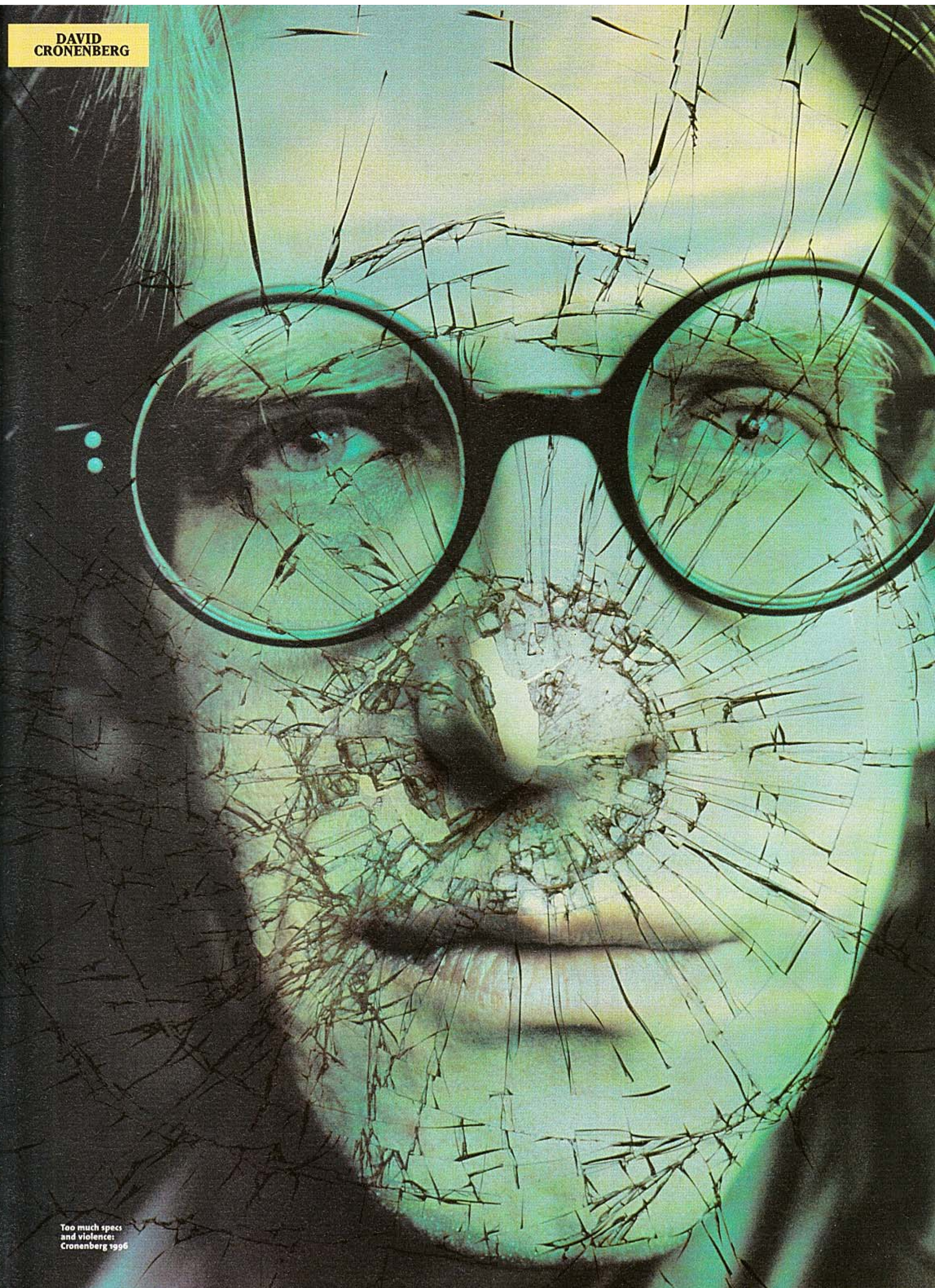


DAVID
CRONENBERG



Too much specs
and violence:
Cronenberg 1996

SICK BOY

Even as a child, David Cronenberg was not like other people. When he started making films, they were just perverse and repulsive. Now, *Crash* is "beyond the bounds of depravity". What is wrong with him?

story by BEN THOMPSON

Montreal, August 1974. At the age of 31, David Cronenberg is making his first movie – *Shivers*, an everyday story of a sexually transmitted virus that inhabits people in the form of a parasite.

