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'ALL THE NEWS THAT FITS'

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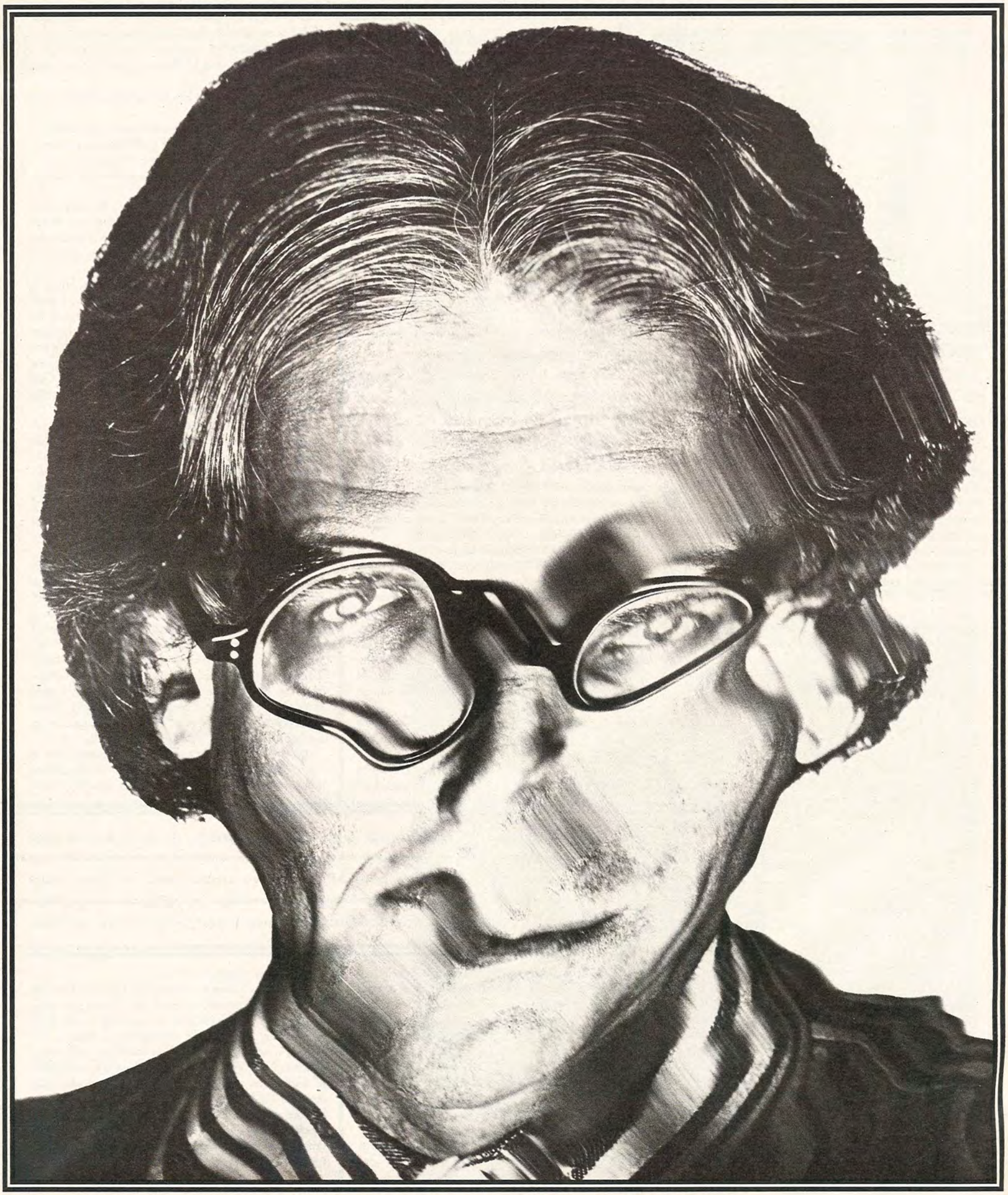
David CRONENBERG

