted to it, and she's then repulsed by her own attraction, but she's found a way to relate to it. So, maybe there's some way that she can relate to this Tom/Joey hybrid, and that they could continue. That is not dealing, though, with the question of whether Tom can ever get away from what he's done in Philly, although he's killed just about everybody there. (Laughter) It's true that once the sheriff starts to hear that Richie in Philly has been wiped out, I think he might have some suspicions. (Laughter) But then, maybe Tom can take out the sheriff. (Laughter) The sequel would be *A History of Even More Violence*. (Laughter)

**SCHWARTZ:** I have to ask you about William Hurt's performance, because it was just such a treat to see him.

**CRONENBERG:** It was obvious to me that that character really had to deliver a whole little world in a very short space of time, because he was delivering a bit of their past together; he was delivering the time—Joey's past in Philly. He was also giving the suggestion of what Joey could've been if he had stayed in Philly and played ball with everybody. He could've had his own funny mansion. I wanted there to be a real shift in tone in the movie at that point, because it's a different place and a different energy. And of course, it's always better when you have a brilliant actor. I really wanted to cast somebody who would play into the

sort of *Sopranos* stereotype, but as interesting as those are, I needed something different.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** You're not typically thought of as a director of action, but I thought the scenes—especially the first scene in the diner was incredibly well-choreographed. It was stylized and shocking at the same time. How did you go about filming that scene? Was it very well-storyboarded?

**CRONENBERG:** I've actually been doing action sequences since I started with *Shivers*, actually, and *Scanners*. *The Dead Zone* also has quite a few action scenes in it. So, it's not really foreign territory to me that way. But once again, I'm not drawing on the past—my own or anybody else's. I'm looking at the movie itself. And given that I'm saying that for these guys, violence is all business, and they would've learned it on the street, I naturally went to the Internet. (Laughter) Bought those DVDs that teach you how to kill people on the street, and I used those as the mock for the violence in the movie. It was always my intention to have it be as realistic as possible, and not pretty, just relatively nasty, brutish. That kind of fighting that you find in a bar or on the street.

I don't use storyboards at all, ever. In this case, though, you do have to have preparation, and I do work it out with the stunt coordinator and the actors. Viggo did all his own stunts, pretty much—no double.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** So, an unarmed guy walking into a room with three armed guys, and disarming them and killing them all—you consider that realistic?

**CRONENBERG:** Yes. (Laughter, applause) Let's just say, three not-very-bright guys with guns.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** There was something almost chilling about this angelic little blonde girl. (Laughter) She seemed impervious to the violence going on around her. It was almost like she was taking it for granted. And you never saw her seeing actual violence, but the first scene with the dream—and then the last scene, where she goes, gets the plate off the sideboard, and puts it down, like, Oh yeah, Daddy's back, okay; everything's going to go on as usual.

**CRONENBERG:** That girl was actually 32 years old. (Laughter, applause) First of all, children just want their family to stay together, no matter what. No matter how hideous it is, that's what they want. And the fact that she hasn't really been exposed directly to the violence, I think, makes it make some sense. Yes, she's got an interesting look; there's no question. (Laughter) But again, I think if you saw the movie again, you'd see she is sensing the tension and the emotion that there is at the table, that's going on in the family. But she knows what she wants, and nobody's giving her father that plate, no one's letting him know that he can sit down, so she does. [She] puts the knife upside-down, and actually, the next moment, she does turn [it] around, but I liked it that way. (Laughter)

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** I was a little surprised at the amount—on the part of the audience—the amount of the laughter at some of the violence, particularly during the William Hurt scene at the end. And I don't know if it was nervous laughter—it didn't *sound* like nervous laughter—but it seemed excessive and inappropriate. That could just be my point of view, but I'm wondering—and I'm sure that this has happened at other screenings—how you feel about that kind of response.

**CRONENBERG:** It's an interesting question. At the journalist and the film-critic screenings at Cannes, there was an incident that was widely reported. Some critics were laughing at one of the scenes, and another critic, who was an Austrian critic, screamed at them, "Shut up, you..." And he was very profane. "This is serious. Don't you realize this is serious?" And those critics, I think, were the critics for *The New York Times*, (Laughter) who were laughing; their feeling... The Austrian thought that they didn't get it, and they were quite right in thinking that, in fact, he didn't get it. Because that's funny.