He is sleeping in the flats that double as Starliner Towers, where the parasites run riot. His bed is slimy with fake blood. Human remains are taped to the windows. There are leeches in his fridge.

The female lead has to cry a lot because her husband is behaving strangely. On set, as shooting is about to begin, she confesses that she can't do it – she took the role to prove she could cry at will, but she still can't – and insists that a reluctant Cronenberg repeatedly slap her face before every take, as grated onions just won't do the job alone. Cast and crew adjust to the routine quickly, but then a new actress is plunged into the action without knowing what's going on. Appalled to find her co-star being slapped across the face in an ante-room, she grabs Cronenberg by the throat.

The director cowers before her. "Don't hit me," he snivels. "She made me do it."

Now, if there's one deeply upsetting thing at

the heart of the much-maligned but barely seen *Crash*, it's not James Spader indulging in *frottage* against a wound in Rosanna Arquette's leg. Nor is it the characters having sex on a motorway embankment in the aftermath of an accident. It's the fact that the society in which these things happen seems to tolerate them: passers-by can see what's going on, but they don't seem to mind.

In the same way, there is one simple, disturbing fact about David Cronenberg: he gives no outward sign of being driven by a rampaging army of inner demons to do the work he does. The scariest thing about him is that, in the flesh, there is nothing scary about him at all.

He receives visitors in his hotel with a regal wave of the hand. It seems difficult to believe that Cronenberg's most famous fan, Martin Scorsese, was once afraid to meet him.

"I *am* a nice guy," he protests warmly. "Most horror film directors get the same response: people expect you to be a maniac. Martin Scorsese is the guy who made *Taxi Driver*. You'd think he'd know better. People expected *him* to be a maniac, of course..."

In fact, Cronenberg is genial to the point of cuddliness, talking in tones that are precise and measured, but not without humour. When the publicity overseer pokes her head round the door to arrange his means of transport to an evening reception at the Canadian embassy, the director

of *Crash* fixes her with a mischievous twinkle and asks, "Can I have a car?"

Whether you've seen one of Cronenberg's films or all of them – from commercial shockers like *Rabid* and *The Brood*, to big-budget artistic coups like *The Fly* and *Naked Lunch* – there is no shaking the sense that he doesn't see things the way other people do. In fact, it's difficult to tell if this is something he turns on and off at will to produce extreme and often twisted film-making, or whether he stifles a constantly fevered worldview so as not to alarm normal people.

But when a cold-suffering interviewer sneezes shortly after shaking his hand, the man who gave the world *Rabid* and *Shivers* looks at his hand in horror, as if he can see the germs breeding.

Growing up in '50s Canada, David Cronenberg was a geeky, intense, bespectacled kid who spent a lot of time watching germs multiply. His was a sophisticated household; his mother was a pianist and his father was a journalist who wrote the odd detective story as well as a stamp-collecting column for the *Toronto Telegram*. If he wanted to while away his hours indoors staring down the barrel of a microscope, that was fine. "What you saw through the microscope was fantastic," he says, "But when you looked up from the microscope, you were lost."

Cronenberg had his first girlfriend at the age →

of five, and preferred spending time with her rather than playing baseball or football. There was nothing terrible or difficult about his childhood. It was just that the outside world was spectacularly dull. Canada at that time was not an exciting place to grow up: like Eisenhower's America, it was repressive and deadeningly conformist. David loved Brigitte Bardot, but you couldn't see her films in Toronto, so he'd have to go down to New York with his parents to see them. The fantastic, erotic world that Cronenberg found inside the cinema simply did not exist in Canada.

