

A PINWOOD DIALOGUE WITH DAVID CRONENBERG AND STEVE KNIGHT

David Cronenberg's *Eastern Promises* is an intense psychological thriller about a mysterious Russian immigrant tied to a London crime family. With its thematic focus on personal and cultural identity, and its exploration of violence and the male psyche, *Eastern Promises* makes a fascinating companion piece to Cronenberg's *A History of Violence*, which also stars Viggo Mortensen. Cronenberg and screenwriter Steve Knight (*Dirty Pretty Things*) discussed the movie at a Museum screening prior to its successful U.S. release. The director's sardonic world view and the screenwriter's more sentimental humanism—and the duo's mutual respect—are reflected in the film and the conversation.

A Pinewood Dialogue following a screening of *Eastern Promises*, moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (September 13, 2007):

SCHWARTZ: There's no better director around than David Cronenberg, and here he is! (Applause)

Well, when we last saw you—the Museum audience saw you—it was right when *A History of Violence* was coming out. That film was a big success, both commercially and critically. I just want to ask you, as a way of segueing into this film, how it came about that this was your next project? What was opened up to you after that film?

CRONENBERG: Well, people sometimes get the impression that you can kind of pick and choose what movies you do, and you're thinking of the arc of your career: "And now, the musical comedy." (Laughter) You know? And in fact, maybe I even would do that. But it has more to do with what comes along—whether it comes from you, or an adaptation, or you see a newspaper article, or your agent sends you a script. Then, when you find something that you're interested in, as I was with Steve's script, even then it took about a year before it came back to me, because money, deals, timing—all kinds of things were not working out, and it's quite possible that I would have done another movie. There were several things that came by. I might well have been talking to you now about some other movie—that

musical comedy, for example—instead of this one.

So when people say, "Well, this is kind of a matched pair with *A History of Violence*," I can see the connections, but I had nothing to do with it in terms of willing it to happen that way. It's not as though I said, "I must do a matched movie to *A History of Violence* that's the flip side; on the other side of the Atlantic, but also a gangster movie." That's the way it worked.

SCHWARTZ: But it'll make a nice double feature at the drive-in.

CRONENBERG: It totally would. It really, really would—if there were drive-ins. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: And how did you come to write the script? I mean, it has some similarities, of course, with *Dirty Pretty Things*, in its portrait of London and a side of London that we don't see often.

KNIGHT: I think it's not just London, it's most big cities—New York, Toronto, any of those cities—have the same industry, the same problems going on, which is the trafficking of human beings. I think if you live in a city like London, it's not only your duty to tell those stories, it's also—Why wouldn't you? Because that's where the real meat, the real drama is really happening, you know. So it was just the fact that this was obviously going on; that in suburbs of London,

there are people who are living in slavery now. If that's your starting point, then you know that you've got real drama there. So that was the reason.

SCHWARTZ: Was there anything in particular that drew you to this script and made you want to do it as a film?

CRONENBERG: Steve [Knight] paid me a lot of money under the table, and I am very susceptible to bribery. (Laughter) Likewise, Viggo [Mortensen]; he can't get work, you know, so I... (Laughter)

No; Toronto prides itself on being a multicultural city, and so does London. That intrigued me, because it's in opposition to the American theory of the melting pot, where you come to America and you become an American; you give up a lot of your national, original identity. In London and Toronto, there's the theory that you can somehow come together and maintain your culture—and there are good and bad sides to both of those concepts, really.

So what you've got in London, and in Steve's script, is this kind of mini criminal globalization going on. You couple that with the rise of a very raw, primitive form of capitalism coming out of Eastern Europe, now that Communism has fallen. The combination is very volatile, very interesting. All of these cultures—you know, we have Chechens, Azerbaijanis, Turks and Russians and so on—trying to work together, but at the same time, they have these thousand-year-old enmities and hostilities, and so they never trust each other. So it's a really rich texture; and of course, Steve's dialogues and characters were wonderful.

SCHWARTZ: Wasn't the poisoning of the spy, former spy—by Putin, ostensibly—going on at that time, when you were [filming]?

