MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE

A PINEWOOD DIALOGUE WITH **DAVID CRONENBERG**

The Canadian director David Cronenberg has redefined the notion of what a horror film can be. While horror and science-fiction films traditionally have been about threats from the outside—monsters or alien forces—Cronenberg's films (including *The Brood* and *The Fly*) have been about threats that come from inside our own bodies, and our psyches. It was fitting, then, that Cronenberg should be the director to adapt William S. Burroughs's novel *Naked Lunch*, with its grotesque and comical mix of the organic, the chemical, and the hallucinatory. Cronenberg spoke at the Museum with a premiere screening of *Naked Lunch* on the opening day of a complete retrospective of his films.

A Pinewood Dialogue following a screening of *Naked Lunch*, moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (January 11 and 12, 1992):

SCHWARTZ: So without further ado, David Cronenberg. (Applause)

What I'd like to do is start—I'd like to use *Naked Lunch* as a way to talk about your entire body of work. I was surprised at how much you kept the spirit of the book but really made it into your film. The very first film you made, *Transfer*, I just watched, and it's set in a snowy field. It immediately reminded me of the ending of *Naked Lunch*. One of the characters is a psychiatrist who flees into exile to become an artist. And there were echoes even in a student film of *Naked Lunch*. So I wanted to really start with the ending of *Naked Lunch* as a way to get back into talking about all of your films, and the first thing I wanted to ask you about was just the idea of Annexia and what that means, the idea of the artist in exile.

CRONENBERG: Well, Annexia is Canada, of course. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: Right.

CRONENBERG: All Canadians recognize it when they see that, that scene. And, next year in Annexia. The sequel will take place in Annexia.

SCHWARTZ: You've said a number of interesting things over the years about being a Canadian artist, what it means to be Canadian.

CRONENBERG: Most Canadians define themselves as not being American. That's the truth. Canada was formed in defense against the thirteen colonies, and I think that continues, the idea. The first thing a Canadian is going to say, if a Frenchman says, "Well, what's the difference?" is, "Well, we're not Americans."

And we have a very ambivalent love/hate relationship with the U.S., which most Americans are completely and wonderfully oblivious to, which is one of the reasons for the hate, you understand. Marshall McLuhan said that one of the reasons that he was able to make such trenchant philosophical observations on American media was because he did not exist in the middle of it, that he was, as he put it, in a backwater of culture, that is, Toronto.

He was therefore able to observe America from that strange, ambivalent standpoint that all Canadians have. So I think there's a sense that all Canadians, in a way, are outsiders *vis-à-vis* American culture—very affected by it, can't get away from it, are constantly trying to define what is uniquely Canadian in a sort of a vacuum and a limbo. And my argument always is that to consider Canada without considering the U.S. is actually an impossibility right from the very beginning. So this does not make me popular in certain circles, you understand.

SCHWARTZ: When you were writing fiction and were influenced by Burroughs earlier in your career before you were making films…Burroughs sees

himself as an outsider to American culture. And I just wondered what the—

CRONENBERG: He does, and he doesn't. I mean, that's why he's sort of a Canadian. He has this same ambivalent relationship to America, but from within. Right now he's living in Lawrence, Kansas, which I think is, geographically, about the absolute center of America. And yet, in order to do his art, he felt he had to get away from America. And of course, Paul Bowles is an American writer who still lives in Tangiers, and yet he's definitely an American writer. In a way, it's a traditional artistic paradox. James Joyce had to get out of Ireland to be Irish. He had to live in Paris. So it's not unique to America, I'm saying. But for Canadians, it is this strange...almost a part of our culture that we are outside America.

SCHWARTZ: What was the influence of *Naked Lunch* and Burroughs early in your career? 'Cause a film like *Stereo* feels very much Burroughs-influenced. If you could—I'd just like to know.

CRONENBERG: Well, it's invisible to me, or, in retrospect, of course, it isn't. But I've been doing a lot of interviews for *Naked Lunch* lately. I did 36 in three days in London, twelve a day, half-an-hour each. You don't get up, you know? There's a chair, and somebody gets into it. And what it does is, it forces you to be analytical about things that you really did totally intuitively. And in a way, telling journalists that you have—that you were influenced by William Burroughs is handing them a sword which they then plunge directly into your guts. There was one journalist who's kind of a friend who said, "It's possible that without William Burroughs, Cronenberg would be bereft of imagery." And I thought, "I don't know what that means, actually." I mean, he's basically talking about plagiarism, isn't he? But the point is that hundreds and thousands of artists have read Burroughs and been influenced by him, and it doesn't necessarily manifest itself in a very directly observable way. And really, I'm—so, going back, I mean…when I started making films, I wasn't thinking about Burroughs or literature at all. In fact, it was one of the excitements for me of film, that it was not literature.

Because as a—I had been a would-be novelist since the age of five. My father was a writer, and I always assumed I would be a novelist. And I was constantly finding myself doing other people, doing Burroughs, doing Nabokov, another influence. And when I got to film, I was free. I felt totally liberated. I felt, well, I could invent my own art form, although, of course, I didn't. I've seen, as much of filmmaking as I can. It wasn't the same relationship that I had to literature. So I felt quite free. And it just—only in retrospect, looking back and saying, "Well, yeah, I mean, I guess there's a lot of Burroughs there."

But when I first read Burroughs, it was kind of more a shock of recognition—someone much more mature, much more crazed, much more experienced in bizarre ways, who had crystallized things that I was only beginning to grope towards. But, if you don't have an affinity for viruses, reading Burroughs is not going to give you one. And I guess I do, because…so, once again, the question of influence and what it really feels like when you're doing your own work is a strange one.

People like De Palma talk about Hitchcock and then in his films, he will actually reproduce this—scenes in *The Untouchables* from Eisenstein and so on, almost shot for shot. And that's, to me, that's very strange. I don't understand it at all, because, of course, you don't come from nowhere. You are influenced. But when you're doing your art, you feel as though you are not influenced. You feel as though you're absolutely inventing it all, and I think that's the way it has—it should feel like that.

SCHWARTZ: You talked about the writing process as being unconscious, and your depiction of the writing process in *Naked Lunch* is—writing is almost something that comes up from the unconscious. And so I just want to know your—I'd like to know about your approach when you finally decided to sit down and write the script for *Naked Lunch*. You came up with something that was very linear, very different from the novel. Did you try different approaches, or did this—I know in interviews you've said that this seemed to flow right out when you finally decided to write it.

CRONENBERG: Yeah. Yeah. Well, yeah, it did. I mean, I'd been—you know, I met Burroughs at his 70th birthday party. And then I was at his 75th birthday party, and I still hadn't written a word. And we were kind of saying, "It would be nice if William were alive to see this movie." So, write something, as they say in Annexia. And I—Clive Barker was insane enough

to offer me the third lead in his movie *Nightbreed*, as an actor. And I told him he should get a real actor, but he was determined. So it meant I was going to be in London for about two-and-a-half months, and I bought my first laptop and started to write *Naked Lunch* on the plane going over. And to my surprise, it just was there. It was just there waiting. And it was as much like automatic writing—it was as much [like] being dictated to by your machine as I've ever had. Now this was a Toshiba 1200, so if you're interested… I guess I could do an ad for Toshiba. I haven't thought of that. *Naked Lunch* was there waiting.

But I think what happened was that I'd been thinking about it for so long, and the extent of my collaboration with Burroughs was really to just phone him up or go see him and talk to him about strange sort of—I even thought maybe irrelevant—things, just to get…I was kind of steeping myself in the Burroughsian aura, you know, and had gone to Tangiers with Jeremy Thomas and Burroughs in 1985, and he would, you know, point out where he had written *Naked Lunch* and had tea with [Jack] Kerouac, and God knows what else, and introduced us to Paul Bowles and other people who were still there. And we talked all the time.

