

HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT: MASQUERADING GENRE IN DAVID CRONENBERG'S *A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE*

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"I don't have a moral plan. I'm a Canadian."
DAVID CRONENBERG

The final scene of *A History of Violence* is played entirely without dialogue, and consequently carried entirely by the blocking and performances of the actors. Nothing is said to assure us of the final resolution of Tom Stall's history. In his commentary on the DVD, Cronenberg relates the fact that the last page of the shooting script contained only two words: "There's hope." Nonetheless, whatever hope remains in the film seems far-fetched, given what it has just put these characters—and the audience—through. Indeed, one of the strongest conventions of film noir, and the source of its ability to engage in social criticism of any sort, is the ambiguous ending. The noir narrative confronts the hero with an awareness that things are not what they seem, and that people are not who they claim to be. As Lee Horsley has written, "In the course of the story, it becomes clear that the things that are amiss cannot be dealt with rationally and cannot ultimately be put to rights. The dispersal of guilt, the instability of roles, and the difficulties of grasping the events taking place all mean that there can be no 'simple solution.' Even if there is a gesture in the direction of a happy ending, the group reformed is damaged and cannot return to prior innocence" (2002). This description perfectly describes the conclusion of Cronenberg's film, all the more so because of the way *A History of Violence* plays at processes of generic masking. So, just as Joey once again adopts the mask of Tom Stall, even for a family that can now see through the fiction, so too, does Cronenberg adopt the mask of a hopeful ending, even for an audience grown accustomed to his manipulations of convention.

To buy into the hopeful ending that Cronenberg describes is to believe that Joey Cusack can disavow his violent self in a way that he could not when challenged to do so first by Leland and Billy, then by Fogarty and finally by Richie. In *Shane* (1953) the hero tells the young Scarrett boy who has grown to idolize him, "There's no living with it, with the killing. There's no going back from it. Right or wrong, it's a brand. A brand that sticks. There's no going back." The American western is rife with gunmen who recognize that their day has passed, who rode off into the sunset in the full awareness that they would sacrifice themselves so that the people they loved might find ways to live that do not include gun fighting. From John

Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) to Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992), the western has proven to be a rich genre for the investigation of the myth of the American male and the centrality of violence and gun culture in the forging of American notions of family and nation. Few film genres speak as plainly and directly to American mythologies as the western, which is, perhaps, why Cronenberg repeatedly evokes the genre in his commentary, despite the lack of obvious western trappings in the film. For instance, in discussing Howard Shore's score for the film, he says that the music "has some hints of great American music from American western movies — John Ford, Howard Hawks." The citation of Hawks and Ford as stylistic influences is particularly telling regarding the film's intentions to be read as a western, not as much in genre trappings but in tone. Indeed, as Robert B. Ray has highlighted, the western, more than many genres, is particularly flexible and available to transgenre experimentation (1985: 145). The lack of formal narrative expectations and the reliance on visual idioms in the construction of the western highlight the way that it is easily evoked as a sensibility, an ideology, or a disposition toward notions of American individualism, family, and nation. The mere presence of a horse beside the Stall barn seems enough to confirm Cronenberg's sense that *A History of Violence* is at least in part a highly revisionist western, or, to use Ray's term, a disguised western.

The gunfighter logic that animates so many westerns plays a part in a particularly fascinating moral sleight-of-hand. Inevitably, the western endorses a neo-Darwinian logic associated with the survival of the fittest. Hollywood's desire for happy endings, or, at the very least, ambiguous endings in which the hero survives to fight another day, necessitates a structure in which the hero is inevitably the fittest gun in the west, gunning down the villain in a climactic showdown. This has the tendency to equate technical proficiency with a weapon with moral superiority, justice, and righteousness, even at the cost of some internal narrative coherence. Thus, in *Shane*, to take but one example, the survival-of-the-fittest law holds when Shane guns down the amoral killer-for-hire Jack Wilson (Jack Palance) at the film's conclusion, but not when Wilson kills Frank Torey (Elisha Cook, Jr.), a scene in which the moral high ground is occupied by the out-gunned homesteader. "That was," as Richard Corliss observed in *Time* about *A History of Violence*, "just the way that, in national and movie mythology, the West was won" (2005). Darwinism, of course, is a famously amoral worldview with survival going not to the righteous, but to the fittest and strongest. It is this amorality that the western seeks to disavow by placing power in the hands of the just.