CRONENBERG: Our production did that. (Laughter) When we started, the Russian mob in London was a very obscure topic, and we thought there should be some way of... (Laughter) No; but in fact, that started to happen halfway through our shoot. Literally half a block from my front door, where I was renting an apartment in London—and

Viggo's and Vincent Cassel, as well—there was a building owned by the Russian oligarch Berezovsky, who has a big feud with President Putin. We walked by there every day, and suddenly there were cops in hazmat suits, and forensic vans finding traces of polonium radiation there because Litvinenko had been there. So we were very hot. We were radioactively hot, in fact.

SCHWARTZ: Could you talk a bit about the process of the collaboration, or how the script developed? What was, say, added to it or changed?

KNIGHT: Well, the great thing about working with David is that he has a hawk eye for things that won't work, and also an instinct for what would work. So when we first sat down to discuss the script, there were elements of it that David instinctively knew would slow things down or wouldn't work. So it was great. As a result of David's sure-handedness, the meetings didn't have to be long. It was sort of like, "Let's do that"—so then I would go away and do it. But also, David gives you the room to fix the problem, as well, you know what I mean? So really, it's an ideal situation.

CRONENBERG: Yes, I found the same. I mean, you can often have writers who are very protective of their material—because it's theirs, and no other reason; not necessarily because it works—and you get a whole ego thing going on there. It can be quite messy. But Steve was not like that. In fact, he was very excited to develop the script, because it hadn't really gotten very far developed. It sort of had languished at BBC Films for quite some time. In fact, I think you wrote *Dirty Pretty Things* before it...?

KNIGHT: It was sort of consecutive. I started to write this just about when *Dirty Pretty Things* was being taken into production.

CRONENBERG: So that movie got made a couple years ago, and this script just was lying around. So he never got a chance to get his hands on it and really start to work with it as though it was going to get made. Once the production is there and you say, "Okay, we're making this movie," then things get intense, and they get real.

SCHWARTZ: The opening scenes are so concise and strong. There are not actually a great number of violent scenes, though they make an impression, and you have this very violent opening. Then this theme of birth is introduced; but birth itself is violent in the next scene.

KNIGHT: I mean, in writing the opening scene, what I wanted to do was to take a very conventional gangster scenario—which is an execution, an execution in a barber shop—and then having established that, then everything should be *not* what you're expecting. So to go straight to birth, now there is a birth and death and renewal, and it's Christmas and all of that. I mean, I think those things are there if people want to look for them.

SCHWARTZ: The image of that baby in that second scene is so striking. (Laughs) Was that a special effect?

CRONENBERG: Well, that's a fake baby. That's a silicon baby. I had one lying around, so I thought... (Laughter) You know, well everybody does, don't they? Yes, at one point we thought we would actually show the birth, and I think that was in the script. We tried that a bit, and then I really thought we didn't need to do that, I thought. The baby—it was a special effects baby, and then added to that is a little bit of CG, a little computer work. Just the lips moving, and the eyes moving in a way that was subtle—too subtle to do mechanically, although the breathing was, in fact, mechanical. But it's not just the baby, it's the lighting and the angle of the shot and the makeup on the baby that make it work so well.

SCHWARTZ: Another thing that's very striking—and this is on a second viewing of the film—is the tone. You talked about having things that you don't expect, and there are more scenes of tenderness in this film than maybe struck me on the first viewing. Example: the scene with the prostitutes. After a very brutal scene, there's a very tender scene, and I just wonder if maybe either of you could talk about that.

CRONENBERG: Well, I tried to get rid of all that. (Laughter) But I didn't manage to expunge every moment of tenderness. I tried. (Laughter) My

analysis of Steve, (as he's sitting here, so I can...) No; I think he falls in love with his characters and he has great affection for them, which is one of the great things about the script—and that goes for even the nasty characters. Then it's just a question of not going too far with that. You want to make sure that you don't go over into sentimentality but at the same time, you want to express this affection that you have for even very flawed human beings, because they are human beings.

KNIGHT: I think that it's the fact that there are several characters who sort of deliberately—and expressly, and innately—do not show emotion. So that when they do show some emotion, I think it has a great effect. I think in particular, Kirill. I am sort of fond of that character because he's so out of control. I think you don't forgive him for what he does, but part of you understands what he does and why he does it.