And I would ask him things like, "So, you know, what about insects, Burroughs? I mean, it seems as though you've always used insects in a negative way in your descriptions. When you say someone has cold, blank, insect eyes, it's always negative. Do you like insects? Are there any?" And he said, "I kind of like butterflies."

And things like, you know, "So I know you believe in an afterlife. Does this mean that you are not afraid to die?" And he said, "Well, no, no, you could end up in the wrong company." (Laughter) Things like that.

And I suppose that, in doing that, I was actually shaping my approach to the film, because I did talk to him about shooting his wife and misogyny and things like that. And would he consider using biographical incidents in a fictionalized way to be a legitimate thing for me to do? And he said, "Absolutely." He didn't separate his life from his art. And he in fact thought of his books as one big work and, in other words, basically gave me blessings. These were blessings from the Pope of Interzone to go ahead and do what I had to do.

And we talked about sexuality. And I said "Mine is different from yours, and I don't know what that's going to mean to the movie. And I just don't want there to be any unpleasant surprises." He said, "It's your movie, do it." Finally, by the time—and there were one or two key issues, I think. One was drugs. I knew that, of course, there would be drugs in the film. But I decided, I think quite at an early stage, that I didn't want to—I wanted them to all be invented.

Now, certainly, there's a precedent for that in *Naked Lunch*. There are mugwumps who emit addictive fluids in Burroughs. There are—there's the black meat of the giant aquatic Brazilian centipede. But the bug powder was my invention, except that—Burroughs wrote a short story, well, really a memoir, called *Exterminator*, about his time as an exterminator in Chicago. And he—some of the lines of dialogue in that scene from A.J. Cohen, "You vant I should spit right in your face?" That's directly from Burroughs. That's maybe the most directly I've taken any dialogue, was that first scene, which is not from *Naked Lunch*. In fact, there are things from *Queer*, *Naked Lunch*, and *Interzone*—which is kind of the outs of *Naked Lunch*. And we actually had, in fact, contractual right to use those things. And Burroughs, of course, had no objection.

I didn't want to use real drugs in the film because I didn't want people to be thinking of Nancy Reagan when they saw the movie, and I didn't want them to think about crack houses in the Bronx and Colombian drug wars and that kind of thing. I wanted it all to reflect internally within the film and to have the references not be so—quite so topical. And the result of all of this sort of meandering and pondering was finally that when I started to write, it just clicked right into place. And literally, it was as though I [was] being dictated to. It was wonderful, 'cause I'm basically quite lazy. And not a good typist, even. So, none of the other scripts that I've written worked quite that way, not quite that easily. And of course, it was having the whole Burroughsian universe to play with that allowed a lot of that to happen.

SCHWARTZ: There are very few passages from the novel that literally appear verbatim in the film, but

there are a few. And one is certainly—when you're reading the novel, there's a number of passages that strike you as Cronenbergian, remind you of your films.And, certainly, the one of the talking anus, the passage about—that starts with Dr. Benway in the novel talking about how inefficient the human body is, and he says, "Instead of a mouth and an anus to get out of order, why not have one all-purpose hole to eat and eliminate?" And then the story about the talking asshole.

CRONENBERG: Yeah.

SCHWARTZ: That seems to have—that has so many echoes of your other films.

CRONENBERG: "You are the talking asshole." That's what you're saying. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: Um—(Laughs)

CRONENBERG: But this is not actually an insult, because and I have proof, because what I do point out is that when people say, "Why are the typewriters so disgusting, and they have this orifice, and they call it all kinds of things, and we know it's an asshole," I say, "Well, you know, there is a structure to the film." And by the end of the film, you have the sort of talking-asshole monologue, which is taken basically word for word from the novel. And you realize—to me, it's obvious that Burroughs is a talking asshole and that I am and that any artist is. In effect, anybody who says things that society doesn't want to hear, that people don't want to hear, that's the hideous repulsive orifice that is speaking and saying these things. And you stick candles up it and try and shut it up, and it won't shut up.

And that's why I wanted the typewriter, which is basically kind—I don't want to get too Freudian about it, 'cause it isn't a Freudian structure. But he is an exterminator. He is exterminating a lot of parts of himself that he would rather not deal with: his homosexuality, his art. And so you can start to say, "Okay, well, the cockroaches are the unconscious thoughts coming out of the crevices of the unconscious. And then the typewriter, of course, is really the writer's unconscious. It's the writer talking to himself when he's talking to his typewriter." It pushes you around. You push yourself around, and you aggravate yourself, provoke yourself. And so that's where all that imagery comes together.

And it's not a structure that's explicit in *Naked Lunch*, but as soon as I realized, really to my surprise, that the movie was very much about writing and about the creative act and why should human beings have the impulse to do that and to invent characters and universes and concepts and stuff, then all of that that I incorporated in the movie from *Naked Lunch* works beautifully with those concepts. The sort of falling hemorrhoid monologue, of course, is pretty directly from *Naked Lunch,* but I think it's actually a version that's in *Queer* that I used. It's slightly different. Burroughs recycles. And some other long pieces of the incantations that Martin makes as a poet are also from *Naked Lunch*, actually, and they're quite beautiful and powerful. Take some questions from audience?

SCHWARTZ: Sure. Over here.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I've followed your movies from pretty much the beginning. And it seems like the early movies you were mentioning were much more involved with the traditional genre of horror. I wanted to know your relationship to it is.

CRONENBERG: Well, it's a sort of a mixed blessing. I mean, when I started to write my first "movie" as opposed to my first "film," which I consider—*Stereo* and *Crimes of the Future* are sort of films in the sort of underground art sense. And *Shivers*, which is called *They Came From Within* here—that was an AIP [American International Pictures] title—was my first "movie" in the sense that it was a professional endeavor. I actually got paid to write it and direct it and so on, and was working with other people, whereas the other films were not done that way. And it was just very natural for me to work within the genre.

It felt, once again—it wasn't calculated. In retrospect, it seemed like a good way to start. The thing is that the genre does protect you in some ways. And we've seen a lot of young filmmakers protected from their own ineptness and brashness and arrogance and so on—and I include myself in that—by the genre. It kind of mothers you because it's a known quantity, and you can get away with murder in it, and it's okay. And you can make a lot

of mistakes, and the momentum of the genre itself can carry you as well. But it was luck. It wasn't calculation, because it was—I mean, I was always interested in science-fiction and horror writing. But when I came to movies, I was interested in everything. I could have just as easily tried to make a western, as a horror film. But when I started to write, that was where I got the juice to do it. And then, of course, your first encounters with the press, and you blithely proclaim yourself the "Baron of Blood," you know and a few other things like that. (Laughter)

And once again, this is the sword you have given, which they plunge into every part of your body. Because no matter what you do later, you are the "Baron of Blood." You are the "Horrormeister." And it just doesn't matter what you do, and you're stuck with it. Whereas, in fact, where it comes from, for me, has nothing to do with genre whatsoever. I mean, I'm just not aware of it or thinking about it. For me, the question of genre is a critical problem or a marketing question. "What is this film, how do we sell it, who's the audience?" But it has nothing to do with where the movies come from. It's sort of after, you say, "Well, okay, what is this?"

I mean, what is *Dead Ringers*? I don't know what category you would put that film into. Or even *The Dead Zone*. Because it was called *The Dead Zone*, and [producer] Debra Hill had done *Halloween*, and I had done, what I had done, and Stephen King, and so on, it was perceived as a horror film and in effect sort of sold ineptly, I might say, by Paramount—not Fox—as a kind of sci-fi/hardware I don't know what. It was very bizarre. And of course it's none of those things, and the book wasn't that, either. But it was—the associations were so strong that it was almost impossible for people to see the movie for what it was until after a while. And you hope the film lasts long enough that the audience that might like it will find it. Sometimes it's despite the advertising and sometimes not.

