

DAVID CRONENBERG

EVOLUTION



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Foreword

The Cronenberg Project reflects a singular relationship that has built TIFF, the organization behind the Toronto International Film Festival,

into its current form. We have grown as an institution alongside David Cronenberg and have benefited enormously from his ongoing support—as a filmmaker who has made multiple appearances at the Festival; as the first donor of his personal effects to our Film Reference Library; as a mentor in our learning programmes; and even as a film curator in our early days. We have been inspired by his iconoclastic body of work and his rigorous approach to talking about cinema and the culture that sustains it. And we love his sense of humour.

A dozen years ago, when TIFF began conceiving the programming for its new home, TIFF Bell Lightbox, a celebration of David Cronenberg and his unique contributions to global cinema was top of mind. We wanted to find a new approach to his work and to allow for other creative forces in the world to intersect with and comment on it as well. The concept that seemed most fertile involved Cronenberg's unique approach to the idea of human evolution, as embodied in his cinema and in his interviews about it.

The body and the mind, the rational and the instinctive, have driven the course of human history. Humanity is endlessly curious, striving to perfect itself, to create the next stage of evolution. Charismatic rebels from the sterile halls of science are convinced they have the key. Experiments occur. The effects are profound, and new forms of life emerge. But the old questions of metaphysics remain: Who is my creator? Who am I? Why am I here? And the answers are still too much to bear. They trigger a psychosexual rebellion in these new life forms—ruptures between body and mind in our prurient present, often with tragic consequences.

The Cronenberg Project has as its centre “David Cronenberg: Evolution,” a film exhibition. Through the presentation of artifacts, props, set pieces and dynamic audiovisual elements, we parallel Cronenberg's growth as a filmmaker with his ongoing examination and interpretation of human evolutionary possibilities, from the telepaths of *Scanners* to the scientist of *The Fly*; from the television producer of *Videodrome* to the twin doctors of *Dead Ringers*. The exhibition also explores subthemes of sexual control, the struggle for personal identity and Cronenberg's relationship to science and science fiction.

The exhibition is divided into three chapters, which organize Cronenberg's career in a loosely chronological way. Part one includes Cronenberg's early films, from *Stereo* to *Videodrome*, and emphasizes his protago-

Cronenberg on the set of *A Dangerous Method* (2011)

■ Photo Liam Daniel ■ Courtesy Prospero Pictures, Entertainment One & Sony Pictures Classics Inc. © Recorded Picture Company, 2011

nists' searches for father figures within the worlds of science and technology. This section also emphasizes the lack of control subjects have over their own bodies and sexual impulses, and the sociopolitical impact of Cronenberg's exploration of ideas like virology and reproductive rights. Part two investigates Cronenberg's middle period, from *Videodrome* to *eXistenZ*, as characters seek to take control of their own lives and divided selves. In this section, subjects come to control and experiment with their own bodies. Part three concerns Cronenberg's most recent films, from *Spider* to *Cosmopolis*, and how the filmmaker moves protagonists, now confident in their origins and personal identities, into the social world. Cronenberg questions what responsibilities we have to others and how we choose to use our bodies to reinforce or reject these connections.

In addition, we chose to create a special space in the exhibition devoted to *Naked Lunch*, a film that embodies much of Cronenberg's metaphorical language and most clearly displays his intellectual continuity with important related thinkers—William S. Burroughs of course looming large among them. To end the show, we proposed a space to contemplate Cronenberg's own evolutionary anxieties: the nightmares related to his own creativity. Here, a screening room projects Cronenberg's chilling metacritical autobiographies, beginning with "Camera," a TIFF commission for its twenty-fifth anniversary in 2000.

With the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (MOCCA), we have created a major visual-art exhibition, "David Cronenberg: Transformation," that features six new commissions from international contemporary artists influenced by Cronenberg: Candice Breitz, James Coupe, Marcel Dzama, Jeremy Shaw, Jamie Shovlin and Laurel Woodcock. We challenged them to contemplate the scientist longing for the next stage of human evolution, and to consider how that figure might be represented. We also asked Cronenberg himself to curate a number of signature works from the National Gallery of Canada that he feels kinship towards.

Cronenberg's vision extends into the future and occupies a contentious place in the world of science fiction. We felt an urgency to create a work to address that place and partnered with the Canadian Film Centre's Media Lab, which collaborated with acclaimed creative director and experience designer Lance Weiler to make an immersive digital extension of "David Cronenberg: Evolution," BODY/MIND/CHANGE. The project sits between an Alternate Reality Game (ARG) and Internet-based, moving-image and performance art. Cronenberg himself participated in its creation as an actor/subject, reacting to the installation of "POD," a cybernetic relative of the Civic TV virus from *Videodrome*, in his body. BODY/MIND/CHANGE can be experienced at bodymindchange.ca.

Film is at the core of our mandate and we took this opportunity to restore many of Cronenberg's films, inclu-

ding *Shivers*, *Rabid* and *Dead Ringers* and to restrike many others. As film curators, we continue to assert that the most fruitful way to understand a filmmaker's work is to see it onscreen, in a cinema.

Finally, we were pleased to collaborate with several universities and colleges in the Toronto area on a Virtual Museum, a legacy online resource that we hope will stimulate ongoing research and interest in Cronenberg's films. It can be found at tiff.net/cronenbergmuseum.

Noah Cowan
Artistic Director, TIFF Bell Lightbox

Piers Handling
Director and Chief Executive Officer, TIFF



Cronenberg ÷ 3: An Overview

by Piers Handling

David Cronenberg has achieved the status of the iconic. His name has become an adjective. Use the word “Cronenbergian” and a set of assumptions instantly spring to mind: excess, horror, violence, chaos, body transformations. Imagery in his films is among the best-known in contemporary cinema: the exploding head (*Scanners*), the body slit (*Video-drome*), the twins (*Dead Ringers*), the car crashes (*Crash*).

His films have attracted acolytes and detractors alike. The release of a new film is the subject of international scrutiny. The most prestigious film festivals have embraced his films and elevated him as an establishment auteur. Articles and books, scholarly and journalistic, have placed the work under a microscope. He is now clearly considered a major artist: a filmmaker with a definite vision, something to say, who has remained true to himself and forged a personal cinema, a cinema of distinction.

But what exactly is going on in Cronenberg’s universe? Open to many interpretations, as the work of any interesting

artist should be, his films have elicited a growing body of critical work. The pioneers were horror and science-fiction critics who situated him within these genres. He became known, somewhat facetiously, as “The Baron of Blood,” a descriptor that provided good copy but which he rapidly outgrew. The gore and viscera that marked his early career have morphed into different forms of horror—psychological ones, of the mind and imagination.

Nevertheless, throughout his career, Cronenberg has remained remarkably faithful to a set of ideas that he has made his study. He is a living, active artist, still highly productive. Even as he celebrates his seventieth birthday, he will no doubt write fresh chapters in his life. But at this point in his career, after twenty feature films, there is an unmistakable arc to his work.

Questions surrounding identity comprise a key element, perhaps the core of his films. Metaphysical and existential questions that have obsessed artists and philosophers for centuries provide a solid basis on which to examine the films of this singular director.

Questions like, Who am I? Where have I come from? Who created me? Am I free? Am I a social creature? What form do my relationships take? inform all of his films, and on closer examination show a man moving through distinct world views.

Cronenberg on the set of *Dead Ringers* (1988)
• Photo Attila Dory • Courtesy David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library / Morgan Creek

Closely tied to this idea of identity is a related idea, that of control, for in the Cronenberg universe both are intertwined and come under intense scrutiny, from his first short films, "Transfer" and "From the Drain," through all of his work up to *Cosmopolis*.

In the first part of his career, Cronenberg asks the question, Who is my creator? Father figures in the form of doctors or scientists determined to better the world experiment on unwitting patients/victims. These projects soon turn in unsuspected directions, creating chaos, and the patients/victims are generally seen as having only partial control over their lives.

Cronenberg's middle period witnesses a significant transformation as his protagonists struggle to regain and exert control. The doctor/scientist figure has all but disappeared. The struggle has been internalized and the protagonists of these films are battling demons of their own making. Who am I? becomes the defining question.

By the time Cronenberg arrives at the third stage of his career, his canvas has broadened. The question is no longer as narcissistic. His protagonists engage with the world, become concerned with groups of people: family, community. The Who am I? is turned outwards to become Who are we? or Who are you?

÷ WHO IS MY CREATOR? (*Stereo*, *Crimes of the Future*, *Shivers*, *Rabid*, *Fast Company*, *The Brood*, *Scanners*)

This is the question that underlies the first chapter in Cronenberg's career. The early films all depict a struggle between a father/authority figure, in the form of a scientist/doctor, and the subjects of his experiments. The dramatic core of each film revolves around this brilliant scientist/doctor attempting to improve the human condition in some way. Each of them is well intentioned, the sole exception being *Scanners*, in which the palette of intent darkens significantly. Western notions of progress underscore these men's work. They are trying to improve humanity in some way. But there is a

pattern of unintended consequences, and Cronenberg adopts a complex and subtle argument when he comes to unpacking what this means.

Telepathic communication and the delights of extrasensory perception, a hot topic in the 1960s, are investigated in *Stereo*, Cronenberg's first low-budget, quasi-experimental, intensely controlled featurette. A cure for "pathological skin conditions caused by contemporary cosmetics" is searched for in the equally playful and striking *Crimes of the Future*, which features a world where a disease has wiped out the population of postpubescent females and is now attacking everyone.

As he steps into the commercial sphere with the gory, outlandish *Shivers*, Cronenberg depicts a doctor trying to breed a parasite to replace failing organs in the human body. Plastic surgery provides the backdrop to the dystopian *Rabid* as a young woman, badly injured in a motorcycle crash, finds herself in the care of a doctor experimenting with new forms of skin-graft technology. In *The Brood*, the new, here an advanced form of psychotherapy pioneered by another "visionary" doctor who encourages people to give physical shape to their anger, lies at the core of his study of a custody battle. In *Scanners*, we see an experiment conducted by yet another unorthodox scientist, overseen by a corporation specializing in international intelligence and security that carries ominous overtones from the get-go. "Scanners" who are created by this technology can read other people's minds and, when needed, can control and kill on command.

The focus of all these films is placed on the victims of these scientific experiments. In fact, the scientists of the first two films, Luther Stringfellow (*Stereo*) and Antoine Rouge (*Crimes of the Future*), make no appearance at all, and serious screen time is really only given to Dr. Hal Raglan in *The Brood*. Indeed, the weight and power in these early films consistently lie with the unwitting individual who appears normal, and in some respects becomes a stand-in for the Everyman or Everywoman. In every instance, they have no control over what happens to them. Forces beyond their power and

comprehension invade their bodies, take them over and turn them into "monsters."

Does the creation myth lie uneasily beneath the surface of these early films? If there is no religious intent, and I think none was conscious (Cronenberg has reiterated many times that he is an atheist), the relationship between the Everyman or Everywoman and the scientist/doctor who in effect creates them, or at least their new persona, is nevertheless worthy of further investigation. Arguably, the scientist/doctor has in effect become the new God, playing with life, but there is also an undeniable Freudian element at play.

The films of this period relentlessly explore this idea, as an omnipotent father figure, blessed with knowledge, creativity and curiosity pushes at the boundaries of human knowledge and sees his experiments go awry. The need to invent, experiment and tamper is an inevitable part of the human psyche, but the unintended consequences are tragic. While *Stereo* and *Crimes of the Future* conclude in ambiguity ("It will be some time before the data is fully evaluated" is the last line of *Stereo*), *Shivers* ends in a kind of anarchic celebration of the release of the libido (an ending that can, and has been, read in a variety of ways). This is certainly not the case in *Rabid* or *Scanners*. The death of Rose in the former is tragic—she simply becomes a piece of trash to be discarded in a dumpster—while the ambiguity of the ending of the latter speaks to a hesitant, uncertain future. In *The Brood*, a highly personal film in the Cronenberg oeuvre, good appears to win out over evil: the doctor who releases chaos is killed, the father retrieves his child, and the malevolent mother whose rage released the vengeful brood in an orgy of mayhem is murdered.

If most critics see *Fast Company* as lying outside the neat arc of Cronenberg's career, both stylistically and thematically, this reading reclaims the film. While there may be no mad scientist, there are three distinct father figures, one of whom, a corporate track rep, pulls all the strings in the lives of his racing team. His formal role and position clearly act as obstacles to the boyish protagonist who just wants to race cars,

a young man who initially shares similar characteristics with other Cronenberg heroes of the period. They do not control their lives; others do.

The key dynamic of these early works positions normal, ordinary people who see their lives spiral out of control due to forces that either they cannot see, or are certainly powerless to affect in any meaningful way. While the protagonists of these films are not passive, outside forces are certainly far more powerful than they are. In an earlier article,¹ I argued that this could be tied to our own colonial history as a country, a feeling that we were not in complete control of our destiny.

An inability to control one's fate is tied to notions of adolescence and immaturity. Cronenberg's early protagonists all fit into this mould. The father in *The Brood*, ironically taking on his wife's shrink in an ugly battle over custody of their child, is the only Everyman in this period who ends up victorious, but his victory is pyrrhic: in the ambiguous final moments, bumps of rage appear on the arm of the daughter he has saved, pointing to an inconclusive future. With some caveats, the same is true of *Fast Company*, in which the evil father figure is destroyed at the end, but by a proxy of the young drag-car racer—his mentor, an older established driver. The protagonist does not yet have the individual power to alter their life.

Perhaps the emblematic image that completes *Scanners* ends this first chapter of Cronenberg's career. The two brothers, one good, the other bad, having engaged in a climatic scanning battle, merge into one, with neither having apparently prevailed, as the surviving body and voice contain elements of both.

÷ WHO AM I? (*Videodrome*, *The Dead Zone*, *The Fly*, *Dead Ringers*, *Naked Lunch*, *M. Butterfly*, *Crash*, *eXistenZ*)

Videodrome marked a substantive change in the Cronenberg project. Most critics have singled it out as one of his major films; some regard it as his best work. It is unquestionably a seminal film, marking a break in more ways than one.

Certainly it was evidence of a new maturity, complexity and control. It saw Cronenberg moving slowly away from the two genres, science fiction and horror, that had tethered him up to this point—ones that provided safety and guidance but that were beginning to constrain his imagination.

In this middle period, Cronenberg's protagonists are probing to the full the idea of their own individuality and what this means. They are free to explore their own bodies and minds through sex, drugs, literature, art, medicine and technology. As in the early films, there are unintended consequences, but control—and identity—are theirs.

Max Renn in *Videodrome* straddles the worlds of early Cronenberg while marking an important turn towards this middle portion of the director's career. The demons now all lie within the protagonist. Max Renn is a driven, tormented, curious, renegade television executive with a taste for the trashy underbelly of pop culture. This eventually leads him, via a slow descent into sadomasochism and degrading fantasy, to his own suicide. The mad scientist is Brian O'Blivion, but he is a peripheral figure: marginalized, only seen on television monitors, in effect an absent presence. A Marshall McLuhanesque media philosopher ("Television is reality and reality is less than television"; "There is nothing real outside our perception of reality"), he provokes thoughts and ideas but is in effect powerless. Max is complex: he makes his own decisions, tries to assume control over his life, his sexual fantasies, and ultimately, perhaps, even his death, but he is not entirely free. Videodrome, the hallucinatory allure of Nicki Brand, and the shadowy presence of O'Blivion's daughter mean that he is still struggling against outside forces.

In *The Dead Zone*, a film that bears some resemblance to *Scanners*, a man named Johnny Smith discovers he has extrasensory powers after being in a coma for five years after a car crash. He can see events in the future. There is a doctor in this film, gentle and kind, who is helping Johnny recover, but the film charts the manner in which Johnny starts to use his new powers for good: initially to track down a killer, and eventually to intercede against a candidate running for

state senator who will unleash a nuclear holocaust if allowed to live. Johnny makes a conscious decision to intervene, to change the way things are, and his actions make a difference, ruining the candidate's campaign. With this film, we are moving away from the tragically powerless victims of *Shivers*, *Rabid* and *Scanners*.

With *The Fly*, scientist and subject merge into one character, Seth Brundle, who, in his words, is "working on something that will change the world as we know it" This is language that we have heard in one form or another from the voices of the scientists/doctors in the early work: Dr. Roger St. Luc (*Shivers*), Dr. Dan Keloid (*Rabid*), Dr. Hal Raglan (*The Brood*), Dr. Paul Ruth (*Scanners*) and Brian O'Blivion (*Videodrome*). But all these men experiment with other people; Brundle experiments with himself. In a step forward from *Videodrome*, the source of the failed experiment increasingly lies within the willing victim, even if Brundle's impulsiveness proves to be his undoing. Cronenberg is beginning to reclaim power of choice, decision-making, and the future within his protagonists.

This sense of self-empowerment is a shift of epic proportions in Cronenberg's cinema, and continues with another of his masterworks, *Dead Ringers*. In the mode of the early films, the scientific experiments, this time in the hands of twin-brother gynecologists, are projected onto other subjects, here an actress who wants to become pregnant. However, the key moment comes when their experiments are turned in on each other, with fatal consequences. Combining as it does two major ideas in Cronenberg's work—experimenting on another and experimenting with oneself—*Dead Ringers* remains one of his most tragic and controlled pieces of filmmaking.

The investigation into the self and the question of Who am I? receives different, but no less meaningful treatments in subsequent films: *Naked Lunch*, *M. Butterfly*, *Crash* and *eXistenZ*. Each holds up this idea for examination in a different way. As control begins to revert to the self, Cronenberg explores the fragility of identity with a prismatic complexity. In *Naked Lunch*, which could be seen as a sly, ironic self-portrait, Cronenberg employs Burroughs's novel to delve into

places where reality and fantasy intersect. The film is a finely modulated examination of creation and creator, in this case a writer experimenting with drugs that fuel his life, imagination and finally his art. Self-actualization may actually involve losing control. Almost the same idea is explored in *M. Butterfly*, in which a French diplomat falls in love with a beautiful Chinese opera singer only to discover that "she" is in fact a "he," and a spy at that: how could he not have known? The fantasy of exotic projection, an inner reality that perhaps denies, or certainly suppresses, knowledge, ultimately wins out.

The idea of control is central to *Crash*. A group of thrill-seeking, zoned-out semicultists explore the limits of their obsessions with technology (cars) and sex (their bodies). Each character in the film, much like Max Renn in *Videodrome*, explores a full range of fantasies available to them. Unlike Renn, there is no cathode-ray Brian O'Blivion pulling strings from afar. These people are all free to act and do as they please. Indeed, their identities, much like in *Naked Lunch*, are bound up with their fantasies, the re-creation of famous car crashes.

Another group of cultists, this time video gamers, function in much the same manner in *eXistenZ*, a troubling and complex film that blurs reality and fantasy, an idea that recurs throughout Cronenberg's work. Ted Pikul, the male protagonist, again reminiscent of Renn in *Videodrome*, is both free but under the thrall of a temptress, Allegra Geller, the creator of the eXistenZ game. She could be seen as another of the mad scientists who populate Cronenberg's early work, but here she has a group of willing gamers eager to experience her new invention, and the conceit of the film lies in the tease that everything might be a game or fantasy anyway, and that she remains elusive, impossible to judge.

÷ WHO ARE WE? (*Spider*, *A History of Violence*, *Eastern Promises*, *A Dangerous Method*, *Cosmopolis*)

Spider, like *Videodrome*, is another transitional film in Cronenberg's career, a work that stitches together ideas from the second stage with what follows. The interest now

extends from the individual, and the couple, into broader social relationships. Family was never entirely absent from the previous films (just think of *The Brood*) but neither was it a central idea to be explored. As Cronenberg's protagonists began to assume control over their lives, and reach out beyond themselves, they did so within the context of singular relationships (Johnny and Sarah in *The Dead Zone*, Seth and Veronica in *The Fly*, Beverly/Elliot and Claire in *Dead Ringers*, Bill and Joan in *Naked Lunch*, René and Song Liling in *M. Butterfly*). Both *Crash* and *eXistenZ* begin to move away from the traditional couple to a more polymorphous portrait of groups of people.

And for the first time, significant maternal figures make an appearance, beginning to balance out the proliferation of paternal figures seen in the early work. If father figures in the form of the doctor/scientists dominate the early work (and much has been made of the one mother figure in these films, the hideous Nola Carveth in *The Brood*), recent Cronenberg has recurring mother figures—if not exactly at the centres of the films, certainly at points close to them. In *Spider*, *A History of Violence*, *Eastern Promises* and even *A Dangerous Method*, Cronenberg's relationship to the feminine, the source of much critical debate, points towards a desire to reconcile with another part of the Freudian world.

In *Spider*, the family centres the narrative and its concerns. Spider's struggle is the battle to work out his relationship with his father and mother. *Spider* also shares many attributes with *Naked Lunch*. It is an examination of an individual trying to distinguish between reality and fantasy. Spider, essentially mad, is attempting to make sense of an Oedipal moment from his past involving his mother and his father. The entire film is a working out, and a reworking, of a trauma—the death of his mother—that has ended in him losing his mind.

A History of Violence contains a beautifully delineated sketch of an ordinary family living in a small town. It is unquestionably one of Cronenberg's greatest films, a work of subtlety and complexity, focusing as it does on a man who has hidden his

past from his family. The past, as it must, resurfaces with a vengeance, the Freudian id in full force, disrupting the quotidian rhythms and patterns of an ordinary household. This family could be a Norman Rockwell cliché. How the film disturbs this Edenic reverie is compelling. As the palette shifts towards darkness, the moral dilemma that the husband, Tom Stall/Joey Cusak, must confront will test who he is as a man and individual, and explore ideas of responsibility, honesty and trust. Conversely, his wife and children come face-to-face with a husband and father who is indeed a different person from the one they knew.

Family is central to both *Eastern Promises* and *A Dangerous Method*. In the former, we are in the world of London's Russian mafia, where notions of family are attached to codes of behaviour even more stringent than those associated with the normal nuclear family. Dishonesty and betrayal put life on the line, a distinction clearly different from the codes at play in *A History of Violence*. Nikolai Luzhin, an outsider, is ritually brought into the *vory v zakone* family where he begins to face his own moral dilemmas. As Ernest Mathijs notes in *Cinema of David Cronenberg: From Baron of Blood to Cultural Hero*, within this detailed examination of family are not only biological concepts, but also concepts of race, class and religion. Each forms a structure within which the individual exists and operates, along with different notions of family, belonging and indeed identity.

Identity, always mutable and fragile in the Cronenberg universe, begins to be associated with the idea of concealment. Both Tom Stall and Nikolai Luzhin create carefully constructed identities that are not their own. Tom is an ex-contract killer, Nikolai an undercover policeman, and both are living external lies.

Hidden identity is not a new idea in Cronenberg's films. But now it becomes increasingly important to him in his analysis of the idea of the individual. The horror genre is built around the idea of becoming a different person, of having one's personality altered in some fundamental manner. In *M. Butterfly* and *Dead Ringers*, Cronenberg begins to deal with this idea

free of the constraints of a genre that had previously provided a framework for his films.

A Dangerous Method fits clearly within this growing fascination with families of various kinds. Played out against the backdrop of a young Carl Jung falling into the orbit of the older and more established Sigmund Freud in the early days of psychoanalysis, Cronenberg portrays Jung as a family man, somewhat unhappily married, who has an affair with a patient, Sabina Spielrein. This triangle plays off against another: Jung, Freud and Spielrein, who oddly create an alternative family structure.

At the same time, two other "families" compete for attention: the religious and the professional. Freud and Spielrein are Jewish, and no small point is made of this. Freud also appeals to Jung's sense of belonging to a nascent, fragile and threatened movement of psychoanalysts. This push-and-pull between the personal and professional, marital and vocational, proves to be a combustible cocktail, ending in emotional and professional separations. But in *A Dangerous Method*, each of the three major protagonists is completely free to live their lives, and to make their own choices.

A further interesting element of the late work is Cronenberg's own reference to his Jewish roots, which he first acknowledged in his four-minute contribution to 2007's *Chacun son cinéma*, "At the Suicide of the Last Jew in the World in the Last Cinema in the World." In this short film and in *A Dangerous Method* we see for the first time Cronenberg—an acknowledged atheist and existentialist—hinting at an identity that he has never fully owned, but which, like the bumps on the arm of the young child at the end of *The Brood*, persists.