SCHWARTZ: Just before opening it up to the audience, I'll ask about the scene that's already become legendary, in a way (which I guess was just a line or two in the script): the fight scene in the sauna. So I guess if both of you could talk about what you had in mind in writing it, what you had envisioned, and then how that...?

KNIGHT: I think it's a masterpiece; I think it's fantastic. And you're quite right; I mean, basically the idea in the script is that here's someone who is naked (and therefore vulnerable), who proves to us that the thing that this character is really best at and really well equipped for is this sort of violence. But then, you know, the execution of it is just amazing.

CRONENBERG: In the original script, he never talked about the towel, you know? Where did it go? Was it on the guy or was it not? (Laughter) So we had to figure that out, Viggo and I. (Laughs)

SCHWARTZ: You have the worst continuity person... (Laughter)

CRONENBERG: Really; yes, yes. No; it was not too detailed a script. And in fact, we did change a few things, I think. In the original script, Steve—once again that tenderness that I so hate!—actually,

the Chechens were not killed, you'll recall. You didn't have them dead, and I said, "They've got to be dead, because they're not going to stop coming after him." (Laughter) So you can't just punch them and make them unconscious, they've got to be dead."

There were a few other things like that, but mostly it had to be worked out in great detail. Really, when you write a script it is broad strokes, mostly, because to put in all the detail that it takes to actually make a movie would take an 800-page script. You know, a script is not even a blueprint, because you can build a house from a blueprint, but you can't build a movie from a script in the same sense. So Steve—wily old character that he is—knows that there's going to be a crew of a hundred people, very enthusiastic, doing research. You know, "What kind of shoes does this gangster wear? What socks? What car does he drive? You know, what kind of sunglasses? And where will the tattoos all be? And what will they represent?" None of that—you know, it would just be too laborious to read. But when you're making a movie, you have to figure all that stuff, figure all of that out.

SCHWARTZ: And I gather Viggo was quite into researching this question about tattoos.

CRONENBERG: Yeah, Viggo is an amazing collaborator. With him, I like to say, you don't just get a solo violin, you get a whole orchestra. He does his own research. He does it in the sweetest, most gentle way, because it's really for him, but he shares it—and if you don't want to look at it, he doesn't mind. He sent me, at a certain point, a book called *Russian Criminal Tattoo*, which was phenomenal—I mean, it was an amazing book—and also a documentary made by a friend of his named Alix Lambert called *The Mark of Cain*, which was shot in maximum security Russian prisons, where you have thirty-five prisoners in a cell made for four. They literally can not all sit down at the same time, so they have to take turns sitting down. They all talked about their tattoos and this subculture of tattooing in Russian prison that goes back to Czarist days—predates the Soviet Union by a long way—and has evolved as a kind of secret society. It still exists now, although it's becoming a bit passé,

once again, in the face of the new capitalism happening. I sent this to Steve because I said, "This is mind boggling." He had, of course, alluded to tattoos, but not ever gotten into it in the detail that we ended up with. And I said, "No writer can resist this kind of stuff. It's just too rich, you know. When we do another rewrite, you're going to want to incorporate this into the film in a huge way."

SCHWARTZ: Just one other detail while it's on my mind, and we're talking about physical details: Anna's character, the fact that she rides a motorcycle seems to be a really important detail. It says something about her character and I know you're very interested in motorcycles...

KNIGHT: Well, what I wanted was the presence or non-presence of her father, who'd recently died. The motorbike belonged to him. It's also a Russian motorbike. So even if we forget that detail, visually there is some connection between her and her father there. So that when she meets Semyon, we understand that she's sort of looking for that sort of father figure.

SCHWARTZ: Okay, let's open it up. Raise your hand, and I'll repeat questions, just so everybody can hear.

(Repeats audience question) This sounds like an unusually high amount of collaboration with the script writer after the script is written and while you're in production.