After *The Dead Zone*, the people who did see the movie for what it was said, "Well, now it's the mainstream," There are no effects in the film to speak of, and it works more on an emotional level, and there's no gore and there are none of these creatures and, "He's dropped the crutches, he can walk now." And then I did *The Fly*, which was really a horror film with a lot of effects and a lot of gore. And I would have done *The Fly* before *The Dead Zone* or after, depending on when they had come together. Or I would have done *Dead Ringers* before both of them if I had been able to get the financing together.

So I'm not really thinking of as they like to say, the arc of my career that kind of stuff. Because it's just not where you make the movies from. It isn't for me, anyway. I don't really think it is for anybody, but it might be. I mean, you might—if you weren't writing the things yourself, you might choose projects to prove a point, that you can do a comedy or this or that. And I guess that's possible, and certainly actors do that. But actors can make a lot more films than directors. So for me, it's just a project-by-project thing. And the vagaries of the business are such that you never know which of the things you're interested in will go first, will be possible first. And so you—it would be very hard to orchestrate your career in terms of starting within the genre and then gradually moving into the mainstream, and then becoming an art filmmaker or whatever, however you wanted to do it. It would be incredibly difficult to really do that. Is that an answer?

SCHWARZ: (Laughs) Over there.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I was curious if you had [inaudible question about William Burroughs seeing *Naked Lunch*]

CRONENBERG: I don't think he sees a lot of movies, William [Burroughs]. And, in fact, he doesn't listen to a lot of music. I noticed that when I was at his place he didn't have any means of playing music—which was interesting for me for this film, because I was thinking of asking for a list of his favorite tunes. He could talk about—he could remember various musicians that he had heard, and so on. But I realized that truly he wasn't—it wasn't that important to him. And Nabokov also confessed he had no ear, that he—if he went to watch an orchestra, he would literally watch it. He said he'd look at the lacquer glinting off the bow, but he wouldn't really hear anything. And I think Burroughs is a bit like that. Music is not that important to him.

And film is—he's excited by it when he comes in contact with it, but he doesn't really have a huge cinema context that he can work out of. And I think he really just saw one or two of my films. He saw

Scanners, and we showed him *The Fly* and stuff. But when I first spoke to him, I'm sure that he hadn't seen anything that I'd done. And I really think it was more on a personal level that he started to have confidence that I could do the film, and also because of Jeremy Thomas as a producer, that we were both real. We were serious. We had done it before. And he'd been involved in a lot of very, sort of iffy attempts to do things with his work. And he was always very amiable about that—I mean, whether it was rock groups or writers, whatever. But I think that's really the truth of it.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: How important is music?

CRONENBERG: it's vital. If it's right, it can do so many things for a film. And, and if it's wrong, it can absolutely destroy a film. I'm sure we've all seen films where the music just kept you out of the movie, and—or made you feel that you were being manipulated so obviously that you refused to respond. And if that happens, you're dead. Music...it's a very...there really are no rules, in fact. But—and you can make up your use of music as you go along, or film by film. And it's a question of even scene by scene: "Is the music there to accentuate something that's already in the scene, or is it there to work in counterpoint against that? Or is it there to suggest something that's going to happen that you wouldn't know just from what's on the screen?" I mean, there are many, many things that you can do with music.

And Howard Shore, who's done almost all the scores, really, except for *The Dead Zone*, only because he wasn't available for that…I sent him the first draft of the script, and we started talking right away. And it's such a subjective thing. I mean, there are more fistfights happening in the sound mix than there are on the set. It's little-known, actually. It's probably the most neglected element of filmmaking now that everything else is getting so much publicity, including editing. But very few people are aware of what goes on in a sound mix, and sound is probably more subjective than anything visual.

So it is really, really quite subtle, what you do with music. In this case, we said, "Okay, well, the obvious thing is jazz, because they're hip, right? And Charlie Parker." And then, "Yeah, but what about Bird? And what about—okay, if we treat music the way we're treating drugs, we should really invent the music the way we invent the drugs, something that you can understand but that is new for the film so that it reflects internally." And then North Africa. Of course, Interzone has a North African flavor where it's maybe a hallucinated version of it, but still, what about North Africa? And North African music is in fact African, not Arabic. It's very rhythmic, and so on. Well, you know, if you were strictly doing Moroccan music, you wouldn't have an Arabic influence. But, well, it'd be nice to be able to use some Arabic.

And then Howard said to me, "Well, you know, there is an instance of a combination of jazz and North African music. And that is a recording that Ornette Coleman did with the Master Musicians of Jajouka in 1973. And I'll send that to you." And he did. And we did a temporary mix, a temp mix, which is done when you're starting to have some screenings for people to see how they're responding. And even if, you know you've made a film yourself, it's very distracting when there are dropouts in the dialogue and there's no music and no effects and so on. So you do a temp mix just to make the film a little smoother. And also, it gives you a chance to experiment with the music. And you begin to realize what problems you have and what things that you thought would work, in theory, in fact, when you try them, they don't actually work. And you very often use pieces of scores from other movies to try and get a feel for what would work. And in our case, we used a lot of stuff that Howard had written for *Dead Ringers* and for *A Kiss Before Dying*, I think—the remake of that.

We put Ornette's stuff, with the North African music, exactly where it is here, which is when Bill Lee says, "I hear Interzone's really nice this time of year." And then you hear this incredible music, which is a combination of...it's Ornette actually playing. He went up to the mountains. These musicians are—it's really religious music for them. And he played with them, and it was recorded. And it—to me, it sort of became the Interzone National Anthem. It's very dissonant and very disturbing, very forceful. And it just worked so well in the temp mix. And we did use some Charlie Parker tunes for all the source music. When they come into the apartment, she's shooting up, and you would hear Charlie Parker.

And Howard said, “Well, you know, maybe—I know Ornette. Maybe he’d be interested in being involved in the movie.” And we sent him a tape of the film with the temp mix. He was living—or he was traveling, anyway, and he was in Holland at the time. And he loved the movie. He completely related to it, and speaking about exiles and living outside America to comment on America. [Ornette] said to [Howard] that the movie was about being brilliant in America. And he wanted to be involved very much. So this was really a coup for us. I mean, we were very excited about it. But we didn’t know how much he would be involved, or what would work. And Howard wrote the opening and ending credit music with Ornette in mind. It was there for Ornette to be improvising over. And he actually…he came to London. We were all in London. Ornette improvised with the London Philharmonic Orchestra. That was very interesting. (Laughter)

Howard introduced Ornette to these musicians, and some of them were very young, and it was obvious that they had not heard of Ornette Coleman. But they were very polite. They applauded. He said, “Ladies and gentlemen, Ornette Coleman.” They applauded and tapped their bows, and so on. And then Ornette has no music in front of him, you know. So this is already very strange. And then they’re starting to play, and he just starts doing what he does. And of course it’s wonderful. And it takes some takes, both for the symphony to get it right and for Ornette to get it right. And after a few takes, when there was a break, a woman, a violinist came up to him. She said, “Are you—you’re not playing with music.” And he said, “No, I’m just kinda, you know, making it up.” And she said, “Do you get jobs?” So we assumed that she didn’t know who he was. (Laughter)

Anyway, so this is a long story, but it’s basically to show you that there really are no rules. I mean, it happens very organically. And this happened very much towards the end of the filmmaking process. Sometimes you’ve got it right from the beginning. As I say, what’s exciting and why I feel that it’s very legitimate to work with the same people over and over again, which I like to do—which is not really the Hollywood way, because there’s always somebody who’s the hottest guy, you have to have this cameraman, you have to have this composer. I don’t really think you get in a rut by working with the same people, because you’re constantly changing. And when you’re a director, your production designer, your cameraman, your composer, they go off and do other movies while you’re trying to get your next one together. So they have other experiences and get a chance to experiment and come back with fresh concepts.