THE ROLLING STONE INTERVIEW BY DAVID BRESKIN

LETTERED BY DENNIS ORTIZ-LOPEZ



PHOTOGRAPH BY ALBERT WATSON

WHEN YOU enter the world of David Cronenberg, there are no slashers in the closet. No one pops up out of the bathtub after a certain drowning. The wind doesn't rattle the windows or make the curtains billow like death shrouds. No. The horror in the world of David Cronenberg is not the easy, external horror of the slasher, but the far creepier, insidious horror of the self, of self-consciousness. I think, therefore I might not be. ¶ It's out of such a disturbing state of mind (and body) that Cronenberg has fashioned his remarkable body of work. Following two "underground" films – *Stereo* and *Crimes of the Future* – in the late Sixties, Cronenberg released his first feature, *They Came From Within* (also known as *Shivers*), in 1975, in which the repressed residents of a sterile high-rise become infected with parasites that sex them up in unusual ways. Marilyn Chambers, sporting an underarm phallic spike, starred in his next picture, *Rabid*, after which Cronenberg made a skidding detour onto the drag strip for the forgettable *Fast Company*. ¶ It wasn't until the Eighties that he really hit stride. *The Brood* was a mini-masterpiece about the horror of the fraying family; *Scanners* brought Cronenberg his drive-in audience, with its famous exploding head and sci-fi subtext; *Videodrome* was a complicated, polyoptic exploration of the connection between image, power and flesh, starring James Woods and Debbie Harry. *The Dead Zone* found Cronenberg boiling down the Stephen King bestseller and extracting the best performance of Christopher Walken's career. And then *The Fly* put him squarely over the top. Featuring Jeff Goldblum and Geena Davis, Cronenberg's reworking of the laughable little Fifties original was masterful: Taut, vicious, disgusting, metaphorically rich and intellectually rigorous, it was slamming yet subtle, like the best of all his work. After *The Fly*, he turned down the temperature with *Dead Ringers*, a stainless-steel-on-skin story of self-destructive, identical-twin gynecologists (both played brilliantly by Jeremy Irons) that scraped to the core of the problem of identity – how we separate self from other. Indeed, considering these six films, an argument can be made that Cronenberg was the most consistently interesting filmmaker of the Eighties.

And now comes the unfilmable film *Naked Lunch*, Cronenberg's long-wished-for fusion of his vision with that of William Burroughs. It's quite a strange film, hardly the free-for-all that the Burroughs novel of the same name promises. Rather, the film is dry as dust, bristly in its intelligence and unsettling in its aura – it's like a visit to the mental dentist. It's also one of the few pictures that generously rewards a second viewing.

I met with Cronenberg in his native Toronto, where he lives quietly – when he's not racing cars – with his second wife and his three children. We talked in his small, Spartan office as the snow swirled outside.

In the past you've mentioned that you are afflicted with the curse of balance.

Maybe this is what people mean when they say my films are conservative. Theatrically, it's wonderful to see someone who's unbalanced. In the sense that actors would always prefer to play a villain, because it allows them to express that obsessive craziness which, despite the danger of it, is still rather admired in our culture.

Evil is more interesting, cinematically, than good.

But I'm not even thinking in terms of evil. Evil is a whole other thing. The minute you say evil, I think Christianity. I don't throw that word around, and it may not be something I even believe in. But let's say cinematic evil, okay, I'm willing to go that far. Yeah, it's more interesting. Because it illuminates things, partly, and partly because it's cathartic. A villain in a bizarre, twisted way is always a Christlike figure: You know he's going to die, and he's dying for your sins, for your rage, for your craziness; he's doing it for you so you don't have to do it.

But your movies never give us an easy evil. They always present both sides of every situation. And it almost leads to a kind of analysis paralysis. . . .

I do think it's a Canadian thing, this balance. Up to a point it's a virtue, and beyond that it's neurotic. I do know people who are so self-obsessed and so self-analytical and so self-critical that they could sit in a room talking to themselves for years and never allow themselves to act. Because they would anticipate the exfoliation, the elaboration of the situation. Anticipating an affair, for example. A simple thing. They would think: I could call her, but then this could happen. I could arrange an accidental meeting: I could bump into her at the cafeteria, but then this could happen. And on and on. To the point where no action would be taken.

And thus they personify – Canada!

And thus, they would, to me. To a certain extent. At its worst, not at its best.

While the United States of America is already contemplating date rape!

[*Laughs*] Yes, exactly. That's right. No, not contemplating. *Doing* it.

Thus the attraction of Canadians to things American, but also the repulsion?

That's right. It's definitely a love-hate relationship.

And where do you find yourself in that nexus as a Canadian filmmaker whose largest audience is American?

Right in the middle. It's a very interesting place to be. It's a *Canadian* place to be.