Young David was not railroaded into any discipline by his parents. With his mother's help, he spent 11 years learning classical guitar until he decided it was not for him. With the scientific portion of his father's vast library on hand, he developed his interest in microbiology. He was fascinated by chemistry, by the body, by plants, the biochemical nature of the brain: by the physical basis of thought and imagination.

But the one thing he always wanted to do was write. He wrote a three-page 'novel' at the age of ten and began sending short stories to magazines. He nearly had one published once; it was about a disfigured handyman who lives in a boiler-room and whose only escape is his ability to project himself into a painting of a Parisian cafe. But otherwise, all he ever received were rejection letters.

When he left high school – reasoning that you couldn't be taught to write, but you had to acquire learning to be a scientist – he enrolled to study science at Toronto University. Cronenberg thought he could become a scientist who wrote fiction, but he dropped out in his first year. He couldn't understand the people on his course, couldn't see how they got on with one another.

"I was just not one of them," he says. "It was very much like *Invasion Of The Bodysnatchers*."

Today, David Cronenberg – the man responsible for depicting a man's head exploding in *Scanners*, James Woods slotting a video cassette into his stomach in *Videodrome* and Geena Davis giving birth to giant writhing maggot in *The Fly* – unquestionably sees himself as an artist. It's not a need to shock but a need to explore the limits of artistic expression that allows him to go so far with his films.

"I don't think there is anything that shouldn't be accessible to art. Nothing. That's the whole purpose of it. It's up to each individual artist to do what he wants to do. I mean, you still get writers in their fifties who are terrified to write something in case their mother will read it. They're waiting for their old mum to die so they can write it. But I just think there's nothing so extreme that you can't examine it."

You can see it in his choice of scripts. He took on the West End stage hit *M Butterfly* – because it was about "a created reality in an intimate relationship" – but refused *Witness*. Typically, not because it was a mainstream Harrison Ford vehicle, but because he didn't want to make a film that represented the Amish culture – which he



Fender bender: Cronenberg's reinforced trousers are a godsend at busy crossings

saw as a repressive, isolated community – as an idealised, back-to-the-planet existence.

The list of films Cronenberg has been offered and refused is just as surprising as those he has made: a partial list alone makes him *The Man Who Could Have Been Tony Scott*. He was asked to do *Top Gun*. He was offered *Beverly Hills Cop* at a time when it was still a Sylvester Stallone movie. They even asked him to do *Flashdance*.

Cronenberg got as far as scouting locations for *Total Recall* but dropped out when he realised the producers wanted *Raiders Of The Lost Ark On Mars*. His version of the story was just too dark, strange and close to the novel it was based on. There wasn't much action in it at all. "Certainly," he says, "you couldn't have had Arnold Schwarzenegger starring in it. They said, 'But you've turned this into a Philip K Dick movie!' And I said, 'Well, yeah! Isn't that what we wanted to do?' And they said, 'Well, not really...'"

It might seem that this devotion to Art has driven him to make movies of books that were widely perceived to be unfilmable – first *Naked Lunch* and now *Crash*. But that's not the case.

"I think all books are unfilmable," he says. "Even the work of Danielle Steel has an innately literary quality, in that she, as a writer, can do an interior monologue which I, as a film-maker, can't. You have to appreciate the essential paradox, which is that you must betray the book in order to be faithful to it, because if you try to be faithful to it, you will betray it."

After leaving the science course, Cronenberg remained convinced he would be a writer. He enrolled to study English, Philosophy and History. He was dedicated for a while, until he met a fellow student who'd made a film. There were no film courses in Toronto at the time – studying film at university seemed as ridiculous as doing a PhD in stand-up comedy –



Drooler killer: foam for the holidays in *Rabid*



May the forceps be with you: clinical fun in *Stereo*

and the mere idea that someone he knew had actually made a movie astounded him.