And of course you’ve got—each movie is a unique universe. Not only, you hope, for the audience that sees it, but it is for you when you make it. So even working with the same people, it’s always different and it’s always exciting. And that applies to the music. I hope that’s enough of an answer.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yes. Do you think that people’s reactions differ when they’re watching a movie on video as opposed to in a theater?

CRONENBERG: yeah. I think video’s a whole completely other thing. And I’m really delighted about video. In fact, I’ve never shot a film in widescreen specifically because of video. I compose my films for both an aspect ratio of 1.85—I actually use 1.75 so that it’ll work in Europe, which is 1.66:1; that’s the shape of the frame, and 1.85 in North America. And it’ll also work on TV without having to pan and scan, or alter the composition of the frame. I’ve always known that more people are going to see my movies on video, right from the very beginning.

And, it’s just—to me, it’s just suicide to ignore that and say, “Well, I make my films for cinema, and that’s it.” It’s just not—it can’t be true. And certainly for films like *Videodrome*, ironically enough, which is very much about video: its almost entire life since it died after the first weekend…but it’s still alive. But it’s alive on video. And I mean, I talk to people who saw bootleg cassettes of it in Cuba and stuff like that, and that delighted me, because of course it’s getting seen. And yet there’s no denying that the video experience is quite a different one. We would not have been able to make either *Dead Ringers* or *Naked Lunch* had it not been for video. Presales of video are a crucial element now in the making of any independent film. And it was the belief that both of those films would be very attractive on video that got them financed.

Naked Lunch—I might be doing Fox an injustice here, but I don’t think so. I think that they really felt that *Naked Lunch* was for video, and that’s why

they got the rights to it. And I think they might be pleasantly surprised right now by how well it seems to be doing in the few theaters that it's been running so far. And so video is so present for any filmmaker now that, as I say, you can't ignore it. But it is a different experience. Sometimes when people say, "I want to see your films, but they're too scary or they're too this or they're too that," I say, "Well, you know, wait till it's out on tape, and then watch it." Because you have more control. You can fast forward. You can stop. You can walk out of the room without feeling guilty and embarrassing yourself. And, of course, it has in some ways a lesser impact on TV, but not always.

I always seem to use a lot of close-ups, and my films seem to be quite claustrophobic. And that isn't because of video. That's just because of my own nervous system and my understanding of composition and my feeling that the human face is really what cinema is all about. In fact, talking heads is what movies are all about, to me, really. And so they work well. They tend to work well on video. But if you've ever watched a film, a tape, with headphones on, at night, three in the morning, it can be a very intense experience, quite different from a theater but very intense. Maybe more intense in some ways, in an eternal way.

So to me, video is the freedom of the image. I mean, I can't imagine now not having access to film the way we do now. But it wasn't that long ago that you just didn't. A film came for a couple of weeks, and it was gone forever. I saw movies before TV, believe it or not, and that was the way it was. I mean, you had a memory of it. You had some stills, maybe. That was it. It was gone. So it really, oddly enough and bizarrely enough, brings movies around to being more like literature, because you have a bookshelf. Except it's a video shelf. You can take your favorite video down. You can fast-forward to your favorite scene the way you might with a book, and re-read it, look at it again, analyze it, fast-forward through those parts that you really hate or are boring. And I think that's great. I mean, it's all more involvement. And I embrace it.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: In the film [*Dead Ringers*], you see so little of their childhood. And I was wondering, did you dream up or plan what their parents looked like?

CRONENBERG: No. I don't waste time on characters who aren't on screen. And I know that some people do, and certainly there are novelists who do that. And, you do whatever works for you. But I really wanted them to be kind of almost parentless and almost a product of their own will. And I didn't want to get into that stuff, although it's incredibly fascinating. And certainly, the young boys who played the twins as children had parents who were there all the time. And the relationship between them and us, it was fascinating. But it was really something I didn't want to get into. There was no room in the film to deal with it. And I think part of making a film successful is to just accept the limitations of the form. I mean, I think it was—yes, it was George Bernard Shaw who said, you know…well, when someone said, "Well, how long should a play be?," he said, "Well, an act can be no longer than the capacity of the human bladder." I mean, that's really what determines how long an act can be. So I think we—you know, you have to accept the limitations of the form and work within it, and really, I was not prepared to deal with that element in *Dead Ringers*. And I do notice that generally I don't deal with that. It's sort of in retrospect. It just, for some reason…I don't know why, what would happen if I did. But I normally don't deal specifically with those elements of child-parent relationships. I'm not sure why.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I've heard—I don't know for sure if this is true—that originally there was a plan to do the North African scenes in *Naked Lunch* in North Africa, and then [inaudible].

CRONENBERG: Yes, that's true.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: And I'm curious about the change of deciding to do it [in Canada], particularly given Bertolucci shooting Paul Bowles's *The Sheltering Sky* on location, the difference of having a Tangiers that is a Canadian sun rather than a...

CRONENBERG: There was no sun whatsoever. That's Canada, you know. Well, yes, it's true that we originally—our schedule was set up to shoot at the end of it for, I think, a couple of weeks in Tangiers. And I was on Bertolucci's set for *The Sheltering Sky* because Jeremy Thomas also produced that, and that was a perfect sort of opportunity for me to see what a production in Tangiers would be like, what would be the problems, and so on. And then three

days before we started to shoot, the Gulf War broke out. We could see it coming, but, you sort of hope that it's not going to happen. And it wasn't so much—I mean, they were saying, you know, "All foreigners should probably get out of Tangiers," because, of course, there was a fundamentalist element in Morocco as well, which the king tries to suppress, but, you know, who knows?

And mainly, though, we couldn't get insurance. Even if everybody on the crew and cast had been willing to fly to North Africa, we] couldn't get insurance for the production, which would mean that our contracts would be invalid, which would mean we have no financing. So it was really the insurance companies who decided it. And I was depressed for a day because, of course, we had done a location survey, aside from *The Sheltering Sky* experience that I had. And we were always gonna build the interiors in Toronto. But when somebody opens a door and you see outside the door, you have to build a bit of what's out there. So we had taken measurements and videotapes and photos and everything—a lot of Tangiers. And we were very prepared to shoot there. And then I started to look at the script the weekend before we started to shoot.

And I realized that we never should have been going to Tangiers. We were really seduced by the reality of Burroughs having written the book there, and through mass hypnosis had all assumed that we must shoot something in Tangiers to connect with that. But when I looked at the script with a very cold eye, I realized, of course, that Interzone is always a state of mind and that technically he's probably never left New York. In fact, he probably hasn't left his apartment. And that I was being forced by circumstances to take that one final step, which would use that, rather than just have it be there.

And that's when we started to blend the Tangiers stuff with the—or the Interzone stuff, really, more correctly…for example, when Hank and Martin come back to his apartment, it's really a combination of his Interzone apartment and his New York apartment. And sometimes outside a window you'll see Central Park, and sometimes you'll see Tangiers, and sometimes you'll see, you know, tenements. That all came into the film afterwards, after we couldn't go to Tangiers. Although, as I say, the concept was there begging to be used.

So I presented the rewritten script to Jeremy and everybody was kind of saying, "Oh, sure, it's better, yeah, yeah." You're rationalizing it because you have no choice. It was better, and it was obvious to everybody—every actor, everybody—that it was just that final step. It was that last draft that should have been written before, and was, finally. And of course, my production people were incredibly excited because it's much more of a challenge to build the Casbah than to go and shoot in it, although I'm sure that's a challenge, too. So that's really the way it happened.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Can you speak a little bit about [working with Jeremy Irons in *Dead Ringers*]?