CRONENBERG: That's pretty normal, I think; and normal for me. Certainly, I did even more of that on *A History of Violence*. Truthfully, it would be great to have a script arrive that was so perfect you didn't want to touch one thing in it, and just go make it. It's very rare, though, that that happens. Part of the reason is that there is a tendency now—and I think it's been there for a long time—that producers or studios don't really want to get into paying for the second draft until they have a director onboard, because directors have a habit of rambunctiously changing everything, and not liking stuff. It's not worth doing a draft to a producer's specification because basically, the producers often don't actually know how to read a script really well. You

know, they don't really understand what it needs to make it work onscreen; they just have an instinct that it could be good. So I think that's the reason. It's not really that unusual that a director should get very involved in the rewriting of a screenplay—and that takes nothing away from what the screenwriter is doing. The more that the screenwriter can do, the happier that I am—because I'm very, very lazy. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: And are you thinking of who's going to be directing this when you're writing it? Or was he in the top ten on your list?

CRONENBERG: He wasn't thinking of me at all, guaranteed! (Laughter)

KNIGHT: Truthfully, you write the script on behalf of your characters, I think. And you know, it's great news when someone comes along who's going to... because when the director's onboard, that's when you know that you're probably going to get into production quite soon.

SCHWARTZ: Over here.

(Repeats audience question) Were there many deleted scenes? Were there many scenes that you guys filmed that didn't make it in?

CRONENBERG: No... There were a couple, there were some. One of the things that Steve will tell you is that I love short scripts, and that most of my glee and pleasure comes from cutting—which you might imagine. (Laughter) I think of that scene where he's cutting off the fingers and I say, "Yes, the guy will be—he'll weigh less." (Laughter) It's one way of losing weight.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: (Asks question about whether there will be deleted scenes on the DVD of *Eastern Promises*.)

SCHWARTZ: Oh; you can still buy the DVD, don't worry.

CRONENBERG: But no; you will not see these scenes on the DVD because I don't like doing that. I did that with one scene in *A History of Violence*. That's the first time I... they're deleted because I don't like them! (Laughter) Really, often

it's not because of a performance or whatever, but just because once they don't work, they're gone. They're out of my head. I don't see why you should see them, anymore than you'd want to read the original draft of Steve's script. Do you?

KNIGHT: Yes! (Laughter)

CRONENBERG: The other reason is that those scenes don't get developed, either. They're like the first draft, you know. I edited this movie in three weeks. So I don't spend a lot of time, normally, if the movie's working and if... I'm very concise on set. I don't do storyboards, but I'm pretty precise. So there's not a lot... I'd love to get to the point where I've cut the script so tightly that there are no deleted scenes, that we shoot everything and it is needed. I haven't quite achieved that yet. But there were a couple of scenes that... They don't get mixed, they don't get refined, because I cut them very early in the editing process. So they're not finished, and I don't have the heart to finish them to the extent that I could present them to you on the DVD as finished scenes, the way they would've been if they'd been in the movie. So that's my feeling.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: (Asks question about whether Cronenberg had to reshoot any scenes in the film.)

CRONENBERG: Did I have to go back to film? You mean reshoots kind of thing? No, I think there was... No; not really, no.

SCHWARTZ: He knows what he's doing, really. Trust me. (Laughter) Okay, another question.

(Repeats audience question) How long did the filming take? And how long did the fight scene take to film?

CRONENBERG: It was a fifty-three day shoot. So it was basically ten weeks, plus a little bit. The fight scene took about two days to shoot. Viggo, having had experience doing other fight scenes on other movies, said that normally something like that would take a week. He was very glad that it didn't, because he was getting very bruised and beaten up. I mean, obviously, he can't wear pads, you know; he's naked! (Laughs) So it meant

that... I mean, the effects make-up man, Stephan Dupuis—he's a wonderful... he's brilliant—said to me, "You know David, I'm spending more time covering up Viggo's bruises than I am putting the tattoos on everyday." And I said, "Just don't tell me that. I don't want to know." (Laughter)

But it takes a lot of preparation, though—though I don't do storyboards, and though I love to come on the set not knowing what I'm going to do—because I want the spontaneity of everybody to be involved. Speaking of collaboration, I want the collaboration of everybody on the set. You know, I have monitors everywhere. Some directors are very possessive about the image. They don't want other people to have the image and know what they're shooting. I want it open to the whole crew. I want everybody to know what's going on, including the actors. If they want to look at it, I'll play it back for them. So that's the kind of trust and transparency that's there on the set, which allows you to do a scene like that with a major actor. Also, the preparation that goes into it with the designing of the set with Carol Spier, who's a set designer I've worked with for thirty years; and the working out of the choreography with the stunt coordinator and the actors... It's just a lot of preparation. So we knew exactly what the fight scene was going to be—as far as you can know without actually shooting it, because once you start to shoot it, everything changes—which is why I don't do storyboards: everything changes, and I like that. But it really just took two days.