You've said that all horror springs from the Latin phrase 'Timor mortis conturbat mea' – the fear of death disturbs me. Was there any way for you to resolve your fear of death other than by making movies about it, or have you not resolved it even with the movies?

I don't know if it's really resolvable for me, but we'll see. I think it would have to be through art, and I think in one sense that is what all art is. I don't mean to be reductive, but I don't think that's so reductive, because the question of death is not a simple question. It's not just fear of death, it's meaning of life – it's the same question. If you're religious, you talk about what God might be like, what the nature of God is. The question of human mortality is not a simple question.

Are you positing "art against death"?

I'm positing art as a means of coming to terms with death. Yes. I'm putting art in opposition to religion – or as a replacement for religion, in the sense that if religion is used to allow you to come to terms with death, and also to guide you in how to live your life, then I think that art can do the same thing. But in a much less schematic way, in a much less rigid and absolute way. Which is why it appeals to me and religion doesn't.

Your particular kind of horror has never been situational horror (the-man-in-the-basement-with-the-knife) as much as existential, philosophical horror. Where does that come from?

I really think it comes from what I need art for. I don't need the story around the campfire; there's a couple of great campfire-type horror stories. But they are basically the-man-in-the-basement-with-the-knife. To the extent that that can be cathartic and entertaining, fine. But it's not enough for me. I want, I need more from what I do: I need more complexity, I need more philosophy, and I need more of a struggle in my art than that. More of a struggle with myself.

If there's a horror in confronting the inevitability of death – and we all carry our little mini-horror film around with us in the shape of our own deaths – wouldn't eternal life be an even greater horror?

Oh, yeah. There's no way out, that's one of the problems. No one *really* wants to live forever, not really. But on a theoretical level, by apposition, you don't want to die, so you really are saying you want to live forever – even though you know that's not really going to work. Now, I've had moments where the inevitability of death is an absolute strength – it's an escape, it's a freedom. And certainly people who find themselves in a hideous situation, like the concentration camps, there's a point where death is truly a release. So, the idea that death is merciful, that's not only a schematic concept to me, I can feel it as an emotional reality as well.

AS AN artist, your responsibility is to be irresponsible. As soon as you talk about social and political responsibility, you've amputated the best limbs you've got as an artist. You are plugging into a very restrictive system.

At the beginning of *Naked Lunch* is the quote "Nothing is true, everything is permitted." Although I don't think it was originally conceived by Hassan I. Sabbah as an existentialist statement, in a way it is. It's saying: Because death is inevitable, we are free to invent our own reality. We are part of a culture, we are part of an ethical and moral system, but all we have to do is take one step outside it and we see that none of that is absolute. Nothing is true. It's not an absolute. It's only a human construct, very definitely able to change and susceptible to change and rethinking. And you can then be free. Free to be unethical, immoral, out of society and agent for some other power, never belonging. Ultimately, if you are an existentialist and you don't believe in God and the judgment after death, then you can do anything you want: You can kill, you can do whatever society considers the most taboo thing.

Including suicide?

Including suicide.

'The Dead Zone' essentially ends with a suicide; Max Renn kills himself at the end of 'Videodrome'; Brundlefly at the end of 'The Fly' asks for a mercy killing; and the Mantle twins end 'Dead Ringers' with what is basically a double-suicide. Your last four pictures all end with suicide, so it's obviously something you've given a lot of thought to.

Yeah. It's probably the only way we can give our death a meaning. Because otherwise it's completely arbitrary. It comes because of some small bodily misfunction or some accident – a safe falls on your head. You're Krazy Kat and a safe falls on your head and it doesn't mean anything! It means fuck-all. And so you say, I don't like this, I don't like the fact that death, which is a pretty important moment in my life, I don't like this to have no meaning. The only way you can do anything about that is to control the moment and the means of your death. And that means suicide, basically.

In opposition to this, you have an inbuilt, genetically programmed desire to survive and stay alive at all costs, no matter how hideous the circumstances. To survive and to live no matter what. In the West, suicide is basically considered a cowardly thing that comes out of despair or hopelessness and is something you should have therapy or take pills for so that you won't do it. I think I've had to find my own way through that.