CRONENBERG: Well, sure. Jeremy Irons in *Dead Ringers*—I'm going to try and remember now. Basically, the reason that I had so much trouble getting someone to do that role was, first of all, gynecology. No American actor could get—well, I won't say none. I went to thirty of the best American actors. The names would astound you. And most of them could not get past the third page, because there was gynecology. Now this is interesting, don't you think? (Laughter) And the other thing that scared them was schizophrenia. They were afraid of the role. And you'd think that any actor would want to be onscreen by himself with himself. This is a dream, dream role. And Jeremy was very up front about that.

But in fact, the thing that this script demanded was not what most twin scripts demanded. And there are a lot of twin scripts around. I mean, also, I went to forty pitch meetings for *Dead Ringers* and couldn't sell the movie. And that's why I ended up producing it myself. They would say, "We've got a twin script right here we'd be happy to do, but please, not that one. Couldn't they be lawyers?" (Laughter) Things like that. "Do they have to both die?" And so it wasn't the fact of twins, it was the fact that they were real twins.

And twins love this movie because they have never seen themselves onscreen before for real. Because, almost inevitably, a twin script is about a crazed psychotic killer twin and a good wonderful twin. It's good and evil, you know, all that stuff. And

this movie didn't give an actor that shtick to fall back on. This movie was two real people who were very much like each other but not identical, and very subtly different. And that was going to be really hard to play. And one very famous actor said to me that he would have to drive himself over the edge of madness to play this role. And people who knew him said it was not a long trip. (Laughter) But I never got to find out. So I don't know.

Anyway, Jeremy—I had to have an actor who spoke English as his first language, you know. This to me was important because the dialogue was important, and that was the role. Jeremy was the first English actor that I went to. And he was the first actor who said, "I'm very interested in this. I want to meet you and talk to you about it." I don't know how he did it. I do know that he used some physical tricks to psyche into the role, and by the end of the shoot we would be whipping him in and out of Beverly and Elliot instantly. You know, there was no, like, "We'll do one day of Beverly and one day of Elliot." It's impossible to do that. So he developed small physical things that he did.

For example, for Beverly, he would stand weighted on his heels and slump a bit. And it just immediately—just that posture and a few hair things would put him into Beverly. And then Elliot would stand with the weight on the balls of his feet more aggressively, and that would change his posture. And he would immediately become Elliot. You know, now I don't know...I didn't have to do that in *Nightbreed*, so I didn't ever figure that out. But for me, it was hard to figure out how to drink a cup of coffee and say a line of dialogue at the same time. That was very tricky, believe me. And then the way I work with an actor is very collaborative—not in the sense of improvising dialogue, because I don't do that. I take a long time with the script, and I want to do it that way, unless there's some line that really doesn't feel right, and the actor just can't make it play. But in terms of the way we choreograph the scenes and our understanding of the way the scenes play, it's very collaborative.

Um, you're really—it's constant little adjustments and fine-tunings. We'd have to get very specific about a scene. Because you work out the basic strokes of it in—I don't really do rehearsals; it just doesn't interest me to do that. I do it on the day. And I mean, if there are problems that the actor has with a scene, understanding it or believing that it works, then of course you talk about it up front. But basically, the way the day begins—I have to do it this way, I'm afraid. I clear the set of everybody except the script person, who will feed you lines if you forget them, and myself and the actors. And we start to block the scene as though it's a play. I mean, we really start to say, "Well, should we be sitting and saying that line? And then you get up to the window and then you pause, and then you turn, and then you say…" You know, you start to do that, and then work out the entire scene that way as a little playlet.

Then you call all the crew on and run it again for them, and also for the stand-ins, who have to walk it while you're lighting, and so on. And then I'll talk to various people. The sound man will say, "This is going to be very hard to boom, maybe we have to use radio mics." The cinematographer will say, "I'm worried about when you have him go up to the window. Wouldn't it maybe be better if he went over here, visually?" And you try to integrate that into the dramatics, and so on. But during that time, that's when you have—the actors have you as a director there, and that's when it happens. That's when you really create the scene, from an acting point of view.

And then I start to work with everybody else to get it to work cinematically. And it's very rare that I have such a specific visual idea that I subordinate everything to that—that I know I'm going to do this long dolly shot so he has to be standing there, and I don't care if he feels like he should be over at the piano; he has to be there. I don't usually do that. And then while you're shooting, you find other things. And it's all minor adjustments and movements, and different things happen in the wide shot than they do in the close-up. So it's very, very difficult for me to be more specific. I could certainly analyze what might have happened during a specific scene that way, but I can't really be much more specific than that.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Most of the films that you made after *Videodrome* were all adaptations. Are you working on any more original scripts?

CRONENBERG: Well, it's interesting about original scripts. I know it might seem unbelievable, but it

really all feels the same to me. To write the script for *Naked Lunch*—when I was starting and being, you know, very much auteurist in my aspirations—I really felt that, you must do everything original, and all that. And I still do think that my writing is one of my main strengths as a director. But there are many ways that that expresses itself. And in a way, it almost doesn't matter where the basics come from, the material that you start with, whether it is in fact a dream, or somebody else's dream, or somebody's book, or a story that someone told you, or a story that you read in *The New York Times*.

So I myself am not particularly obsessed with that and, as I say, *Naked Lunch*—writing *Naked Lunch* felt as satisfying to me as writing *Videodrome*, maybe more, because I had more time to do it and rewrite it than I did with *Videodrome*. So I am working on a couple of scripts now. One is an original but it's based on the lives of some real people, and in a sense, at the moment, it looks as though they're going to still have those names when the movie comes out. Well, when the script is written. Another one is an adaptation of J.G. Ballard's book *Crash*. And that is, like, a dream I had. So I don't know. I mean, will there be one that isn't technically based on something else? At the moment, I'm not working on one that's like that, exactly. As I say, I'm actually working on a script about racing cars.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: *The Brood* is my favorite film of yours. It's like you are the Ingmar Bergman of horror.

CRONENBERG: Well, that's better than the "Baron of Blood." That's good. That's good. I appreciate that; thank you.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: You seem to be obsessed with the concept of doctors as a malevolent force.

CRONENBERG: Well, I don't really think of it that way at all. And I actually don't think I'm obsessed at all. I don't think of myself as an obsessive person. Not truly. I know some truly obsessive people, and I don't feel that the way it works with me is quite that. But no, I actually—my crazed doctors and scientists are my heroes, really. I like them. And they're my artists. I mean, sometimes I'm talking about artists, writers, sculptors, and sometimes scientists. But really, I think they're just doing an extreme version of what I think we all do, which is to try to invent the world for ourselves, and to try to interpret it, and to try to gain some control over it. I mean, that's the way it feels to me. And I think that they're exhilarating to watch, even though they might be insane and veering towards destruction all the time. I think that that's what you want to watch. And I know that.

And so, in that sense, they're my heroes because it's what they do and how extreme they are that starts to illuminate things in the film. So I don't really think of myself as anti-medical or anti-scientific. I think that it's innate in human nature to do those things, to not be satisfied with the way things are, to not be satisfied with things as basic as a human body. We've been redesigning ourselves from the beginning. We've never accepted sitting in the middle of [a] field or a forest the way monkeys do, you know. We built our own world, our own environment. And we're building our own bodies.

And so in that maybe slightly perverse sense, they are my heroes. And certainly in terms of the dynamics of the film, they're my heroes. So I'm not really—we could get into, "Do you trust doctors and lawyers?" That's a whole other question.

But it's not really the way I feel.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I'd like to ask you, when you first carved that out, your reputation preceded you... Did you start out *Naked Lunch* filming a movie about writer's block with the reputation preceding you? And was it your idea to do those water bugs?