We are now left with Cronenberg's final feature film at the date of this volume's publication, *Cosmopolis*, a work that initially appears little concerned with family but which is certainly interested in the intersection of a man with community and the wider world around him. At first glance, Eric Packer, the steely-eyed, financial wunderkind, rich beyond imagining, seems to be a throwback to earlier Cronenberg protagonists.

Like Max Renn (*Videodrome*) and Seth Brundle (*The Fly*), he knows what he wants. His strong senses of identity and self suggest the assurance of Tom Stall (at least in the first half of *A History of Violence*) and Nikolai Luzhin (*Eastern Promises*). But, more than any other Cronenberg protagonist, he is in absolute control of every facet of his life. There is no authority figure, no family, his wife only a ghostly, unconsummated apparition. Locked away in his fully outfitted limousine, he lives in a carefully constructed, hermetic environment, allowing the outside world to enter at his choice when he is joined by a series of advisors, lovers and doctors. Totally self-contained, passionless and monotone, he is already one of the living dead—and the voyage traced is of a man moving towards his own, willed death.

But beneath the surface, family is ultimately the itch that must be scratched. Packer's voyage through a New York seething with unrest, gridlock and protest is motivated by his need for a haircut. Initially a descent into a Dantean purgatory, *Cosmopolis* becomes almost a Homeric search for home. When Packer finally arrives at the barbershop, family bubbles to the surface. Memories of his father, his own first haircut, his father's death when he was five, are all triggered by the barber, who is likely the only remaining connection the young man has with his past. Family is absent, but lives on, and drives a man disconnected with himself and his own ruin into its clutches. But it will not save him, as it does not save Stall in *A History of Violence*. Packer, haircut unfinished, abruptly gets up—"I've got to leave this place"—and propels himself into the night and towards a confrontation with his own death.

If the arc of Cronenberg's work moves from disempowerment to empowerment, from a world that is controlled by others to one where control is regained, along the way he indeed ventures boldly into what an identity, free and independent, might mean, and into how this unique identity intersects with the other. Lonely are the brave, these Cronenberg protagonists who explore new worlds of media, literature, science, finance and medicine only to meet with their own deaths, more often than not at their own hands. Suicide is indeed a recurring motif.

Is it another form of control, or an abandonment of faith and hope? Max Renn, Seth Brundle, Johnny Smith, Elliot and Beverly Mantle, René Gallimard, Vaughan, Eric Packer: all have escaped the suffocating power of the doctor/scientists of the early films. They are free. And even if all of Cronenberg's protagonists do not die as they do, the survivors—Bill Lee, James Ballard, Tom Stall, Nikolai Luzhin and Carl Jung—are caught in a Sartrean *Huit clos*. There is no exit.

¹ Piers Handling, "A Canadian Cronenberg," *The Shape of Rage: The Films of David Cronenberg*, ed. Handling (Toronto: General Pub. Co., 1983), 98–114.



David Cronenberg: Evolution

by Noah Cowan

“I always really did feel that we have created our own universe.”

“You have to believe in God before you can say there are things that man was not meant to know. I don’t think there’s anything man wasn’t meant to know. There are just some stupid things that people shouldn’t do.” — David Cronenberg¹

The struggle between science and received wisdom is a founding legend of the modern age. From Galileo and Leonardo, through to Newton and Linnaeus, scientists developed methods of inquiry that changed how we saw the world, and made discoveries increasingly at odds with organized religion. This tension came to a climax with Charles Darwin and his theory of evolution, which made God unnecessary to the study of natural history. Scientific inquiry was then rapidly applied to remaining subjects previously reserved for religion: most spectacularly by Sigmund Freud (the mind) and Albert Einstein (the metaphysical). Thus the modern age was born, with the scientist as its liberator and philosopher king.

But just as theism requires spirits and hellfire to operate effectively, so evolution necessitates a popular expression of its dark side. As Darwin’s theory entered the mainstream, dystopian science fiction rose alongside it. H.G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* makes for a fine example: a horrific ride into our cannibalistic future, it maps Darwin’s theories onto late-Victorian politics, and sets the template for speculative fiction of all kinds to come. Wells positions the scientist as a lode-star of Victorian moral responsibility—the likely source of our future happiness, despite the horrible mistakes he might make in science’s name.² Wells’s vision was enormously influential in subsequent decades, inspiring a steady stream of evolutionist fiction. Only after Hiroshima is the scientist’s moral leadership placed in serious doubt in popular culture, most notably by author Robert Heinlein (who, along with Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke, formed the “Big Three” science-fiction writers of the era) and through the (perhaps unexpected) agency of iconic comic-book villains, such as Lex Luthor, Superman’s archrival. Yet even in these texts, the core of traditional evolutionist thinking remains intact: science will ultimately bring us a better world and the ostensibly good scientists will understand better than most the moral consequences of new inventions.

Only with the rise of television and computers, complex technology without a single inventor/scientist, does a contemporary, more radical discourse around science’s place in society emerge. In short order, Marshall McLuhan insists that

Cronenberg with the Sex Blob on the set of *Naked Lunch* (1991)
• Photo Attila Dory • Courtesy TIFF Film Reference Library / Twentieth Century Fox and Entertainment One © Recorded Picture Company, 1991

technological innovation has no relevant relationship with morality. William S. Burroughs takes on scientists themselves, calling them “reality addicts”³ and disputing their central role in shaping society. J.G. Ballard speculates on how we might (re)construct useful core value systems, however perverse, now that science is no longer a useful dominant narrative.⁴ David Cronenberg, several years later and in casual alliance with these men,⁵ continues their deconstruction of traditional evolutionist storytelling. In his films, he deploys scientists, often in their most morally questionable forms, to posit speculative (though never explicitly futuristic) scenarios that undermine science’s exalted role.

Cronenberg’s interest in science is not at all surprising. While growing up, he had competing interests in writing and science, unresolved until he was well into his university career. His first story intended for public consumption was in fact for a science-fiction magazine⁶ even while his head was being turned around by Vladimir Nabokov and Burroughs—both known for their love-hate relationship with science fiction as a genre. Film, introduced to Cronenberg through underground screening parties in 1960s Toronto, appealed as much for its technical complexity—Cronenberg likes to quote Orson Welles: “This is the biggest electric-train set any boy ever had”—as its narrative possibilities.

Cronenberg’s fascination with science is modulated by a deeply felt atheism, developed through his university encounters with the writings of existentialist philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger. Sartre’s insistence on man being alone in the world, and on the need to reconstruct our identities in full awareness of the finality of death, can be found throughout Cronenberg’s films and in his interviews. With Heidegger, Cronenberg shares an enthusiasm to get at the root of what fundamentally (and tragically) connects us as human beings—and an appreciation of the difficulty of caring about such things once God is removed from the equation. Cronenberg also mimics Heidegger’s retracing and upending of the history of philosophy with his own, ongoing deconstruction of traditional evolutionist narrative. Existen-

tialism leaves Cronenberg ambivalent about science’s role in society; it must not act like another falsely comforting grand theory of the universe.

These various fiction-based and philosophical elements—a skeptical fascination with science and scientists; a curiosity about new social structures; the futility of imagining life after death—inform a remarkably consistent and crucial impulse in Cronenberg’s films: the overwhelming and hubristic desire of his characters to witness the next stage of human evolution. These “new evolutionists” impatiently conduct biological and social experiments in an artificial effort to force humanity forward. We find them in three distinct forms. In Cronenberg’s early work and, then, dotted throughout ensuing films are traditional scientist-inventors reimagined, deconstructed and stripped of moral authority, such as Emil Hobbes (*Shivers*), Seth Brundle (*The Fly*) and Allegra Geller (*existenZ*). Then there are amateur, civilian social scientists—one might call them sociobiological explorers—who create controlled experiments to test out their theories of possible futures. Examples include James Ballard (*Crash*), Bill Lee (*Naked Lunch*) and Eric Packer (*Cosmopolis*). Finally, there are superheroes, with significantly advanced powers already, and wary of integrating the rest of us into their worlds despite enormous pressure on them to do so. These are Tom Stall (*A History of Violence*) and Nikolai Luzhin (*Eastern Promises*), but also, to a lesser extent, Johnny Smith (*The Dead Zone*) and Cameron Vale (*Scanners*). (*Videodrome*, Cronenberg’s most influential masterpiece, plays with all three forms, with Brian O’Blivion, Barry Convex, Nicki Brand and antihero Max Renn himself periodically interchanging the role of hungry evolutionist.)

All of Cronenberg’s new evolutionists inevitably and tragically fail. While he acknowledges that their attempts to form “a man-made, man-controlled environment short-circuiting the concept of evolution” is “noble in that [it is] an attempt by human beings, however crazy, to try to structure and control their own fate,”⁷ the scientists-inventors unwittingly cause mayhem and, often, mass murder. The sociobiological explorers find their experiments unstable—leading to suicide,

prison or catatonic despondency. The superheroes cannot protect those around them from danger; the next stage of human evolution will manifest itself despite their efforts to delay its arrival.

In other words, Cronenberg actively undermines them. They represent the old heroes of evolutionist narrative, false gods of science’s fallen kingdom, their arrogant attempts to father a new form of humanity cut down by existentialism’s dictate, You will die alone. Some of the scientists, especially ones that resemble Wells’s Victorian inventors, are made to look particularly foolish: Seth Brundle (*The Fly*) engages in his tragic experiment because he gets drunk, not out of any noble class consciousness. Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud (*A Dangerous Method*), the bumbling fathers of psychoanalysis, bicker with one another rather than constructing a useful treatment for their patient. Other, more up-to-date scientist types are quickly executed—by the end of reel one in *Shivers* and *Rabid*, utterly marginalized from what should be their own stories. Sometimes, they seem outright incompetent, like Hal Raglan (*The Brood*) and Paul Ruth (*Scanners*), caught in their own narcissism and unable to see the underlying dangers of their constructs. Even the superheroes get a rough ride. In *A History of Violence*, the dashing Stall is relegated to a life of monastic lividity with his dour family after saving their lives.

Cronenberg’s new evolutionists, pilloried as they are, serve as key agitators in an ongoing, sometimes hopeful project: how can we eradicate theistic narratives and theistically inspired moral codes from cinema? Once we toss out all forms of theism, including the scientist as philosopher king, how do we organize society in a functional way? Can atheism, existentialism and the principles of scientific inquiry, working together, lead us to a greater understanding of social organization and even the meaning of life? To address these questions, Cronenberg creates a unique, shifting, personal cinema, infused with the traditional tools of speculative fiction: cautionary tales, counterfactuals, experiments gone wrong. In his early work, he seeks ways to free speculative fiction from its Victorian roots, especially any and all socially

constructed, hegemonic narratives, be they Christian, scientific or something else. Next, he questions the very roots of Judeo-Christian thinking about the self, suggesting new ways of considering ontology and society. It is unlikely that such a quest is fully conscious for Cronenberg. He in fact compares his filmmaking process to “the philosophy of emergent evolution, which says that certain unpredictable peaks emerge from the natural flow of things and carry you forward to another stage. I guess each film has its own version of emergent evolution.”⁸

Cronenberg’s first “unpredictable peak” emerges in his student film, “From the Drain.” A slithering drain creature designed by the military takes revenge on a seditious soldier, sparing his more loyal colleague. Often read as a political text, the film is equally an existentialist intervention: the soldiers’ moral superiority has no bearing on the weapon’s behaviour. Such moral indifference continues in Cronenberg’s first feature, *Stereo*. It chronicles a failed large-scale experiment in which surgically created telepaths devolve into vegetables and sex-crazed maniacs. A dystopian vision to be sure, *Stereo* nonetheless sees Cronenberg adopting a calm and even eulogistic tone, suggesting a fatherly pride in this attempt to construct a new social structure without theist underpinnings. Cronenberg encourages us to excise traditional morality from any authentic vision of our future and from the very concept of evolution.

Then comes gore. Bodily fluids, new body parts and parasites become the tools of choice for Cronenberg. Gore first appears in his second feature, *Crimes of the Future*. A virus accidentally carried by a new kind of makeup has wiped out all adult women. As a side effect, it causes gooey secretions that are irresistible aphrodisiacs to the healthy. The film’s oblique, experimental form and Kenneth Anger-inspired Bacchanalian wilfulness make it more of an oddity than a prospective thesis. But it signals Cronenberg’s use of bodily fluids to make a range of arguments in his next two, more commercial efforts, *Shivers* and *Rabid*. In *Shivers*, a parasite infects an isolated apartment complex, turning the residents

into sex-crazed, blood-drenched zombies. In *Rabid*, a phallic feeler generates as a side effect of experimental organ surgery, driving its carrier to feed on human blood, and thereby to infect her victims with rabies.

All these oozing fluids signaled to critics that Cronenberg was a horror director. He was duly compared to contemporaries like Wes Craven (*Halloween*) and George A. Romero (*Night of the Living Dead*). The dominant model for reading horror films then and now involves sifting them for evidence of a collective unconscious and its (often scary) archetypes that, in part, govern our interpersonal relations. Critics twisted themselves into pretzels to squeeze nightmarish archetypes out of Cronenberg's films, but they simply don't function that well as horror. They lack certain basic elements for such a reading, failing (*a*) to conjure up a central figure of evil that is (*b*) formed somehow in our nightmares and (*c*) caused (usually) by our repressed sexuality, and that (*d*) upturns conventional society.⁹

In *Shivers*, the joyous penultimate scene, a swimming-pool orgy, suggests the parasite's effects, all things considered, might not be that bad. In *Rabid*, the feeler is an object of fear for the uninfected but not an object of evil. The carrier is both a victim and beneficiary of an agent that does not care about her, reflecting existentialist moral codes rather than issues with repressed collective memory. The deployment of horror-film elements seems to be a red herring, then: an interpretive trap laid by Cronenberg, not unlike the political reading easily found in "From the Drain."

The Brood, Cronenberg's next film, perhaps settles the case. The mother of a small girl wills into existence creatures that act out her rage, prompted by her psychiatrist's radical therapeutic techniques. Although the film contains brutal, bloody killings, grotesque fetal excrescences, and seems to satisfy some of the conditions of horror listed above, Cronenberg extinguishes the power of these creatures at a crucial juncture. He literally deflates them—they are kept alive through a temporary air sac—when their acts of terror are no longer needed for his story. This immediately reduces their status

to nonhuman, despite the mother's ritual cleaning of them once they drop off her body. It also strongly suggests they are manifestations of the mother's personal unconscious, not of those of a collective. They are parapsychological pests, rather than a waking nightmare—and so only questionably associated with the monsters of horror.

Why does it matter if these are or are not horror films, or if the creatures in *The Brood* are or are not manifestations of the collective unconscious? The answer lies in the ontological status of these three creatures: the parasite, the feeler and the brood. They are examples of evolution artificially accelerated by invention. They are products of bad science. And, in each case, there is some question about their relationship to humans and the collective unconscious. Cronenberg reinforces this connection through the creatures' physical connectivity to the human body, the so-called gore factor. If these creatures are in fact to be found in our collective unconscious and are built to be part of us, there are elements of ourselves that could potentially live on and act as ersatz souls. But Cronenberg rejects this, especially if it includes a definition of the collective unconscious that sounds suspiciously like Christian heaven. And so, with great force, the creatures' roles in a putative collective unconscious are effectively dismissed by each film's end as anthropomorphological fallacies. They have no actual, authentic relationship to us. The fact remains: we die alone.

By the time Cronenberg gets to *Videodrome*, *The Fly* and *Dead Ringers*, the deployment of gore more directly relates to evolutionary pressures on human beings as a species—and we find the new evolutionists more directly involved and implicated. In *Videodrome*, a small-time porn mogul is infected by a televisually transmitted virus that brings on a brain tumour and hallucinations that create evocative orifices in his body. He finds himself in the middle of a conflict between a religious cult and a corporation, both of which use the virus to exert control over consumers of sexually violent media. In *The Fly*, a scientist mistakenly teleports himself with a fly, causing his body to mutate into a new hybrid creature. In

Dead Ringers, twin gynecologists share everything, including a sexual affair with a patient. Her discovery of the ruse leads to a conflict between the brothers and their ultimate demise; their shared consciousness cannot take the strain. Distinct from the earlier trio of films, these films portray humans who evolve to a new stage of existence without the aid of nonhuman creatures.¹⁰ Even at the end of *The Fly*, with Brundle fully mutated into a grotesque mess of atoms, he still carries a recognizably human self-awareness.

Cronenberg deploys gore at this stage in a more systematic way. There are fewer instances of it and, when those moments appear, they have a baroque intensity and an unmistakable power. More is at stake. Could Cronenberg actually be going after a larger philosophical target than the collective unconscious? If so, the probable candidate is theism's most powerful argument, the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* ("I think; therefore, I am"): the mind/body distinction at the core of Western thought and oft-cited proof of an extraphysical soul. To radically reset evolutionary discourse along an existentialist pathway—a continuing project of evolutionary biology, with its reading of the soul, if at all, as an inherently physiological entity—all traces of the superstitious, the unknown, the independent character, epitomized by this mind/body binary, must be erased. Otherwise, one could escape the finality of death.

Cronenberg tests the mind/body binary with the most outré examples imaginable. His dramatic uses of intense gore are final proofs of mind and body's indivisibility. In *The Fly*, mind and body—at least what's left of them—remain firmly melded, even under great duress. In *Videodrome*, despite the various powers at work within his psyche, Renn appears to face death in full command of his own mortality ("Long live the new flesh!") regardless of the ravages of the Videodrome tumour in his consciousness. And in *Dead Ringers*, despite their best efforts, the twins, with their shared consciousness, cannot be severed by medicine, physical trauma or even death.

But laying waste to the *cogito* is serious business. A much greater intellectual vacuum is created by this than by Cro-

nenberg's previous attacks on scientific and psychoanalytic fallacies. By dismantling the mind/body split, Cronenberg is forced to rehearse a new theory of personal identity. If the notion of a mind separate from and governing the body is discarded, how are our identities formed? How are we motivated into action? What might a new set of ethics look like within these new self-definitions?

Cronenberg's answer, in keeping with a former microbiology student and continuing enthusiast of body science, is to embrace mutability itself as the basis for reconstructing personal identity. In a recent interview,¹¹ Cronenberg cited Gerald M. Edelman's *Neural Darwinism* to illustrate how ongoing environmental stimuli for years after birth share the shaping of our brain with our genetic preprogramming. In fact, our brains are perpetually in a state of change, much like a rainforest. Also cited was Matt Ridley's *The Agile Gene: How Nature Turns on Nurture*, which extends this reasoning to the cellular level, describing how certain genes contain within their own biological structures both preset programs and mechanisms that alter their own structure based on environmental pressure. For Cronenberg, these scientists demonstrate a built-in biological uncertainty about identity and a porosity between experience and consciousness, inherent in our deepest atomic layers, that makes us ongoing, active participants in the destruction and reconstitution of ourselves. And yet, Cronenberg resists the idea that this inexorable process might deny human beings free will. We also self-consciously resist entropy—or as mighty physicist Erwin Schrödinger would have it, "Living matter evades the decay to equilibrium."¹² And so there is a constant, ongoing effort to reconstruct an identity at multiple biological layers. Cronenberg sees the push-pull of environmental pressure and entropic resistance as inherently inspiring, certainly the wellspring of human creativity and perhaps the basis for ethical, authentic living itself.

Cronenberg starts to make proposals for new social structures suggested by these findings in *Naked Lunch*, *Crash* and *eXistenZ*, all isolated to specific communities connected by related obsessions. The new evolutionists now also have a

new role, as catalysts for social change. In *Naked Lunch*, drugs and, to a lesser extent, sex connect the residents of Interzone in a highly contained paranoid universe. In *Crash*, the erotic thrill of car crashes brings together a secretive group seeking enlightenment. The beta test for a new video game unites a community of gamers in *eXistenZ*. What connects these groups is far away from the usual bonds of community and traditional moral values or structure, and yet they all function fairly effectively, for a time, as coherent, authentic, family-like entities. They also illustrate Cronenberg's biological theories of personal identity and suggest how new social structures may operate along those same lines. In each film, the protagonist requires constant stimulus and reinforcement from his group in order to function, just like our biological tissue. Members also need to defend the group against inevitable entropic decay, and they do so through the creative act of writing, playing video games and elegantly crashing cars. They come to these new social structures as narcissists, to exploit the group for their own sexual or professional needs, but find themselves enmeshed in a community that requires their authentic participation and care to function. That these projects ultimately fail does not diminish how exciting the communities feel in full flush. In some sense, their failure is part of their authenticity. For a rigorous atheist existentialist like Cronenberg, any extension of human life, even one as marginal as a car-crash club, smacks of life after death.

Though the films teem with polymorphous perversity, there is little need for gore now; gruesome moments still occur but they rarely carry the explanatory weight of Cronenberg's earlier work. For example, the Chinese restaurant of *eXistenZ* is an amusing demonstration of the lack of moral codes written into the game being played, but a far cry from the exploding head of *Scanners*, a truly shocking gambit in the director's mind/body discourse. What they share is mind and body operating in lockstep, building on his findings in the *Shivers-Rabid-The Brood* trio, with little doubt expressed by the characters about the strangeness of their many environments, both mental and physical, or about the actions they perform within them.

Such hermetic worlds become difficult for Cronenberg to sustain. After *Spider*, his next two films, *A History of Violence* and *Eastern Promises*, seem to question the entire intellectual project of rebuilding society from scratch. His superheroes, Tom Stall and Nikolai Luzhin, both played by Viggo Mortensen, desperately try to sustain far more traditional and iconic ecosystems, small-town America and a gangster underworld respectively, even though they and their hidden identities do not belong there. Of course their very presence creates an unstable social ecosystem that guarantees its collapse. Perhaps Cronenberg seeks to explore how a person at the next stage of human evolution might attempt to lead us into a more authentic life, but these guys are not especially capable of such a manoeuvre. More likely, after a period of exploring utopian impulses of community, Cronenberg wants to make sure we understand the dark side: that any attempt to resist entropy too completely, to try to bottle a social structure, is doomed to fail.

This reading could be taken into account to explain his motivation for making the most recent film represented in this book, *Cosmopolis*, a claustrophobic and cautionary tale of a businessman isolated in his car, and seeking a very dangerous haircut while angry anticapitalists riot in the streets. Despite its hermetic setting, the film's ambitions appear to exceed the modest social ecosystems of small-town America and gangster life. Cronenberg in fact appears to call into question the inherent stability of, and to identify the points of weakness in, the governing stories and structures of capitalism itself—a megasystem positioned as aggressively as science as a worthwhile, dominant narrative in contemporary society.

While a sequence of films devoted to undermining capitalist pretensions would be a most exciting prospect, one senses Cronenberg's coming targets will be more personal—further reflections on the interior consequences of his philosophical inquiries, so poignantly addressed in his shorts, "Camera" and "At the Suicide of the Last Jew in the World in the Last Cinema in the World." These provide a platform for the director to admit his own entropic biorhythms: that his physical decay



and increasing paranoia are essential to his filmmaking process. He builds on these thoughts in his interviews, asserting a deep, rigorously existentialist skepticism about his career trajectory and, really, about any kind of personal betterment. "History is absolutely not a continuous move towards perfection," he says, suggesting that film, like the human body, is "not very architecturally together; its interior is chaotic and messy. It is absolutely not schematic."¹³ And yet he, too, has reconstructed a value system and identity to resist entropy's relentless approach and existentialism's grim march to an empty death. He insists on being an artist who is "not a citizen of society," and who is "bound to explore every aspect of human experience."¹⁴ For Cronenberg, personal creativity, expressed freely, authentically and with deep personal awareness, is a necessary biological function to ward off entropic decay. It is a wellspring for a career that promises many more surprises before it is complete.

¹ Chris Rodley, *Cronenberg on Cronenberg* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), 58, 5.

² The best example comes much earlier, in the Faustian, proto-science fiction classic *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley. The novel essentially presents an ethical quandary: will the doctor help his repugnant creation live a good life, or will he extinguish it for society's benefit?

³ Interview with Gregory Corso and Allen Ginsberg, *Journal for the Protection of All Beings*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1961), 79–83.