SCHWARTZ: Is there discussion about the thematic elements of the film? As an example, it occurred to me watching that fight scene that it has something to do with the idea of birth. There's a lot about birth and rebirth in the film, and he has just talked in a previous scene about being dead and that scene is sort of a rebirth. People have talked about how the film has elements and thematic relationship to your other works, but how does that manifest itself in terms of how you work on the set?

CRONENBERG: Well, Steve is twitching. (Laughter) I think that means he wants to say something.

KNIGHT: It's sort of not essential that people get the themes, I don't think, to enjoy the film. But

there are themes of rebirth and resurrection all the way through, I think, and also violence as destructive and violence as creative. I think those images and those themes are there. But I do think even if you're consciously aware of them, you feel their energy—the energy of those ideas in there—I think.

CRONENBERG: Somebody actually came up with a very interesting religious interpretation of the whole movie, with the baby being Moses in the bulrushes. Honest to God, I'm serious! You know, it was convincing. I'm convinced! (Laughter) I've made a religious epic, oh, my God! I loved *Ben Hur* (1959)... (Laughter)

But the truth is that even as you can not photograph an abstract concept, and an actor can not act the role of an abstract concept, I as a director can not direct an abstract concept. I'm talking about themes. You can't really... That doesn't help you creatively do anything. Even though when the film works, it does evoke these things and provoke them in the minds of the audience; and that makes it potent and interesting, and makes for interconnections and stuff. But basically, when you're making the movie, it's really detail by detail, shot by shot. It's very plastic and sculptural for me, making movies. It's got a lot to do with space, and three dimensions, and moving through space. No more than a sculptor can really think of the themes of what he's doing—you're working with stone or whatever it is, and you're trying to get the chisel to work and... that's how it feels.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) It seems like there's a lot of emphasis on intimate exchanges between characters. Was that a conscious thing?

CRONENBERG: Well, it was written that way. It's a very intimate film, really. Also, I think the claustrophobia of—you know, what we were talking about—the multiculturalism, everybody being jammed together and having to figure out a way to work together, even if it's a criminal enterprise.

KNIGHT: What I wanted to get in there is that there are a lot of secrets. There are a lot of people with

two lives. There are a lot of moments when secrets are shared, or when we can see that secrets have not been shared in the normal way. So yes, that intimacy between characters who are desperately trying not to show their feelings I think is important, and that causes the tension.

CRONENBERG: And knives are intimate. Much more intimate than guns. In Steve's script, there were no guns. In London, there are a lot of guns. I mean, in England now. There used to be a time when the Bobbies, the police, famously didn't carry guns; but that's long gone. But I liked that element of Steve's script because it meant forced intimacy. I mean, if you're going to kill somebody with a short little curvy knife, that's an intimate act. It's got a strange perverse eroticism about it... especially if he's naked in a steam bath, of course. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: But there is an underlying sexual... a sexual undercurrent and a homoerotic undercurrent, which perhaps you are not working out consciously what you want to do with it, but it seems to be there throughout the film...

CRONENBERG: There is? (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: Well, I could be reading into it....

CRONENBERG: No, of course, there is! And that is Steve's basic repressed homosexuality coming out... (Laughter)

KNIGHT: I'll show you my tattoo later. (Laughter)

CRONENBERG: Well, it starts with Kirill, the character of Kirill, who is basically really in love with Nikolai. He's a gangster who's gay, who could not possibly admit that even to himself, because that's like a death sentence in that milieu. Nikolai, for his own reasons—and at first we think it's because he just wants to use Kirill to rise in the mob, and then later we realize he has other reasons for doing it—he flirts with him. He manipulates him. He uses that love, and that sort of repressed homosexuality, for his own purposes. So that's the basis of that; and then it comes out also in the steam bath scene and so on.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Have you always had this kind of open collaboration on the set? Or has that evolved more over time?

