



DOUBLE IDENTITY:

David Cronenberg's

A History of Violence

In an era of independent films that are calculated attention grabbers and mainstream movies pumped up with sound and fury, it's inspiring that David Cronenberg has made a movie as gripping, intricate and flawlessly directed as *A History of Violence*.

Cronenberg's first picture since *Spider*, his portrait of a madman desperately trying to grasp why he lost his mind, is free of both directorial muscle-flexing and the intellectual doily-making endemic of directors who think they have something big to say. Working with frequent collaborators such as cinematographer Peter Suschitsky and composer Howard Shore, Cronenberg consistently hits the right notes on everything from the visuals, to the nuanced tone of the performances, to the dark humour, to a *mise en scène* that is loaded with detail but never cluttered.

A History of Violence opens with a long take that starts on the exterior of an old-time country motel, cicadas buzzing in soft light, and tracks to a convertible just as a guy emerges from a cabin and slides into the passenger seat. It's a nostalgic image suggesting one of the numerous American Dreams the movie alludes to. But Leland and Billy (Stephen McHattie and Greg Bryk) are no Kerouac and Cassady travelling the highway in search of angel-headed highs. As the hypnotic travelling shot moves with them toward the motel office, their chit-chat gets sinister, especially in the off-hand comment, "The maid was giving me trouble." Moments later, a laconic shocker of a scene displays a bloody destruction of life as casual and banal as the mops and vending machines that the camera lingers on. Leland and Billy are snakes in the grass who put into motion what turns out to be a fable about human identity and the inevitability of violence.

By
Maurie Alioff

Opening on darkness, Cronenberg crash cuts to light. A golden-haired little girl, terrified by a nightmare about monsters, is being comforted by her handsome, well-intentioned father, who assures her that monsters don't exist. Unfortunately, we've seen Leland and Billy in action back at the motel, so we know better. Moreover, we eventually discover that daddy might be concealing scary facts about himself from little Sarah (Heidi Hayes), teenage son Jack (Ashton Holmes) and wife Edie (Maria Bello).



David Cronenberg

the same title because, "It has very strong American mythology attached to every aspect of it. Obviously, I embraced it; I wasn't trying to fight it."

Unlike Robert Rodriguez, whose film version of Frank Miller's *Sin City* also competed at this year's Cannes festival, Cronenberg had no particular interest in merging the aesthetics of movies and comics. In fact, when he first read Olson's screenplay, he didn't even know that it was based on a graphic novel from the publisher of *Road to Perdition*.

Daddy is Tom Stall (Viggo Mortensen), such a model of small-town good-heartedness, generosity and dedication, Frank Capra would have been proud to shake his hand. It's

source material for the movie, which deviates in many ways from the novel, you probably wouldn't suspect its origins. Cronenberg's spare approach is far removed

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a wonderful life in Millbrook, Indiana, a reverie of America Cronenberg brought to life on Toronto sound stages and the actual town of Millbrook, Ontario. During an interview several weeks after the movie world-premiered in competition at Cannes 2005, and preceding its North American debut at the Toronto International Film Festival, Cronenberg told me that he decided to retain the real burg's name because it's a perfect match for the world he imagined. Was he also taking a sly dig at the Canadian pretense that we don't engage in American dreaming? New Line Cinema got Cronenberg interested in Josh Olson's script, an adaptation of John Wagner (*Judge Dredd*) and Vince Locke's 1999 graphic novel of

from Rodriguez's ultra-stylized *Sin City* or the *Masterpiece Theatre* fussiness of Sam Mendes's *Road to Perdition* adaptation.

MILLBROOK

At Cannes—where a polling agency called Médiamétrie reported that *A History of Violence* was this year's number-one movie—many viewers read Cronenberg's take on mid-western America, and the film's hero, as demystification. But the movie's vision of rural Indiana is often affectionate and luminous, recalling the surprisingly heartfelt road trip from Iowa to Wisconsin in David Lynch's *The Straight Story*. Just compare the world of the film to the book's somber, even grim, black-and-white drawings.