⁴ In a 1962 article entitled "Which Way to Inner Space?" Ballard stated that "science fiction should turn its back on space, on interstellar travel, extraterrestrial life forms [and] galactic wars," a sentiment fully in line with Cronenberg's rigorous approach. In his 1974 introduction to *Crash*, Ballard also tossed off this juicy quote: "Over our lives preside the great twin leitmotifs of the twentieth century—sex and paranoia." It's as influential a statement on the world of David Cronenberg as one could imagine.

⁵ And there are others: Wilhelm Reich, Philip K. Dick, Thomas Kuhn, plus a whole host of existentialists.

⁶ Cronenberg relates, "It was about a kind of a dwarf who lives in a cellar. He has a painting and he fantasizes about living in that painting. He would be more than what he was. He finds out later that the painting was painted by a guy just like him, a dwarf who lived in a cellar." (See p. 31.)

⁷ Rodley, 27.

⁸ Rodley, 41.

⁹ These rules are based on Robin Wood's contribution to *The American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film* (1979). Wood was a harsh detractor of Cronenberg but several critics, among them the late John Harkness, have since suggested that Wood misread Cronenberg as a horror, rather than a science-fiction, filmmaker.

¹⁰ And now there is no longer the generic question; these films and their effects are decisively situated in science fiction, not horror.

¹¹ With Piers Handling and myself in preparation for the exhibition, "David Cronenberg: Evolution," at TIFF Bell Lightbox, 2013.

¹² Erwin Schrödinger, *What Is Life?: With Mind and Matter and Autobiographical Sketches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 69.

¹³ With Piers Handling and myself in preparation for the exhibition, "David Cronenberg: Evolution," at TIFF Bell Lightbox, 2013.

¹⁴ Rodley, 158.

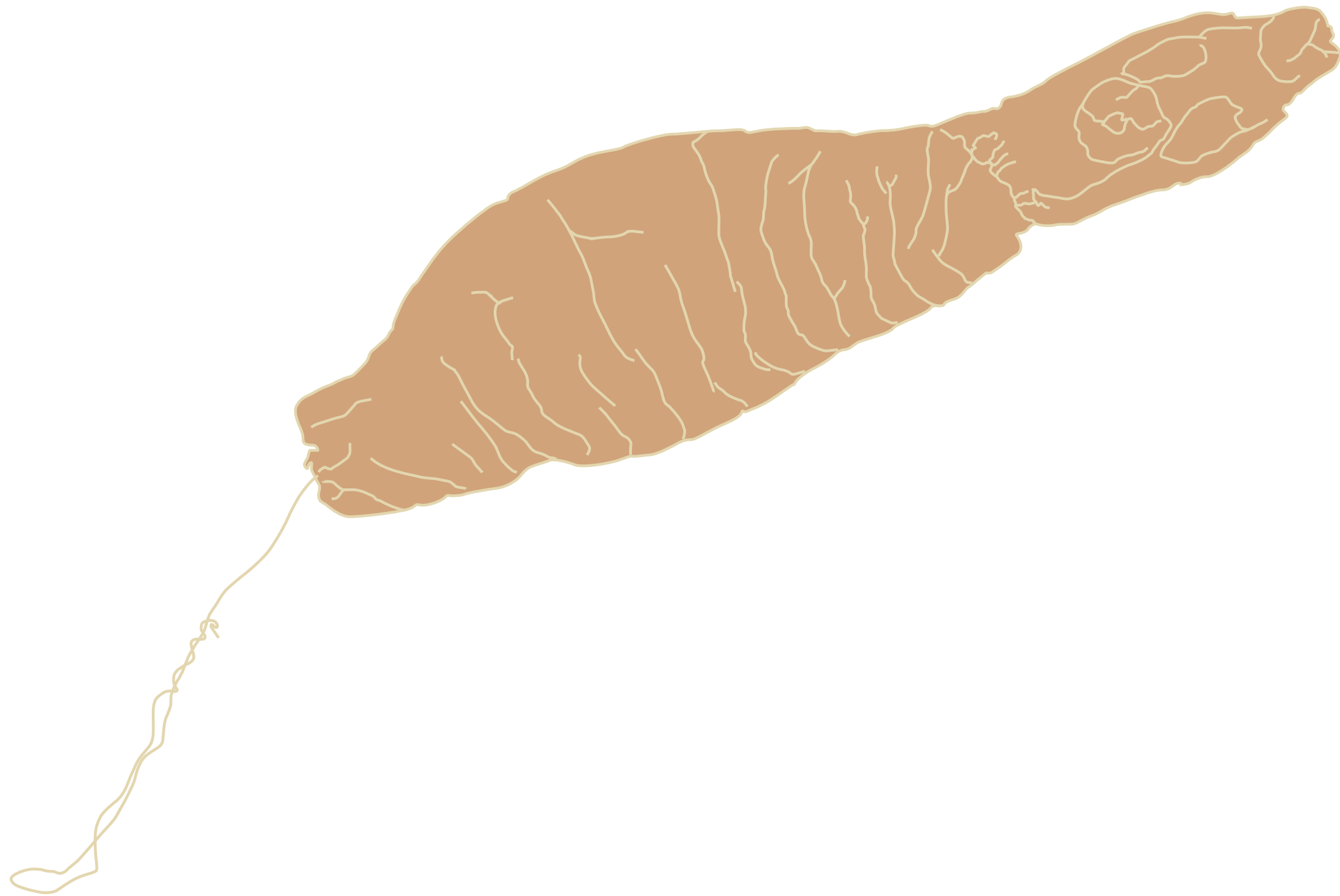


A note on the **interview** text

The quotes by David Cronenberg found throughout this book are the result of two afternoon conversations, held on February 25 and March 4, 2013, in the director's Toronto home. We took the opportunity to explore his thought processes in an effort to locate the philosophical underpinnings of his films. Contemporary film journalism and academic scholarship tend to focus on the minutiae of Cronenberg's films and the processes of making them. Once he realized the conversation would not turn to plot points or a given actor's performance, Cronenberg shared a range of insights, from midcentury existentialism to contemporary microbiology, that in turn helped to shape the essays in this book.

NC & PH

Cronenberg and baboon on the set of *The Fly* (1986)
▪ Photo Attila Dory ▪ Courtesy David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film
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Who Is My Creator?

The young David Cronenberg was avidly interested in both science and literature. From his first low-budget short films, "Transfer" and "From the Drain," through his experimental featurettes *Stereo* and *Crimes of the Future* and into his early feature films *Shivers*, *Rabid*, *Fast Company*, *The Bro-*

od and *Scanners*, he demonstrates a keen interest in doctors and scientists who initiate experiments with unforeseen, often disastrous, consequences.

The films' protagonists are not these doctors and scientists, however, but their victims: subjects who must come to terms with an increasing lack of control over their own bodies and impulses. Cutting-edge scientific research promises a new, liberating future for the body, but the end results are quite different. The films end tragically, in mayhem or, at best, ambiguity. The early films are characterized by gore and viscera: this is the chaos wrought by these doctors and scientists, many of them archetypal father figures. Cronenberg works within the structure of the horror and science fiction genres, a groundbreaking step for a Canadian filmmaker.



The education of an artist

is to find out what is really going on
that is not being acknowledged.

It certainly turns you into an outsider, in a very gentle way.

Classic Bildungsroman stuff.

I almost had a short story published.

It was about a kind of a dwarf who lives in a cellar.

He has a painting and he fantasizes about

living in that painting.

He would be more than what he was.

He finds out later that the painting was painted by a guy just like him,

a dwarf who lived in a cellar.

TRANSFER

1966

FROM
THE
DRAIN

1967

Filmmaking derailed me,
as I was very interested in writing novels.

I became intrigued by the technology and I liked the machinery, the cameras,
the excitement of filmmaking in the sixties, the accessibility of it, plus the cool factor.

The technology of film was very seductive,
and it had a social aspect: working with other people rather than sitting alone in a room.

Although, being alone has never been a problem for me.

Cronenberg, actor Stefan Nosko and Sound Recordist Margaret Hindson
on the set of "From the Drain" (1967) • Courtesy David Cronenberg / David
Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library



STEREO
1969

I used to have
nightmares

about the Korean War—Chinese soldiers
coming over the snowfields in their quilted coats.

That loomed large as did the A-bomb,
the idea
that there would be
a nuclear war.

Sci-fi was absorbing all of these things,
and I read sci-fi: Isaac Asimov,
because he was a writer
who was also a scientist.

My science teachers thought I would be a scientist
and my English teachers thought I would be a writer.

I thought I should be both.





Ron Mlodzik,
whom I used in *Stereo* and *Crimes of the Future*, looked like
Max von Sydow.

I was inventing my movies
based around him. He was flamboyantly gay.
I liked the way he looked.

It was natural that alternative sexuality was part of the film. It seems to me
to be part of the mutability of human experience—that it's incredibly variable
and a part of my **relativism**. Not just cultural,
but physical and sexual.

You can't talk about cultural relativism but limit yourself to that.

You are saying that these other sexual experiences are all equally valid.

CRIMES
OF
THE
FUTURE
1970



*Stereo
and
Crimes of the Future*

are very much found art.
Scarborough College was brand new and I had access to it.
And Massey College. The architecture came first,
and then the choreography second. *They were
fantastic sets
to play with.*



SHIVERS

1975

We had no money for sets.

I had to shape the character
to the apartments we got.

I'd look at the apartments and say,

"I think this character could fit with that apartment and this other
character could fit in that apartment if we just changed a few
things around."

It was **found
art**, once again.

There was very little tampering with what was given to us.



ABOVE, OPPOSITE AND OVERLEAF
• Cronenberg on the set of *Shivers* (1975)
• Photo Attila Dory • Courtesy Fern Bayer Collection,
TIFF Film Reference Library



Hobbes parasite (prop) in *Shivers* (1975) • Creatures Creator and Special Makeup
Artist Joe Blasco • Foam latex, paint, metal wire • 7.6 x 54.6 x 8.9 cm
• Courtesy David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library



I've often thought that I'm really making **documentaries** in a weird way.

At the moment you are making a film you are awash in the details of your moment. In *Shivers*, I nailed the seventies. It's there in the way I shoot.

It's why I don't do **storyboards**. For me they are too abstract.

What you're shooting is really a documentary of that moment, no matter how much control has gone into it.

There's a level of **determinism**, predeterminism that I don't want on a **film set**.

David Cronenberg and Allan Kolmar (credited as Alan Migicovsky) on the set of *Shivers* (1975) • Photo Attila Dory • Courtesy David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library

RABID

1977

For good or bad,
we've never accepted the environment as being a *fait accompli*.

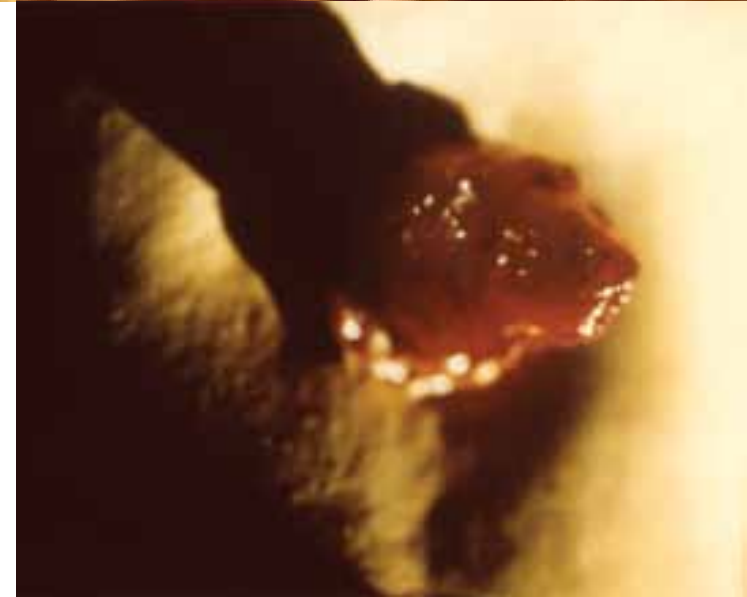
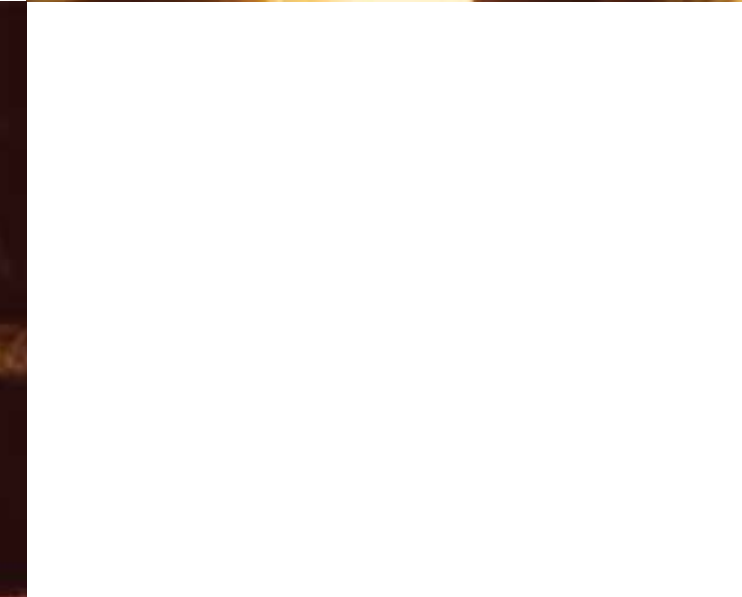
The **clothes** we wear,
the **technology** that we absorb,
and now things like
plastic surgery,
exercise,
diet,
reading different languages
and **pharmaceuticals:**

it's a part of human nature that we not accept determinism.





Rabid sete di sangue • Italian poster for *Rabid* (1976)
• Photo [Attila Dory](#) • Courtesy [TIFF Film Reference Library](#)



THE
BROOD
1979

Because I was making horror films,

I was immediately connected with
John Carpenter and **John Landis**.

I did a talk show where all three of us were interviewed
by Mick Garris. After the interview,
Landis and Carpenter came up to me and said,

"You said stuff that we would never, ever say.

We would never call ourselves artists
the way you did."

Whereas I'm thinking,

"I'm an artist; **I'm trying to create art.**

And the fact that I'm doing it within
the horror genre doesn't matter."

To talk about your movies as art

was so pretentious and so intellectual for them.

There's a strain of anti-intellectualism in American life.





PIERRE DAVID
and VICTOR SOLNICKI
present

**OLIVER REED
SAMANTHA EGGAR**

in
DAVID CRONENBERG'S
THE BROOD

starring
ART HINDLE

with
NUALA FITZGERALD HENRY BECKMAN
SUSAN HOGAN

and introducing
CINDY HINDS

written and directed by DAVID CRONENBERG
produced by CLAUDE HEROUX
executive producers VICTOR SOLNICKI and PIERRE DAVID

from MUTUAL PRODUCTIONS/ELGIN INTERNATIONAL PRODUCTIONS



A unique experience in inner terror.

**IN MAY 1979,
THE BROOD WILL TAKE YOU
BEYOND FEAR,
BEYOND TERROR,
BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES
OF THE MIND...
AND WILL DEVASTATE YOU
TOTALLY.**

MORE FRIGHTENING
THAN THE UNKNOWN
IS SOMETHING YOU KNOW
YOU CAN'T CONTROL.

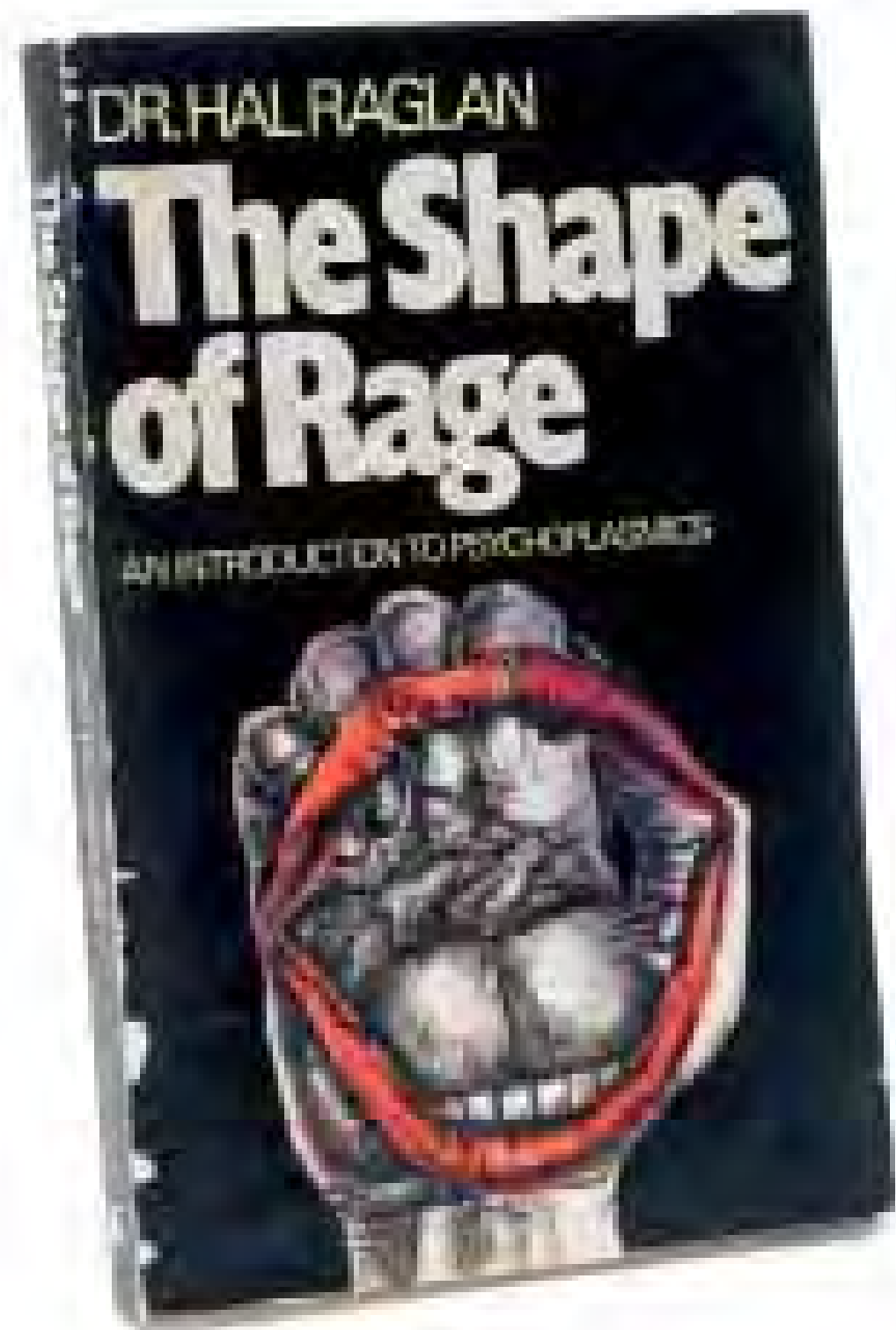
INSIDE SOME OF US,
IT'S HIDING...
SCREAMING TO GET OUT.

IF IT'S EVER UNLEASHED,
IT WILL DESTROY
ANYTHING THAT GETS IN ITS WAY.
THE BROOD.

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Promotional advertising flyer for *The Brood* (1979) • Offset on card, folded, 4-sided
• 28.5 x 21.7 cm • Courtesy David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library



The Shape of Rage: An Introduction to Psychoplastics by Dr. Hal Raglan (prop)
• Art Director [Carol Spier](#) • Paper, cardboard, gouache-collaged cover • 22.9 x 15.2 x 1.9 cm
• Courtesy [David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library](#)



FAST
COMPANY
1979

The first set
that I ever designed was on *Fast Company*.

It was the interior of Bill Smith's trailer.

We'd shot on locations dressed to characters' needs,
but they were still **actual locations**. It was incredible
for me to have my art director Carol Spier ask,

"Do you want the fridge to open left-handed or right-handed?"

"I can decide that!"

"Yeah, you know, we're building it!"

That was interesting to me because up to that point
you were absorbing what
was available.





FastCo Motor Treatment (prop) • Art Director Carol Spier
• Metal can with affixed paper label • Courtesy Carol Spier

SCANNERS

1981

The desire
to improve humans

has to do with the body,
and health,
and extending life. It's not saying
that we're going to create
the perfect human
being.

The more modest of my crazy characters
are trying
to improve things.

We can go back as far
as *Shivers* and *Scanners*.

It's to improve in a very specific way,
not to create
a superhero.



French poster for *Scanners* (1980) • Offset on paper • 157.4 x 116.1 cm
• Courtesy David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library

OVERLEAF • Early film treatments by David Cronenberg
• Courtesy David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library

In the year 2000, a Thailand-like-type drug disaster has produced a small number of men and women with psychic abilities, unable to handle the strains that telepathy has put on them, most of these Psychics (their popular name) have become social outcasts, bitter about their revealed lives.

One of these, Harley Quinn, is a peculiar variant of psychic deviant whose obsession is the telepathic race of strange women. When we first meet Quinn - about 30, not bad looking but resembling a clown in his general state; unshaven, filthy old coat, torn pants, suffering from malnutrition - he is about to rape a young woman on a crowded subway train.

The woman suddenly falls to the floor, writhing and screaming. People around her think she's an epileptic; they don't see what she is doing for her. Finally she releases and falls into some kind of stupor. Quinn, who has remained unrecognizably at the back of the subway, slips out at the next stop, nervous, pursued by a few fleeting sensual glances still peering his brain. He is followed by two large men as he leaves the subway station.

A few blocks later, the two men arrest Quinn and take him to a central police station. Quinn protests his innocence. The police then search the suspect through a psychiatric hospital. It's not really their fault, so they're responsible; it's difficult to get convictions against psychics because of popular sympathy for them. What a shame that Quinn, who was once a promising medical student, should have become such a down-and-outer, a chronic offender. But Quinn is not tooled.

Quinn is left in a cell overnight. In the early morning, he is taken by an unmarked police car to a base government building where he is interviewed by Dr. Paul Hargis, a psychiatrist who specializes in the problem of Psychics. Hargis is especially interested in the name and strength of Quinn's psychic abilities. Quinn's ability to communicate telepathically to women, such women as Quinn is obsessive, uncontrolled, female except when sexually is involved.

Quinn also exhibits other telepathic gifts: on occasion, he can use small objects without touching them. When nervous, for example, he can manipulate small mechanical devices or the telephone to sensitize their family and general psychological outlook.

Hargis is pleased with Quinn; Quinn is perfect, he says. For what? asks the dejected Quinn. You'll see, says Hargis. Quinn is given a room and allowed to sleep. In the morning a valet dresses him, gives him a bath, dresses him in clean clothes, and takes him to an interview with a top government official named Simpson.

Simpson wants to recruit Quinn as a government spy to be placed in a correctional prison. Simpson explains that corrections have become states unto themselves and that they have the power to imprison anyone who breaks company laws as long as they comply with certain government regulations. Simpson then reveals that the corporation involved is the same one that produced and released the drug thirty years ago that produced Psychics. Quinn is shocked.

Quinn goes on to say that this corporation is one of the most powerful and profitable that the government owns. Quinn feels any power and wants to break it; and that Quinn is only one of many who are trying to find out what the corporation is doing. It is very hard to get close to the corporation; Quinn is going into one of their prisons - a women's prison - to find out what this will attract Quinn's interest - as part of a non-existent rehabilitation program for Psychics. Quinn is told that Quinn is going to be placed in a women's prison. Quinn is told that Quinn is going to be placed in a women's prison. Quinn is told that Quinn is going to be placed in a women's prison.

Quinn agrees to go - he faces jail, among other things. If he refuses - and is terrified by Dr. Hargis on what to expect in the prison. Once delivered to the prison, Quinn meets Warden Hargis, a totally dedicated company man. Hargis makes it clear that he doesn't trust Quinn in the least. Quinn's life in the government, and has no sympathy for Psychics, whose mad-scientist "gifts" are, he believes, just the invention of the media.

Hargis explains to Quinn that he is to operate an office in the prison which is open to the inmates day and night. The women come out to Quinn with any problem or complaint they have and Quinn is simply to try everything on the spot. Quinn is to relay it to the prison administration. Quinn is also to administer special psychological tests to the women periodically to sensitize their family and general psychological outlook.

Hargis then takes Quinn on a tour of the prison. Quinn is surprised to find that the women are in a better mood than he expected. The prison: there are no bars or visible restraints of any kind; the guards - all male - act very little more service than guard, etc.