Darwinism and the myth of the American West have gone hand in hand at least since Frederick Jackson Turner delivered his essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. Turner's "frontier thesis" drew on an evolutionary model to explain that the frontier, the region between civilized society (urbanity) and the untamed wilderness, was the source of American exceptionalism. Turner argued that with every generation that moved westward from the coast, European traditions were lost and new distinctly American ones were formed. Thus, each generation that moved west became more

“American,” specifically more democratic, less tolerant of hierarchy, more individualistic, more distrustful of authority, and, significantly, more violent. This popular and enduring equation of the frontier with America and American values as a whole has had the effect of reinforcing certain ideological associations common to the western. Consequently, to make a western film, or even a partial pseudo-western as Cronenberg has done here, is to make a film that has something to say about the American dream and national values.

Late in the film, Richie highlights the degree to which *A History of Violence* is a story about the United States, when he observes about Joey, “You’re living the American dream. You really bought into it, didn’t you?” Indeed, Joey really has, and Cronenberg uses the clash between his past and his aspirations for the future as a means, as Manohla Dargis noted in *The New York Times*, to explore “the myth and meaning of America (or at least a representative facsimile) through its dreams, nightmares, and compulsive frenzies” (2005). Yet, what precisely do these explorations lead to? In unsettling the traditions of the western, perhaps the most triumphalist of Hollywood genres, by combining it with the tropes of other genres of cinematic violence, what does the film have to say about the myth and meaning of America?

Centrally, *A History of Violence* is concerned with the shifting nature of heroism in contemporary America. Very early on in the film, Cronenberg leads us to believe that this will be the film’s central theme. When Tom kills Leland and Billy he is hailed as a national hero on a series of television stations, in newspaper headlines and greeted as a champion by a crowd gathered outside the local hospital. Moreover, Tom’s heroism apparently rubs off on his star-struck son, as he suddenly discovers a new side of himself in standing up to Bobby. In mobilizing the wrong-man scenario, the film allows us to imagine for a brief moment a film that is very much about the intersection of fame and heroism, and the consequences of glorifying violence for a community. Yet this is clearly not what the film is about at all.

As Joey walks back into the Stall household at the end of the film, the question of whether he was ever a hero is posed in important ways. Without his ruthless past as a hitman, he never would have had the speed and skill to dispatch the criminals in the diner. In short, it is his violent past that saves both him and his family. Yet for Joey to remain a hero to his family, and, by extension, to the viewer, it is necessary that his acts of violence be condoned or sanctioned in some manner. Generally, both in movies and in real life, that sanction takes the form of God, country, and family, and this film is no exception. Joey kills Leland and Billy because they threaten his friends and his business. He later kills Fogarty because if he does not, he knows that Fogarty will kill his family. But can the same be said of Richie and his men? Joey seems justified in his actions since, after all, they are in the process of trying to kill him. And certainly Richie’s initial question on the phone, “You going to come to see me, or do I have to come see you?” implies a threat to the Stall family. Or does it?

As in the execution of the unarmed Leland, the killing of Richie and his men exists on a different moral plane than the killings during the shoot-out. Importan-

tly, the killing of Fogarty, perhaps the only morally straightforward murder in the film, is actually accomplished by Jack, not Joey. In this way the film suggests that violence is not the best solution, and is actually part of the problem. As we learn in retrospect, it is Joey, not Tom, who kills Billy, and it is Joey whose ruthless instincts kick in when Leland is killed as well. Once the initial trigger is pulled and Joey is released into Millbrook, the entire moral equation is abandoned. Tom might like to think that he has acted to protect his family, but it is made clear from his actions in Philadelphia that Joey is protecting Joey. He fights the mob in Pennsylvania so that he does not have to fight the mob in Indiana. His pre-emptive strike is not presented as such — “I’m here to make peace,” he unconvincingly says to his brother, but it seems clear that he has long moved past heroism and into the realm of vigilantism.