I was shocked when Hemingway committed suicide, because he obviously could have lived a lot longer. But he made his very Hemingwayesque statement that all that mattered to him was fucking and writing and hunting and fishing, and that he couldn't do any of them worth a damn anymore, so why be alive? And as you get older you say, he has a point, he really does. If your life has meaning, then it can also cease to have meaning. And if you're still alive after that point, what are you? And I also believe, really, that the only meaning that there is in the universe comes from the human brain. I don't think that there is a God or that there is an external system of meaning out there that exists apart from human beings. So, from that point of view, it's even more cogent, the possibility that suicide is an elegant and properly structured way out of life – that it could be, anyway. And whether I could ever do that, under certain circumstances, or could overcome the will to be alive, which is strong, I don't know.

When I heard that Hemingway had died, I *became* Hemingway. I imagined him taking the shotgun, I imagined him the way he did it, and the feel. Did the barrel cling on his teeth? How did it feel? I imagined the moment of death. Whenever I read about a suicide, I do that. And, in a sense, whenever I'm having a character in my films die, I'm rehearsing my own death.

I want to touch on catharsis. You routinely insist on catharsis in your films as a benefit and a raison d'être for horror as a genre, and yet I've rarely consumed the work of an artist that leaves me feeling less cartharsis than yours.

Yeah. Yeah. Well, it's the catharsis of the ambivalent. Maybe that's what I'm selling to you here. If you're simplistic, or your work is simplistic, or you choose to make it simple, then there can be a simple catharsis; and you get that in soap operas, you get it in the traditional comedy, where things are tied up in the end and everything feels all right after you've gone through some perilous moments. And maybe, the catharsis in my films is more complex, in that it is my reconfirming that things are not simple, not easily – perhaps not ever – resolvable. When I'm feeling . . . when I need a book, I don't want a book in which everything is sweet and neat and nice. What book do you take to the island with you? What really *consoles* you? Is it something that tells you everything is all right? Is that really consolation? I feel that it's not.

But even with the intellectual ramifications of doubt, which your work provides, it seems like one could have those and still provide the audience more release and recovery.

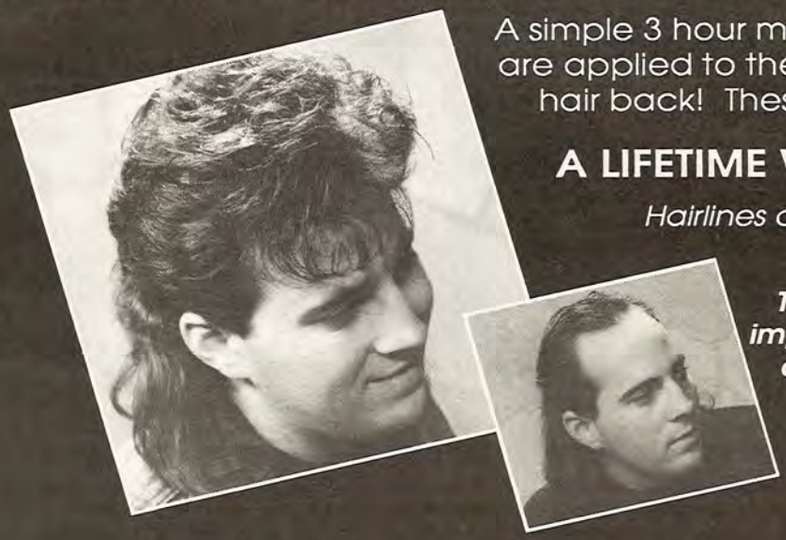
It sounds like trout fishing [*laughs*]. You catch them, say hi! and throw them back.

You've caught them in the theater – the audience as trout!

And maybe I don't want to let them go. Maybe catharsis is, literally, letting them off the hook too easily!

I'm not insisting that catharsis is the be-all and end-all, I'm just pointing out that it's a mechanism that seems to be there. And obviously, it can vary hugely from work to work. But certainly when you begin to mix your blood with the characters in the film, or if it's a scary film, you're mixing your own anxieties with the anxieties that are being played out in the film, the ca-

"I FOUND A PERMANENT ANSWER TO BALDNESS"



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tharsis does not purge, it makes clear. I suppose my version of it is not totally classical. It's like the frame isolating things out of the chaos on the set. It's sort of saying: For the moment we're going to concentrate on this. I'm not saying this is the whole world, but for the next two hours it's going to be your world, it's going to be our world together, we're really going to dive in deep, and we're going to explore all the aspects of it. To me, *that* is cathartic, right there. It doesn't have anything to do with whether there is a happy ending.