CRONENBERG: Well, the first movie I did, it was called *Shivers*, and it was shot in fifteen days, and you know... I think the collaboration with the actors came later, because in that first movie, it was like the actors were the bulls in your china shop, and the movie was the china shop. I had such a tight schedule that if an actor said, "Why don't I lie down over there, instead of saying the line by the window?" I'd go, "*No, no!* We got light over there, we got—the lights are over there, and I've got ten minutes to shoot this. Then we've got to kill the security guard and crash the car!" (Laughter) I didn't realize, though, that you could just say that to an actor, and then he would find some way to make what you had to do interesting for him. So it took me maybe three-quarters of that movie to realize that in fact, you didn't have to think that way about your actors, and that they could be collaborators.

But really, I think one of the only things that I can say to a young director as advice—because everything's changed so much since I started—is that you must invent your own version of being a director. There are no rules. All of the mythologies that your teachers give you is just mythology. You don't have to be like von Sternberg, you know? You don't have to be like... There's no one that you have to be like. There are many ways to be a director, and it has to come from you and your own temperament. There's no point... I would be terrible yelling at actors; I'm not good at that, you know? So I don't think that that works anyway, and the actors agree with me. But nonetheless... (Laughter) Well, there's a great... There are some directors who buy the whole, "You must humiliate everybody and you must torture them, you know, to get good stuff." I don't find that to be the case, and I've never had any reason to think any way differently. So yes—in short, yes; I've always had a very open and collaborative set.

Once monitors came in, I immediately felt that the idea that you must not show your actors; you mustn't let your actors see themselves—because they'll freak out; they won't like what they've done, and they'll want to change it, they'll want to

reshoot it, and then it'll take a lot of time and so on and so on. I suppose if you had a really neurotic actor of a certain kind, that could happen, but I've never had that be the case. Mostly, actors who don't like to see themselves while they act, they just automatically just don't look. It's very straightforward.

SCHWARTZ: Was it true that you and Viggo were each reading Dostoyevsky while [filming]?

CRONENBERG: Yes. Doesn't that sound pretentious? (Laughter) But it's totally true. I thought, "Okay, what...you know, Russian-ness. Okay, we've got to get into Russian-ness. How do we do that? Well, Dostoyevsky. He's Russian; I'll read him." I just happened to have the latest translation of *The Possessed*, which in the new translation is called *Demons*. This is the Pevar and Volokhonsky, you know, series of— And I have a lot of those new translations. And I started to read *Demons* and I thought, "My God, this is just—this is sort of our movie, in a way." You know, anticipating it... secret societies and revolution and crime and all that great Dostoyevskian stuff. So I phoned Viggo and I said, "Viggo, you know, you really should read this, because... and don't read the old translation. Don't read Constance Garnett. This is really much better, much rawer and cruder and so on." He said, "I just finished it." (Laughter) So we were totally in synch; and you know, it's not research in the sort of traditional sense, but it's just we wanted to get into the soul of Russian-ness, each for our own reasons.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Viggo is very good in these fight scenes. Did he bring fighting experience before *A History of Violence*, or is he...?

CRONENBERG: No, I had to teach him everything. (Laughter) In fact, for *History*, I did find on the net some DVDs that teach you how to kill. So don't mess with me, that's all I'm saying. (Laughter) Because sometimes it's a reflex, I can't help it. (Laughter) But we did look at those, because we thought that that character would've learned to fight on the streets of Philadelphia, and it would not be military training or anything else; it would be street fighting, and that's what we based that

on. Whereas, for this movie, we felt that he would have some military training, probably KGB spetsnaz, we don't know; special forces. In fact, for each of those characters in the steambath scene, we assigned a kind of fighting to that character, because they would really have learned it from different places. In a way, it helped them to... You know, the way you fight is also an expression of character and your background. So it was basically very worked out choreography for a specific reason, not coming from Viggo's background—although God knows... you know. He has that scar here, you know....