The shift from hero to vigilante happens in a heartbeat, so subtly that the audience is left no time to reflect upon it, but it is crucial to the meaning of the film. Cronenberg relies on cinematic tropes to establish scenes in which it seems only natural that the villains should be dispatched by the fastest gun in the room, but on closer inspection the morality of these decisions appears deeply flawed. Joey’s reasons for killing the other men so he can continue as Tom Stall do not make his actions heroic or even justifiable any more than they did when he killed for profit and for pleasure in his earlier life. While the film seemingly draws on an initial presumption that some people are naturally evil and deserve to be shot, it perturbs this notion by allowing Joey Cusack, the fittest, fastest, and most violent of the film’s characters, to survive and beg for forgiveness merely because he has a family, and because he now wears a Christian cross around his neck. In a film that relentlessly demonstrates how violence begets further violence, Cronenberg is also at pains to illustrate how easily we can be led to embrace violence and immorality to protect the things we cherish. In the end, Tom is not a hero in this film, nor is his cause just, and Cronenberg leaves us with the question: Just who are we rooting for in this film?

This is, of course, the same question that Edie poses when she confronts her husband after the shoot-out with Fogarty. The identity issue is of paramount importance in *A History of Violence*, and it raises the related question of whether or not a family can live with the cold, hard truth that their titular head is a killer. The hospital room conversation between Edie and Joey revolves around the tension that derives from her sense of a stable identity and Joey’s conception of the possibility that a man can remake himself. For Joey, adopting the identity of Tom was a painful undertaking that he equates with death and rebirth, a slow deliberate process of reconstruction that is, in fact, one of the promises of America. For Edie, on the other hand, the sudden loss of identity is jarring: “Our name, Jesus Christ, my name. Jack’s name. Sarah’s name. Stall. Tom Stall. Did you just make that up? Where did that name come from?” In Edie’s case, the truth does not immediately set her free; rather it fundamentally undermines her own sense of self and her rootedness within the community. By revealing the fact that her very name is, in fact, arbitrary, her own sense of identity is compromised.

Joey’s identity, on the other hand, seems remarkably stable in retrospect. As the film unfolds it invites the audience to at least consider the possibility that Tom

is losing himself amidst the confusion surrounding his relationship to Joey Cusack. Yet by the end of the film, when we have been exposed to the full reality of who Joey is, it is easy to see that Tom Stall never existed except as a role that Joey successfully played for decades. Just as his family begrudgingly lets him back into the home knowing what they know, the audience also realizes that we have always known we were watching Joey even when we hoped it was really Tom. If Tom were who he said he was, he would have perished in his diner at the hands of Leland and Billy. Instead, it is Joey Cusack, professional killer, who is the “American hero.” Moreover, it is Joey who is the authentic self. When Richie asks, “Hey, when you dream are you still Joey?” it seems to be a question intended to befuddle the audience, since we have not been given access to the character’s interior mind. Yet in retrospect, the question is simple to answer: of course he is still Joey. The violence at the diner does not draw Joey out of Tom, but simply begins the process of unmasking Joey to the world.

To that end, perhaps the most pressing question asked by the film concerns forgiveness. In a perceptive review of the film in *The Nation*, Stuart Klawans reminds us that “women and children everywhere live with men who are killers,” or, more specifically, they live with men who were soldiers, men who “did what they had to do” (2005). Living with killers, Klawans suggests, is not a difficulty. What is troubling is when that killing is not sanctioned by a sense of a larger purpose. Absent that larger purpose, Joey Cusack is a man with little hope of redemption. He is, after all, a guilty man living with a family of innocents. Further, his guilt has been visited upon the people he loves, and they have been scarred by the consequences of his choices, becoming liars, cheaters, and even killers themselves in order to help save him from himself. He is not, as the film so relentlessly teases in its first half, the wrong man, but they are the wrong family. They are singled out to pay for crimes they had nothing to do with, and which they could not possibly have known about. In this way they recall the mute little girl killed in the opening scene, helpless victims of forces beyond their comprehension. It is no coincidence that the film concludes with a scene featuring another mute little girl that mirrors the opening. We are forced to wonder, has Joey ended Sarah’s childhood just as Billy ended the other girl’s?

