

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The Chronicle Review

January 31, 2003

'Spider' Reveals a More Nuanced Cronenberg

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David Cronenberg's admirers may be surprised, but his new film *Spider* features no mutated insects or other grotesque creepy-crawlies, demented entomologists, or hypnotic special effects. Nor is it a sequel to *The Fly*, the 1986 thriller that became one of his biggest hits.

Spider is something of a departure for Cronenberg -- a restrained, almost austere portrait of psychosis, delusion, and dysfunction in which his ever-present tropes of disfigurement and trauma are all internal, visible to us only through the mind of a psychologically tormented protagonist. While fans of *Naked Lunch* and *Crash* may find *Spider* too moody and unspectacular for comfort, its sympathetic portrayal of a deeply troubled soul suggests that Cronenberg is moving toward a more mature and introspective stage in his eclectic, often controversial career.

Cronenberg has been intriguing and disconcerting viewers since the 1970s, when he gained a cult following with luridly titled thrillers like *Shivers* (1975), *Rabid* (1977), and *The Brood* (1979), all dealing with ordinary people besieged by malign, infectious pests. The moviegoers most drawn to him were aficionados of horror and science fiction, genres of dubious respectability. His commitment to those genres led skeptics to regard him as a minor purveyor of sensational shocks. It didn't help that his budgets were low, his technical resources limited, his actors less than stellar.

Or that he hailed from Canada, which has never managed to establish a distinctive cinematic voice in the way some European and Asian countries have, partly because of the three-way split among the somewhat experimental Ontario wing, the Francophone filmmakers in Quebec, and the more Hollywood-like

British Columbia group. Cronenberg is a mainstay of the Ontario filmmakers, along with Atom Egoyan and Don McKellar, who make different sorts of movies but share his penchant for unconventional structures and sociocultural critique. Some consider him a national asset worth every penny of the Canadian government's filmmaking subsidies. Others take the dimmer view expressed in a widely quoted post-Shivers article, by the Canadian critic Robert Fulford in the magazine *Saturday Night*, called "You Should Know How Bad This Film Is. After All, You Paid for It."

Cronenberg graduated from the exploitation-film ghetto in 1980 with the slightly higher-budget *Scanners*, about a cult of people with destructive telepathic powers. He then scored enough box-office success with his 1982 techno-thriller *Videodrome*, about a malignant TV show designed to invade the minds and bodies of its viewers, to get the job, a year later, of filming Stephen King's novel *The Dead Zone*, with Christopher Walken as a man who awakens from a coma with powers to see the future. That assignment put him on his best behavior, resulting in a movie that's both impeccably crafted and surprisingly tame. His book-based movies since then include *Naked Lunch* (1991) and *Crash* (1996), from William S. Burroughs and J.G. Ballard, respectively both novels thought by Hollywood studios to be unfilmable. He has also developed original projects like the gynecological horror-drama *Dead Ringers* (1988) and the sci-fi fantasy *eXistenZ* (1999).

Cronenberg has never been a dependable hit-maker or a favorite with consumer-guide reviewers, but thoughtful critics have taken him seriously, with mixed results. Some find him a deeply personal filmmaker who has taken familiar formulas of the horror, science-fiction, and psychological-drama genres and put them through highly original transmutations and recombinations, arriving at apocalyptic visions of rare forcefulness.

Others agree with the influential academic critic Robin Wood, who finds Cronenberg to be a conservative, even reactionary, allegorist of contemporary culture. According to this view, summed up in Wood's essay "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," the best horror fantasies serve to liberate their audiences by

unleashing anarchic monsters that embody the unquenchable spirit and inevitable return of libidinal urges. The monsters' unleashing puts audiences in momentary touch with truths about nature -- human and otherwise -- that, at our psychological and spiritual peril, we normally repress and deny. Wood places Cronenberg's movies in opposition to "progressive" films that use horrors as metaphors for oppressive bourgeois institutions like marriage and family. He deplores Cronenberg's conception of the monstrous as physically disgusting and metaphysically obscene, manifesting a paranoid view of the body in general, and sexuality in particular.