But he's very athletic, and it would've been very difficult, obviously, to shoot a scene like that with an actor would—or couldn't—really do that. Stunt coordinators, who helped work out the scene, love working with actors because they come up with unusual things; and stunt guys have a stunt guy mentality, and it's usually a very, you know, restricted range of things that they would come up with. But sometimes you have to block the scene out with stunt people, and then just show the actors and let them do whatever they can. But in this case, all three guys—I mean, the big Chechen is actually a Turkish Cypriot who was forty-seven and zero in his amateur boxing career, and the other guy was a Georgian who had been in the military—so they were very able to do this on their own. But once again, it basically is choreography that's created dramatically.

SCHWARTZ: Of course, what's powerful that Viggo's performance is the subtlety and what he does when he's still, when he's not fighting; the kind of little smirk he gets. There's so much ambiguity about how you read him, and you're always trying to, as you're watching the film, trying to figure him out and read him.

CRONENBERG: Well, he did go to Russia on his own. Some people were horrified. They said, "No, no, you can't do that. You have to have a translator, and you have to have a guide with you and stuff." But he went to Moscow and St. Petersburg, and then he went to Yekaterinburg, which is in Siberia, which is where we figured this character would come from. He just went alone, because if you go as a celebrity—and Viggo never does that anyway, I can tell you—but you

can't really observe people. Anonymity is really important for an artist. You need to be anonymous. You need to be able to observe without being observed. If the people are looking at you, then you can't really see them. So he was driving a car, you know; being chased by farm dogs in Siberia and all of that stuff. (Laughter) It was all to see the whole... the kind of weight of a thousand years of depression, Russian depression; to see the way they held themselves; the way they hid themselves; the way they stayed aloof. How did they do that? And how did they speak? He saw all of that.

SCHWARTZ: Could you talk about your own research within London?

KNIGHT: Yes. The character of Semyon is based on a real person (which is one of the first things that sort of prompted me to start writing this); someone who, even though he's involved in organized crime, used to do Pushkin readings. You know, he was really quite intellectual. Also had that fantastic hospitality and warmth, but was also quite mournful and regretful. You know, and there's that lovely darkness about certain Russian characters and that sort of Russian temperament, which I think is a great sort of environment for this kind of story to develop.

SCHWARTZ: Howard Shore's credit, when it came up, got applause, and the music, as you were talking about that tone, is so much is captured in the music. I just wonder if you'd say...?

CRONENBERG: I hate when that happens. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: When they're applauding other people?

CRONENBERG: Yes. (Laughter) No, Howard is... you know, we grew up in Toronto...

SCHWARTZ: You were the one hissing in the background.

CRONENBERG: I was singing. That's the way I sing. (Laughter) No; Howard and I grew up together in Toronto, and he's done almost every movie that I've done, and he's just so sensitive to...

Analyzing the way music is usually used in movies, it's there to exaggerate or support the tone that's already in the scene. You know, so if it's a sad scene, you get really sad music; if it's an action scene, you get action music. Often that betrays an insecurity of the filmmakers, who feel it's not punchy enough, it's not giving you what should be there, so you know—wall-to-wall music, perhaps.

But the kind of music that we like, and that I asked for, is music that adds a whole other layer of meaning and emotion that's not necessarily in the scene itself, or is only a subtle thing in the scene. That the violin, the voice of the violin was so beautiful... There's a wonderful English-Italian woman who played that violin for us in the movie, and it's just so emotional and so wonderful. But you know, you say, "Okay, it's Russian. So there's got to be balalaikas, right? Well, we do have balalaikas, but it would be so easy to be kitschy and just do a Russian pastiche. Howard managed to find the soul of Russian-ness, without doing a kind of kitschy version of Russia. It's so subtle, what he does, and so beautiful.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Is three weeks a long time to edit? What kind of editing equipment do you use? (I guess he wants to get the same machine.) And then at what point do you let the film go and let it—?

CRONENBERG: Well, three weeks is ferociously short. It shocks all other directors, and they hate that I say that, because then their producers will expect them to not do the six months of editing that they want to do. And no; I think normally in your contract—in a DGA contract, in fact—I think it's fourteen weeks that you get. Marty Scorsese spent a year doing *The Departed*, I think? It really varies. But there are standards; standard contracts and stuff.