Cronenberg immediately became fascinated by film – but not like any ordinary movie buff. He'd always been interested in taking things apart to find out how they worked, and he didn't want to be a consumer, he wanted to get into it. So instead of enthusing about the new Fellini movie, he went to the library and looked things up in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*: Lens, Film, Camera, F-Stop. He began hanging out at a local camera rental shop and talking to cameramen.

In 1966, at the age of 23, he made his first film, a short called *Transfer*. He wrote, shot, directed and edited it all himself. The following year he made another short, *From The Drain*, in which two veterans of a mysterious war are sitting in a bath, talking – until a plant emerges from the plughole and strangles one of them. At the end of his first year on the English course, Cronenberg took 12 months off to go to Europe. He returned in 1968 with long hair and a paisley

"YOU GET WRITERS IN THEIR FIFTIES WHO ARE TERRIFIED TO WRITE IN CASE THEIR MOTHERS READ IT. THEY'RE WAITING FOR THEIR OLD MUM TO DIE."



"Left a bit... Ooh, that's lovely... James Woods with a difficult task on the set of *Crimes of the Future*

shirt. It was not the kind of thing people at Toronto University were accustomed to.

While doing his MA in English, he rediscovered film-making, and started work on another short, called *Stereo*. Set in the future, the film is set in the fictional Canadian Academy for Erotic Enquiry, where parapsychologist Dr Luther Stringfellow's theories about human sexual behaviour are being tested with brain surgery, drugs and aphrodisiacs. The results are inevitably catastrophic.

With *Stereo* in the can, Cronenberg dropped out of his MA and made his next film, *Crimes Of The Future*, an avant-garde sci-fi drama involving poisonous cosmetics, a mad dermatologist and all-round biological mayhem. After that, he dropped his plans to return to college. There was no going back.

Despite many offers from Hollywood, Cronenberg is still resolutely based in Toronto. *Crash* was filmed just a few blocks away from his home, giving a strange biographical resonance to the motorways and slip-roads he passes every day. He's quite the local hero there, respected for his refusal to emigrate, but being Canadian is fundamentally important to the tone of his movies. Canada is what makes them so disturbing.

"There's a sense of isolation in the films," he nods, "and of the intensity that comes out of that isolation. That's very Canadian. We always define ourselves against America. Americans often tell me they find my movies very strange, because the cities look sort of like American cities but not, and people talk like Americans but not."

It's not just Americans who find that strange. The world has now become fully conditioned to seeing movies that are all filtered through Hollywood, and Cronenberg's anti-septic Canadian cityscapes look like US locations with all the

humanity somehow sucked out of them.

"That's how they *should* look," he says. "Very dreamlike, reflecting the fact that Canada is a strange phantom of America."

Cronenberg didn't know he needed Canada until he tried to leave. In 1971, he spent a year in Tourette, a village in southern France. He tried to write a novel and had a go at sculpture, travelling to Nice to have his first work cast in aluminium; he called it 'Surgical Instrument For

Operating On Mutants'. Eventually, he bought himself a 16mm camera and filmed a few shorts for Canadian TV.

That same year he decided to go to the Cannes film festival, sleeping on the floor of the Canadian Film Development Corporation's office. He hated what he saw there - the hype, the excess - and took off back to Tourette, shaken and disillusioned. But when he thought about it, he realised it was not his problem - he would never, ever, be sucked into that scene. Within the week he was back at the Festival, laughing at the absurdity.

The next step was now obvious. He couldn't go on making obscure shorts - he wanted to reach a bigger audience - so it was clearly time to move on. Returning to Toronto, he set about writing the script he thought would take him out of his self-imposed ghetto. It was called *Blood Orgy Of The Parasites*.

But even with a script, he was stumped. He not only wanted to stay independent, he wanted to stay in Canada. Yet there was no industry there. The only company even vaguely likely was a Montreal outfit called Cinepix, who mostly distributed porn. He showed them *Stereo* and *Crimes Of The Future*

and the managers were strangely impressed. "We know you've got a sexual sensibility there," he was told. "We're just not sure what kind it is."