Arguably Cronenberg's most naturalistic movie, as well as one steeped in myth, *A History of Violence* induces you to believe in its elegiac depiction of Millbrook and its inhabitants. One of the key settings in the film is the Stall family's vintage farmhouse, nestled in lush green pastures. Even more central is the diner that Tom runs. When you see a traditional diner in an American town, the 1940s look and bantering regulars stir up longing for a straightforward, uncomplicated way of life. Cronenberg doesn't push the nostalgia to *Blue Velvet*'s absurd levels of hyper-lyricism, but like David Lynch, he conveys a complex attitude toward the sweetness and light. Millbrook is light-years away from Dogville, the mythical Rocky Mountain setting for Lars von Trier's single-minded anti-Americanism.

Even before things go bad in the film, certain scenes imply that Millbrook might be too good to be true, as if everybody is performing in their own version of *Our Town*. Although Tom and Edie are believably still hot for each other after 20 years of marriage, their relationship sometimes comes across as a little too harmonious. And when they make love near the beginning of the movie, they are play-acting. Edie, a successful lawyer, turns Tom into a horny teenager by dressing up like the Prom Queen cheerleader he never actually dated. Meanwhile, over at



Maria Bello as Edie Stall

Millbrook's high school, a baseball game looking like a Norman Rockwell painting turns inside out when a malevolent bully threatens Tom's son, Jack. And later in the picture, there's the far more malevolent stranger in town who sneers at Tom, "You're trying so hard to be this other guy, it's painful to watch."

Millbrook's bubble gets pricked at the end of a typically easy-going day. When Tom is about to shut down the diner, Leland and Billy barge in. The frightening invasion onscreen echoes American classics ranging from Hemingway's short story *The Killers* (twice adapted into features, and an obvious influence on this story), to *High*

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Noon and *Shane*, archetypal Westerns that Cronenberg says moved him deeply when he was a kid who “saw Westerns all the time.” In *The Killers*, people in a small-town lunchroom react passively to a duo of big-city hitmen. In *A History of Violence*, just when Leland and Billy embark on their robbery-and-murder spree, Tom abruptly leaps out of his mild-mannered personality and blows the creeps away with lightning speed and breathtaking efficiency. The sedate diner mutates into a rip-roaring saloon, a traditional arena for fights and gun battles in pictures about the Wild West.

Portraying this bad day in Millbrook, Cronenberg directs the scene as a muscular burst of action typical of the violent showdowns to come. He’s not aiming at the glossy pyrotechnics of a Michael Bay extravaganza; we are closer to the realm of fatalistic 1940s and 1950s B pictures such as *Detour* and *Out of the Past*, and almost anything directed by Sam Fuller or Fritz Lang. A tight insert reminds us that a bullet to the head can really, to paraphrase Jonathan Swift in *A Tale of a Tub*, alter someone’s appearance for the worse.

When the shootout ends, Tom stares at the big .45 in his hand with an expression that is more trepidation than

triumph, confused and feral at the same time. Like a junkie out of a William Burroughs’s novel, he’s dissociated from what his right hand just did—it shot off a human face, he seems to be thinking. Did I do that? In a performance Cronenberg calls “astonishing,” Viggo Mortensen shows a gift for registering overlapping emotions, subtleties that you don’t see in his *Lord of the Rings* character, Aragorn. He also suggests the acting of classic Hollywood stars, for instance the young Kirk Douglas’s ability to be nobly wide-eyed (*Paths of Glory*) or chillingly ruthless (*The Bad and the Beautiful*).

When Tom is hailed as a conquering hero by his community and turned into a media star, he wants to settle back into the diner’s comfortable routines, but he can’t. The storyline twists again when a trio of big-city gangsters, led by dapper, black-suited Carl Fogarty (Ed Harris in a hilariously insinuating performance), shows up at Tom’s pristine counter. Fogarty, who saw Tom on television, confronts him with his certainty that Mr. Nice Guy is really “Joey,” not just a criminal back in the day, but a vicious one at that. Fogarty lost an eye and part of his face to Joey’s uninhibited use of barbed wire as a weapon, and he wants payback.