CRONENBERG: Um, well, that's a few questions. I don't really think about my reputation when I'm writing. You really try to divest yourself of all of those considerations because of your career, of how you will be perceived, how the critics will perceive you, whether they'll think you're doing something that's retrograde, whether you're going to be hammered by the feminist right wing or the gay activist left wing—you've got to get rid of all that stuff. You can't worry about it for many reasons, the primary one being that if you do that, you will paralyze yourself before you set down a word. You just don't have enough time to consider all those kinds of variables, which are really not calculable, anyway. The other thing is that you

never know which movie that you're trying to make is actually going to go when, so you can't talk in advance about the arc of your career or anything like that.

Because, for example, I would have made *Dead Ringers* in 1981 if I could've got the financing together. And that would have shuffled the deck, really, in terms of critical appraisal of [my] chronology. After I did *The Dead Zone*, critics were saying—well, not just critics, "Now he's entering the mainstream, and no more special effects, and this is a very emotional film, and it's rural instead of urban." And, you know, all that stuff. All of it was true, except that then I made *The Fly*, right after it.

And then after *Dead Ringers*, which was actually an effects film but not visibly, and was considered by people to be, I suppose, more realistic, whatever that is—

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I didn't consider it another horror film—

CRONENBERG: No, no. But you see, a lot of people didn't consider *The Dead Zone* a horror film, and I don't, either. But the other thing is that those kinds of categories are really a critical problem or a marketing problem. They're not a creative problem. I mean, it's irrelevant when you're doing the thing whether it's a horror film, or a quasi-horror film, or a science-fiction horror film, or—that's completely irrelevant. You don't draw any shape from that or any energy from that. It really doesn't do anything for the way you're working.

So it's not something that's part of the creative process, and it's only after the fact that you start to see that—the fact that it's difficult to figure out how to sell the movie, for example, because your last film was a horror film and it did well, so do you mention *The Fly* when you're trying to sell *Dead Ringers*? That's the kind of problem it is. But it's not a creative problem. And after the fact, you get analytical about things that you were in fact only intuitive about while you were doing it.

CRONENBERG: The insect typewriters are my invention.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Absolutely brilliant.

CRONENBERG: Thank you. Well, I have to say that Burroughs himself loved them, wanted to take them home off the set. And he does have a mugwump in his bedroom, I can tell you that, and—it's tied up, though. It's okay. And said that he thought any writer could relate to those typewriters, which was a huge compliment. And I must say that Burroughs was totally supportive and very easy about the making of the film. I mean, he always, as he's written in the preface to the—there's a book, *The Making of Naked Lunch*, as well, which is not out yet, but it will be in about a week. And in a preface that he's written, he mentions a story about Raymond Chandler when people said, "Aren't you appalled at the things that Hollywood has done to your books?" And he said, "Well, Hollywood hasn't done anything to my books. They're right there on the shelf." And I think that's really Burroughs's approach. His work is his work and nothing that I could do would ever change it, really.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [inaudible question about Burroughs's "William Tell" shooting of his common-law wife]

CRONENBERG: Yeah. Well, the William Tell routine and the killing of Joan—until I started to write the screenplay, I wasn't really sure how I was going to approach doing the book, and I really avoided it for many years. I was at Burroughs's 70th birthday party, and then I was at his 75th birthday party. I still hadn't written a word. And we thought, "Well if William is going to see this movie, maybe we better start doing something."

But I was in fact gathering keystones or points of reference almost unconsciously, I think. And I was really struck by the preface that he wrote to the book *Queer*. And we had the rights, really, to use *Queer*; *Interzone*, which is kind of the outs of *Naked Lunch*; and *Exterminator!*, which is a group of short pieces, the title one being a sort of a short memoir of his time as an exterminator in Chicago. And in the preface to *Queer*, he says that at a certain point in his life, he was forced to come to the appalling conclusion, he says, that had it not been for the shooting death of his wife Joan, he would not have become a writer. And that really just struck me with incredible force, and I knew that I had to have that in the film in a very fictionalized way. And I wasn't sure why.

And in a sense, when I make a film, I'm really making the film to find out why I want to make it. I absolutely am not sure why I want to make it until it's finished. And even then it takes some time to settle in. And I think that's what gives me the drive to continue through all the agony that you do go through. And there's fun, too, but, I mean, it's tough. It's to find out why you are...obsessed? No, I won't use that word. To find out why you are focused on that particular project. People said, "Why do you want to make this story about, the twin gynecologists, they end up dead?"
I tried to, we pitched that to about forty—at literally forty or more meetings in Hollywood. And you can go back to the same office again, you know, because next week it's all new executives. (Laughter)

And you also run into the situation where you go into an office and they say, "Yo, when I was at TriStar, I was a minor executive, and I loved your project, and I just couldn't do anything. I didn't have the power. Now let's do it again." And so you say, "Here it is. It's about these twin gynecologists and they end up sort-of dead. It's great."

And then they say, "Um...we'll get back to you." And then you go the next day, [and] they [say], "No. Well, I have the power this time. No."

40 meetings. And yet I have to say that one of the difficulties—it was really partly my fault because I couldn't tell the story in the way—well, you can't tell the movie. And in particular, I [couldn't] tell the movie, because I hadn't written it at that point, because you kinda want the studio to pay you while you're writing it so you can survive. And after they see the movie, they say, "Oh, right, now I see what you meant." But I can't give them the movie before I make it. And the main reason is because I don't know quite what it is, on that very basic level.

I didn't know until I really got into writing the script of *Naked Lunch* that it was—my version of it was—about writing, that it was…I went back to Burroughs to get to the root of the need to be creative, the human need that's unique, as far as I know, on Earth and maybe in the universe, to invent characters, to recreate things in a different way, to try to bring order out of chaos, to give meaning to things that might, you suspect, be meaningless. That kind of thing.

And so the film, in a way, became a meditation on writing, using the Burroughsian example; I suppose, [that that] is what it is. And that's basically how that happened.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I wonder if I could ask you what your personal perception of censorship is [inaudible] with regard to some of the films you made [inaudible]. And also, have you found any differences in audiences' or critics' perceptions of your films in Canada as opposed to the U.S., or [inaudible] is there something distinct about the American experience [inaudible]?

CRONENBERG: Well, in terms of the response to the film, it's a little early to say because it's only just opened in Canada on the 10th, really. It played in five theaters in the U.S. early, just in order for it to qualify for the Academy Awards. This was—we'll see about that—a little optimistic, but why not? And so I really can't talk specifically about the difference in reaction, because the Canadian reaction is just happening this weekend, and I'm not there. So I don't know. I mean, we got three good reviews in the three main Toronto papers, but they were very different in their approaches.

And you know, you can get a good review that you think is not so smart. And that puts you in a very strange place because you want a good review, and what you fear, of course, is an intelligent bad review. You really hope you won't get one of those. And so far I haven't had any of those, but it's possible. I know it's possible. Now what was the other—

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [inaudible question about censorship]

CRONENBERG: Yeah, well, censorship is a huge issue and maybe I can only say that I really think that as an artist, and I guess this really—Nabokov said it, and I think he was right: that you have no social responsibility as an artist. You must not censor. You cannot self-censor, and you must fight to not have any of your work censored. And I think that's absolutely true.

There is a strange, uneasy relationship always between society and art. It's inevitable. I think part of it is because art's primary appeal is to the unconscious. I'm not speaking in strictly Freudian

terms, but it's good enough. And society, as in one of the Freudian formulas—this is also a gross simplification, but civilization is repression. That's one other formula. So if art appeals to the unconsciousness but civilization is repression, you get a very strange relationship between the two. And so censorship will never go away. It's an unending process. I mean, it will never go away. There will always be an element, a desire to repress or censor coming out of a culture, any culture. There's not a culture in the world that has zero censorship.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Are there some things [inaudible] that you wanted to shoot, or actually did shoot, and then [inaudible] studio they said, "No, no, no, we need an R rating?"

