

# SPIDER

Stripped to the Bone: David Cronenberg's

By Maurie Alioff

“If I could turn you on, if I could drive you out of your wretched mind, if I could tell you, I would let you know.”

R.D. Laing in *The Bird of Paradise*

If *Spider*, David Cronenberg's impeccably directed, deeply moving portrayal of a schizophrenic outcast had a guiding shrink, it would be R.D. Laing, the late Scottish psychoanalyst whose radical methods and ideas made him a hero to the 1960s counterculture. Rather than treating the insane as neurochemical anomalies, he envisioned madness as a perilous voyage to be lived through, learned from and hopefully transcended on the way to renewal. Laing also believed that going crazy sometimes makes sense in a world gone wrong.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the period that helped form David Cronenberg's sensibility, figures like William Burroughs, Robert Crumb and Laing routinely broke taboos in their full-frontal assault on the oppressive blandness of mainstream culture. But the pendulum is now firmly stuck in the opposite direction. In film, most of today's "independents," at least in Western countries, avoid the territory staked out by the Cronenbergs, Lynchs, Kubricks, Buñuels and contemporary Asian directors such as Takashi Miiike and Park Chan-wook. The pictures made by these artists are unrestrained visions of the grotesque twists and turns of destiny. In the era of *Dr. Phil*, darkness and tragedy don't exist, and psychiatrists insist that life is a bowl of SSRIs. Gabriel Byrne, who plays a key role in Cronenberg's new movie, told me during an interview that *Spider* "is important because our alternatives in every facet of life are becoming less and less."

Like R.D. Laing, David Cronenberg embraces dangerous mental travelling at the risk of the voyager being ground into mush. In the typical Cronenberg film, the protagonist's journey into lunacy begins when an overwhelming event, often a sexual one, destroys his superego and unleashes a raging id. In conventional horror movies, scary creatures are unwelcome invaders of normal life. Cronenberg slyly implies that the worst fiends are incubated by their repression—or as Francisco Goya put it: "The sleep of reason breeds monsters." His besieged characters often think way too much. And when they let loose, they metamorphose into oversexed insects, sprout video-cassette slots in their bellies, or get their kicks from car crashes.

*Spider* is different because right from its eloquent opening shot, our hero, performed with unwavering commitment and precision by Ralph Fiennes, is floundering in a soup of psychic turmoil. The camera fast tracks along a London train station platform as the passengers disembark and rush toward us. They have destinations, they know people and there's an apparent purpose to their lives. Then we see schizophrenic Dennis Cleg (nicknamed "Spider," we eventually learn, by his mother). Dressed in a rancid-looking raincoat, backing off the train with a pathetic little suitcase, muttering non-stop, he seems hopelessly disoriented on the now empty platform. Robin Williams's psychotic bum in *The Fisher King* and Russell Crowe's Mr. *Beautiful Mind* have it easy compared to this lost soul.



On the other hand, despite the bizarre array of junk in his suitcase, not to mention his sartorial habit of wearing four shirts, Spider clearly hasn't given up trying to navigate through the confused pain evident in his clenched face. Although he never explains himself verbally throughout the entire movie, we are always acutely aware of his human suffering. Unless your mind has been completely shut down by our maniacally success-driven culture, you can't help but recognize your own ordeals in this alien creature, Cronenberg's most compassionately treated character since the doomed Mantle brothers in *Dead Ringers*. Spider recalls the archetypal Everyman, ranging from Sisyphus to Chaplin, Keaton to Samuel Beckett's tramps in *Waiting for Godot* and especially to characters from the latter's trilogy of novels that begin with *Molloy* and end with *The Unnamable*. If he could, Spider might say, as one of Beckett's characters does, "I can't go on. I must go on. I'll go on."