After three years of frustration, *Blood Orgy...* finally began shooting in the autumn of 1974. The story began as a dream Cronenberg once had, in which a spider crawled out of a woman's mouth as she slept. It wasn't a nightmare, he recalled, it was just how it was. It was just a spider that happened to live in a woman's mouth. →

VILE BODIES

Tense? Nervous? Dicky ticker? Don't rent anything from Dave's oeuvre. You might see one of these bits...



cutting his own throat. Sadly, the treatment is ineffective.

SHIVERS (1975)

In a bid to rid the world of his venereal parasites, mad doctor Emil Hobbes strangles an infected prostitute, slashes her stomach open with a scalpel and pours acid into her steaming entrails before



audience of sceptics and scientists. Imagine their surprise when Revok finally causes the specialist's head to explode in a volcanic shower of viscera, spewing brain tissue over the startled crowd.

SCANNERS (1980)

Darryl Revok (Michael Ironside), leader of an outcast group of telepaths, is invited by an unwitting specialist to give a public display of his psychic talents in front of an



VIDEODROME (1982)

Obsessed with a mysterious sado-masochistic snuff cable channel, sleazy TV producer Max Renn finds his grasp on reality beginning to loosen. He is therefore alarmed

when a gaping, vaginal slit appears in his stomach, but finally accepts his pulsating, 6in wound as an ideal storage place for the insertion of incriminating handguns and video cassettes.



arm-wrestles with a man in a bar, snapping his arm back so violently that he breaks it in two - although, technically, this is cheating. Not content with a queasy cracking sound, Cronenberg shows the flesh tearing and the severed bone protruding.

THE FLY (1986)

After bonding his DNA with that of a housefly in an ill-advised telepod experiment, Dr Seth Brundle (Jeff Goldblum) finds himself with amazing, insectoid superpowers. Testing his new-found strength, Brundle



DEAD RINGERS (1988)

Identical twins Beverly and Elliot Mantle (Jeremy Irons) are both involved with the same woman, actress Claire Niveau (Genevieve Bujold). In a hallucinatory dream sequence, all three are in

bed together and the twins are shown to be joined together by a mutant, veined umbilical cord, which Niveau bloodily severs with her teeth. This is not a known medical condition. DAMON WISE

The dream provided him with one of the film's most disturbing images. The story centres on the legacy of a mad venereal scientist who has unleashed an aggressive sexual parasite on an antiseptic, state-of-the-art housing block. As they spread throughout the building, turning its middle-class residents into sex-crazed psychos, these parasites gain entry through the mouths of their victims in a bizarre parody of kissing.

And when its doomed central couple try to escape the madness, they are cornered in the basement by leering maniacs. One of them in particular is having a whale of a time, grabbing and licking a little more enthusiastically than the others. It would not be the last time David Cronenberg made an appearance in one of his own films. Or anyone else's, for that matter.

When the film was finally released in Canada in 1975, its title had become the rather less lurid *Shivers*. But its impact was not diluted. Cronenberg's first taste of controversy came when one of Canada's most influential film critics devoted a whole article to the film, calling it "the most perverse, disgusting, repulsive" film he had ever seen.

But by the time he came to make *Crash*, David Cronenberg was almost respectable. After his first real mainstream success with *The Fly*, Cronenberg's name was synonymous with a new kind of horror. A kind of horror that didn't flinch from the unshowable but treated its audience with respect and intelligence.

It was sometime after *The Fly* that Cronenberg had a strange experience. Although well-steeped in cinematic gore, he'd had surprisingly little experience of the real thing. But one day, while he was driving down Toronto Highway 410 in his Range Rover, Cronenberg was first on the scene of a serious car accident. He stopped and ran over to find a young woman hanging upside down in the wreckage of her car. She grabbed his hand and held it tight, explaining that the crash was the result of a drunken argument and begging him not to tell her mother, because her brother had just been killed. Cronenberg asked how he'd died. "He was decapitated," she replied, "in a snowboarding accident."