Anticipating Quinn's questions, Hargis says very proudly that company women how to be just psychics. Quinn is told that the women are being used to make special children. The women dream of establishing a Psychic State in which they will not be forced to use their gifts for military ends. They ask Quinn to help them. Quinn agrees.

To prove good faith, Quinn must first meet Dr. Hargis, who, they say, is really a company spy who has infiltrated the government, and who is too close to suspecting that the women are themselves Psychics. Quinn is told that Quinn is going to be placed in a women's prison. Quinn is told that Quinn is going to be placed in a women's prison. Quinn is told that Quinn is going to be placed in a women's prison.

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But what neither the company nor the government knows is that the women have become Psychics as a side-effect of giving birth to their special children. The women dream of establishing a Psychic State in which they will not be forced to use their gifts for military ends. They ask Quinn to help them. Quinn agrees.

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A businessman's partner is found murdered under bizarre circumstances. While trying to straighten out the dead partner's affairs, the businessman discovers that the partner had for many years been involved in a sub-religious group called the Heterologists. Being further into this aspect of his partner's life, the businessman begins to discover that his company has, with the help of his partner, been infiltrated at all levels by other Heterologists, whose purpose is to take over control of the company - for reasons the businessman cannot understand.

As the businessman becomes drawn further and further into the life of his partner, a man he thought he knew but obviously didn't, he finds himself caught up in a deadly struggle for power between two pseudo-religious groups, the Heterologists and the Golden Flower Mission, a kind of secret holy war which begins to spill out onto the streets of the city as a result of the businessman's attempts to follow the labyrinth of his partner's affairs and double dealings with the two groups.

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When we shot *Scanners*

we made all these heads and filled them
full of dog food
and fluid and macaroni.

Dick Smith, the classic special-effects guy who got an Academy Award® for *The Exorcist*, was involved in making the heads.

We exploded a couple of heads the way we planned,
with the explosives inside the head.

But all the fluids would just vaporize, and you'd get a big cloud of smoke and you would see nothing. So I said,

"OK, why don't you just take the shotgun and blow the head up with the shotgun?"

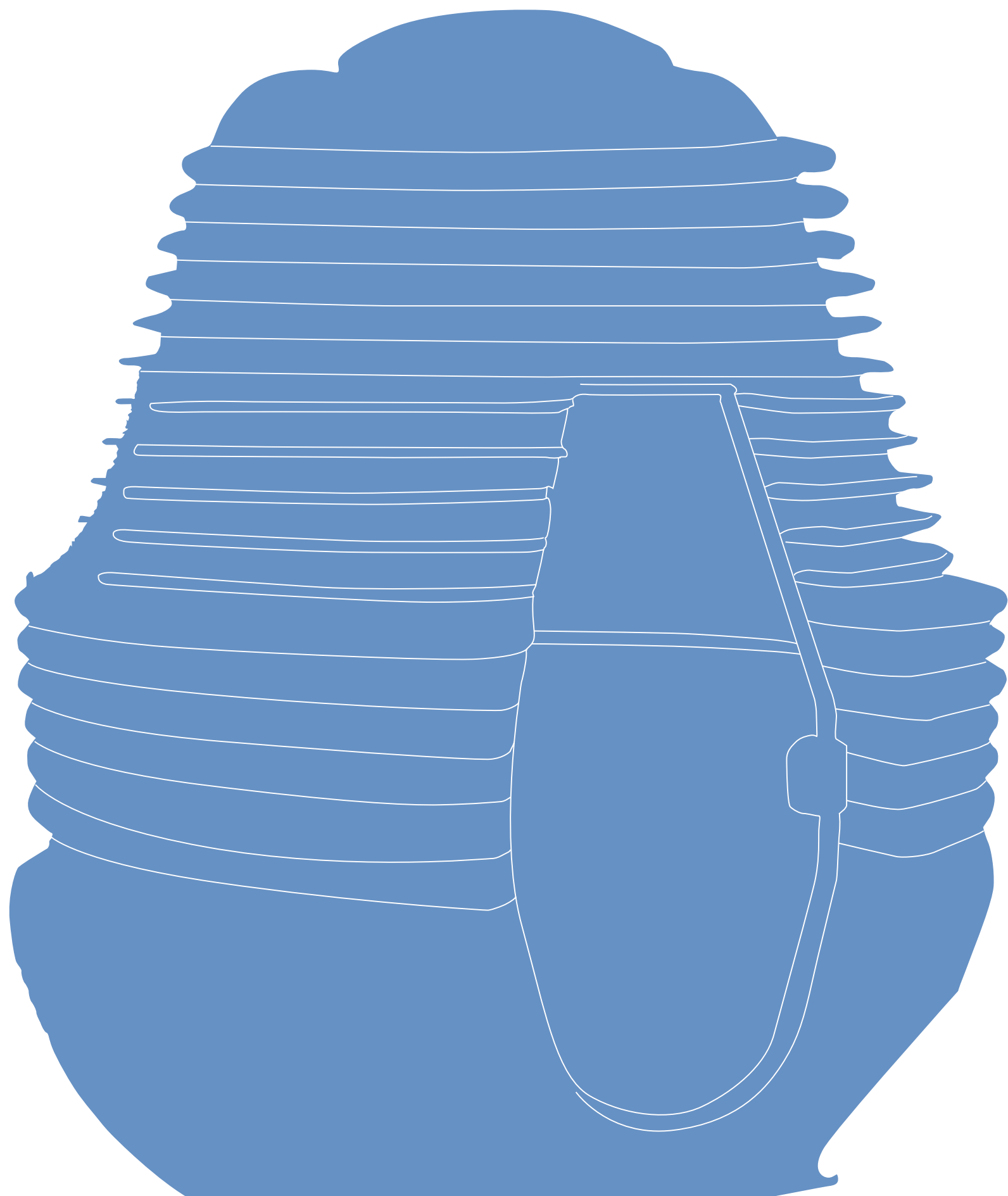
I can't remember if it was absolutely my suggestion, or his,

or if we came up with the idea together. We
were getting very frustrated and we were running out of heads.

So, he lay down behind the chair with the shotgun pointed up to the head—and that was how we got the fabulous exploding head. In other words, it was not planned.

The impromptu, frustrated,
let's-fucking-blow-this-apart-with-a-shotgun
approach worked.





Who Am

I?

As Cronenberg establishes himself as a director of international repute in the 1980s and 1990s, the characters in his films find a new sense of individualism and begin to establish control over their worlds. Beginning with *Videodrome* and continuing through *The Dead Zone*, *The Fly*, *Dead Ringers*, *Naked Lunch*, *M. Butterfly*, *Crash* and *eXistenZ*, Cronenberg's cinema remains concerned with renegade experiments involving science, technology, drugs, art and sex, but his protagonists now essentially experiment on themselves. There is no longer a distinction between experimenter and subject—the two merge in a series of bold existential trials. Power of choice, however dangerous or ultimately futile, now belongs to Cronenberg's protagonists. Control has been wrested away from the father figures of the early work, and while the results are as questionable as those of the earlier films, the protagonists' increasing responsibility gives the films a different dynamic and complexity. While science fiction and horror still inform this period of Cronenberg's work, in these films one can see the filmmaker testing out new forms of expression and progressively liberating himself from generic structures.

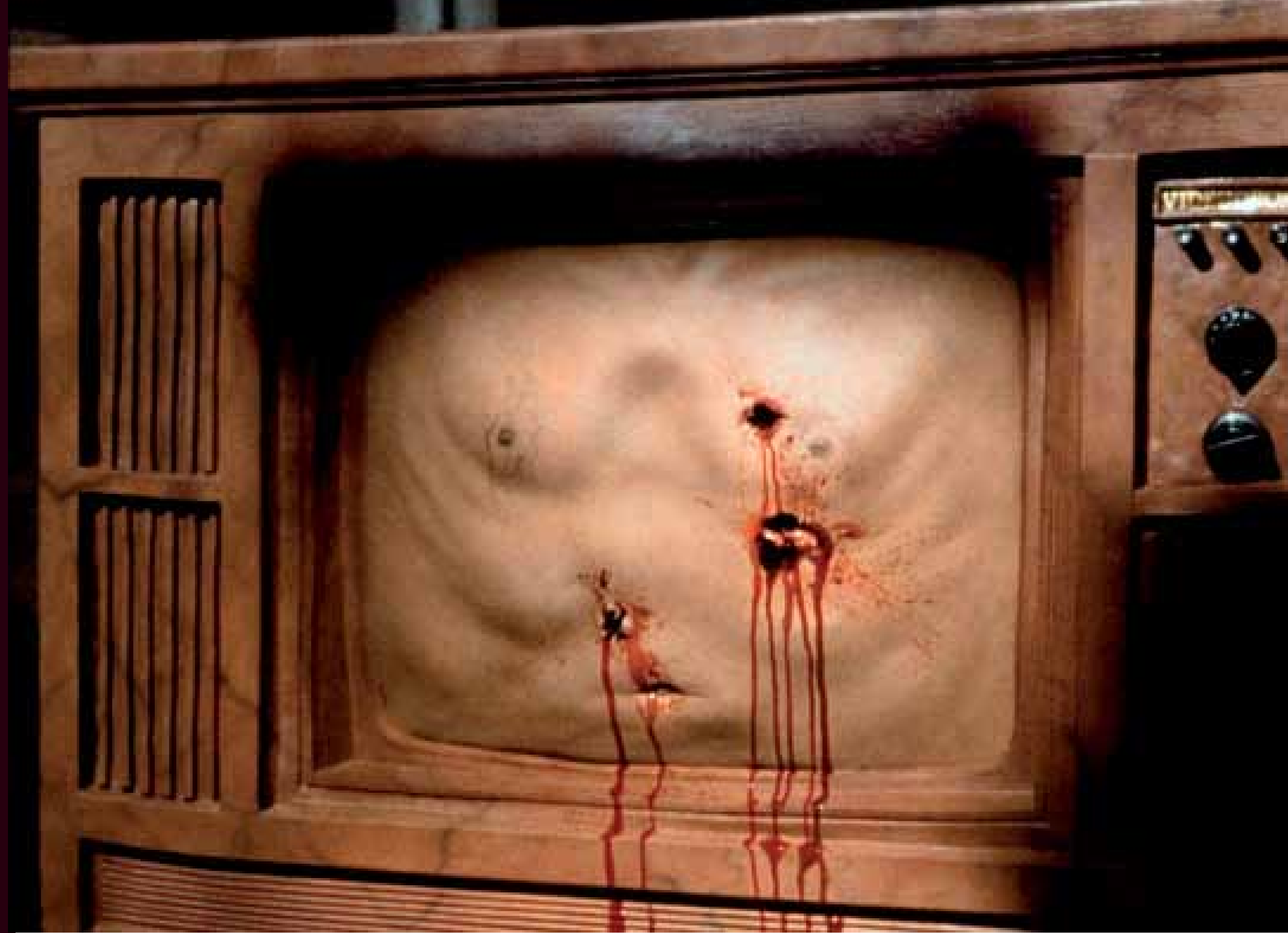
VIDEODROME

1983

I am drawn
to extreme characters
who have extreme ideas
and who try
to act on them, to

actualize and realize them.

Throughout history
these are very interesting people,
even though what they do
often leads to total disaster
because **they're very
successful.**





I don't think that history
is a constant movement
towards improvement and perfection.

I don't believe in the Victorian view that man
has advanced over animals and that it's a programmed, deliberate advance
by some God which will gradually allow us to evolve into superhumans.

I think it's rather delightful that **we're an accident.**

**I totally disagree
with the Western notion
of progress,** the Hegelian notion of progress.

I'm ready to buy the new iPad® mini.

I like the advance of technology and I think we've made amazing
strides forward.

Even saying "strides forward" suggests Hegelian progress.

But it's all just fun. It's interesting. It comes from **our desire
to also understand what
it is to be human.**

We have a built-in desire to understand what the human condition is,
which is unique. It's not just fear of mortality that causes us to want
to understand how an animal works, how a human being works,

how a cell works. We have an inquisitiveness, a curiosity,
that's built into us physically. **And I think that's
where the progress comes from** but it's not
progress towards anything.

It's just a progress towards understanding, and some control
as well. There is an element of survival in it too.

We build a house so we're not sitting outside

in a field, shivering and freezing.

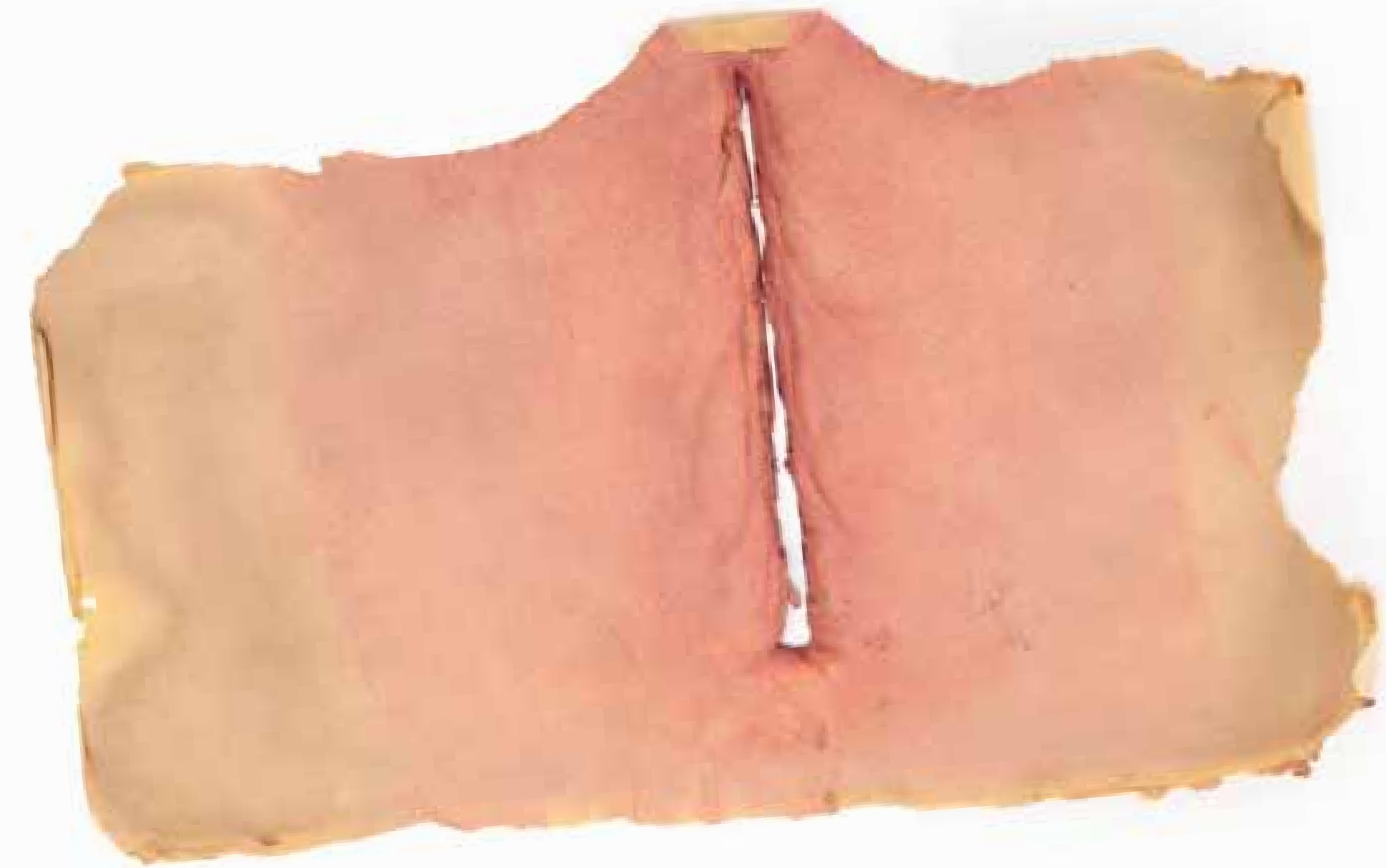


Max Renn's flesh-gun prosthetic, worn by James Woods
• Special Effects Makeup Designer Rick Baker • Foam rubber
• Courtesy Bill Sweetman Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library



ABOVE, OPPOSITE AND OVERLEAF • Accumicon – Spectacular Optometry International Helmet (prop)
• Assistant Art Director Tom Coulter • Plastic, foam, metal • 35.6 x 44.4 x 31.8cm
• Courtesy David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library





Stomach-slit prosthetic worn by Max Renn • Special Effects
Makeup Designer Rick Baker • Foam rubber • 23 x 40.6 cm
• Courtesy Bill Sweetman Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library

THE
DEAD
ZONE
1983

Is painting superior to a novel?

Are surrealist paintings more or less magnificent
compared with surrealist writing?

They're different and you just have to accept that.

I was completely aware of this

when I did my first adaptation, *The Dead Zone*.

That's where the interface comes,

when you're adapting a book for the screen.

I was totally ruthless and have always been.

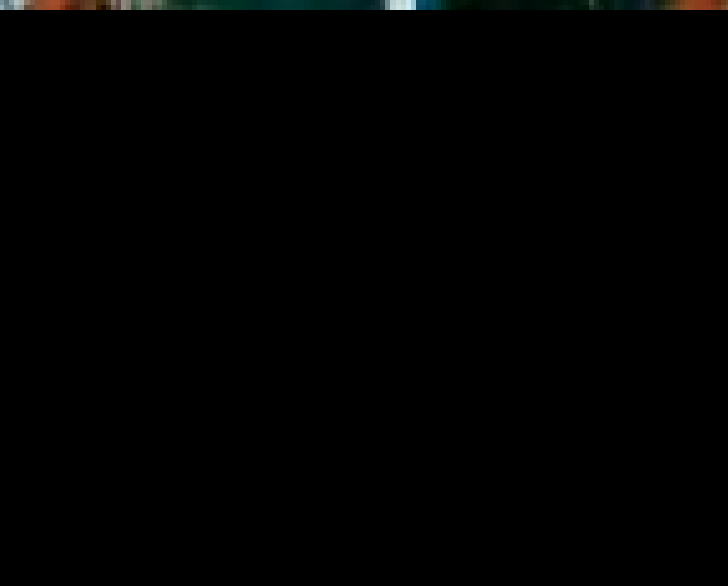
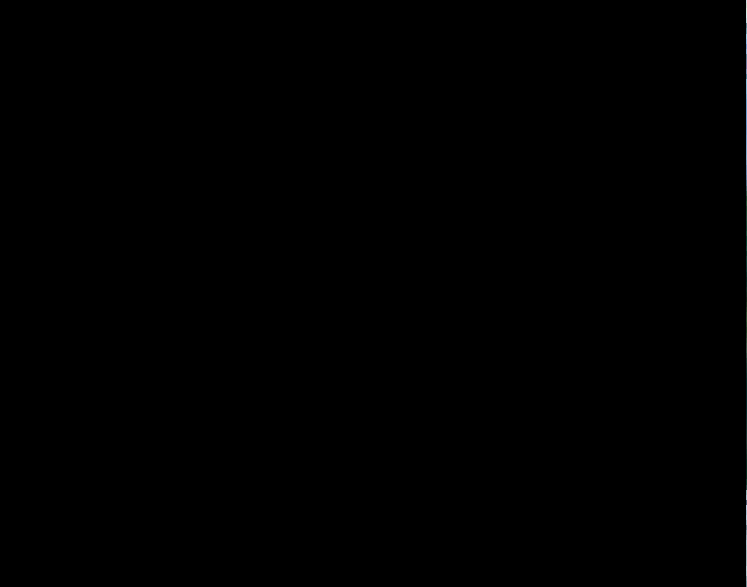
I knew there was no way to convey the novel

in any real way onscreen that you could call

an accurate translation.

The two media are totally different.





There's always been a huge American paranoia that seems to be necessary.

I think it's a political mechanism, although the politicians believe all that stuff. It would be almost a relief to think that they could just be totally cynical and manipulative, but they believe it as well. It goes with American exceptionalism. "God put us on earth to rule the world!"

This is America talking. That's weird talk. But it's American talk.





"Elect Greg Stillson to the United States Senate"
campaign brochure (prop) • Brochure, offset on paper, 2 folds
• Courtesy David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library

THE
FLY
1986

It was on *The Fly* that I started to feel
the **Samuel Beckett** influence.
It's really just
three people in a room.

Nobody perceived it that way,
but I really did. It was almost theatrical
in its structure although not in its delivery.

The shooting required
**a lot of coverage
and special effects**, but I started
to simplify the coverage,
the amount that I needed to shoot,
the number of angles.



What is consciousness, and awareness?

What is *real* and what is not?

It's Hume versus Locke
versus Bishop Berkeley. Is everything
an illusion, an invention of the mind?

As a filmmaker, you run right up against what you can photograph.
You can only photograph objects
that reflect light.

And yet you might want to convey with those images things
that light doesn't reflect.

How do you photograph and create that?

You're dealing with the physical world
and the social world
and the economic world,
and the world of your actors
and the world of technology
and the dynamics of the film set.

The reality of that certainly does seep into what the films are about.

Cinema is not a mechanism
for abstract storytelling, but it's all integrated.

The physicality of the world is hugely important.