Who hasn't been in Spider's tattered shoes, shell-shocked by life, trying to figure out what the hell to do next, wondering if there's any point doing anything. In retrospect, the subversive irony of the movie's opening scene is that Spider might have a deeper purpose than the solid citizens bustling out of the train station to their offices and lunch dates. Or conversely, they could also be him. As Cronenberg said to me the day after his gala screening at the 2002 Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), "Without being cute about it, it wouldn't take much to put anybody on the street like that. You have a stroke, you have an economic disaster or an emotional disaster, and you are walking the streets talking to yourself. Without a cellphone. With a tiny suitcase that has everything that you own in it."

The arc of Spider's story charts his attempts to grope his way toward some semblance of structure and order, the opposite of the trajectories Cronenberg mapped out in *Videodrome*, *The Fly*, *Dead Ringers*, *Naked Lunch* and *Crash*. Released from a mental hospital, after years in confinement, Dennis moves into a halfway house run by the icy Mrs. Wilkinson (Lynn

David Cronenberg

Photo by Annie Levenson



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Redgrave), whom Terrence (John Neville), one of the lodgers, calls the "Tyrant Queen." Decaying, pitilessly ugly, set in a zone halfway to hell, the house is in the same neighbourhood where Spider grew up and lost his mind.

The desolate poverty of the picture's anonymous, timeless setting is right out of Dickens at his bleakest, or Orwell's 1984. Filmed with an austere colour palette devoid of warm sunlight, it offers zero comfort; even when Spider sinks into a bath, the rusty water seems stained with blood. In director Terence Davies's nostalgic excursions into his working-class past, neighborhoods like this offer compensatory pleasures. In *Spider*, there are no movie palaces screening Gene Kelly musicals, and the pub, rather than being a cozy sanctuary where cockneys sing their way out of the ugliness of their lives, is envisioned as a cesspool of loveless sin.

Cronenberg weaves inextricable threads between Spider's gloomy external world and his madness. It's a barren, toxic place defined by a typically Cronenbergian recurrent image: a polluting gasworks that looms malignly overhead. Throughout the movie, Spider sniffs at his clothes, terrified he's being poisoned. But of course, the gasworks is also within. His body is so full of psychological contaminants that must be controlled that in one of the movie's most subtly and hauntingly disturbing scenes, he wraps up his torso in a protective girdle of newspapers and rope.

Someone I know who lived through certain Spidery experiences wrote the following (unedited) passage while in the midst of them: "I would like to breathe deeply but the air around me, feeling poisoned in a most threatening manner. You breathe to live but if every inhaled breath is a threat you stop breathing. Catch 22. Breathe and die or don't breathe and die. Right now the electric pressure is so dense I feel like dying heavy in the chest and temples and a near nausea."

At the heart of the picture, as in other Cronenberg films, there's an investigation. Spider's need is to answer certain fundamental, existential questions: "What happened to me? Why am I like this? Why am I here?" A stooped, gnomish figure barred from all of life's joys, incapable of communicating coherently with the outside world, he suggests Diogenes or a Zen monk, relinquishing everything to pursue knowledge. As Spider shuffles along the narrow streets of his old neighbourhood, he remembers his apparently tortured childhood with his parents. And in the movie's major break from its generally realistic approach, adult Spider sometimes observes boy Spider (Bradley Hall) à la Dickens's Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*. These flashbacks represent, according to Cronenberg and writer Patrick McGrath (whose screenplay is an adaptation of his own novel), Dennis Cleg's real memories, as opposed to "infected" ones, or out-and-out fantasy.



When Spider is not drifting and observing, he buzzes with the insect energy of *The Fly*'s Seth Brundle, and searches for answers with the determination of Kafka's Joseph K. In fact, the methodical obsessiveness of his investigation, and Fiennes's angular physiognomy conjure up the image of a demented Sherlock Holmes, puffing away on hand-rolled ciggies instead of a meerschaum pipe.