Because your work is certainly less classically cathartic than, let's say, a filmmaker like Oliver Stone's, to make maybe the boldest, capital-letter example: 'Platoon,' where at the end of the film, if it works, there's a wash of emotion – you've really bathed in that bath of feelings.

[*Laughs*] Are you saying his films are bathetic?

Or you may be very upset in 'Born on the Fourth of July' that Tom Cruise has a terrible experience in the VA hospital, but by the end, you've recovered, because in the grand –

Well, that's because Oliver Stone is afraid to say the truth. For all the shouting, he's still not quite able to deliver the final blow, which is that Cruise had these horrible experiences in the VA hospital and it didn't *mean anything*. And it didn't have to happen. And it really has fucked the guy's life, and nothing can be done about it! That's the truth that maybe is not speakable for Oliver Stone, I don't know. It's a hard truth. And the truth does not really lend itself to the dramatic structures that are immediately available to the Hollywood filmmaker. I'm not saying absolute truth, because I don't think there is absolute truth, but in the particular construct which you are dealing with for two hours, there can be relative truths that mean something. To the extent that you are a Hollywood filmmaker, you have to buy the several suits that are on the rack. And you have to expand or contract to fit them.

The transformational aspects of love, relationship and the body itself – the mutating possibilities – is something that you verbally have endorsed as exciting, inventive, attractive; and yet your films, in a very different way, always show those sorts of mutations and transformations in a quite horrific light.

Hmmm. Dramatically, of course, something that goes wrong is always more interesting than something that goes right. I have to confess to being part of that structure. It's Shavian: Conflict is the essence of drama. I mean, if a guy transforms into a fly and it's really nice and everybody likes it, you know, what have you got? You've got a comedy on TV. But you don't have heavy-duty dramatic stuff. So that's part of it.

And the other part is that I'm perhaps admitting in the films what might be potentially positive in theory is maybe quite difficult to manipulate to the point where it's positive in practice. I'm trying to say: Well, what happens when we put this theory into practice? That's the extent to which my films are my little lab experiments. I say: Let's try it out. Here's a guy who's transforming into *this*, and uh-oh, I see a problem, it's not turning out so nice, what's he going to do? In a way, it's play. It's the way children play to try things out.

Do you ever feel trapped by your own reputation of going further than other people will go? That people carry with them a certain expectation when they see a Cronenberg film?

No, I love disappointing people's expectations. I really do. It's a perverse power trip for me. So, in fact, no, I don't feel the slightest bit trapped. I'm very stubborn. And I really just do what I fucking well want.

So you don't still feel any kind of compulsion to show the unshowable and speak the unspeakable that you did earlier?

Not if I don't feel like it that day. And I might feel like it tomorrow. But today I don't. The artist's duty to himself is a culmination of immense responsibility and immense irresponsibility. I think those two interlock.

Does the artist have any moral or social responsibility?

No. No. Still doesn't, after all these years. Still irresponsible, after all these years. As a citizen, of course. As a parent, of course. But as an artist, that's where the paradox is, your responsibility is to be irresponsible. As soon as you talk about social or political responsibility, you've amputated the best limbs you've got as an artist. You are plugging into a very restrictive system that is going to push and pull and mold you and is going to make your art totally useless and ineffective.

Formally, your art is more willing to stick with a tight controlled frame – more willing to show "talking heads" than a lot of other auteurs are?

Yeah. Yeah. To me, the "talking head" is the *essence* of cinema. The most fascinating thing to a baby is the human face. The baby will look at your face and watch your face move and want to touch it, it gives you a whole other insight into what a face is. We get very used to them, but in fact, if it's a fantastic head, and what it's talking about is fantastic, then you can't have anything better. It's the best! So I'm not afraid of it. I'm not afraid to sit on a close-up and let it happen. If you've got the right face saying the right things at the right moment, you've got everything cinema can offer.

Let's get into one of your very favorite subjects – sexual politics. You've been asked before about the "sexual humiliation" of women in your films, and I'll just read you one of your responses, which is maybe the best way into this discussion: "I think it certainly has to do with the fact that I am male, and my fantasies and my unconscious are male. I think I give a reasonable amount of expression to the female part of me, but I still think that I'm basically heterosexual male. . . . I have no reason to think that I have to give equal time to all sexual fantasies whether they're my own or not. Let those people make their own movies – leave me alone to make mine. . . . If I'm going to get into scenes of bondage and torture, I'll show a female instead of a male. . . . Fantasies are sexual, not sexist."