CRONENBERG: No, there's no studio. There is no studio involved here. This is an independent film that's being distributed in the U.S. by Fox, but that's it. This is not a studio picture. It's an independent film produced by Jeremy Thomas, and believe me, he paid the price in blood—I mean, can you imagine? I mean, imagine this if you want a few laughs—going into, you know, the head of Fox and putting *Naked Lunch*, slapping it down on the table and saying, "Read this and I'll get back to you tomorrow. You know, we're going talk about the movie." Well, that would be fun.

It's just not a project that could ever have come out of an American studio. It's just not possible. And it is a bit of a miracle that a major studio is distributing it, but on the other hand, they got a really good deal. They've already made money on the video aspect of it.

And the fact that it seems to be doing okay at the box office, in the limited release that it has, is just kind of a surprise to them, I think. So once again, that to me is the basic structure of those things.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [inaudible question about Cronenberg's reality]

CRONENBERG: I think the bizarre and maybe somewhat unacceptable truth is that there is no single reality. We structure it. I mean, it comes out of our biochemistry and then it comes out of the culture that we're born into, and then we get these little intimations that it's not an absolute at all—that in fact, I mean, it's really quite variable and changeable. And you can change reality in many ways. But I mean, if you imagine that our biochemistry was such that we had an organ that secreted LSD—which is to me quite a possibility I can imagine a creature like that—we could still function quite well. But it would be a totally different reality, completely, I mean, in terms of time and space and color and shape and tactility and everything. I mean, it would be] completely alien reality. And it's very possible.

So Bill Lee, I mean—I can give you a quick little sketch of the structure. this is me being a critic, you understand, and I might not be very good at it because, once again, it's not what I do. I don't sketch this on a pad when I'm trying to figure out how to do the film. I work through intuition, and when the things feel as though they're clicking into place, you have confidence that later they will be able to be subjected to a sort of intellectual analysis and it'll still work. But you're never really sure.

If Bill Lee is an exterminator, and he is exterminating some elements of his own makeup, his homosexuality, his creativity, because he's afraid, because they leave him vulnerable, because in the 1950s those things were not particularly acceptable to the official reality of the times and he didn't want to expend the energy to fight against that. And there is some biographical truth there. I'll just mention that although Burroughs and [Allen] Ginsberg were sort of considered the hippest of the hip, or maybe in retrospect were, they bought the official reality of the Eisenhower era enough that they both considered their homosexuality to be curable diseases, curable by psychoanalysis, possibly by drugs. It took a long time before that understanding of that was considered archaic and maybe laughable. But even they wrote about it to each other and talked about it, and Ginsberg in particular tried very hard to turn himself into a heterosexual, very hard.

But here he is, an exterminator. And of course, if you get into Freudian symbology you get, these things, these kind of—to me not repulsive, but to most people repulsive, in fact—Madagascar cockroaches, which are really about that long and quite pretty, really. But they are the—what comes up from the dark crevices of the mind but the unconscious thoughts, the unconscious desires

which we repress? So there's Bill Lee trying to exterminate them. And that's why his typewriter, his typing machine, when it becomes the means of delivering back to him the things of his unconsciousness, should take the form of an insect.

And so that's why the typewriter also has a talking asshole. And in a way, that's Bill Lee talking to himself. So is it not reality? Has he lost touch with reality? No, I think he's very much in touch with reality. It's just a different version of it, a different level of it. And then what he does with it, he creates a place, Interzone, where everybody recognizes him for what he is. They're all saying, "You know, you can jump into bed with this guy, you can jump into bed with that guy." And he's saying, "Why? Why are you saying these things to me? I'm not a homosexual." And they're saying, "Yeah, you could write this report with that machine and write that." And he's saying, "Well, you know, I'm just writing reports. I mean, I'm not really a writer." So he's actually created a place where he must be what he should be. And that's basically my structure.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: So you're basically saying it's what he has to do to survive.

CRONENBERG: Yes.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Survive his life. Almost like [inaudible] [R.D.] Laing in *Schizophrenia*.

CRONENBERG: Yes.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [inaudible question about the box office success of *Naked Lunch*]

CRONENBERG: How well is the film doing? 'Cause he's from L.A. That's Bob. I'm actually not sure. All I can tell you—I haven't gotten the figures for this weekend because it's not over yet. But speaking of horror films and box office and so on, a horror film traditionally drops 37 percent the second weekend. And so it sort of suggests that most people who want to see a horror film come out for the first weekend, and then it kind of trails off, and each weekend after that, or each week, it drops quite a lot. So that's why often, *Friday the 13th* sequels will be in 2,000 theaters, because you—you hit them hard, and then you're gone. But *Naked Lunch* only dropped one percent from the first weekend to the second. Now that's only in five theaters, but I've never had a film that held like that. So if that's any indication, then it could be a very interesting experiment, because we really are releasing this film in very few theaters. So it could work very well. So the auguries are good, Bob, they're good. (Laughter) Trust me, trust me on this.

Sometimes it's not a question of how it's being sold. It's people's perception of it is often—the way the film is sold is not necessarily the way it's perceived. *The Dead Zone*, for example, was not a horror film at all and not really even a science-fiction film, but because Debra Hill had worked on it and she was well-known for *Halloween*, and I worked on it, and it [had] a Stephen King book as the basis of it, it was perceived as a horror film. And that's really how it acted, even though it wasn't quite sold that way, either. So sometimes there's a disjoint between the two.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: How do you feel about being so well received by [the critics]?

CRONENBERG: Well, it's strange. I mean, I just came from seeing Dennis Potter's film *Secret Friends*, and Dennis was there. And he was an absolute wreck. And it didn't matter whether people said they loved his film or kind of just didn't talk to him. He was still a wreck. And although externally I'm not shaky like he was, it's a strange thing. I mean, of course you want this. I mean, you want people to love what you're doing. But it's very strange. I haven't figured it out yet, really.

And there are enough strange and negative things that happen that keep you balanced. I'm not likely to get unbalanced, because we have had some bad reviews for it, from—some quite definitely, quite negative reviews. And so it's not as though it's all positive. And every screening—maybe not here, but [in] every screening there are walkouts, which does not always happen. Even if people don't like your film, they don't leave. Now I haven't had the experience that I really want to have, which is to sit with a paying audience at a kind of normal theater—not in a museum situation—and an audience that doesn't know I'm there and that owes me nothing and that will—if they hate the film, will know that.

I haven't had that experience with this film yet because I had to leave to come here when it opened in Toronto. Normally, I'd be there Friday night, sitting, scrunched down, sweating, really, a lot, in a theater. And I need that experience because I can't really respond to the film myself anymore, you see. I have to do it vicariously through the audience because, of course, every cut, every moment in the film has a huge history for me. And I can't really see it.

There comes a time when you would—well, most of the time, especially of course when you're editing, you would give anything to be able to erase the history of the film from your mind, and walk in and see it cold, like a normal audience, just to have that objectivity and that clarity. But you never, ever get that. So you do tricks to try and give yourself as much of that as you can. And you're wary, even, about people telling you that they like the film because you can get awfully picky. It's like, "But did you like it the right way?" You know? And that's completely unfair. And in fact, it's ridiculous, because at the same time you know that the response to the film is so totally subjective. It's like music, really, in a way, finally. It's so subjective that it's almost beyond articulation.

And when you read reviews, you're looking for that one review—and I do read them. I mean, if it's a really horrible one, then it's too masochistic to read. But if it's not totally horrible, you'll read it. Especially the first thirty or forty. By the time you've [read] two or three hundred, and your film has gone on to be in forty countries, sort of, you just don't care what anybody thinks anymore, because you've got to be working on your next film. And you sort of pray for that after a while, to just be that insensitive to it. But you look for a review that's really, really intelligent and profound, in the sense that it gets to the heart of something that actually you didn't get to yourself. Because a good critic actually can tell you something about your film that's true, that you couldn't articulate yourself. And it's incredibly exciting, and it's quite emotional when you connect with a review like that.