The film deploys two powerful visual motifs that communicate Spider's hyperactive intellect and desperate emotional hunger. As a boy and as an adult, he collects all kinds of debris—bits of feather, foil, pieces of newspaper and especially string that he uses to craft elaborate webs fit for a human-size spider. (As a child, his mum's lyrical descriptions of spider webs in the countryside delighted him.) Analogous to Spider's web spinning, shots of him scribbling obsessively in his secret notebooks punctuate the movie. Earlier drafts of McGrath's script featured a first-person voice-over that Cronenberg felt was "too self-aware, and literate and articulate," so he came up with an elegantly simple visual correlative.

Cronenberg emphasizes that his approach to character is all about building a network of tangible detail: clothes, hair, posture and so on. "You can't say to an actor you represent existential angst, so that's what you'll play. I felt that our Spider would have a compulsion to record and a paranoid need to record in code, and try and straighten things out. I needed to give Ralph something physical to do, but I said, 'I don't want to be able to read it,' so I asked him to develop his own hieroglyphics that would be his own language."

Fiennes told me he worked his way into Spider's innermost thought patterns by studying a catalogue for an exhibition of writings by madmen. Still excited by his discoveries, he explained, "They're all different forms of made-up writing. Very beautiful. Variations. Scrawly stuff, very detailed stuff. They write in codes. They write in stories. They write in private diaries. They can understand it, even if actually, they can't."

Incidentally, even though Cronenberg insists that the "project was not to do a clinical study of a schizophrenic," Spider's behaviour is consistent with psychoanalytical thinking (the movie bypasses brain chemistry and modern medications). The British child psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, who studied the way children play, thought that string games are all about separation, loss and trying to master a connection to a loved one. As for Spider's coded diaries, some of Freud's key theories were inspired by the memoirs of Daniel Paul Schreber, an esteemed 19th-century German judge who cracked up, and for years wrote compulsively about his lunacy. Among other delusions, Schreber believed that extraterrestrial rays were zapping his genitals, and that God was morphing him into a woman, specifically a hot-to-trot, irresistible Babylonian whore.

## Fun and Furor:

An Interview with Ron Sanders

By Kathleen Cummins

"Working on a Cronenberg picture is always fun, for one reason or another. I loved working on a picture like *Crash* because I knew it was going to be interesting, but I also knew it was going to piss a lot of people off. And it's going to create furor. It's much more fun to be involved with something like that, something that has some intellectual weight and does cause divisions of opinion. It's fun to watch it happen."

Ron Sanders

A long-time Cronenberg collaborator, Ron Sanders has edited 11 films for the master of psychosurreal thrillers. Three of them—*Dead Ringers*, *Crash* and *eXistenZ*—winning Genies for Sanders. His other Cronenberg credits include *Naked Lunch*, *M. Butterfly*, *The Fly*, *The Dead Zone*, *Videodrome*, *Scanners* and *Fast Company*. Other notable editing credits include such films as Yves Simoneau's *Perfectly Normal*, Norman Jewison's *Dinner with Friends* for HBO, Sturla Gunnarsson's *Joe Torre*, Iain Paterson's *Hidden Agenda*, as well as Patricia Rozema's *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (as consulting editor). When he isn't cutting a studio picture or a high-profile HBO special, Ron has often found time to lend his knowledge and skills in the cutting room to young emerging filmmakers, as well as mentoring some key names in the Canadian film industry, such as editors Susan Shipton and Susan Magee. I recently sat down with Ron to discuss *Spider*.

Can you describe the overall experience of cutting such an intensely interior film such as *Spider*?

A picture, if it has any life, changes from when you're shooting it to when you're cutting it. So you're never quite sure where it's going. The idea is, when the film has a life, you recognize it and allow it to go that way. *Spider* did develop a life of its own. That's why it was relatively easy to cut. Editing is about making choices. Sometimes the choices are harder to make. But they weren't difficult to make in this movie. We knew what we had to do. It was just there.