I say, "basically heterosexual." I was recently talking to a journalist who was making a very cogent point, of the gayness that goes through all my work. And I say, "Well, you know, I'm interested in sexuality, and in my normal fashion I don't want to limit myself to what I might *live* out of." One of the reasons you do art is to live other people's lives and to plug into other modalities. One of the reasons actors act is to be other people. So I'm not afraid of homosexuality, and I'm not afraid of exploring those things. And I have explored those things in the films. There are a few men I sort of whip and torture in the movies, too.

You have a kind of – I don't know if we want to say – "repressed" homosexuality in a lot of your work. The first two films you did – 'Stereo' and 'Crimes of the Future' – your lead actor certainly had a gay presence; then you gave Marilyn Chambers an underarm phallus in 'Rabid' –

But I gave her a vagina; I gave her a cunt, too! First there's the cunt, and then the phallus – it's both, you got everything! I gave her everything!

And you gave Max Renn [James Woods] a vagina in his stomach in 'Videodrome,' and vagina dentata as well. So there's a sort of bisexual play through the work. Has this always been part of your consciousness?

Yeah. I think it has been. I think we start off with what Freud called a polymorphous perverseness. Which is not a negative thing. It's a children's sexuality before it becomes specific and genitalized and acculturalized and all that. We have what I called an omni-sexuality. Which does not recognize the sorts of normal barriers and liaisons and taboos. And to the extent that I'm interested in exploring stuff that's beyond taboo, I would explore not just bisexuality but any kind of sexuality. Dog sexuality. Animal sexuality. Insect sexuality. Whatever. The sexuality of food or touch or words. So I don't think I'm limiting myself to bisexuality. That's just the most obvious to people. They might not see some of the other things I do as sexual, and I do.

CONFLICT IS the essence of drama. I mean, if a guy transforms into a fly and it's really nice and everybody likes it, you know, what have you got? You've got a comedy on TV. But you don't have heavy-duty dramatic stuff.

Have you experienced any of these things in your life, or only in the world of the image?

Unfortunately not. Well, I won't say I haven't, but not in the sensationalist way that any journalist would of course want to discover. Now, however – within the act of normal, quote, heterosexual sex – you do have these Dionysian moments. And that I have experienced, definitely. Without the aid of drugs, I will add, because I really don't do that. Moments when you are not male or female, you are just sexual. And you don't know whether you are being fucked or you are fucking, and it doesn't make any difference. I really feel that I have felt that. And at the best moments, that's the way it always is. You lose, to a huge extent, your individuality. And yet, it's the individuality that heightens the sexuality – you *know* who you're having sex with.

Why are you so attracted to images of sexual violence?

I don't think I am. Am I? I'm not. I'm definitely not.

I think you are.

How many *minutes* of my films are devoted to that as opposed to, say, discussion.

In 1983 you said, "That isn't to say that I haven't noticed that I can be attracted to images of sexual violence and wonder what that means about myself." I'm just asking you the same question you ask yourself: What do you think it means about yourself?

Sure, I guess that was at the point of *Videodrome*, where I was actually creating some images of sexual violence so I could be attracted to my own movie maybe. Well, sexuality is, as we've been discussing, a complex thing. As it becomes connected with various cultural dynamics, it can start to express itself in various ways that we might call perverse, unnatural or unacceptable, or politically incorrect is what we'd say today. And yet they seem very *forceful*, these images or concepts. There are a lot of people who do play bondage in sex – *play* bondage. Of course, you're not supposed to talk about this. And yet I remember my cat. In cat sex, the male cat seizes the female cat by the neck, he bites her neck to hold her down, and she's struggling with him like she doesn't want to have any part of it. And then when she finally manages to get away, she sort of rolls around on the ground in a very flirtatious fashion [*Cont. on 96*]

Cronenberg

[*Cont. from 70*] and waits for him to come to her again.

That's the way lions are doing it in Africa.

They are doing it at this very moment, thank God, whatever few lions there are left. And you say, that comes from survival of the fittest: The most aggressive male is the one who is going to survive, so the female's got to make it difficult for him to get to her and so on. And maybe there is still a holdover of that in human sexuality. And maybe there is something in female sexuality still that comes from that very primitive beginning, which wants a man to dominate, which wants a man to defeat other men in order to have this woman, and then she herself makes it a little difficult just to make sure that he's really serious and really the most aggressive, dominant one – and has to pin her down or to tie a sash cord around her arm or wrist or just hold her down with force when they're having sex, and that's more satisfying. And you will not find any feminists who will admit that this is a possibility.