Cronenberg poses with Fly puppet for *The Fly* (1986)
• Photo Attila Dory • Courtesy Twentieth Century Fox,
All Rights Reserved





Life-size head of *The Fly* creature (prop)
 • Creature Effects **Chris Walas Inc.** • Foam rubber, bristles • 34 x 21 x 28 cm
 • Courtesy **David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library**



ABOVE • Dentures worn by Jeff Goldblum as Seth Brundle in a deleted scene • Creature Effects **Stéphan Dupuis**
 • 10.5 x 9.5 x 15 cm • Courtesy **Stéphan Dupuis**



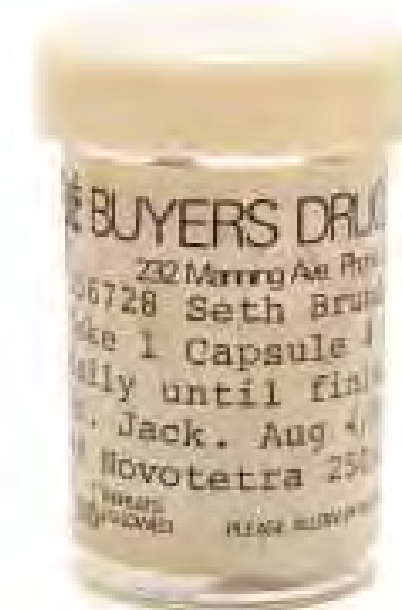
ABOVE RIGHT • Seth Brundle's detached ear (prosthetic) • Creature Effects **Stéphan Dupuis** • 7 x 4 x 1.5 cm • Courtesy **Stéphan Dupuis**



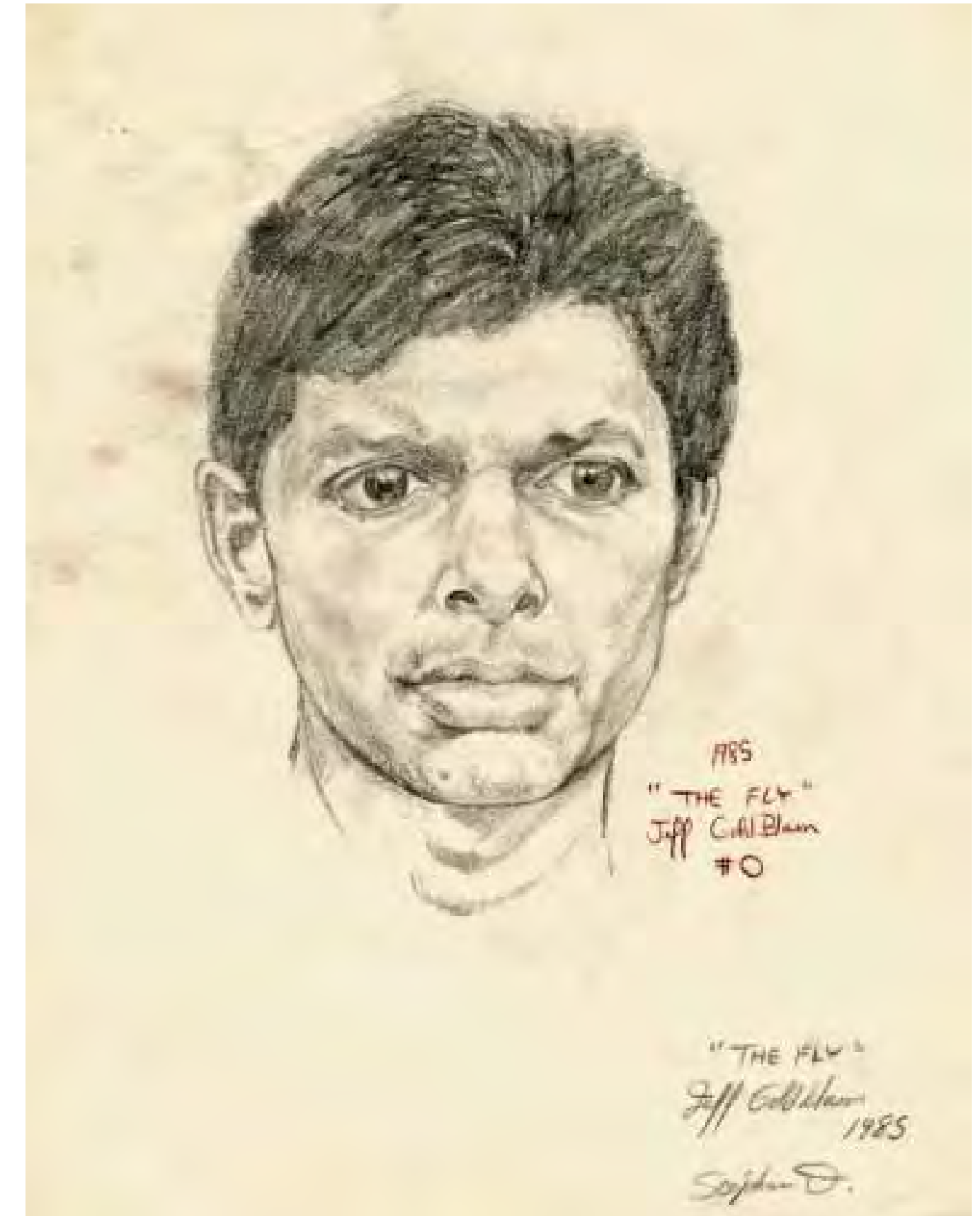
ABOVE MIDDLE • Seth Brundle's left ear in soap dish (prop) • Creature Effects **Chris Walas Inc.** • Surface painted tinted hydrocol and white plastic soap dish • ear: 7.8 x 5.8 x 2.2 cm / dish: 10.1 x 6 x 2.4 cm • Courtesy **John Board**



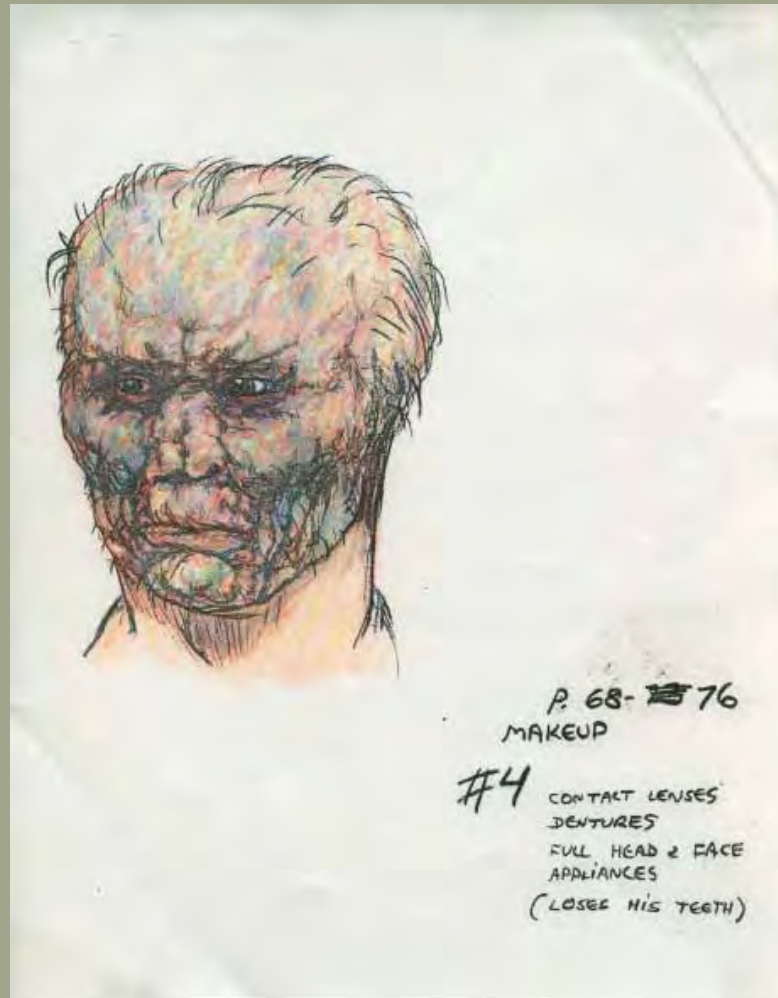
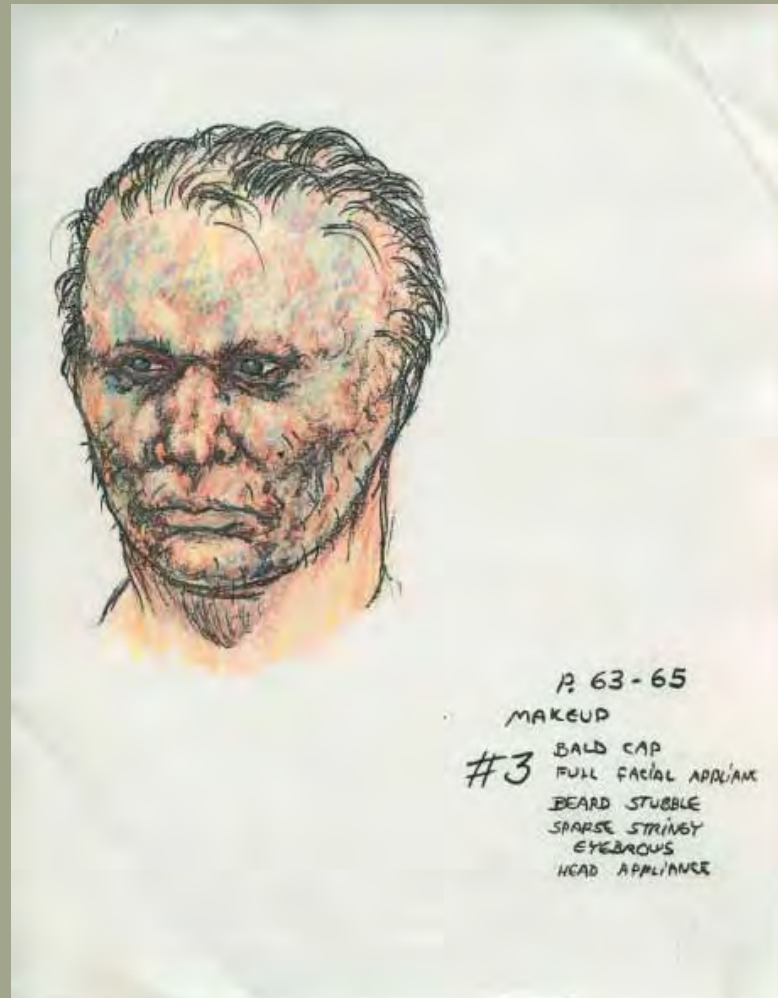
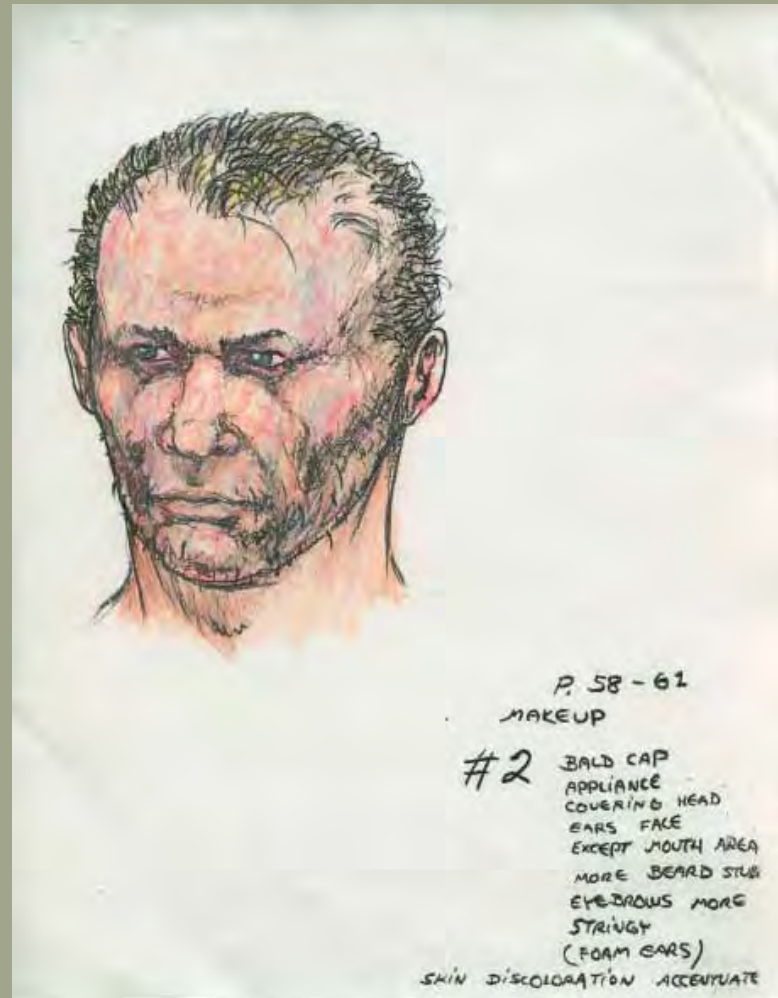
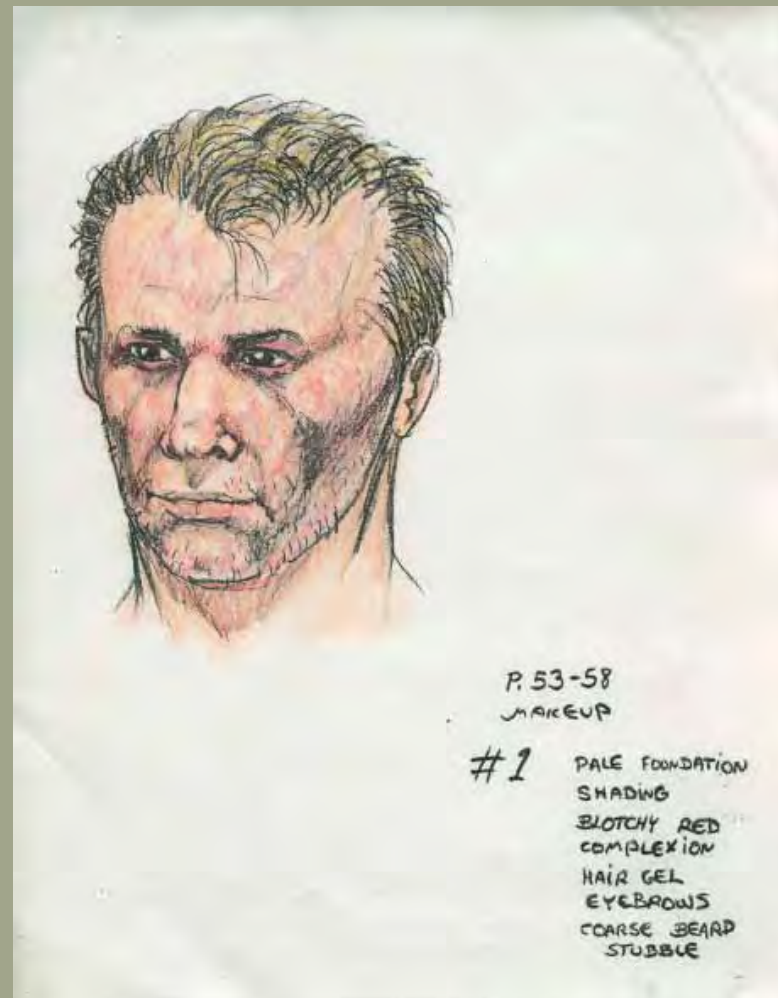
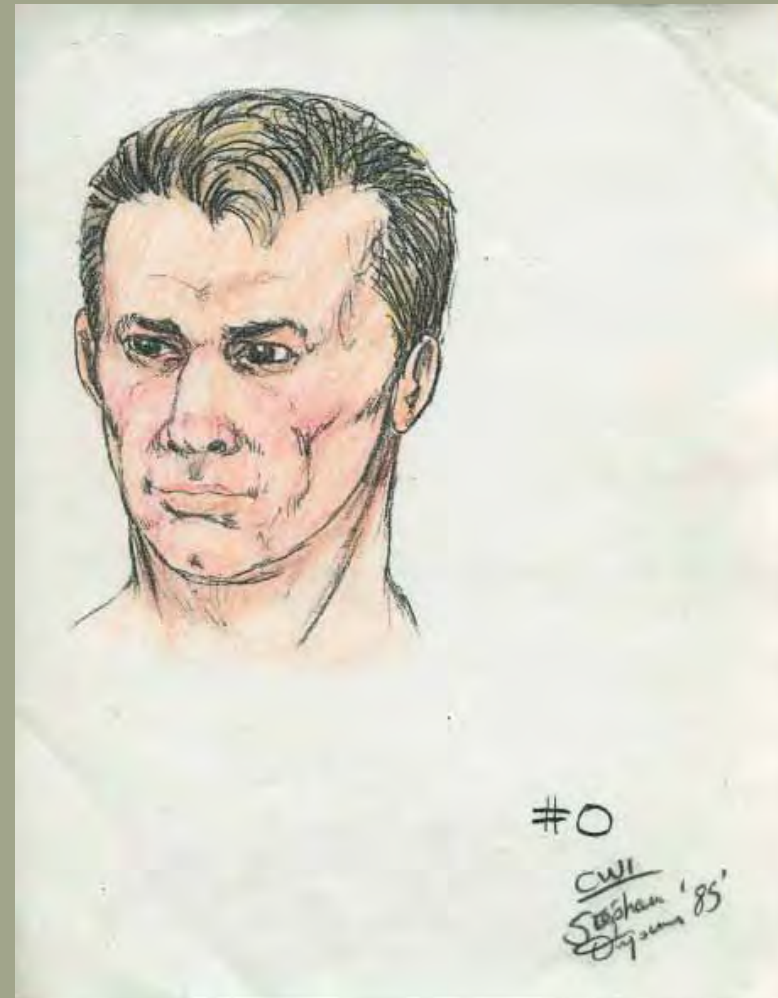
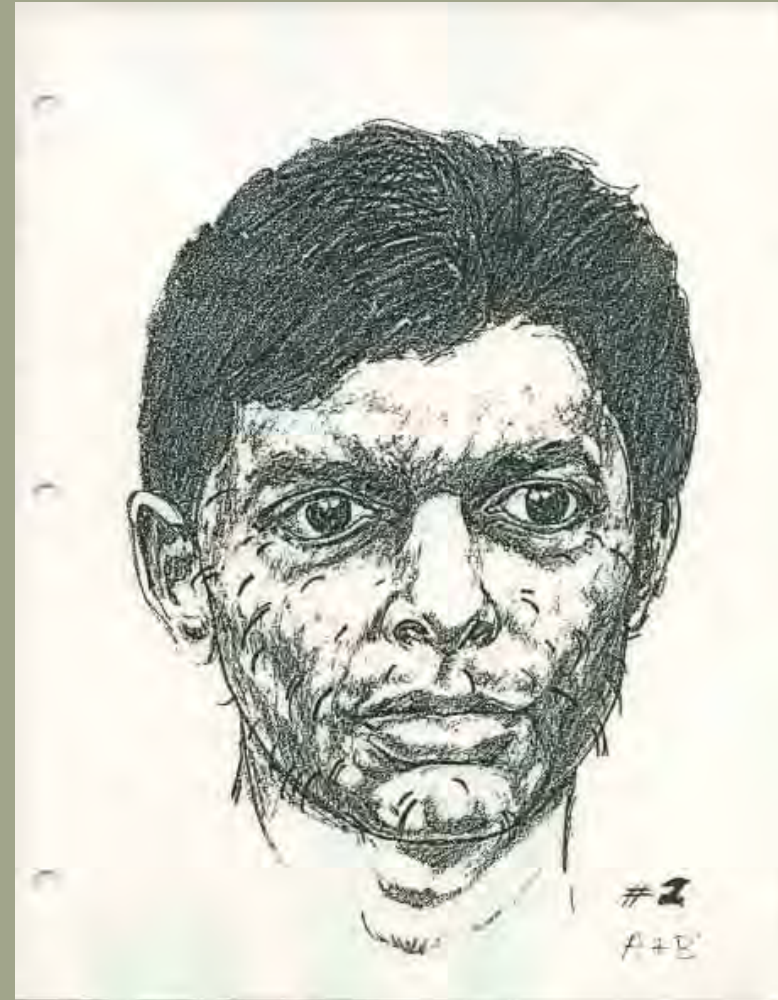
RIGHT • Seth Brundle's toe and prescription bottle (prop) • Creature Effects **Chris Walas Inc.** • Surface painted tinted hydrocol and plastic prescription bottle toe: 4.6 x 2.3 x 1.9 cm / jar: 5.7 x 3.9 x 3.9 cm • Courtesy **John Board**



Jeff Goldblum sketch • Creature Effects **Stéphan Dupuis**
 • Pencil crayon on paper, signed / inscribed: "1985 'The Fly' Jeff Goldblum #0" • Courtesy **Stéphan Dupuis**



OVERLEAF ABOVE • Fly Man Makeup Breakdown Sketches (#0-#7)
 • Creature Effects **Stéphan Dupuis** • coloured pencil, pastel on photocopy on paper
 • 27.9 x 21.6 cm, each • Courtesy **David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library**
 OVERLEAF BELOW • Fly Man Makeup Breakdown Sketches for Jeff Goldblum (unnumbered, #1 A + B, #2, #3A, #3B, #4, #5, #5B, #6) • Creature Effects **Stéphan Dupuis** • photocopy on paper with annotations by David Cronenberg • 27.9 x 21.6 cm each • Courtesy **David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library**

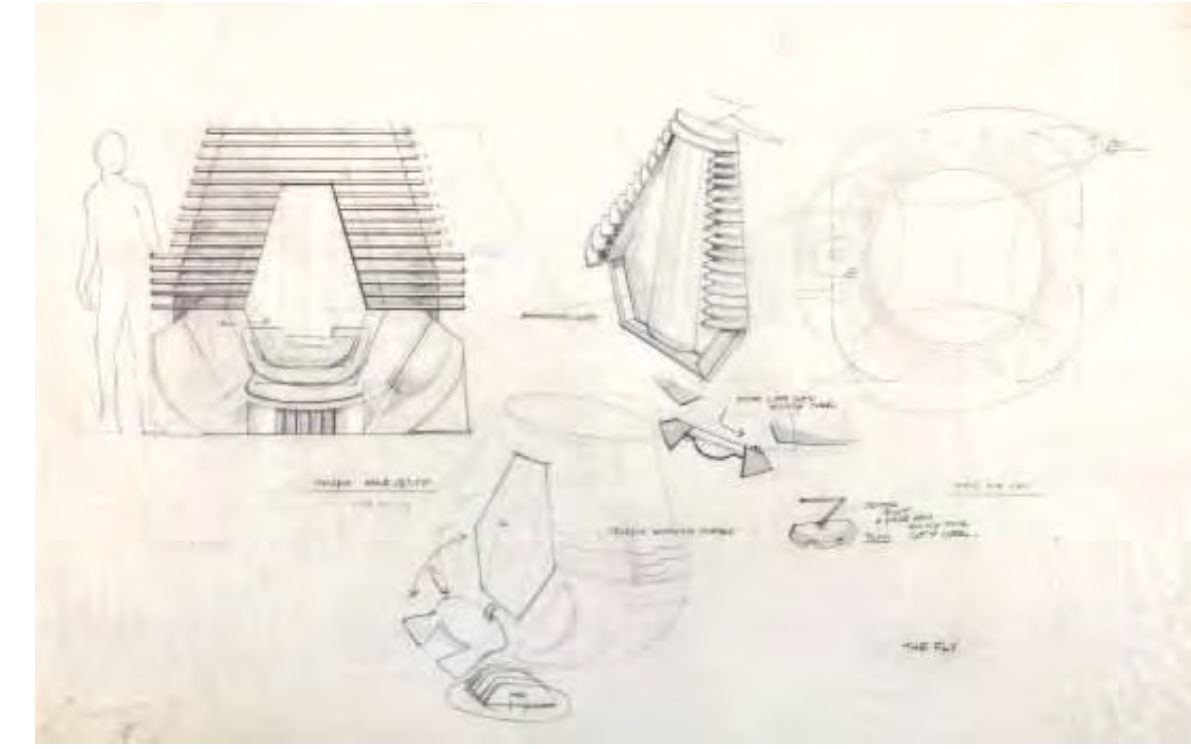




Maquette for mechanically operated Fly creature/puppet • Creature Effects
 Jim Isaac and Chris Walas Inc. • Foam rubber, bristles, metal • 31 x 21 x 11 cm
 • Courtesy David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library



David Cronenberg's Ducati engine, used to
 inspire the design of the Telepod • Photo Tom
 Moore • Collection of James McAteer and
 Carol Spier • Courtesy Fern Bayer Collection,
 TIFF Film Reference Library

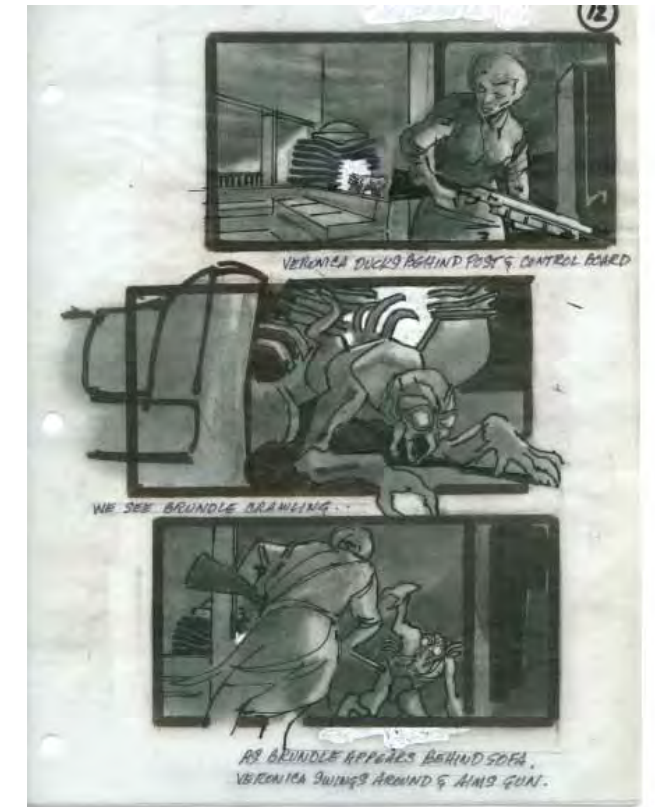
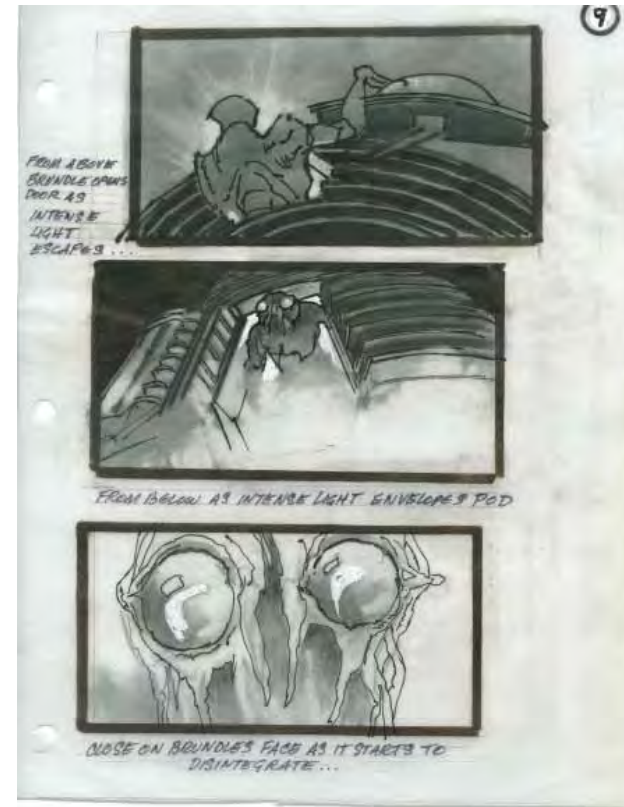


ABOVE LEFT • Telepod sketches • Production Designer Carol Spier
 • Graphite on vellum • 61 x 91.4 cm • Courtesy Carol Spier



ABOVE RIGHT • Preliminary Telepod maquette • Set Designer James
 McAteer • Unfired clay • 9.6 x 12.4 cm • Courtesy Carol Spier





DEAD
RINGERS
1988

The weird, mutant
instruments for gynecology

in *Dead Ringers*

didn't exist in the article about
the real twins that I read, or the so-called book
on which we were technically basing the film.