Viggo Mortensen as Tom Stall



Why does one of the most vigorous, big-hearted nations in history

As doubts about Tom's identity sink in, scenes are punctuated by meditative shots that observe him from a distance. We don't know exactly what he's thinking, but we can imagine. Although Tom keeps saying the mobster has the wrong man, like *Spider's* Dennis Cleg, he is obviously bedeviled by the brutal awakening of his past. At first in awe of his valiant act, Edie and the children start to wonder, as Fogarty puts it, "How come he's so good at killing people?" For viewers who see Tom as a symbol of

consultation with Josh Olson and the movie's American producers, Chris Bender and J.C. Spink, eroticizes them. In fact, two sharply contrasting sexual encounters between Tom and Edie crystallize the movie's primary tensions. The power of these scenes, which Cronenberg says were among his main contributions to the screenplay, is driven by Maria Bello's full-bodied portrayal of a typically Cronenbergian female character. She's hot, she's smart, but she's also wounded.



Ed Harris as Carl Fogarty

America, Fogarty's question could imply: Why does one of the most vigorous, big-hearted nations in history have such a history of violence?

In the novel's version of the characters, Tom (sporting Clark Kentish glasses) and Edie are a stolid, asexual couple. Cronenberg, who reshaped the script in

In scene one, Edie, the make-believe cheerleader, queens it over bashful high-school boy Tom. Later, following an aggressive encounter with killer Joey on the staircase of their farmhouse, Edie fights him off, then fucks him with abandon and ends up with bruises on her back. For Cronenberg, who often tells tarnished love stories, "In the second scene, it's a very schizophrenic thing. She's making

have such a history of violence?

lead a kind of strangely balanced, schizophrenic existence.”

In fact, “It isn’t really schizophrenic, because they’re

the same guy, you know.”

love to two men at once in a way. She can’t disconnect from the Tom-ness of Tom, and she also is responding in a complex way to Joey who is exciting her and repulsing her at the same time. And that is how we played that scene. It’s a great marker of the shift in their relationship.”

Haunting that relationship is the tricky issue of whether a constructed persona can evolve into a real person. For Cronenberg, *A History of Violence* grapples with this question of “creational identity.” Could someone like Joey turn himself into someone like Tom, or is he using his alter ego as a front? “If he’s had 20 years of marriage and children, and being Tom without it ever showing, that’s pretty successful,” Cronenberg points out. “If he had got hit by a bus just before Fogarty showed up in town, no one would have ever suspected him.” While Cronenberg believes “that people do really change,” he stresses “the amount of energy going into maintaining an identity every day is enormous. *Spider* was an examination of a person who could not maintain an identity.”

In *A History of Violence*, Tom and Joey, like the Mantle brothers in *Dead Ringers*, are inextricably linked. One can’t exist without the other; their contradictory impulses are equally genuine and equally powerful. The conundrum of Tom’s situation is that as the threats escalate, and he must protect the people he loves, he becomes Joey, who maims and kills without hesitation. And it was to escape Joey that he became Tom in the first place.



Stephen McHattie as Leland

A History of Violence reflects the mind-boggling cases of double identity that loom up in real-life stories. For instance, the self-named “BTK Killer” of Wichita, Kansas, a devoted and hard-working husband, father, and church volunteer, enjoyed torturing people to death, sometimes on lunch breaks. “We keep reading about these guys whose families have no idea what they’ve been doing,” says Cronenberg, “and obviously, they are able to

Unlike the novel and various drafts of the script, the movie offers little information about Tom’s history. We are never really sure about the extent of his youthful brutality, or whether there were circumstances that could explain it. For Cronenberg, who eliminated pages of expository back-story dialogue, Tom’s past is open to interpretation. Maybe he was a “crazy one,” as one character remembers him, a Keyser Soze who relished



spilling blood. On the other hand, Cronenberg, who has always portrayed his dark heroes empathetically, favours a more benevolent view. "When he kills, when he does stuff, he's not really exulting in it, he's not having a great time. It's functional. He does it well, so there's a kind of athletic satisfaction. But it's not as though it's emotionally thrilling and exhilarating. We didn't play it that way."