Feminists have an extra bone to pick with Cronenberg, asserting that women's bodies find especially dark fates in his stories. Misanthropy might be as easy a case to build as misogyny. After all, James Woods and Jeff Goldblum are certainly put through ugly paces in *Videodrome* and *The Fly*, respectively. Still, there is something grimly characteristic in the *Videodrome* image of Deborah Harry snuffing out a cigarette on her breast, the *Naked Lunch* shot of Judy Davis injecting dope into hers, and so on, stretching at least as far back as *Rabid*, when the vampiric Rose ends up dead on a garbage heap.

Many a Cronenberg man meets a similarly harsh end -- such as the twin gynecologists played by Jeremy Irons in *Dead Ringers*. Then again, they aren't your every-day gynecologists, and Cronenberg's camera seems awfully fascinated by the bizarre instruments they invent for their nightmarish examinations of female anatomy.

Sexual politics aside, Cronenberg has received more analysis than any filmmaker this side of Oliver Stone from critics who think theatrical movies are outgrowing their modernist roots and entering a postmodern era. Postmodern elements in Cronenberg's films include disjunctive stories, self-reflexive overtones, and genre-bending scenarios in movies as diverse as *Videodrome*, *Naked Lunch*, *Crash*, and *eXistenZ*. His rejection of traditional lenses for viewing human experience -- including all manner of philosophical and ideological master narratives -- produces an apocalyptic, doom-laden spirit that's eminently suited to the postmodernist idea of contemporary culture as severed from the

myths of a shared past. The literal meaning of "apocalypse" is "an unveiling," usually in the sense of an unveiling of a state of affairs that has been present all along. Many of Cronenberg's films are steeped in this spirit, using scenes of violence and dysfunction as metaphors for tendencies toward anomie, disorientation, lawlessness, and chaos.

Here again, though, Cronenberg proves difficult to pin down. Postmodernists champion the end of master narratives and all-embracing worldviews; hence the affection they often feel for fragmented films like David Lynch's *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*. But Cronenberg has busied himself positing an intricate network of new mythologies and unifying themes, suited to the still-emerging conditions of the postindustrial landscape.

The dangers of science and medicine, contemporary media's implacable hold on us, and the feral enticements of sex loom large in his vision, which combines a pessimistic philosophical outlook with a sense of existential excitement conveyed by the relentless audacity of his style. Sex loses its allure as intimate fun in *Crash*, offering murky new pleasures in the fusion of sensual gratification with technological disaster. Science forfeits its status as a civilizing force in *eXistenZ* and *The Fly*, taking on alchemical powers that bend biological nature into unheard-of configurations. Mass media betray their innate incoherence in *Videodrome*, revealing themselves as invasive parasites capable of hardwiring humanity into their perverse commands. Such films present a vision of society on the cusp of a future that's bewildering and barbaric from a humanistic perspective, yet alluring and perhaps liberating for those who plunge adventurously into its intimidating depths.

Given the radically strange contours of Cronenberg's fictional world, it isn't surprising that his characters are often as disoriented as we'd be if we found ourselves wandering through it. His longtime fascination with mental aberration, prominent in such signature movies as *Videodrome* and *Dead Ringers*, surfaces again in *Spider*, which gains much of its eerie power from a refusal to separate the protagonist's delusion-riddled thoughts from the everyday surroundings in which he's adrift. Set in the 1960s, the film begins when the title character (Ralph Fiennes) is released to a

halfway house in London after years in a psychiatric institution.

Disturbed and inarticulate, he shuffles through the grimy streets of the neighborhood where he grew up, constantly jotting notes in a small journal he keeps inside a knotted sock. Harrowing memories start to recur, inducing him to relive his childhood days.

We experience them too, shuttling through the skein of past and present that constitutes Spider's jumbled mind. As a boy, we learn, his name was Dennis, and he had a close relationship with a loving and protective mother (Miranda Richardson), who gave him his nickname after witnessing his curious habit of making little webs from strands of thread.

Later in his childhood he was traumatized when his abusive father (Gabriel Byrne) apparently murdered his mother after she caught him having sex with a local prostitute (also played by Richardson, this time with snaggle teeth). When he remembers the prostitute moving into the family home, Spider's thoughts become increasingly distraught, leaving us unclear as to what actually happened to his mother, and what role he may have played in her death.