I was totally involved in conceiving them.

That was my invention.



Jeremy Irons, Geneviève Bujold and Cronenberg on the set
of *Dead Ringers* (1988) • Photo Attila Dory • Courtesy Morgan Creek



Entropy is a huge presence, on a cosmic level as well.

The reality of it for a conscious being

is a horrific element of life.

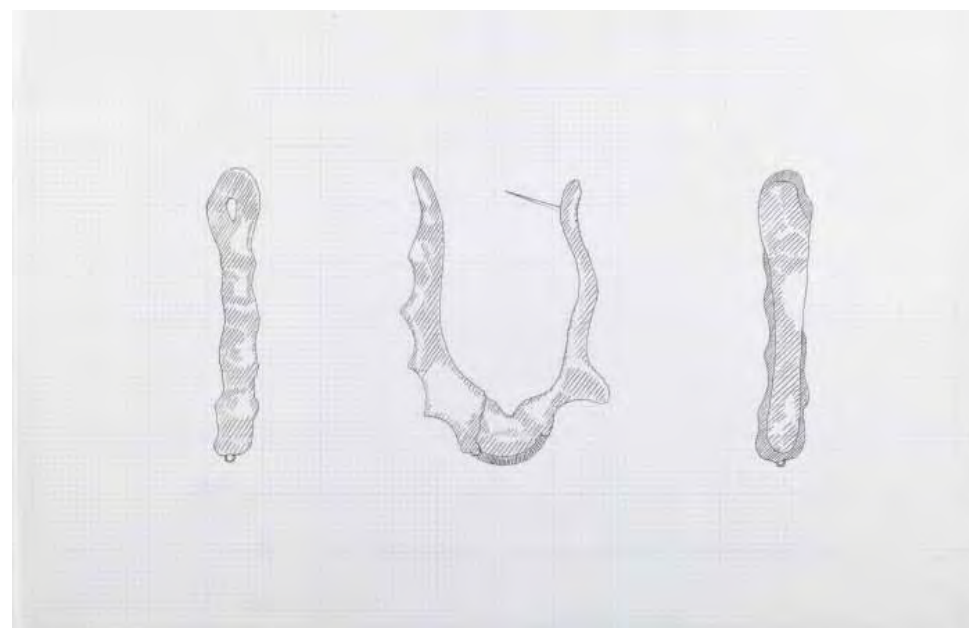
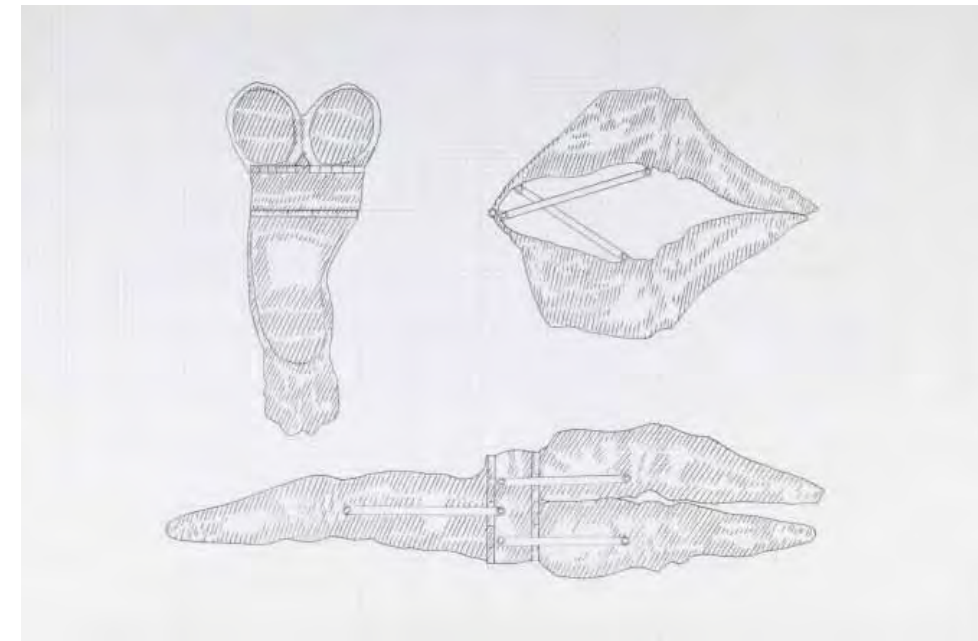
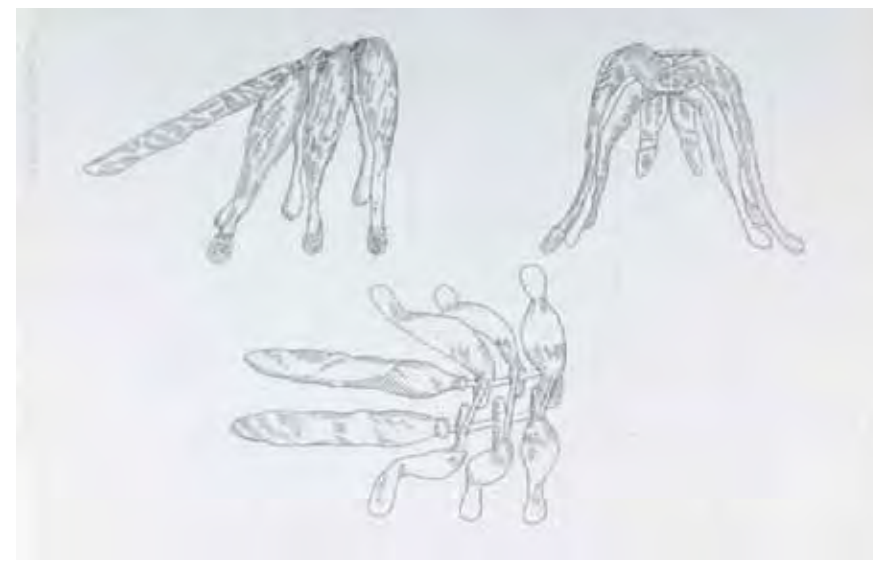
Who comes to terms
with his own death? Or, the death of loved ones?

You don't come to terms with it. You accept reality.

What I'm doing as a filmmaker is contra-entropy.







The **gynecological instruments** go back to the control issue.
 It's men manipulating female sexuality in the most physical,
 straightforward way, with **machines, tools, technology.**
 What does that say about control and submission and all of that?
 To me it was such a potent, obvious thing, but to many other people it was unbearable.

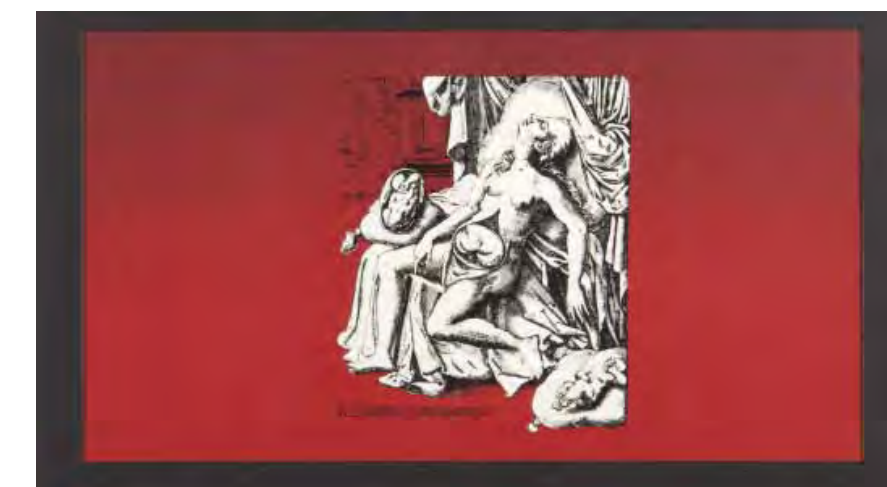
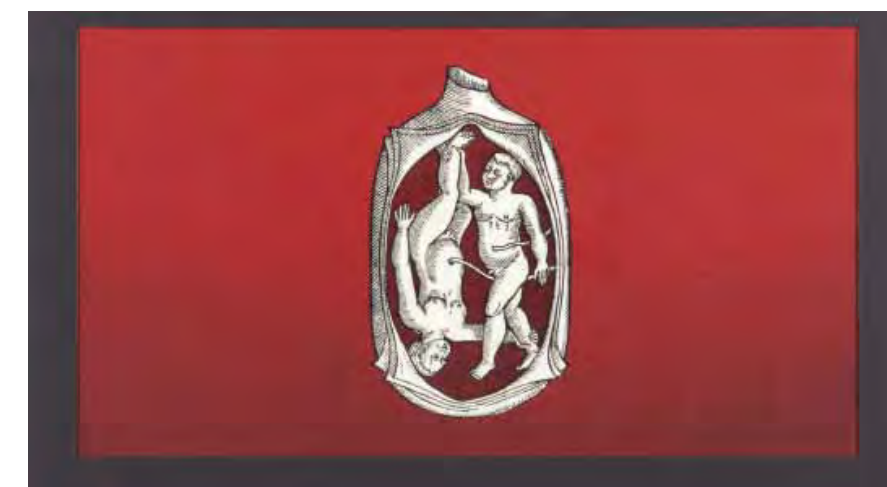
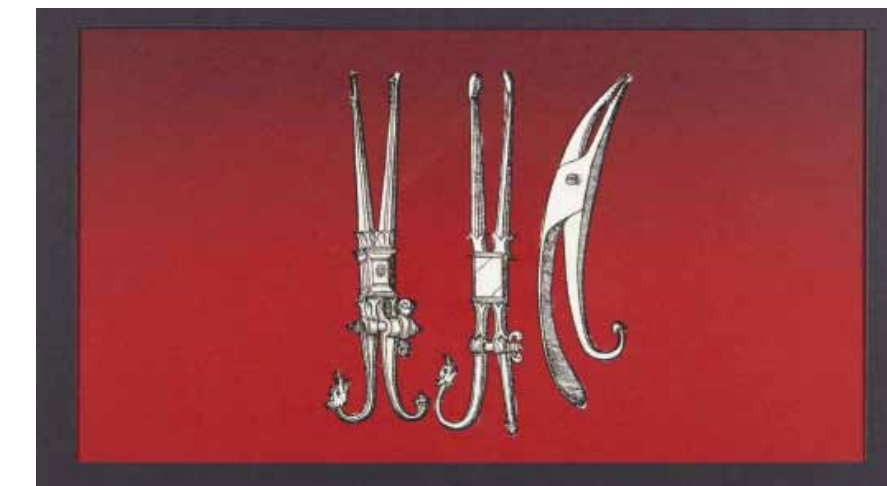
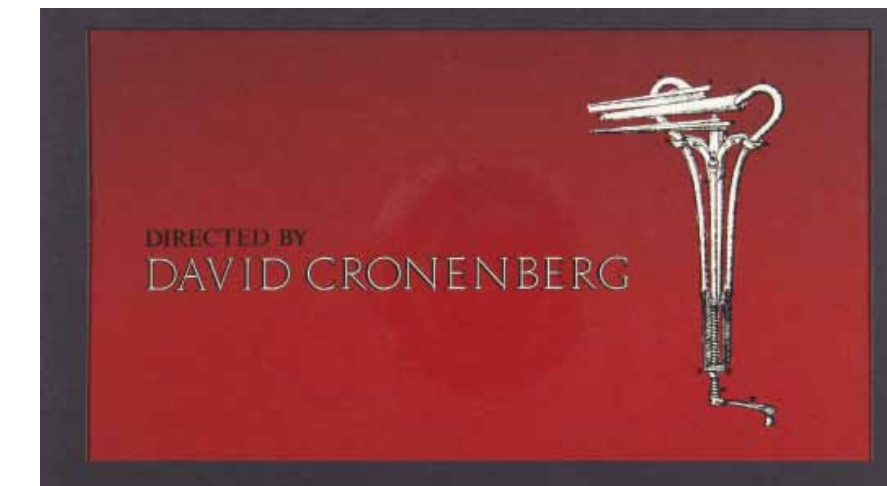
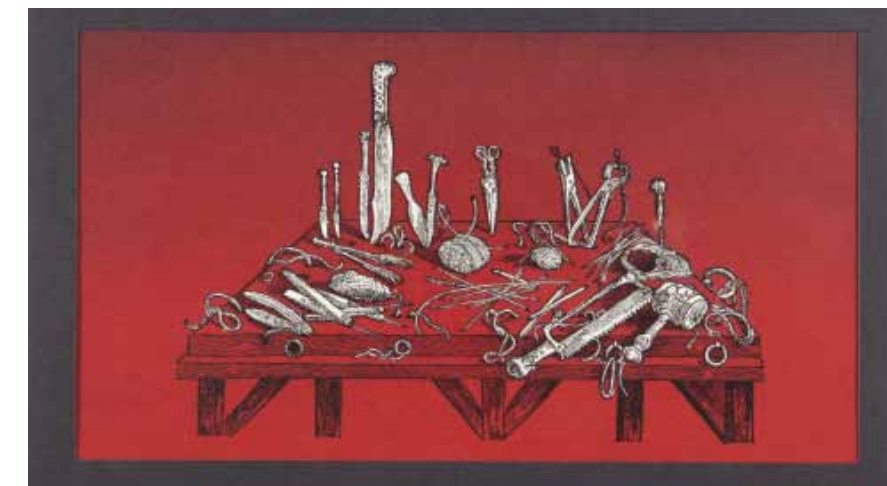
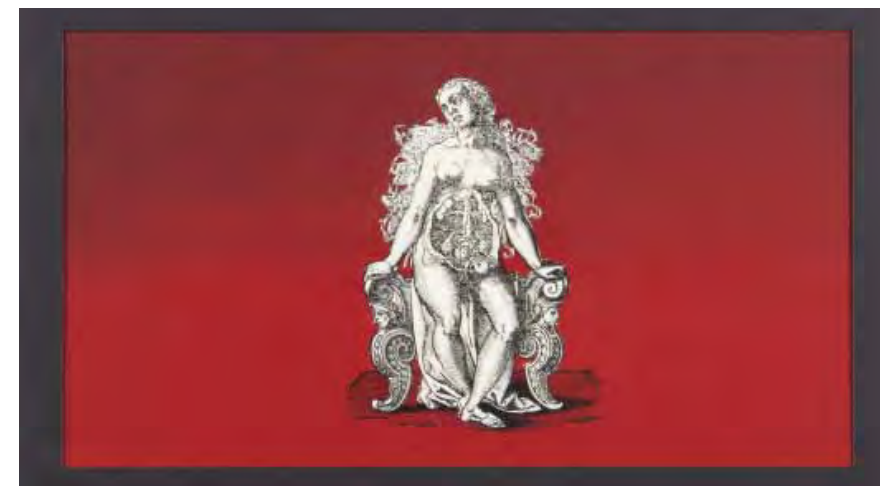
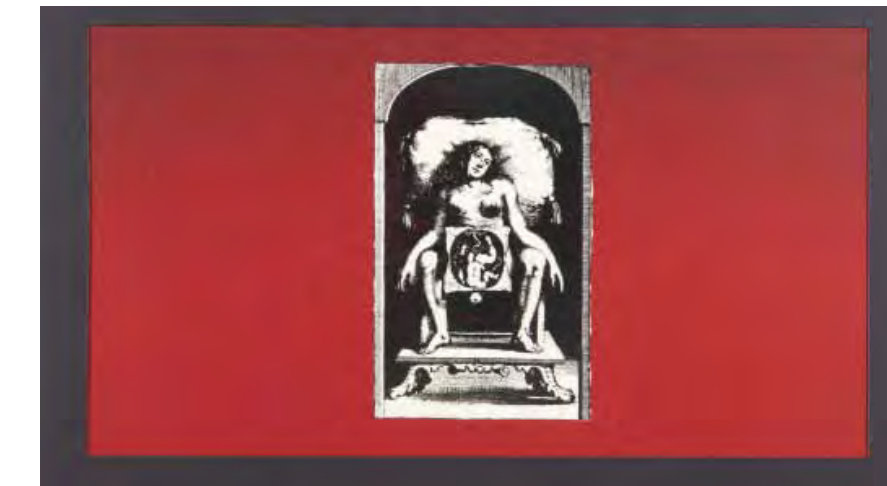
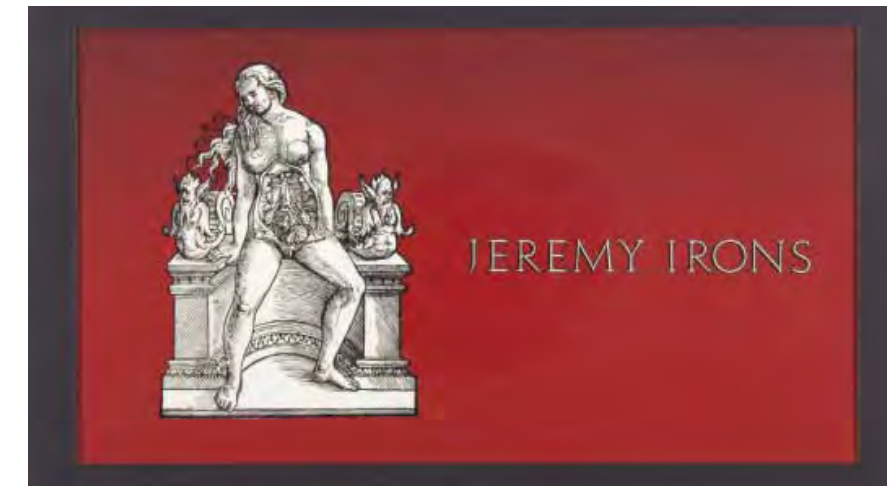
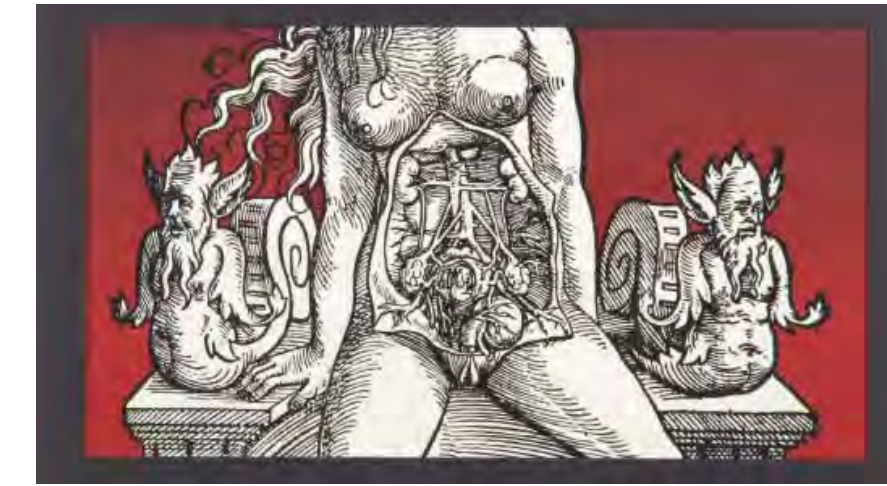
Beverly Mantle's concept drawings for the Instruments for Operating on Mutant Women (props)
 • First Assistant Art Director Peter Grundy • Ink on graph paper • 28.2 x 43.3 cm
 • Courtesy David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library

Instruments for Operating on Mutant Women (props) • Sculptor Cheryl Camack Grundy,
 Fabricator David Didur, First Assistant Art Director Peter Grundy, Supervising Art Director Alicia Keywan,
 Designer David Dyder • Burlap, nickel-plated brass • Various dimensions
 • Courtesy David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library



The Mantle Retractor Award (prop) • Production Designer Carol Spier
 painted aluminum and acrylic • 29.5 x 38.5 x 24 cm
 • Courtesy David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library

OVERLEAF • Storyboard for Title Sequences (*Twins*) • Title Designers Randy
 Balsmeyer and Mimi Everett • ink on Mylar mounted on card • 21.4 x 25.5
 cm each • Courtesy David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library



NAKED
LUNCH
1991

If you're talking about a **Mugwump**, or an **insect typewriter**, there are no **real-world equivalents**.

The Mugwump is not that well-described in Burroughs.

The collaboration is with the people who have to build it. I can draw a little bit, but it's nothing like what Tim Burton would do. **My instructions are pretty much all verbal.** I'm looking over their shoulder as they are drawing.





Giant aquatic centipede (prop) • Special Creatures and Effects Chris Walas Inc.
• Foam, paint • 200.5 x 32.5 x 6.5 cm • Courtesy David Cronenberg





CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT
 Set concept sketch, Bar Preliminary • Art Director James McAteer • Graphite, ink and blue pencil crayon on tracing paper • 46 x 43.7 cm • Courtesy Carol Spier
 Set concept sketch, Yves Bedroom • Art Director James McAteer • Graphite, ink, blue pencil crayon on Transtex paper • 60.5 x 91.6 cm • Courtesy Carol Spier
 Set concept sketch, Frost Apartment • Art Director James McAteer • Graphite and purple pencil crayon on Transtex paper • 60.5 x 91.6 cm • Courtesy Carol Spier
 Set concept sketch, Int. Seaside Restaurant Entrance • Art Director James McAteer • Graphite on paper • 60.5 x 91.6 cm • Courtesy Carol Spier
 Set concept sketch, Interzone Market #32 • Art Director James McAteer • Graphite on paper, photocopy adhered to centre • 61 x 91.4 cm • Courtesy Carol Spier



Kiki and Mugwump (prop) • Special Creatures and Effects Chris Walas Inc. • Wood, cast plastic on base
 • 37.7 x 26.7 x 26.5 cm • Courtesy David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library



I am very involved in the creation of the objects I use in my films from beginning to end.

Completely. Those bugs are not in Burroughs at all. It begins with the script.

You describe it: **"This is a creature that talks and is a combination of a typewriter and an insect."**

That's pretty specific, but it's not specific enough that the design immediately presents itself.

Obviously, the more invented they are, the more

I have to be involved.



CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT

Case Officer Beetle / talking asshole (puppet) • Special Creatures and Effects Chris Walas Inc. • Foam rubber, paint, moulded plastic, hand-operated levers • 22.9 x 45.7 x 33 cm • Courtesy David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library

Mujahadeen Typewriter • Typewriter with Arabic characters adhered to keys, paint, metal, rubber, plastic • 27 x 42 x 38 cm • Courtesy David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library

Clark-Nova Typewriter, beaten (puppet) • Special Creature and Effects Chris Walas Inc. • Cast plastic, paint, metal, typewriter keys, wires (mechanized for operation) • 55 x 56 x 28 cm • Courtesy Marcus Hu

Clark-Nova typewriter (prop) • Special Creature and Effects Chris Walas Inc. • Hard foam, paint • 47 x 84 x 21 cm • Courtesy David Cronenberg





Mugwump, Dispensary model (prop) • Special Creatures and Effects [Chris Walas Inc.](#) • Foam latex, internal wooden armature, paint, plastic, metal chains, leather • 200 x 64 x 20 cm • Private collection



Moroccan kettle and brazier (prop) • brass
• 20 x 18 cm • Courtesy Elinor Rose Galbraith

M. BUTTERFLY 1993

Some people think
that if you're an atheist
and an existentialist,
it means that everything is permitted,
that there is no moral structure, no moral grounding.
We don't live in a vacuum. We live within the world,
and some are passionate about religion
while others believe in their legal structures.