For sure, Cronenberg doesn't want Tom, or any of the film's characters, to be seen as possessed by evil. "I really avoid the word," he laughs, "because as soon as you start talking about evil, you're into kind of religious territory as far as I'm concerned. We're talking about wilful violence and destructiveness and so on. These are things that can be dealt with. When you say 'evil,' you're throwing up your hands and saying, 'Well, it's Satan, it's an absolute in the world,' and you're abdicating responsibility."

As for wilful violence, Cronenberg's movie is far from being a plea for its eradication. Like much of Stanley Kubrick's work, it sidesteps moralizing to depict the horror of carnage, its adrenaline rush and its inevitability. "It's an innate part of human nature," Cronenberg explains. "It will never not be. The energy and will that's required to deal with it is enormous, and obviously, it's preoccupying a lot of the world right now."

The movie's climactic showdown explodes in a shadowy urban mansion that couldn't be more different from sunny Millbrook. In this setting, reverberating with melodrama and tragedy, our hero commits his most transgressive act of violence. His antagonist in the sequence (William Hurt, in a performance as funny as it is menacing), also seems befuddled about his own split nature, but that might be an act. By the end of the picture, the initial tension between Tom and Joey resolves into a melancholy

acknowledgement that they must co-exist and the future is an excruciating unknown. Typical of Cronenberg, the hero mutates, faces an enormous dilemma and finds himself thrust into a daunting new life.

While *A History of Violence* is a restrained movie compared to *Videodrome* or *Naked Lunch* (for one thing, the body-horror effects are limited to one side of Ed Harris's face), it explores the dark corners Cronenberg will always peer into. Innumerable articles about him compare the guy who revels in showing audiences those corners, including exploding heads and sex with centipedes, to David Cronenberg: gentle, courteous, a pleasure to know and work with.

Cronenberg laughs when I bring up the subject of his double identity. "I've told this story many times, so you'll

William Hurt as Richie Cusak



forgive me if I say it again. Marty Scorsese, who had seen a couple of my first movies, was very intrigued by them, and wanted to meet me, but was afraid. I thought here's the guy who did *Taxi Driver*, which I thought is a lot scarier than any of my movies, and he was afraid to meet

a spider wrapping a web around something to keep it away, to preserve it." Especially in his horror movies, Cronenberg says he is "acknowledging the bad things, hoping that by acknowledging them, you will keep them out of your life. If you don't acknowledge them, they say,

"There's always the death problem, you know, and it's not likely to go away. It's part of the human condition." — David Cronenberg

me. I thought that if someone in the business, someone who's a wonderful director could be confused by that identification of an artist with his work, then a straight citizen could certainly be forgiven for doing the same thing. There is a very complex relationship between an artist and his work, and it's not usually one-to-one."

Despite all the fear and trembling experienced by his perverse identical twins and obsessed scientists, Cronenberg says he's never been particularly anxiety ridden or paranoid. "It's not something that is in my viscera every second, the way it is with some people. I've never taken an antidepressant or even a tranquilizer." At the same time, "just being an animal in the world calls for anxiety. There's always the death problem, you know, and it's not likely to go away. It's part of the human condition. I don't think it's unique to me."

Of course, writing and directing lead Cronenberg into troubled nightmare worlds. "When you go into your little creative trance, you do call on things that are not necessarily there every second in your daily life. When you are really trying to delve into the essence of the human condition, you're not just dealing with your own specific life and your own emotional reactions to things. You are really trying to get to something universal, and at that point you really have to take notice of things that perhaps you don't normally focus on."

When he's in that trance, does Cronenberg ever spook himself? "On a certain level, I definitely do. Yeah. In a way, it's almost like

'You don't acknowledge me, I'm going to make my presence known.' There's a little bit of that in the process, I think, of dealing with things that are scary and inevitable. You are gaining a little bit of control over them by creating them yourself."

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Maria Bello and Viggo Mortensen