The story casts doubts on claims that he was "too disturbed" to finish Ballard's novel the first time he read it. The idea of the man who made *Videodrome* not finishing *anything* because it

"THE BOOK ISN'T FUNNY, BUT THE FILM IS. THE SCENE WHERE ACCIDENT VICTIMS MASTURBATE TO FOOTAGE OF CRASH TEST DUMMIES SPRINGS TO MIND."

disturbed him is hard to swallow anyway.

"Well," says Cronenberg, "I was about halfway through, and I thought, 'I've got this, I understand what's going on here now; I'll finish it later.'"

That's not being disturbed, it's being bored.

"I don't think so," he ponders for a moment. "But the book is something of a one-trick pony. I don't think it would be an insult to Ballard to describe it as monotonous: it has an unrelenting, singular tone that doesn't let go. And I don't think I quite did that in the movie; it's just not in my nature, which is why the book is not funny but the film is in some places. The scene where a group of accident victims quietly masturbate to video footage of crash test dummies springs to mind. Maybe I'd just had enough of the book when I stopped reading it the first time..."

"Then again," he smiles, "I suppose that in itself is quite disturbing."

Would he be upset if people don't find his film an incredibly traumatic experience?

"I don't take it as an insult."

It's just that the two main characters are so devoid of anything remotely resembling humanity that any form of contact – however warped or

perverse – seems like some kind of improvement.

"That's exactly how it is. They've had all these options and they're not getting anywhere, which I think, incidentally, is the process of the 20th century. That's why I say the film has a happy ending, because it is a movement towards a kind of love, albeit a very bizarre kind, through which they somehow find a way of expressing to each other."

So it's *The Big Chill* on wheels?

"If you want to sell that to a major studio, you go and try. I didn't bother. I can see the Hollywood version of this movie, though – hot young couple; successful, more like the people in *Fatal Attraction*. Then you have the demonic stranger who somehow seduces them into this life of craziness, and at the end they would probably kill him and come to their senses and be returned to normal bourgeois life and that would be the thrill of the movie."

A dry pause. "I think that's a film I've managed not to make."

The movie Cronenberg *did* make sits perfectly with its predecessors. Although beautifully shot and stylised in the manner of his 1989 psychodrama *Dead Ringers*, *Crash* is closest in spirit to the anarchic *Shivers*, the film that, tellingly, launched his notoriety. Taking out a key element in the book's plot – in the novel, the sinister Vaughan is obsessed with maiming Elizabeth Taylor – Cronenberg turned this into a story about a more general mutation of sexuality.

Like *Shivers*, its characters are breaking a social taboo; like *Scanners*, it deals with an outcast fringe group involved in a social revolution; and like *Videodrome*, it's concerned with biology – the transforming effects of wounds, scar tissue, callipers. When Vaughan (Elias Koteas) is trying to entice Spader's character into joining him, he throws him this very line: "It's something we're all intimately involved in: the reshaping of the human body by modern technology."

Although not ostensibly a horror film, *Crash* is too disturbing to be a simple thriller. But then, as Cronenberg cheerfully acknowledges, "No horror film is truly mainstream. When people say, 'Great, another Cronenberg movie! Let's take everybody and have popcorn,' then I'll know I've made a mainstream movie."

Does he feel burdened by his reputation as the man who made horror respectable?

"This is a more modern perception and I think it's because for most people horror means *Friday The 13th*. But it didn't always. Carl Dreyer made *Vampyr*, Hitchcock made *Psycho* and Kubrick made *The Shining*. Some very good directors have made horror films.

"I think the genre is very forgiving and very generous. You can do things with it that perhaps you could not do without it. I mean, what is the plot of *The Fly*? Two attractive, intelligent people fall in love, one of them gets a terrible wasting disease, slowly rots while his girlfriend looks on and then she helps him commit suicide. And that's the end of the movie. If I'd tried to make that as a straight melodrama, I wouldn't have been able to make it. And people probably wouldn't have gone to see it, so there's a sense in which the genre really protects you."