But no; three weeks is ferociously short. We did refine it after that, you know, when we sort of screened it for friends, and there were little things. But the structure—you know, the deleted scenes, and the basic shape of it—I mean, let's put it this way: In three weeks I said, "Okay, that's my director's cut. I'm willing to show it to my producers and to Focus [Features] distributors."

So that means that I'm confident that that's pretty much the movie. I'm open to feedback at that point. But usually directors are pretty reluctant to do that until they're pretty confident they've got what they need.

We edit on Avid. I love electronic editing. People who say you should go back to film are insane. You know, forget it! Because with electronic editing... Well, for me, it's like word processing. I couldn't wait to get rid of typewriters (even though if you saw *Naked Lunch*, you know I have an affection for typewriters.) because it works the way your mind works, which is nonlinear. That is to say, you jump around, and you can do that with electronic editing. So I would never—I mean, film editing is pretty much dead. I think Spielberg still does it; but you know, that's him.

And what else—oh, when do you let it go? Well, you let it go... I don't find that very difficult. I mean, by the time you go into the sound mix, any cuts that you make mean a lot of work for a lot of people, because you have a hundred soundtracks, and if you make one frame change, then they have to change all hundred tracks. Of course, it's easier, because they're all digital and electronic too. So by the time you go into the sound mix, you should pretty much be prepared to say, "That's the cut."

SCHWARTZ: And are you seeing cuts of the film? When do you see them?

KNIGHT: When David has done the edit.

CRONENBERG: I haven't let him see it yet! (Laughter)

KNIGHT: Yes, exactly; what happens?

CRONENBERG: Soon, soon...

KNIGHT: No; but the process of the edit takes place, and then a version is shown. But I mean, for me, interestingly, the first time of seeing anything is horrifying. It really is. It's just weird! At that point, you don't know if this is any good or not, and you just have to wait... and then you finally get to understand how it looks.

CRONENBERG: You never told me that. (Laughter) You told me it was great!

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) So, you've had an interest in violence, terror, sexuality, and sensuality throughout all your films. What keeps bringing you back to that?

CRONENBERG: Well, isn't everybody? (Laughter) Yes; well, I can tell you that first of all, it's intuitive and instinctive. Then gradually, as you get older and you start to observe yourself, you come to some understanding. I think I can almost say it's a philosophy now. For me, the first fact of human existence is the human body. I'm an atheist. I don't believe in an afterlife. I think that if you kill someone, that's an act of absolute destruction. There's no saying, "Well, but he's in heaven, it's okay; with the seventy-two virgins..." or that it's karmic recycling and he'll come back as a fish or something.

So I take violence very seriously—because when we talk about violence, we're talking about the destruction of a human body, and therefore, of a unique human being—by my way of figuring. So you read about statistics; five-thousand people died today here and there. I take it seriously. It's very deep. I want it to be... to have this weight that I think it deserves.

Likewise, then, if you're thinking of the body—which so much of culture, religion, art, politics, tends to hide; the importance of the human body is veiled by all of those things—if I unveil that, than of course sexuality is obviously a hugely important thing. And sensuality—when you talk about senses, sensuality, you're talking about the body. So to me, therefore, as an artist drawn to what is most primal, and potent, and profound, that means those things to me. That's the way I see it.

SCHWARTZ: Well, we'll end on that grand philosophical note. I want to thank all of you; the film opens tomorrow. Thank you so much for being here.

CRONENBERG: Thank you very much. (Applause)

The Pinewood Dialogues, an ongoing series of discussions with key creative figures in film, television, and digital media, are made possible with a generous grant from the Pannonia Foundation.

Museum of the Moving Image is grateful for the generous support of numerous corporations, foundations, and individuals. The Museum receives vital funding from the City of New York through the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and the New York City Economic Development Corporation. Additional government support is provided by the New York State Council on the Arts, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and the Natural Heritage Trust (administered by the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation). The Museum occupies a building owned by the City of New York, and wishes to acknowledge the leadership and assistance of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, Queens Borough President Helen M. Marshall, and City Council Member Eric N. Gioia.

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