However, we have now taken our evolution into our own hands, we have done it long ago, we have mucked about with our environment, so that all of those factors that might have made survival of the fittest work don't necessarily work in our society, because we have dephysicalized our society. It's now no longer necessarily the guy who's *physically* strongest – it might be the guy who's the best at manipulating stocks on Wall Street who is the dominant one. But how does he express this dominance that is no longer physical?

By having the biggest house or having the fastest car –

That's exactly right. Or having the most mistresses. And we haven't sorted it out yet, because half the time we're denying that it's all true. But underneath it all, there might still be the desire in men to physically dominate women and the desire in women to be physically submissive to men through a bit of a struggle. A bit of a shadow struggle even then. With my cat . . . she was going to get fucked, and she knew it and he knew it, but they still had to go through the whole thing. Why is it so horrible if that is still a vestige that we have to deal with? It's only horrible because of political implications and cultural problems, and it becomes a political/cultural football. And it makes these people, who still must do these things, these poor men and women, all of us maybe, sublimate it or change it or shift it or jigger it around somehow in our mind so that we don't have to feel ashamed of our sexual politics in bed and all that kind of stuff. It's interesting. And I am interested in exploring it. I think that may well be the reason why – hmm, a naked woman tied up? Do men respond to that sexually? Well, I think they do. I really do. Now it might vary from culture to culture. Certainly in Japan it's more accepted as a sort of ritual of sexuality embedded in the culture than here. But I say, yeah, I do respond to that. And I think I've begun to figure out why, and it's not *deadly* – and it doesn't mean that I hate women and want to kill them. I think it comes from someplace else.

There's a possibility that we're hard-wired for a lot of stuff.

There's no doubt that we're hard-wired. That's not just a pun, it's a good metaphor. It's only sane to look at it as it is and not futz the issue and cover it up with so much politicking. It's not the same thing that a man and a woman should want to play bondage and that someone shoots seventeen women in Montreal.

But the image police would have us –

The image police must make it the same thing, and the image police must make policy based on this. I think it's very destructive. And if my films shake things up and make people shake their fists at each other over that, then I say fine, because I think things need shaking up. I myself have been accused by a writer in Toronto, in a *Toronto Star* article, of being a direct contributor to that massacre in Montreal, where a man shot seventeen young women and said, "The feminists made me do it." She said, in her article, that we have a misogynistic culture, and it is constantly being fueled and created by video games and a whole list of things with no names attached, and then she said, "and the films of David Cronenberg." And the only other name mentioned in the article, other than the name of this killer, was Adolf Hitler. She was comparing women to Jews and men to Nazis. I find *that* irresponsible.

There's another theme I'd like to examine – the Cronenberg hero: Dr. St. Luc in 'Shivers,' Hart in 'Rabid,' Frank in 'The Brood,' John in 'The Dead Zone,' Max in 'Videodrome,' Brundle in 'The Fly,' the Mantles in 'Dead Ringers' and Bill Lee in 'Naked Lunch.' There's a certain –

[*Surprised*] They're all fucking repressed! Just as you give me this litany, I think, these are all really repressed guys. Which is maybe where some of the misunderstanding of the movies comes in. If this is the Cronenberg hero, in the sense that Cronenberg posits this as the correct kind of human being to be, then you've immediately warped all of the films.

That's a terrible misreading of the function of narrative art – to think that you are positing your hero as an example of humanity refined and perfected.

But it happens all the time. I have an ironic distance on these characters. I'm saying, there's always a part of me that's repressed or undiscovered, and that's why I keep forcing myself to look and discover. Maybe these characters are a projection of that part of me. But they are not necessarily my model of ideal behavior. But a lot of people assume that. So many people identify you with your main character, it's scary.

Not only are they repressed, but there's a kind of passivity in your heroes – one could say, the passive-reactive Cronenberg hero, as opposed to active. They are often very ineffective and always on the defensive, all the way through Bill Lee.

I'd say you're absolutely right. Those are my guys, my boys . . . my *team!* They're my team. My soccer team.

Your team – they all got picked last on the playground!