But the downside is that it puts your psyche up for dissection. He still gets very angry, for



Medical mystery tool: Genevieve Bujold in *Dead Ringers*



This alarming man: Cronenberg hangs out with a few friends while filming *Naked Lunch*



Superfly guy: Jeff Goldblum turns a bit nasty



"Hmm...": Jeremy Irons falls for John Lone's androgynous charms in *Butterfly*

example, when people suggest that his films only turned out the way they did because his father died of a horrible disease. Not because the disease wasn't horrible – his bones lost the ability to process calcium, so eventually when he turned over in bed he'd crack a rib – but because David was in his thirties and already well into his film-making career by the time of his father's death.

"It's ridiculous. Every film-maker of my age has had people that were close to them who have died, so why doesn't everybody make films like I do? My father was 63, which is reasonably young, but in terms of a portrait of the artist, forget it. I was born knowing this stuff!"

"People would like to be able to trace everything back to your childhood", he says vehemently, "because if they could figure it all out, that would mean that all the ills in the world – any strangeness, any psychopathologies – could be eradicated. But the truth is that the thing that emerges cannot be anticipated – no matter how much you know, an unknown factor will always emerge that will change everything."

And that unknown factor is what David Cronenberg films are usually about?

"Absolutely, yes," he insists. "I have such a healthy respect for the element of the unknown that I actually feel that prophecy is impossible. *Videodrome* was certainly not meant to be prophetic, just as I very much doubt if JG Ballard meant *Crash* to be. If it accidentally turns out to be prophetic, of course that's fine but if you're like Arthur C Clarke – writing something, then saying, 'I predicted satellites', that diminishes what you're doing. It's not what I'd call art."

Whatever he considers to be art, it's not welcome in Britain. In the prelude to a general election and the aftermath of a gruesome, alleged 'road rage' murder, *Crash* is a political hot potato. Cronenberg is taking the media seriously but can't hide his delight at Alexander Walker's now-infamous article, headlined "A movie beyond the bounds of depravity".

"Exactly," he exclaims. "If it's beyond deprav-

DEPRAVITY BITES!

How the book they didn't read became the film you can't see

1970 April 4-28 Science fiction writer JG Ballard hosts a show at the Arts Lab in London. Titled 'Crashed Cars', it features three written-off vehicles – a Mini, an A40 and a Pontiac, which visitors are invited to a look at while a topless woman circulates among them. "I was the only sober person there," says Ballard. "Wine was poured over the crashed cars, glasses were broken, and the poor girl was nearly raped in the back of the Pontiac."



Ballard: "Beyond psychiatric help"

1972 Ballard completes his next novel, *Crash*. In the aftermath of a car accident, a man is drawn into a bizarre sexual underworld. He is named Jim Ballard. Two

weeks after completing it, the author is involved in a serious car accident, demolishing a No Entry sign for which he is later billed £100. The same year he submits the manuscript to a major UK publisher, where it is read by the wife of a leading psychiatrist. "This author is beyond psychiatric help," she warns. "DO NOT PUBLISH."

1973 *Crash* is published. Reviews range from "boring" to "repellent".

1975 A US producer interested in the book wants to move the action from Shepperton to LA, with Jack Nicholson starring. No film is made.

1986 Cronenberg opens the book. He is "too disturbed" to finish it.

1991 After filming *Naked Lunch*, Cronenberg announces his plans to film *Crash*. JG Ballard is delighted.

1995 Filming begins in Toronto.

1996 March Ballard congratulates him on the finished film: "Your film of *Crash* absolutely stunned me. It's the most powerful and original film I've seen for years..."

May 15 At a Cannes press conference, Cronenberg is hotly criticised. When he is asked about the imbalance of male nudity in *Crash*, James Spader interrupts: "It has more to do with geography. Most of the time we were fucking; when you're fucking you don't see the penis."