The William Hurt character, on one level, is a comic character. But it's also a sinister, scary character. I play a kind of a game that is often dangerous, and can certainly backfire on you, which is to mix the serious with the humorous. Humor is a survival mechanism as well, in humans, and this movie is very funny. It really is. If you saw it with a Toronto audience, they really yukked it up (Laughter) at that scene. They were a little sorry to see Richie get shot, because, though he deserved it, they missed

him after that. (Laughter) So, what I'm saying is that I'm definitely mixing it up. I'm asking my audience to follow me on a lot of twists and turns.

There's another scene, for example: the scene where Jack gets slapped. He says to his father, "No, in this family, we shoot 'em." And that's a laugh line. That's a smart-mouthed kid coming up with a good laugh line, but then his father slaps him. So, you do get the audience laughing, and then it's normally cut short by the slap. Then you get a kind of mixed feeling, because the kid obviously looks devastated, and the father's devastated. They [audiences] don't laugh all the way to the end of the scene. Now, if they did, that wouldn't be good, but I want them to laugh at that line. So, I'm asking for a lot; it's true. It's very possible for there to be laughter in the middle of nastiness or tragedy. In fact, it's almost necessary, I think. So, how I feel about it is that, in this case, those are the correct responses.

Now, it's possible to get bad laughs. And I have had that happen in some movies, and that's why you often have test screenings, because aside from the whole in-studio/not-in-studio thing, it's very good to test a movie while you're still cutting it. I know I'm never sure what an audience is going to do, really. Unlike Hitchcock—at least in terms of his own mythology of himself, where he was the puppetmaster, and he was manipulating your responses to a fine T—I actually admit that I have no idea what is going to happen for sure. I have things that I hope will happen. I have my own responses to the movie, but people bring their whole lives to it. It's impossible to anticipate all of that.

There are all these cultural differences and subjective personal differences. I must say, I think people get out of the habit of complex reactions, because movies these days don't ask for complex reactions. They're very: This is the sad scene—the music is sad, everything's sad; it's supposed to be sad. Now, here's the happy reconciliation scene, so the music's happy, everything's happy, the lighting's happy. It goes in chunks and segments. It's not asking you for the complexity that any one of us can find in any single day of our lives. So, I'm reverting to that, and having confidence in my audience and in myself that we can kind of find our ways through it.

**SCHWARTZ:** And the usual mode of laughter in most films these days seems to be irony, that you're laughing at the character.

**CRONENBERG:** Yes; this is the other thing. This is not a postmodernist movie, this is a modernist movie. There's no irony. There are no quotation marks around anything. These actors are playing these characters as straight as they can, as realistic as they possibly can. Because I feel that, once you're into irony and you're into retro and stuff like that, you've really locked yourself into a certain kind of—or you only allow yourself a certain very narrow level of discourse at that point. And I wanted more, I suppose.

**SCHWARTZ:** Whereas, when you see [scenes] in a small town and in a diner, and all this iconic imagery, it seems to be a setup for irony.

**CRONENBERG:** Yeah. But it isn't. (Laughter)

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** What is your philosophy of directing actors?

**CRONENBERG:** Well, it's very sucky. (Laughter) They probably wanted me to have a whip, riding boots, and a riding crop. But in fact, there was a very warm, familial tone I set on the set. Actors, I find, do not respond well to being humiliated, berated, harassed, and confronted. There are directors who think they have to do that to, quote, "get a performance" from somebody. But if you've got somebody like these actors, you don't have to *get* a performance. What you're really doing is, you're guiding their performance, finessing and fine-tuning

it. I want to give my actors a protective, safe haven, a feeling of protection so that they can do silly things and try different things. It's a real collaboration. They know that they're very involved. They can discuss anything. I had monitors all over the set; I encouraged the actors to look at their takes, if they want to. A lot of directors don't like to do that. And that doesn't mean that I'm asking them to improvise the dialogue. Most actors don't want to do that. That's a pressure they don't need.

I can also say that I don't do rehearsals beforehand. I find that rehearsals of a theatrical kind, that is to say, sitting around a table and reading the script to each other—I find them completely useless, because I think everything changes once they're really there on location or on the set, in their costumes and stuff; everything changes, the dynamics change. For me, it's a very sculptural thing. It's very physical, tactile. I can touch the actors and move them around physically—which is why I don't like to use storyboards, because that's a very abstracted way of doing it. Storyboards are usually done before the actors have even been cast. So, if you really stick to the storyboards, you kind of cut out the possibility of collaboration with your actors. You've got the actor standing over in the window saying the line. What if the actor comes up with a great way of doing the dialogue sitting over there instead? You'd say, "But wait, the storyboard says you have to be over there." It doesn't make sense to me, I must say.

**SCHWARTZ:** We will be waiting for your next film, ready to laugh at it. (Laughter, applause)

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