Spider is based on a novel by Patrick McGrath, who grew up on the grounds of the Broadmoor hospital -- England's most notorious institution for the criminally insane -- where his father was medical superintendent. McGrath also collaborated with Cronenberg on the screenplay, and his hand is evident in the finished film, which is more compelling as a finely wrought portrait of mental illness than as a psychological horror film.

Spider grimly evokes the nightmarish world of the protagonist's mind, encompassing him in an atmosphere of dingy suffering, faded wallpaper, dirt, filth, and grime that echo and reflect his turbulent inner state. The streets he shuffles down are shadowed by the looming tower of an enormous gasworks; the dark alleys and bridges he skulks across suggest a subconscious landscape full of psychosexual tensions. Spider himself, with his layers of shirts, obsessive scribbling, and stringing up of threads, is a frightening example of a man trapped in a self-spun web of anguished visions.

Spider's tortured thought processes and tenuous relationship with reality recall the novels of Samuel Beckett, whose craggy appearance was an influence on Fiennes's concept of the character, as the actor noted at the Toronto International Film Festival this fall. That literary touchstone notwithstanding, Cronenberg captures Spider's inner life in largely nonverbal terms, relying less on dialogue and action than on details of lighting and dcor. "Patrick's first draft had voiceover narration and insects," Cronenberg said at the Cannes film festival, where the film had its world premiere last spring. "I really felt this was a different kind of movie," said the director, "and I'd rather use damp, moldy wallpaper ... to give you the interior of Spider's mind."

Spider provides a subtler evocation of key Cronenberg concerns -- psychological disorder, agonies of abjection, violence of body and mind -- than many of his earlier films. It is very much a Cronenberg movie, though, continuing his exploration of yet another ongoing theme: irresistible transformations in which the boundaries of self fracture and disintegrate. These transformations take different forms in different films -- an abandonment of self to a collective impulse or gestalt (Shivers, Rabid), a merging between two beings (The Fly, Dead Ringers, M. Butterfly), a surrender of independence in order to serve incomprehensible conspiracies (Scanners, Videodrome, Naked Lunch). What's unusual in Spider is that the transformation is entirely internalized, as the markers of the protagonist's selfhood collapse, wish-fulfillment fantasies merge with self-punishing delusions, and the very nature of human identity is called into question.

Spider includes few of Cronenberg's patented twists and turns of plot, and unlike such recent movies as eXistenZ and Crash, it presents no harrowing fusion of flesh and technology. Instead we come face to face with something at least as disturbing: a terminally disordered mind, with no hope of improvement. The film's minimalist aspects may be a momentary departure for Cronenberg, who said at Cannes that he'd cheerfully return to "effects and violence and gore" if they're called for by the next story that catches his eye. It's also possible his interests are taking a more pensive, inner-directed turn, however. He suggested as

much at the Toronto festival, when he acknowledged that Spider was a particularly personal project for him.

"Flaubert said, 'Madame Bovary, c'est moi,'" he remarked. "I say, 'Spider, c'est moi.' I think I'm just that far away from being Spider at any given moment, frankly -- walking in the streets, mumbling, probably about the film business, in an old coat with a tattered lining and all my possessions in a small cardboard suitcase that's falling apart. I can see that happening at any moment. So there was something about Spider that was very compelling and close to home."

It remains to be seen whether Cronenberg's followers will find it close to home as well. Usually sympathetic critics have been ambivalent so far -- it was selected for the prestigious official competition at Cannes, but overlooked by the New York Film Festival, the most selective North American festival -- and early reviews have been mixed. If Spider fails at the box office, the next round of Cronenbergian effects and gore could come sooner than expected. If it finds an eager audience, it could encourage him to further experiments along subtler, less cinematically explosive lines.

In our view, the latter would be a welcome development. While we have long admired Cronenberg's pluck and audacity, we feel his films are often more interesting in conception than execution. They're exciting to think and talk about, but actually watching them can be dull by comparison -- prime examples are *Naked Lunch* and *Crash*, as theoretically bold as any movies of the past dozen years, yet so sluggishly paced and cinematically labored that we are rarely tempted to give them repeat viewings. The comparative restraint and inward-looking mood of *Spider* indicate a new willingness on Cronenberg's part to embrace elements of narrative nuance and psychological ambiguity that have eluded him in the past. We await the next stages of his career with heightened curiosity.

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