May 20 *Crash* is awarded a special jury prize for "daring, originality and audacity". The news is greeted with applause and jeers.

May 29 The film is given an NC-17 certificate in America. Cronenberg and the film's distributor, Fine Line, refuse to make any cuts.

Jun 3 In a piece headlined "A movie beyond the bounds of depravity", *Evening Standard* critic Alexander Walker condemns the film, saying it contains "some of the most perverted acts and theories of sexual deviance I have ever seen propagated in mainstream cinema."

Oct *Crash* is set to open in the US, until the vice-chairman of Time-Warner, owners of Fine Line, steps in. "People of warped minds are going to love this movie," he says. The release goes back to spring '97.

Oct 25 Columbia TriStar acquire the film's UK rights. A release date is pencilled in for January 24, 1997.

Nov 8 Before the film shows at the London Film Festival, Walker's outrage is recycled in the media. Heritage Secretary Virginia Bottomley says, "I would urge local authorities to use the powers they have to refuse the film a screen. All of us



"And while you're down there..."

must be worried about material which, if seen repeatedly, can influence lives." She is not worried enough to bother seeing it, however.

Nov 9 As *Crash* is shown at the

LFF, the *Daily Mail* urges "Ban sick car crash film", and Westminster Council is under pressure to stop the screening. The same day, the RAC comes under fire for

A movie beyond the bounds of depravity



Filth! Fury! Fulmination! Fuck off!

"approving" the film. "It sounds like the horrific scenes in this film could well have the effect of making people driver safer," a bewildered spokesman is quoted as saying.

Nov 10 Ballard and Cronenberg take part in a festival debate. The director notes the misuse of the word "pornography" to create concepts like "the pornography of violence" and "the pornography of war". "I'm just waiting for the pornography of pornography," he says.

Nov 20 As Westminster Council meets to review the film, a host of British filmmakers – including Nic Roeg and Michael Winner – issue a statement of protest. The committee votes to refuse the film a rating and asks the national film censor to make three specific cuts. "I don't like all these sex scenes and car crashes," says councillor John Bull. "It's not for me. But then I am a senior citizen." The film's release date is temporarily put on hold.

Nov 27 *Crash* wins five Genie Awards – the Canadian BAFTAs – including one for best direction.

Dec The film's UK publicists maintain that the film will be released in February. DAMON WISE

ity, that means it must be *somewhere else*."

Nonetheless, In America he still fought for *Crash* to be given an NC17 rating (no children under 17) on the grounds that "there has to be a way of adults communicating without children looking over their shoulders." So is he concerned about the effects of screen violence on children?

"I think my understanding of that is pretty good. I've raised three children of my own, I've seen other people raising theirs, and I remember being a child myself. But the thing that people who want to ban movies have no understanding of is that what frightens a child is *not* what adults think will frighten a child. *Bambi* terrified me, as did *Dumbo*, but probably the scariest experience I've ever had in a movie apart from those two – and I'm not kidding here – was the original *Blue Lagoon*. I had to have the lights on for a week after that. What it is, is separation from your parents – that's what's scary in those movies. If they're dead, or you're on an island and they're gone and you'll never see them

again, there's nothing more terrifying than that."

Home Alone must have been a disturbing experience in the Cronenberg household, then.

"That's what was so brilliant about it. It's in the title." He shudders. "*Home Alone*..."

Is that why he seems so at ease with the outlandish? If people have come to terms with the real-life horror of loneliness, everything else he throws at them – exploding heads, man-fly mutants – shouldn't be a problem?

He gives this some thought.

"You wouldn't think so, no."

So instead of being repulsed by these things – death, mutation, decay – we should celebrate them? Things could be worse?

"The decay might as well be what you want," he grins, "because it's what you're gonna get, and embracing it is finally the only way to happiness."

Cronenberg gets up to leave. Having witnessed three or four more sneezes in the course of the interview, David Cronenberg wisely opts not to shake hands. **Q**