I haven't seen one like that yet for *Naked Lunch*. But it's hard for a reviewer, as opposed to a critic, someone who has to sort of write for a paper—limited space, quick response—for a film as complex as *Naked Lunch*. I mean, they can only deal with one element of it. Most of them choose to deal with Burroughs a bit and then by the end of the review, they're just sort of mentioning things, but they can't really deal with them. So I'm still waiting for that one.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I was wondering, who are your favorite directors and [inaudible]?

CRONENBERG: I don't have… there are a lot of directors that are… I don't have a favorite director or two or three. I really don't. I love, you know…Fellini and Godard and Bergman were all very important to me. And the reason that I mention three European directors is simply…I was raised on Hollywood stuff. I used to see Hopalong Cassidy and the Durango Kid, and Burt Lancaster pirate movies, and loved them all and was very exhilarated by them, and obviously very influenced by them in the sense that they delivered to me my understanding of what movies could be.

But I never thought of films as art with a capital "A" until, well—I could tell you exactly when that happened. I used to go to a theater in Toronto called the Pylon, and that was before television, believe it or not. We used to all walk to—every Saturday we'd be like lemmings going to the ocean to jump in. We would be streaming—the kids streaming towards these cinemas, and you'd meet your friends along the way, and you'd stop off at various shops along the way to buy, gum or something. And you'd go to see a movie. And across the street…now, where I lived, where I grew up in Toronto, there was a big Italian population, 'cause it was sort of an immigrant section of town. And that wave of immigration was Italian. So there was an Italian cinema across the street called the Studio, which only showed Italian films in Italian, no subtitles.

And I remember coming out of the Pylon and seeing people coming out of the Studio. And when I looked, I saw that they were men and women, but mostly men, and they were crying, coming out of the theater. And I couldn't believe it. The thought that a film could make a grown man cry was astonishing to me. I remember crossing the road to look to see what the film was, and it was Fellini's film *La Strada*. And that really struck me and said to me that film can be something besides Hopalong Cassidy, much as that was great. So the influences

on me are enormous, but they're so diffuse I couldn't really point...I've not been haunted by one filmmaker the way De Palma says he is by Hitchcock, or whatever. I don't have that feeling that there is one filmmaker looking over my shoulder saying, "No, no, that's—the camera should go a little lower," you know? It's not like that.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Inaudible] adaptation of *Crash*, and when did you first come in contact with the book? And also, in the way that you have been involved with Burroughs on this film, do you anticipate any kind of similar involvement with Ballard?

CRONENBERG: Well, *Crash*...I haven't written...well, now, that's not true. I've written a few words on *Crash*, actually. Jeremy Thomas and I have bought and optioned—it's been going on for some time, for the book. And I've met Ballard a couple of times, most recently just about two weeks ago in London. I was there doing publicity for *Naked Lunch*. And I don't know what's going to happen with that. I mean, at the moment, we understand from our experience with *Naked Lunch* that I have to write the script. Then Jeremy needs about half a year to a year to raise the money for it, based on the script, because we cannot just show someone the book. It won't work. Same thing as *Naked Lunch*, basically. I mean, it's a different book, but it's rough, and if you're a producer, you know you can't just show somebody that. And I don't know what my approach will be.

You have an enormous problem—it's not a problem, I mean, it's just in the nature of it. Books and film are completely different, and things that are incredibly easy to do in a book, inner monologues and the use of metaphor, are impossible, really, on film. They just don't work the same way. So a lot of what I do with effects in *Naked Lunch* is my version of metaphor. It's not an attempt, for example, the fact that I give all the good sex to the rubber in *Naked Lunch*, and none to the actors, to avoid censorship, but to try to reproduce that metaphorical thing that happens in Burroughs when you read all this bizarre sex, which is not pornographic because it's doing a whole bunch of stuff. But if you had your lead actors on screen doing it, it would be probably legitimately considered pornographic, and I'm talking from an aesthetic point of view now, not a censorial one. Therefore, it would not be doing the right thing for your film.

So it's—those kinds of interpretive things are what you deal with, what I deal with when I'm working with a book, which I've only done twice. And of course, *The Dead Zone* was quite a different thing in many ways, but it had similar problems. I don't know what I'm going to do with *Crash*. I mean, in a sense, you'd say, "Well, it's more...it's more likely to be a movie because it does have characters that continue all the way through," which I do feel the need of. And it does have a narrative of sorts, but it has a lot of other things that you just...I don't know how I'm going to do it, I really don't. So that's where that is right now.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [inaudible question about the subjective nature of reality in *Naked Lunch* and *Videodrome*]

CRONENBERG: In *Videodrome*? Yeah. Well, there was a lot of discussion between myself and the producers on *Videodrome*. But the structure is different from *Naked Lunch*. In *Videodrome*, I'm presenting a character who—it's a first-person film in a total way, so that I just decided that I was going to be very rigorous about it, even though I knew it was a little suicidal, in that as my character's reality changed, so too would the reality of the movie and the reality that was there for the audience. And I was not going to show anybody else's version of it, because that was the only version there was in this…in the same way that if your own reality were changing, shifting, that would be all you have. But, I mean, I could make up—what would a passerby see when Max Renn is doing this? And I thought of those things.

But I never bothered to schematically work it out because it was irrelevant, basically. In *Naked Lunch* it's different, because there's a sense that Bill Lee is, on a very real level, conscious of the fact that he is creating his own reality, first with drugs and then with his art. And he knows, there is a sense…I wanted to suggest that it's not just the audience who knew—knows what's going on, it's also Bill Lee who knows what's going on. And yet he is willful enough and focused enough to continue that, despite the fact that it's dangerous. So that's why I gave little hints of some outside reality in *Naked*

Lunch and didn't in *Videodrome*. A different sort of project that way.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Just also, you mentioned earlier that you felt your writing was one of your main strengths as a director [inaudible].

CRONENBERG: Yes, true. (Laughter) Fortunately, not with other people's films, though.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Oh, yeah. But I was wondering, when you said earlier you thought your writing was a strength, [inaudible question about what Cronenberg thinks are his weaknesses as a director].

CRONENBERG: There are tricks you can do. And one of the tricks is that you surround yourself with really talented people so that they can compensate for your own weaknesses. And if you work with them enough, and they become friendly—you can actually confess to them that you just don't know what the fuck you're doing, and, "Will you please help me?" But I mean, that's a joke, but it's not a joke.

One of the fascinating things about making a film is that it is so complex. I mean, it does draw on every part of you, because it draws on the social part as well, and on the sort of temperament part, and on the dealing-with-a-lot-of-people part, and dealing with yourself in the way that writing does, and dealing with the economy. I mean, I had to produce *Dead Ringers* because nobody else would do it. And I had to deal with all that stuff that really bores me and I hate, but I had to do it. So instead of taking a nap at lunchtime, which is what I do to maintain my sanity, I had to get on the phone and try to find out why the French deal fell apart. Where's the French distribution deal? Where's that money?

And so it's impossible to be good at every aspect of film. I really do believe it's impossible to be on a level of real excellence on every level. But if you're shrewd and clever, then it's like Muhammad Ali. So you don't have a punch, okay. But you can invent rope-a-dope. I mean, I often feel that I'm on the ropes and I'm getting pummeled, but the ropes, they're giving me a bit of help. So one way to deal with that is to find people that you can trust who you can work with, who understand it and who have that sense of whatever—if it's a sense of style, if it's a sense of color, if it's whatever you feel...and it might vary from film to film. I mean, something that you felt really on top of on one film, you just don't have the maximum on another film. And you find somebody to help you. That's really what you do.

SCHWARTZ: Thanks a lot to David Cronenberg. (Applause)

CRONENBERG: Thank you very much.

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