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As his active, creative hands play with his string and fill page after page with deftly formed markings, Spider is trying to pull together patterns and create a structure. Otherwise, it all collapses into chaos, tears apart like pieces from a puzzle or shards of glass that another lunatic smashes in the film's most hair-raising moment. Moreover, the glyphs are Spider's attempt to transcribe feelings too complicated to express and require a language from another world. In other words, he's a nutty professor saying, "I think, therefore I am," or, as Cronenberg put it, "an archetype of the artist trying to make significance and meaning out of the chaos of existence, which, if you are an existentialist, doesn't have any meaning." Spider is Samuel Taylor Coleridge deliriously writing *Kubla Khan*, William Burroughs in *Interzone*, churning out *Naked Lunch*, M.C. Escher and his puzzling labyrinths. From one angle, *Spider* plays as a subtly comic picture metasatirizing the most exalted forms of obsessive human behaviour. Dennis stands at a bureau when he's working, just like Claude Gauvreau, the schizophrenic Québécois poet, and Thomas Wolfe, the classic American novelist who wrote the 1940 novel *You Can't Go Home Again*.

Walking in and out of his past like a ghost haunting the scenes of his childhood, Spider views what probably happened, what might have happened and what probably didn't happen. As is characteristic of Cronenberg, lines between reality, fantasy and full-tilt hallucination slip and slide all over the place. In all his films, the distinctions are elusive, partly because outlandish situations are presented with a deadpan approach, exemplified in *Naked Lunch* when Bill Lee (Peter Weller) acts like it's perfectly normal to chat with insect typewriters and talking assholes. Cronenberg's vivid characters attain even more resonance from cinematographer Peter Suschitzky's nuanced lighting and composer Howard Shore's subtly imposing music.

The most sober, even Bressonian of Cronenberg's movies, *Spider* abstains from using lurid effects to visualize streams of consciousness. There are no giant centipedes sucking out brains or Chinese restaurant "specials" featuring mutant amphibians. The only horror flick shock is a sound cut of glass breaking and a scream. At TIFF's press and industry screening of *Spider*, the audience jumped, convinced by the surround sound that some buyer in the theatre was having a heart attack.

The poisonous fantasy that inhabits the movie's hero involves what Cronenberg refers to as "memory, identity, how the two connect and how memory is a created, invented thing." Spider's investigations lead him to an imaginary personal history—note: if you haven't seen the film, big spoilers are coming up—in which his gloomy father Bill (Byrne) hammers his mousy but loving mother (Miranda Richardson) to death and replaces her with Yvonne, a nasty, shark-toothed pub slut (also Richardson). The only special effect in all this is Richardson's finely calibrated performance, a balancing act, as she explains, that often involved invoking the ogress when she was in character as the saint.

Boy Spider creates Yvonne, an alter ego for his sweet mum, when his own guilt-ridden erotic longings get mixed up with Mrs. Cleg's sexuality. In a classic Freudian primal scene, the young Dennis Cleg witnesses his parents getting hot with each other, and in another pivotal moment, Yvonne deeply alarms him when she flashes her tits. Eventually, in the movie's final revelation, we discover that Spider, not Bill, was the murderer. Son, repressed lover, paranoid killer—just like Norman Bates—who transforms his slutty mother into a Victorian matriarch by committing matricide.

Of course, guilty feelings about mummy don't "cause schizophrenia more than anything else," as a psychoanalyst friend of mine puts it. "A psychotic person will find a psychotic solution to Oedipal conflict. A neurotic person will find a neurotic solution." Cronenberg's movies invariably portray troubled male-female relationships that never offer pat explanations for anything. As Bill Lee says in *Naked Lunch*, "Save the psychoanalysis for your grasshopper friends." Or as Cronenberg himself jokes, "You see one breast and it makes you insane. Certainly, that's what happened to me."

While some viewers see boy Spider's apparent crime as the movie's "reality," a solution to its mystery,

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Cronenberg agrees with me that *Spider* is open ended. There's only one ultimate truth: Dennis's ravaging guilt. "There could be a third ending, or a fourth or a fifth," he speculated. "And when *Spider* goes back to his asylum, maybe he'll discover those other things, and maybe he won't."