[*Laughs*] They came in first in the *last* division. We won, we won, we got a trophy! Yeah, but it's the last division, and there's only one team in that division.

And a fragile bunch, too. You present masculinity as a fragile proposition.

I think that's true. I'm not actually presenting these guys as the embodiment of masculinity – they're male people, it's not quite the same thing. But if you want to reduce everything to sexual politics, I'd say, yes, my vision of masculinity as revealed in the movies is not at all the sort of macho-insensitive-rapist that all those feminist critiques present.

Or the in-control manipulator or the powerful technocrat or any of those models. None of them work in your pictures.

That's true. I like this, I like this line of reasoning. It's so obvious, I've never quite talked about it this way before. I think I find that kind of character a very good basis for a film in which one explores human nature. Rather than a guy who's very opinionated, very secure, very strong, very aggressive, very focused, very active. Certainly, there are any number of writers who start from *that* vantage point – Shakespeare did okay. But obviously, it works best for me to have a character much more like the ones we've been talking about. It's not conscious.

They're almost recessive. Just as Brundle recedes –

Like a hairline.

Or a budget. Just as Brundle recedes from life as a man into an insect, and the Mantles recede into the chrome work of their practice, and Bill Lee – who's recessive to begin with – recedes into a kind of complicated wallpaper, there's a sense of the watching man, the man who sits and watches and is too late. I wonder, do you identify with that?

[*Pause*] I think there's some truth in that. It's true that I have a real *horror* of passivity, in one sense. I don't like fantasy in my life. I have an incredible abhorrence of that, and a real drive into reality. I suppose I'm putting my characters in that difficult, passive position deliberately. To see what it takes to provoke them to action. I'm interested in that mechanism. It is an *issue* with me, and it's interesting to notice that I give my characters the deficit at the beginning and see what happens.

You have an oddly romantic disposition.

Yeah. I've never denied that there's a romanticism in any of my films. I haven't talked about it much, in fact.

A certain astringent romanticism, perhaps.

Yes. The best kind. [*Laughs*] We don't want to get too messy.

Acerbic romanticism.

Acerbic, yes. "Astringent" I like because it's more medical.

Let's talk about your take on 'Naked Lunch.' The book is very much about control and the body, the algebra of need, addictions of all kinds. The film is really not about that. It's about writing. Why focus on that? When all the other concerns of the book, which are fundamentally Cronenbergian concerns –

No, wrong. Wrong. Wrong. This *is* a very Cronenbergian concern, and here's what it is. In a way, in coming to grips with writing, with being creative, I think I'm coming *closer* to the basics. And coming closer to the flame by dealing directly with it. Because what is writing but trying to order reality? Trying to make order out of chaos? To come to understand phenomena that are not really susceptible to understanding. To creating your own reality. To coming to terms with your own reality. I deal with this in all my films. All of my characters do this sort of thing. And here I'm coming to a distilled version of it, i.e., a writer. And the fact that it's a *dangerous* thing to do cinematically – because it's difficult to do it well – is part of the thrill. Just like the difficulty in doing Burroughs because it's an impossible book to film is part of the thrill.

People would expect a lot of flesh in this movie, and there's basically none.

Like I said, I love to disappoint people.

Why make the typewriters embody the characters' strange sexuality instead of the characters' embodying their strange sexuality themselves?

Because I'm probably giving you the same sort of avoidance, the same sort of avoidance-denial level cinematically that I'm saying Lee is doing psycho-emotionally. That's what's happening. I'm saying Lee is denying and avoiding certain realities about himself. And to the extent that he is controlling his fantasies, they are also avoiding, denying fantasies. So that if he is squeezing mugwump jism into a glass, he is not allowing himself to see that he is really sucking a boy's cock. I think it works. I think it's a structure that has never been used before. I've never seen it. I made some inroads in that direction in *Videodrome*, where it's the character's point-of-view fantasy that is now controlling the reality.

It's a relentlessly first-person movie in the same way.

Now, why did I choose that structure? Partly, I wanted to deny people their most ordinary expectations. Because I want to surprise them and confound them and intrigue them and jar them out of their expectations. That's one reason. I guess it's the anti-entertainment part of me. An entertainer wants to give you exactly what you want. An entertainer gives you those good old songs that you want to hear. An artist wants to give you what you *don't know* you want. Something you might know you want the next time, but you never knew you wanted before. ■