The cross he wears throughout the film initially leads us to see Tom as an innocent man, but by the end it more pertinently suggests that Joey will be crucified for his sins. While the initials J.C. in any work of fiction always invite speculation about Jesus metaphors, *A History of Violence* is, as Ken Tucker notes, an “interestingly irreligious heartland movie” (2005). There is no question that Joey makes a horribly inappropriate substitute for the Christian savior. Yet the central question posed by the ending of the film is tremendously resonant with the Christian sensibility at the heart of so much American mythologizing: can Joey’s family forgive him, and, perhaps more appropriately, should they? Writing in the liberal Catholic magazine *Commonweal*, Richard Alleva identifies the film’s central theme as, “Is a person allowed forgiveness for an immoral past after he demonstrates a genuinely reformed character and a willingness to live in society peacefully and even benevolently, but does not make legal reparations for specific crimes?” (2005). It is a fas-

cinating question, but mistaken in one of its central premises: what evidence is given to suggest that Joey Cusack is genuinely reformed? Alleva regards the fact that the protagonist remains too ambiguous as a central shortcoming of the film when he writes, "For his plight to truly move us, we would have to be privy to how he experienced a profound conversion years before the events in the film" (2005). For this to happen, we would need the film-noir-style flashback that Cronenberg so conspicuously denies us, a denial that highlights a difference between the intentions of the filmmaker and the desires of the film critic. *A History of Violence*, it seems, is not a film about the moral redemption of Tom Stall, but about the moral downfall of his family. More specifically, it asks us to consider the cost that must be paid to maintain the family as the moral center of the United States. Writing in *Rolling Stone*, film critic Peter Travers describes the themes of the film as innately American: "Cronenberg knows Americans have a history of violence. It's wired into our DNA. Without a hint of sermonizing, he shows how we secretly crave what we publicly condemn, and how we even make peace with it. The family tableau that ends the film is as chilling and redemptive as anything Cronenberg has ever crafted" (2005). Sitting at their dinner table, the Stall family opts to ignore the violence that needs to occur elsewhere for them to be allowed to continue to live their lives in peace. In the end, *A History of Violence* is not a film about forgiving, but about forgetting.

Travers's contention that violence is America's secret craving accords nicely with the possibility that *A History of Violence* is not quite the realist examination of family dynamics it initially seems to be. Indeed, the unreality of the film, its occasional lapses into implausible action sequences and other unlikely scenarios highlights the possibility that an entirely different sort of interpretation is required to get to the bottom of this film. Writing in *Sight and Sound*, Graham Fuller offers one of the least conventional, but most interesting, readings of the film when he suggests that the action that unfolds is largely the dream life of Tom Stall, a film in which "the dark side of the American psyche emerges into the light" (2005). Fuller suggests that the narrative of *A History of Violence* amounts to little more than a dream, or the daydreams of Tom and of his son Jack, each emasculated in reality but longing for a life in which they are virile men. Tom, though he is a lowly diner owner with an ambitious and successful wife, imagines that he could be the type of man who stands up to his rich, dismissive brother, who ravishes his wife, and who is hailed as a national hero for his action-hero style gunplay. In short, he dreams that he could be Shane. Similarly, Jack imagines that he could make the decisive play in a baseball game, beat the daylights out of the bully who torments him, and save his father's life. One of the biggest problems with Fuller's thesis, however, is the way these competing dreams intersect. How, for example, can we reconcile Tom's fantasy serial killers meeting with Jack's bully on the streets of Millford? Fuller is not able to fully square these problems, offering only that "the demarcations between these reveries are vague, and it isn't always clear who is experiencing them" as a way of explaining away the apparent inconsistency that mars his thesis (2005). Yet even if his argument fails to truly persuade the reader that *A History of Violence* is a large-

scale fantasy akin to *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (1947) or *Billy Liar* (1963), films in which impotent men fantasize about virility, he usefully highlights the sheer unreality of the proceedings, and the important ways that Cronenberg indulges his taste for the fantastic even within a largely realist framework.