What is moral, what is ethical is quite variable from society to society.
It's so obvious that we are creating our own realities.

This reflects our desperate need to create a structure to survive.

You have all these belief systems,
but the relativist view is the most real and honest view of the world.
Every society needs to create
these realities.

Part of the excitement is to say there is no
moral or ethical absolute,
that everything could be permitted.

Is it really? And if not—why not?

It's not as though I really think everything should be permitted.

In some societies, stonings of women are not only permitted;
they're demanded. I have to deal with that reality.

I am saying to my audience, "You have to deal with that reality too."

It's not my job to sit in moral judgment
of my characters.
It might be the audience's.



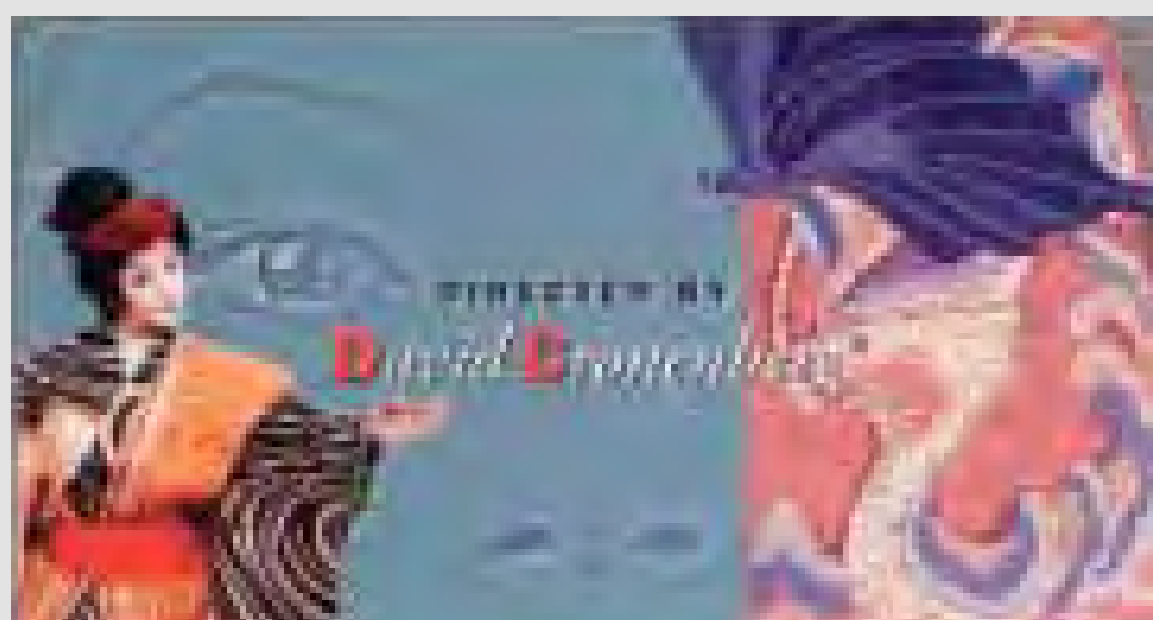
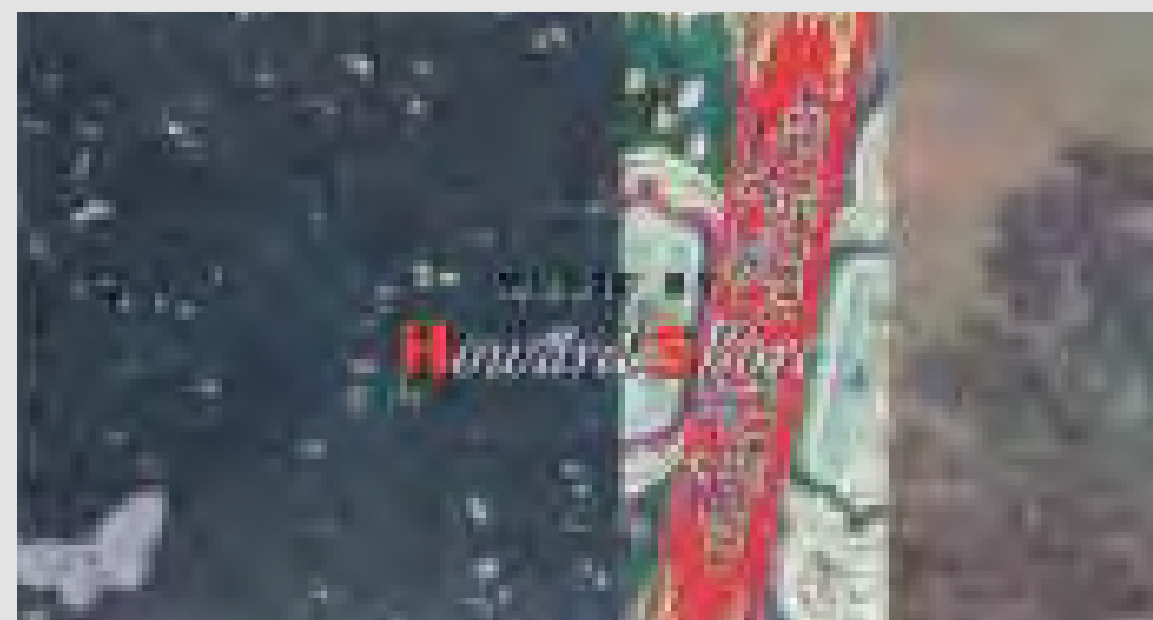
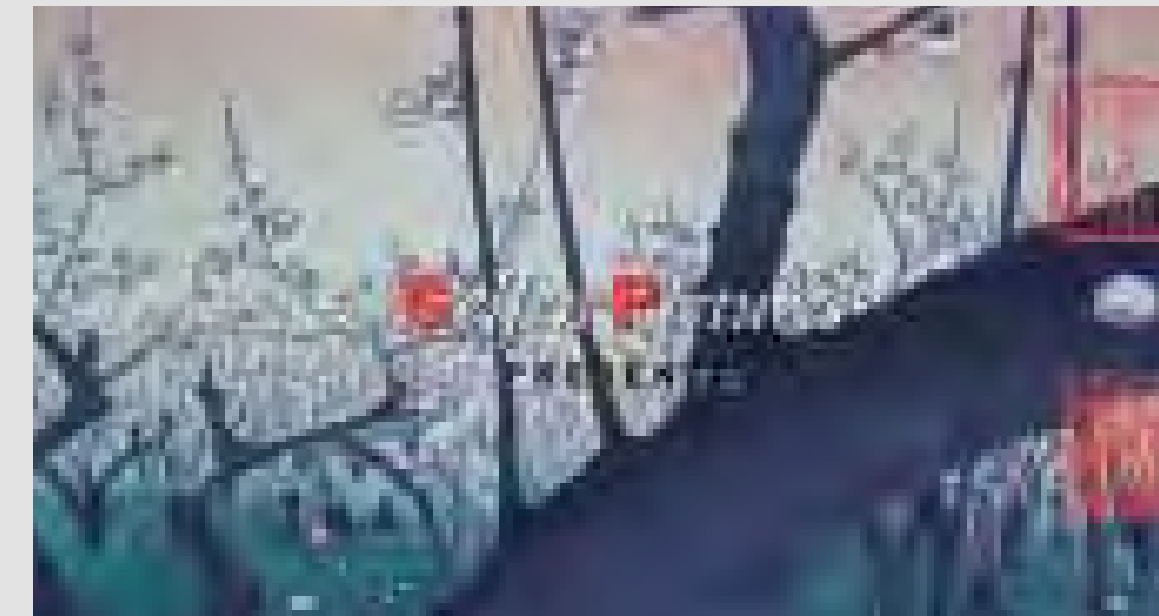


Yang Yu Huan costume for Song Liling's (John Lone) role in *The Drunken Beauty* • Costume Designer [Denise Cronenberg](#) • Beaded headdress, silk embroidered coat, silk embroidered pants and silk embroidered silk belt
• Courtesy [David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library](#)



Shoes from Yang Yu Huan costume for Song Liling's (John Lone) role in *The Drunken Beauty* • Costume Designer [Denise Cronenberg](#)
• Embroidered silk shoes with pom poms • Courtesy [David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library](#)

OVERLEAF • Storyboards for *M. Butterfly* title sequence
• Title Designers [Randy Balsmeyer](#) and [Mimi Everett](#)
• Courtesy [David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library](#)



CRASH

1996

If you're not provocative on
some level,
you're not an artist.

But that doesn't imply a juvenile kind of
antisocial provocation. It comes from the word
provoke. You're provoking discussion, thought,
action—to me that's good.

That's
cinema.

It's exciting
and it's what makes art worthwhile.
There are many religions and social projects—
including Plato's *Republic*—which dismiss art
as innately bad, destructive and not socially
progressive.
Plato wanted the artist to leave his republic.

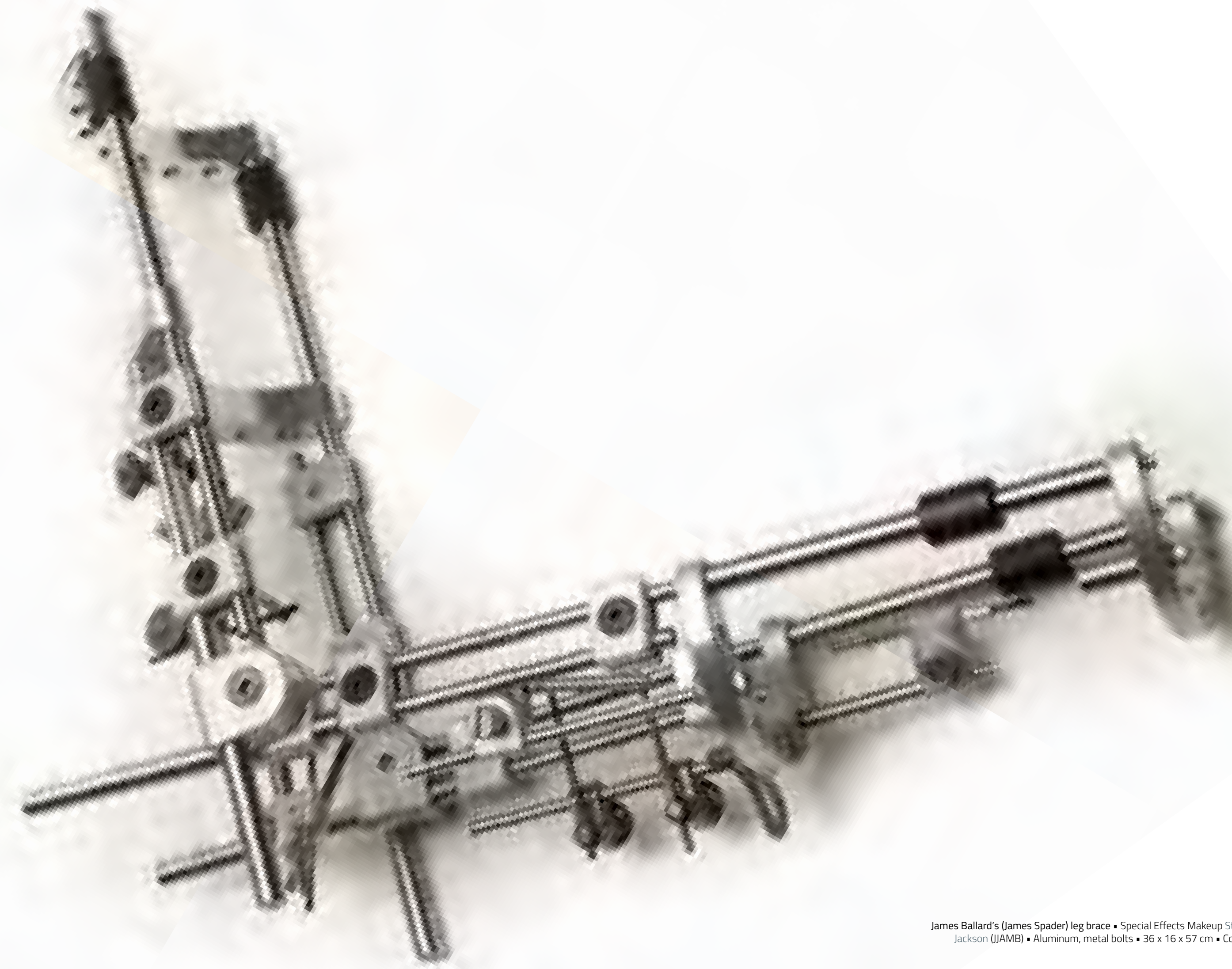
What they do is too disturbing,
too disruptive,
not productive.



David Cronenberg poses on location for *Crash* (1996)
• Photo Michael Gibson • Courtesy Entertainment One / Licensed by
Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc., All Rights Reserved



Clapboard, *Crash* (1996) • Wood, slate • Courtesy David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library



James Ballard's (James Spader) leg brace • Special Effects Makeup Stéphan Dupuis, Fabricator John Jackson (JJAMB) • Aluminum, metal bolts • 36 x 16 x 57 cm • Courtesy David Cronenberg





Gabrielle's (Rosanna Arquette) shoes • Plastic upper, rubber sole and metal buckles
• Courtesy David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library



Gabrielle's (Rosanna Arquette) upper-body brace, recto and verso
• Special Effects Makeup and Prosthetics Designer Stéphan Dupuis
• Moulded plastic, fibreglass, synthetic leather, polyurethane foam • 37 x 37 x 12 cm
• Courtesy David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library



Gabrielle's (Rosanna Arquette) belt (costume) • Special Effects Makeup and Prosthetics Designer Stéphan Dupuis • Painted plastic • 10 x 30 x 20 cm
• Courtesy David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library



Gabrielle's (Rosanna Arquette) lower body brace (costume) • Special Effects Makeup and Prosthetics Designer Stéphan Dupuis • Moulded plastic, fibreglass, synthetic leather, polyurethane foam • 30 x 37 x 16 cm
• Courtesy David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library

EXISTENZ

1999

The inner penetration of society into an individual:

what's this semipermeable membrane of an identity that allows things to come in and out?

It's very much like cell biology.

A cell really does have to control its integrity. It has a membrane. I think of myself as a cell unit in the multicellular organ that is society. It is your membrane that keeps the outside from overwhelming the inside and keeps the integrity of what is inside from flowing out of all those pores.

The body is amazing, fabulous, wonderful!

Erwin Schrödinger writes, and I'm paraphrasing, that we are an entity that is constantly repairing itself so that it doesn't fall into entropy. According to the physics and the biochemistry of the world, we are basically disintegrating, under attack by endless parasites and viruses and other things.

The struggle of life is not to become this perfect thing,
but to maintain what you are, and this requires incredible energy.

Our cells are constantly repairing themselves and dying, and new cells are being born, replacing them.

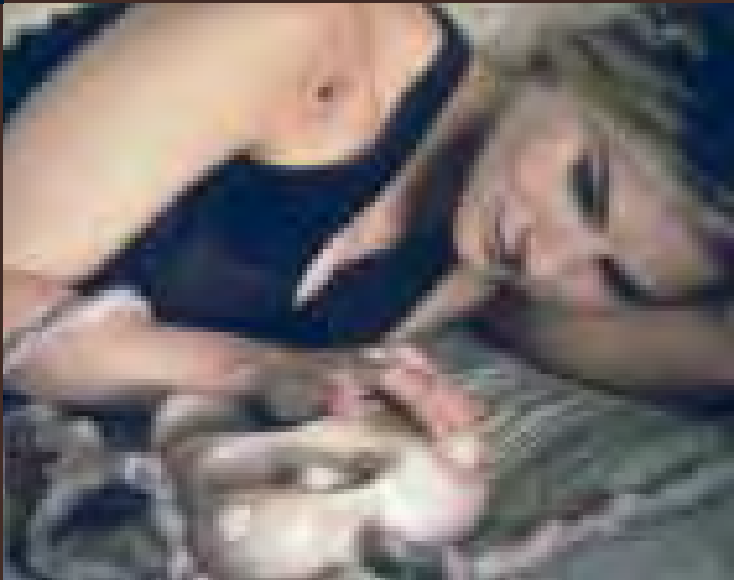
Little repair mechanisms are going on at a molecular level and an atomic level which, when you see them, are quite silly. We've got little tractors pulling things along little railings inside our bodies that are strands of molecules. You say to yourself, "This is never going to work. Life is obviously impossible." Within the brain, there is a struggle for survival of neurons and everything else.

They're constantly battling each other. The idea of the brain as a passive mechanism, like a computer, has long been dismissed. It's a living organism, and it's constantly changing.

The brain is more like a rainforest
than a computer. But eventually

the resources you need to maintain yourself become exhausted,
and you die.







CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT

Umby Cord (prop) • Special Makeup Designer and Creature Designer *Stéphan Dupuis*, Visual and Special Effects Supervisor *Jim Isaac* • Moulded silicone with painted surface, hidden metal components, wires • 30 x 26 cm, coiled • Courtesy *David Cronenberg Collection*, *TIFF Film Reference Library*

MetaFlesh Game-Pod (prop) • Special Makeup Designer and Creature Designer *Stéphan Dupuis*, Visual and Special Effects Supervisor *Jim Isaac* • Composite silicone, mixed media, hidden metal components • 7 x 20 x 18 cm • Courtesy *David Cronenberg Collection*, *TIFF Film Reference Library*

Diseased MetaFlesh Game-Pod (prop) • Special Makeup Designer and Creature Designer *Stéphan Dupuis*, Visual and Special Effects Supervisor *Jim Isaac* • Silicone, hidden metal components and wires • 7 x 20 x 18 cm • Courtesy *David Cronenberg Collection*, *TIFF Film Reference Library*

Diseased Umby Cord (prop) • Special Makeup Designer and Creature Designer *Stéphan Dupuis*, Visual and Special Effects Supervisor *Jim Isaac* • Moulded silicone with painted surface, hidden metal components, wires • 30 x 26 cm, coiled • Courtesy *David Cronenberg Collection*, *TIFF Film Reference Library*



Gristle gun pieces, assembled by Ted Pikul (Jude Law) to create the Gristle Gun (props)
▪ Special Makeup Designer and Creature Designer *Stéphane Dupuis*, Special Effects Technician *John Jackson* ▪ Found objects, science-hobby-kit components, latex ▪ various dimensions ▪ Courtesy *David Cronenberg Collection*, *TIFF Film Reference Library*



"transCendenZ" headset and handset (props) • Art Director Tamara Deverell • Moulded blue plastic with blue, red, white cables • 12.7 x 22.9 x 12.7 cm; hand-control, 7.6 x 15.2 x 3.8 cm
 • Courtesy David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library



Barb Brecken trout-farm name badge, worn by Jennifer Jason Leigh (prop)
 • Plastic card with metal clip • 13.5 x 6.5 cm
 • Art Director Tamara Deverell, Art Direction Department
 • Courtesy David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library

Larry Ashen trout-farm name badge, worn by Jude Law (prop)
 • Plastic card with metal clip • 13.5 x 6.5 cm
 • Art Director Tamara Deverell, Art Direction Department
 • Courtesy David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library



Bleeding Bioport (prosthetic) • Special Makeup Designer and Creature Designer Stéphan Dupuis • Silicone • 43 x 35 x 3 cm
• Courtesy David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library





CENTRE • Mechanical operating two-headed mutant amphibian (maquette)
• Special Makeup Designer and Creature Designer Stéphane Dupuis
• Silicone, paint, plastic, wires, brass handles • 35 x 34 x 12 cm
• Courtesy David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library

Mutant amphibian creatures (props) • Special Makeup Designer and Creature Designer Stéphane Dupuis • Silicone • Various dimensions • Courtesy Eric Norlien Collection, David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library



Two-headed mutant amphibian (maquette) • Special Makeup Designer and Creature Designer Stéphan Dupuis • Hydrocal, paint • 12 x 41 x 18 cm • Courtesy David Cronenberg



Tray with 34 surgical dressing instruments (props) • Various tools (metal, wood, paint, tape) in metal tray • 2.2 x 19.7 x 28.5 cm • Courtesy David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library

The focal point of my films comes from my bedrock existentialist underpinnings, having to invent your belief system. **One is condemned to be free.**

Heidegger says that we are thrown into existence without any preparation, without enough time to deal with the enormity of existence. I'm always exploring the implications of that existential conundrum.

Part of being thrown into existence is that it is so overwhelming that we can't accept anything as a given. We think. **It is existential fear that induces the desire for control. Part of control is to defeat death.**

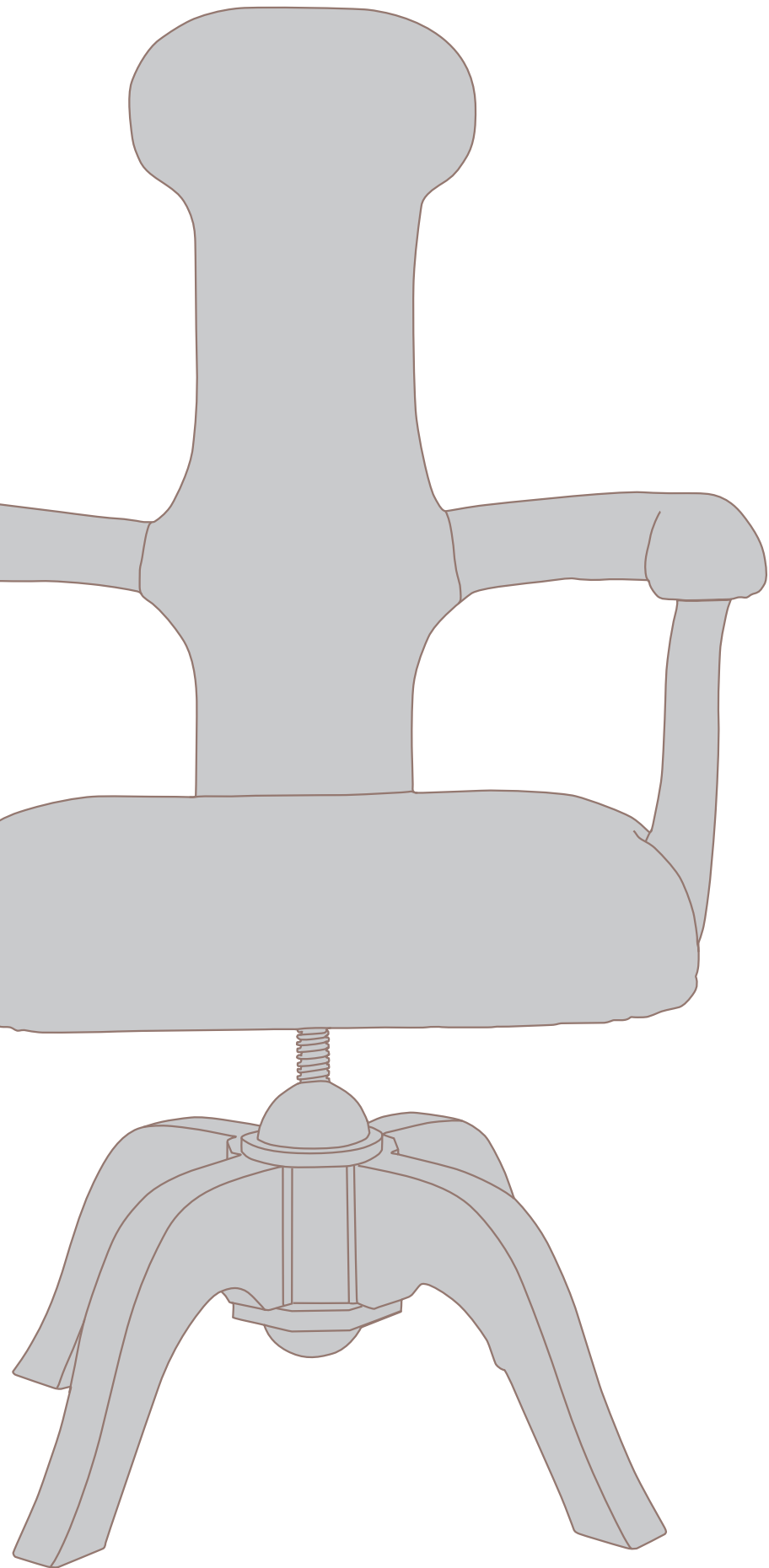
All religions have some version of that. It's delusional and a fantasy. Religion is a fantasy.