Cronenberg's entirely unschematic, unsentimental picture is, as Gabriel Byrne describes it, an "alternative film about the nature of madness," far removed from the clichés of a sub-genre that ranges from *The Three Faces of Eve* to *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Girl Interrupted*. "Most movies that have dealt with madness," Byrne continued, "have tended to romanticize, patronize and simplify it. I think one of the things that *Spider* tried to do was to give an insight into the pain and loneliness, the consciousness that mad people have."

Ralph Fiennes triggered this adaptation of McGrath's novel, and along with British producer Catherine Bailey, approached Cronenberg because "he confronts things in the makeup of human beings that are sometimes worrying and frightening, but he does it, I think, with a great humanity, and he allows actors great breadth in the films that he makes."



Ralph Fiennes

## Could you describe your process for cutting *Spider*?

There was a slight difference in approach. We gave David two cuts, the usual script cut that we do, which was cut like it was shot, and then we did another version where we dropped scenes. Normally we don't do that, but David had very little disagreement with what we did. David wasn't in the cutting room very long. Certainly, we thought it could be cut many different ways. We didn't impose much on it. It was very rigorous.

## Could you elaborate on this process of restraint?

The first shot in the film is three minutes long, with no cuts, and we were very aware of that. We tried to make it shorter, but at a certain point—and the reason we knew the picture was finished—was that everything that we changed didn't work. Our first reel is probably the slowest first reel you've ever seen.

## You mentioned that editing is a process of making the right choices. What motivates your choices as an editor?

You have to channel the director when you're working, and serve the director and the film. It really doesn't matter whether it's car crashes or schizophrenia, you go into it to cut it and serve the material. Find out what you've got and understand where you want it to go.

## How do you do this? How do you serve the material, particularly such horrific and interior material as *Spider*?

Nothing is going to work if you don't care about the characters. On some level you have to be afraid of them or love them or be fascinated by them, it doesn't matter, but you have to be engaged on some level. You have to feel that way about *Spider* because you don't know what he's doing, but he doesn't know what's going on either. So you have to be with him, doing exactly what he's doing. You don't know until he knows. When you hold on Ralph's face—and he's in a memory and then you come back to him writing in his journal—you just hold on his face, it's all there. You don't need any more. You have an actor *acting*. And doing an extremely good job of it. Ambiguity is not something that happens in movies much anymore. There are so many cartoon movies, where things just blow up. I wouldn't care if I never saw another CIA movie where something blew up or, in fact, had a CIA agent in it, again!

Some of Fiennes' admirers, particularly those who think *The English Patient* was to the 1990s what Clark Gable's Rhet Butler in *Gone with the Wind* meant to an earlier generation, can't understand why the star would want to play a grungy figure like Dennis Cleg (or the psychotic serial killer in *Red Dragon*, for that matter). Fiennes, who first attracted international attention as a murderous Nazi in *Schindler's List*, and played a sleazy hustler in Kathryn Bigelow's *Strange Days*, couldn't care less. "I felt very emotional about the part," he said in Toronto. "I love Spider's persona. I felt passionate about this man. I wanted to be him."

And Cronenberg, who agreed to direct the movie because Fiennes is a gifted performer who could "disappear into the role," echoes his lead actor: "Spider, *c'est moi*. I'm not condescending to this character, I'm not examining this character from a distance. I feel like I am this character." At the heart of this particular investigation, this despairing yet inspiring movie that honours suffering, is the question: "How far do you have to go, stripping things away, to get to some essence? I think you can strip away an awful lot, and still have a human. I was attracted to this character who has none of the paraphernalia of life to distract from his essential struggle. He doesn't have a network of friends, he doesn't have a job with all the complexities of that.

He doesn't have a religion. Take that away and then it should be very revealing. That was the idea.

If you take away and take away, what do you reveal? Or

do you reveal nothing? You have to be prepared for it to reveal nothing. That's partly, I guess, the way that I've been going in my filmmaking. It's just a matter of temperament. It's not, like I say, a theory of filmmaking. It's just the way I've been doing it."

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Gabriel Byrne