It comes from the inability to face the inevitability of death. When people talk about transcendence, they are referring to an escape from the body, the image of a spirit escaping from the body. The ascension. However, within any religion, is it really an escape from the body?

And, **why escape from the body?**
Animals are not like that.



Cronenberg on the set of *eXistenZ* (1999)
• Photo Ava Gerlitz • Courtesy Entertainment One



Who Are We?

The most recent stage in Cronenberg's cinema sees the individual in control of his world but concerned with exploring more varied social relationships: family, friends and society. There is a gradual move outwards. *Spider* deals with a character deeply disturbed by a family trauma, an idea that is extended in *A History of Violence* and *Eastern Promises*, both subtle portraits of the role that secrets and concealment play in the family drama. The idea of family, both personal and professional, also informs *A Dangerous Method*, while *Cosmopolis* depicts a self-contained individual who is driven in part by familial childhood memories. The films are more naturalistic, and far less reliant on generic conventions. In this period, we also see Cronenberg revealing his own anxiousness about artistic identity and mortality in the evocative shorts "Camera" and "At the Suicide of the Last Jew in the World in the Last Cinema in the World."

CAMERA

2000

Sometimes I'm consciously trying things out.

What would it feel like
if I were to commit suicide?

Why would I? Under what circumstances? You
put your fears into a movie
so they won't be
in your own life. It is simplistic

because there is always a huge playfulness
about moviemaking and the creative act,
even when you are doing terrible,
horrible, depressing,
dangerous, scary stuff. There's a lot
of play involved, trying out stuff as children do when
they learn how to live—playing with dolls
and in the sandbox. It's not as though I am excluding
these things from my life by putting them
on the screen. They will be in my life. The basic bad
things in your life, your mortality and the mortality
of the people you love around you, is not going to go
away. You're not going to make it safe
by building this cinematic membrane around it.
I'm completely aware of that, so I don't think that's
the process.

Making a movie
is in itself a positive act.

Writing a book
is a positive act.



Cronenberg with Harrison Kane on the set of "Camera" (2000)
• Photo Rhombus Media • Courtesy Toronto International Film Festival

SPIDER
2002

In some ways,
I am Spider.

I feel like I'm this far away from being Spider. Most people are very close to that state because you do hear voices:

the voices of society,
of newscasters. Think about how many voices you have in your head.

This goes back to *Scanners* in which I make it rather literal. The lead character asks,

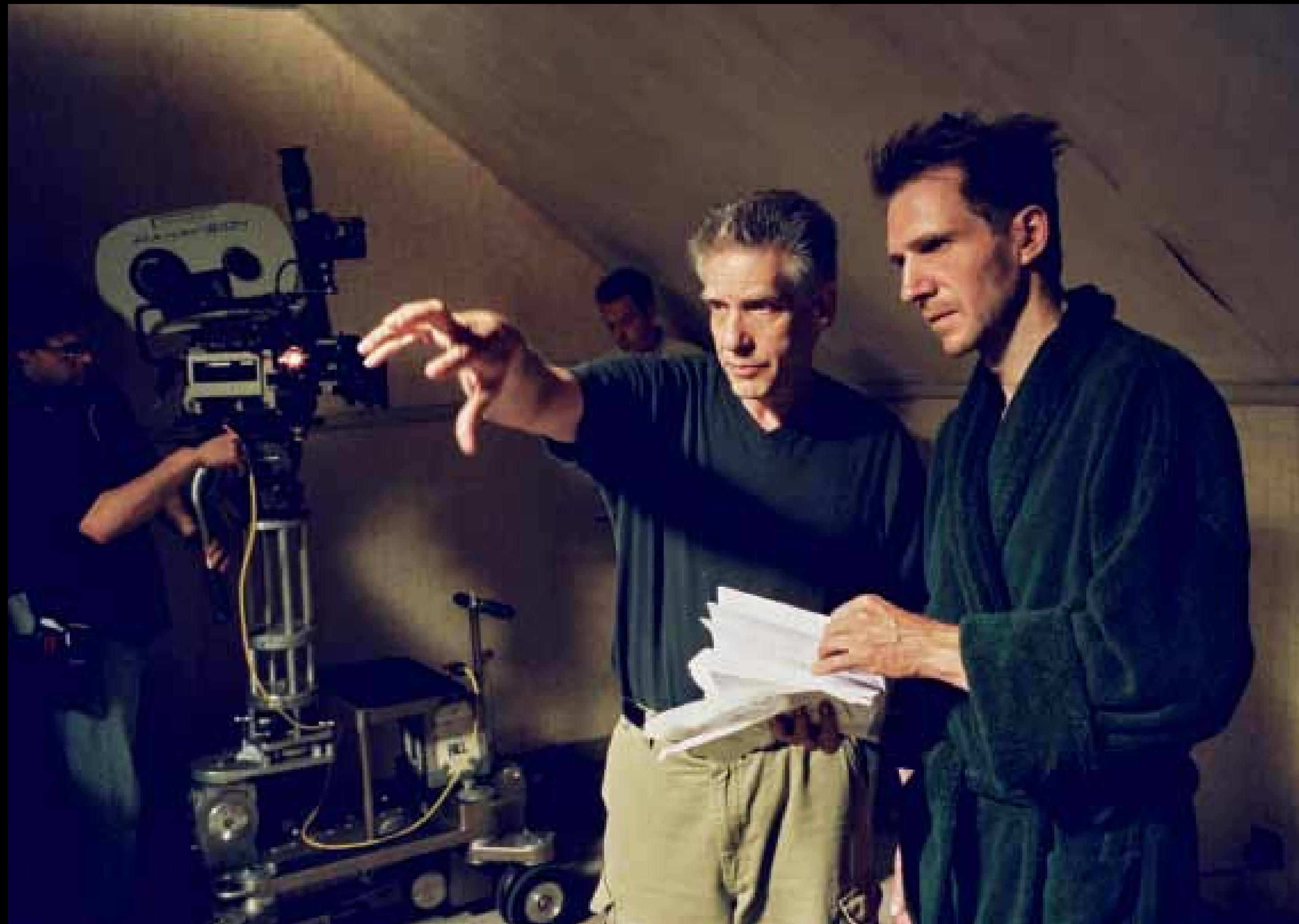
"How can I hear my own voice
when I hear so many other voices
all around me?"

I need to let those other voices out."

Sometimes they are real voices—your father.

Alive or dead, it doesn't matter—
it's the things he said to you.

Or, things you heard from your president or prime minister, or some cop.



Cronenberg and Ralph Fiennes on the set of *Spider* (2002)
• Photo Takashi Seida • Courtesy Prospero Pictures,
Entertainment One and Sony Pictures Classics Inc.



You have these voices.

How do you know they're not your own thoughts,
and that you're not actually hearing them?

They're not coming in through your ear,
but they're already in your head.

How did they get there?

Did they come in
through your ear?
Did they come in
through your eye?

It's the penetration of society
into an individual.







A
HISTORY
OF
VIOLENCE
2005

I think it's impossible
to be neutral
in terms of visuals.

You are always saying something.

By being far away with a long lens, or close with a short lens,
you are saying something about where you want the audience to be.
On the other hand, you can't be sure how people will react to your film.

How people react
varies from culture to culture,
and moment to moment.

There is no absolute. You can only be so controlled.
There's a certain point where you have to let go.
But as I say, you know that

what you're shooting
is not neutral.
It has meaning,
but you don't know
what the meaning is.

That's a strange set of parameters to be working with, for any artist.

Cronenberg with Ed Harris as Carl Fogarty, directing a deleted dream sequence
from *A History of Violence* (2005) • Photo Takashi Seida
• Licensed by Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc., All Rights Reserved





Stall's Diner coffee mug (prop) • Production Designer Carol Spier
• Transfer-printed glazed ceramic • 11 x 12 x 9 cm • Courtesy Carol Spier

The politics
of the staircase scene were

almost irrelevant to the scene within the movie.

The question of **rape within a marriage**

is huge right now, because of what is happening, not just in the Muslim world but also in India—the idea that the wife has to be sexually available no matter what.

On a human level, we all know that rape
is absolutely possible within a marriage.

The politics are pretty heavy.

But, in terms of the drama, those politics didn't exist.

As far as I'm concerned, this is an intimate moment

in a house where nobody else is present.

When **I'm shooting this,
I'm not even thinking
about the audience.**

It's odd, because of course you're making it for an audience,
but you have to ignore the audience.

They shouldn't factor into what you're doing.

Making a movie involves a strange schizophrenia.

You are absolutely aware of the audience,

and things need to be clear, but on the other hand

it's as though they don't exist because you are trying
to make this little world where only the characters are real
and they exist in this house. Why would there be an audience
watching what's going on in this house at night?

I guess **it's a completely anti-Hollywood
approach**, where you are totally, one hundred per cent

servicing the audience. I'm thinking about the characters

and what's going on in that house

and what they're feeling about each other.



EASTERN
PROMISES
2007

I think of myself as a humanist.
My version of humanism is that we are all we have.

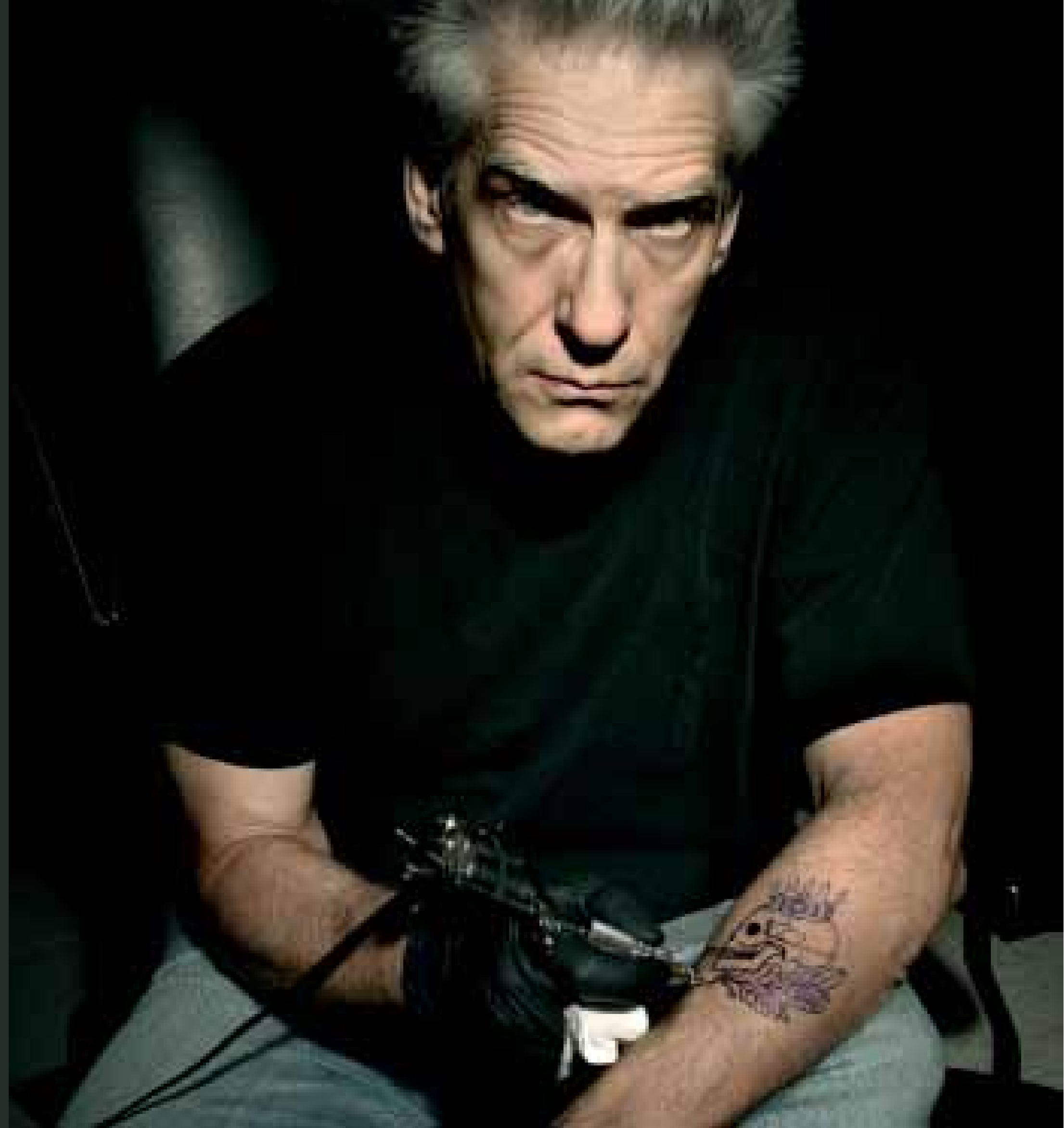
There is no God.

There are no other civilizations in other planets
that are going to save us.

We are our only salvation
in terms of making the planet exist as long as it possibly can—
which will not be forever

no matter what we do. **If we
would only accept that,
the world could be
a better
place.**

Cronenberg in a promotional photo for *Eastern Promises* (2007)
■ Photo Caitlin Cronenberg





Kit used to tattoo Nikolai Luzhin (Viggo Mortensen) at the Trans-Siberian Restaurant (prop)
• Attaché case with multiple components • 40.5 x 26.5 x 12.5 cm, closed
• Photo Gary Krueger • Courtesy NBC/Universal Archives and Collections, Universal City



Anna Khitrova's (Naomi Watts) motorcycle helmet, glasses and gloves (costume)
• Costume Designer Denise Cronenberg • Photo Gary Krueger
• Courtesy NBC/Universal Archives & Collections, Universal City

Every director is a control freak up to a certain point,
but at what point do you let go?

I often walk onto a film set and I've been involved in its design, and it's like I'm walking into a pre-existing building that I've never seen before.

We talked a lot about **the shape of the Russian restaurant** in *Eastern Promises*, how the rooms would be configured, the ceilings and everything else. But when you see it for real, it's like,

"Wow, I'm walking into this Russian restaurant I've never seen before.

Fabulous! How am I going to use this?"

And then I use what's there. A lot of designers design great details, and the director never uses them.

I find a way to get the actor to go into that weird corner,
and use the strange samovar or the tools that are there.



Trans-Siberian restaurant (maquette) • Production Designer Carol Spier • Painted foam, paper, fabric, plastic • Base: 101.4 x 76.0 x 1.3 cm, Restaurant section: 77.2 x 74.2 x 16.0 cm, Ceiling: 71.2 x 66.2 x 8.5 cm • Courtesy Carol Spier





Tatiana's diary (prop) • bound notebook with handwritten pages
• 14.5 x 9.5 x 1.4cm • Photo Gary Krueger
• Courtesy NBC/Universal Archives and Collections, Universal City



The fight scene in the Turkish bath

was done on the spot.

The stunt guys had worked out a lot of stuff. Then we were on the set, Viggo was suddenly naked and I had no idea what lens I would use, how I would shoot it.

“OK, let’s see what happens—show it to me.”

There was a major element of spontaneity, and a reaction to what you’re seeing.

You do tests and so on, but there’s always a documentary element.

I try to be very organic and of the moment.

It’s an existentialist approach. It’s as though this movie is the first and only movie ever made. You’re trying to feel what feels fresh and right for the moment.

It’s a strange,

multilevelled game you’re playing with yourself.

AT
THE
SUICIDE OF
THE LAST
JEW
IN THE
WORLD
IN THE LAST
CINEMA
IN THE
WORLD
2007

Suicide is the only way
that you can control
the end
of your life. Otherwise,

that decision is taken away from you. I am not a depressive.
For me, suicide is an antientropic act. You can take
control of your own mortality. It's an escape.

It seems odd, but you can say, "Well, there's always suicide!"

If you accept that there is no future, what do you do?

Where does your sense of life's value come from?

You can no longer think about what you are going to do tomorrow, because there
isn't going to be a tomorrow. How do you deal with that? How do you absorb
that and still live a provocative,
enthusiastic,
joyful life?

David Cronenberg starring in and directing "At the Suicide of the Last Jew in the
World in the Last Cinema in the World" (2007) • Photo Brandon Cronenberg
• Courtesy David Cronenberg and the Cannes Film Festival



A
DANGEROUS
METHOD
2011

I've always
loathed sentimentality.

Oscar Wilde said sentimentality is the death of true emotion, or something like that. I think I'm reacting against the prevailing pseudo-emotionality of drama that we find everywhere, including in news broadcasts. I find that horrific, hideous.

I want the audience
to have a real reaction—and
an emotional reaction—even though
we're in this incredibly contrived, artificial
structure, which is film, where everybody
knows that those are actors.

Pseudo-emotionality
is so false and
destructive. Hysteria is
everywhere, even more because of the Internet.
It's bizarre how much anger and bitterness
there are out there.



David Cronenberg and Cinematographer Peter Suschitzky
on the set of *A Dangerous Method* (2011) • Photo Liam Daniel
• Courtesy Prospero Pictures, Entertainment One
& Sony Pictures Classics Inc. © Recorded Picture Company, 2011





Reproduction of Sigmund Freud's chair
 • Wood, leather, metal studs, on swivel stand • 111 x 63 x 53 cm
 • Courtesy David Cronenberg Collection, TIFF Film Reference Library



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP
 • Keira Knightley, David Cronenberg and Viggo Mortensen
 onset in Dr. Sigmund Freud's office / David Cronenberg conducts
 camera tests with Vincent Cassel, who plays Dr. Sigmund
 Freud's student Otto Gross / Michael Fassbender as Dr. Carl
 Jung and Viggo Mortensen as Dr. Sigmund Freud • Photos Liam
 Daniel • Courtesy Prospero Pictures, Entertainment One & Sony
 Pictures Classics Inc. © Recorded Picture Company, 2011

COSMOPOLIS

2012

Those who are more successful are usually more obsessed and less flexible. Their strength comes from this intense obsessive focus on the thing that they have chosen. It makes them very vulnerable as human beings because

they can't deal with other things, with everyday life, as in the case of Spider. Eric Packer in *Cosmopolis* has all the technology and money around him but he doesn't know how to speak to people, or talk to his wife. He realizes that by focusing with laser-like intensity on success—it's like the magnifying glass under the sun and that hotspot that burns—he has ignored what almost any normal human being has learned, which is how to deal with people in a social setting. So he says,

"This is how people talk to each other when they're married," as he says to his wife. He doesn't really know. He's faking it on that level even though he's a total master of the particularly contracted universe he has created within his limo.



Eric Packer's J12 Chromatic wrist watch,
same model as worn in the film by Robert Pattinson • Designer Chanel
• Various parts, titanium, ceramic • Courtesy David Cronenberg



ABOVE LEFT • Eric Packer's limousine interior
• Photo Arv Greywal and Joshu de Cartier
• Courtesy Prospero Pictures



RIGHT MIDDLE • Set drawing for Jane Melman's (Emily Hampshire)
limo seat "In Progress #11," dated April 2, 2011
• Production Designer Arv Grewal, Illustrator Vicki Pui
• Computer-generated drawing • Courtesy Arv Grewal

RIGHT • Eric Packer's limousine
on green-screen stage for *Cosmopolis*
• Photo Arv Greywal and Joshu de Cartier
• Courtesy Prospero Pictures

I really like all the CG—computer-generated—stuff. I enjoy green screen.

It gives you incredible freedom in ways I'm not sure some people understand.

To have green screen in the limo for *Cosmopolis* really frees you. You don't have to worry about synchronizing what's going on in the limo with what's actually happening in a real street as you're towing the stupid thing and the traffic is screwing you up, and it suddenly starts to rain, or the light changes.

That limits what shots you can use.

You may have a great take of this actor, but the sun went away and the lighting's bad.

With the green screen you don't have to worry about that. You get the best performance out of your actor and then you get the best background. So to me, it's the opposite of frustrating.

It's liberating, actually.





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Portrait of David Cronenberg
• Photo [Caitlin Cronenberg](#)

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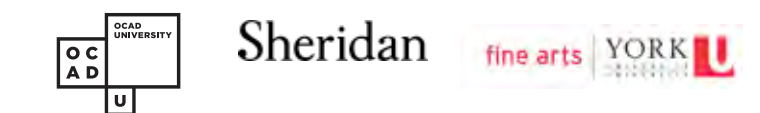
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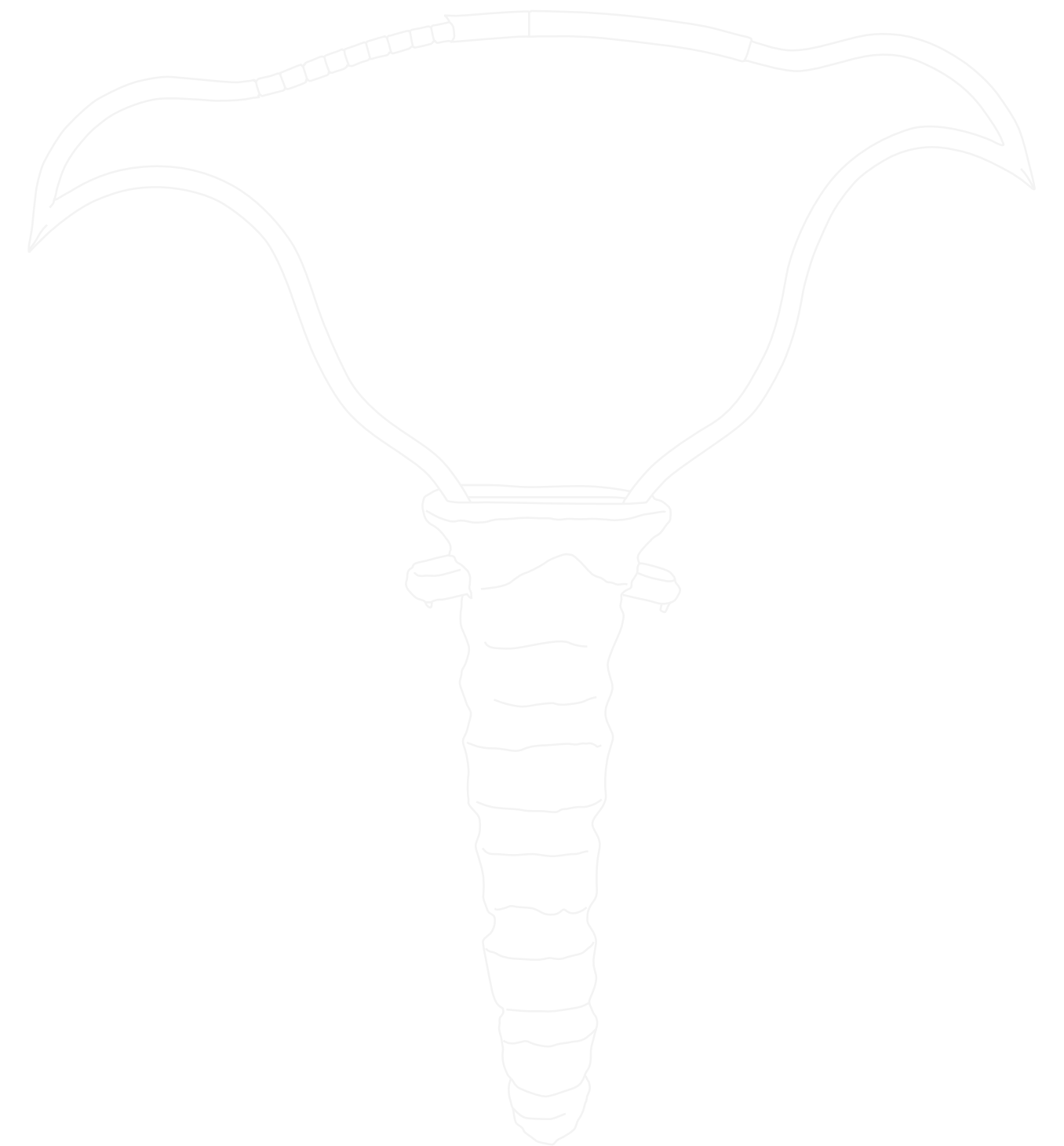
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