Fuller's contention that Jack's "unexpected lurch into swift, decisive violence is unlikely for such a gentle, highly strung boy —except, of course, in a movie" seems paramount to understanding the film (2005). Central to the logic of *A History of Violence* is a sense of postmodern self-awareness, the assuredness that the type of violence the film addresses is movie violence, rather than that of the real world. In this way, the unreality of the America portrayed in the film, the self-consciously Norman-Rockwell-styled Middle America, can be productively compared to other films depicting darkness behind the façade of normality. Cronenberg's work here is commonly compared to that of David Lynch, who, in films like *Blue Velvet* (1986) and *Mulholland Drive* (2001) highlighted the constructedness of American normality. From this point of view, Cronenberg has not made the most realist film of his career, but a movie that is itself a commentary on notions of cinematic realism. Lynch's arch self-awareness might seem at odds with Cronenbergian cinema, which most often expresses itself as a particularly idiosyncratic form of wide-angled expressionism, yet in a film about masked identities, the logic seems to make perfect sense.

In short, if *A History of Violence* seems to lack a certain generic stability, this might be explained by the collision of its postmodern sensibility and art film aspirations. Despite its large budget, it is clear that the film aspires to exist in the same rarified cinematic air as the non-commercial and critically lauded films that Cronenberg has focused upon since, at least, *Dead Ringers* and *Naked Lunch*. He has not, as many critics and arts writers maintain, returned to the Hollywood model in order to produce a typical blockbuster thriller, but has tied the conventions of the thriller to those of the western, the film noir, the gangster film, the high school bully movie, and the serial killer film in a way that comments upon each without ever fully embracing the conventions of any. Cronenberg moves through each as a way of unsettling viewer expectations about narrative, but without ever fully departing from a cause and effect structure. To this end, the film might seem to be little more than a postmodern excavation of the history of cinematic violence. With its focus on narrative causality, *A History of Violence* is at odds with the classic definition of the "art film." *Chicago Reader* critic Jonathan Rosenbaum stressed the tension between art and genre when he asked, "Is *A History of Violence* a popular genre movie, soliciting visceral, unthinking responses to its violence while evoking westerns and noirs? Or is it an art film, reflecting on the meaning, implications, and effects of its violence, and getting us to do the same?" (2005). Rosenbaum concludes that, despite the filmmaker's "genius," the conventions of these two cinematic modes are irreconcilable. Following that line of reasoning, it might be fair to say that the movie seemingly evokes the traits of the art film, particularly the investigation of personal identity, without actually embracing them. In this way, Cronenberg treats the art film as a genre like all the others. It is not privileged as the meta-genre that holds the

whole project together; rather it is simply another element in the long catalogue of cinematic tropes mobilized by the film.

The question remains: is there a single unifying framework through which this film can be made comprehensible? Certainly, auteurism holds out some hope as one such possibility. The deft combination of techniques characterizing the narrative style of the art film and the classical Hollywood movie seems at once both a hallmark of postmodern cinematic practice generally, and also of David Cronenberg's career, specifically. Despite having incorporated the wide range of filmmaking styles and practices from the high modernist *Stereo* to the low pulp of *The Brood*, and seemingly every stop in between, Cronenberg's work, more than that of almost any other Canadian filmmaker, is widely considered to evince, as William Beard has argued, "a high degree of consistency in its thematic concerns, distinct trademarks in its subject matter, considerable evidence of artistic self-consciousness, and a notably expressive cinematic technique" (1983: 1). Similarly, Peter Morris has highlighted the way that Cronenberg is a filmmaker who has "remained dogmatically loyal to his artistic vision, which, among other things, insisted that there was no difference between high art and popular culture" (1994: 10). These and other critics have long emphasized how Cronenberg's career can—and perhaps should—be read in unified terms, despite its many dramatic shifts in tone, genre, theme, and subject matter. Nonetheless, *A History of Violence*, which the director has openly characterized as a work-for-hire project, holds the possibility of problematizing this integrated view of the filmmaker's career by introducing atypical elements and approaches. In short, the question becomes whether this film is a departure from the filmmaker's customary concerns, an extension of those traditions, or something else entirely.

The "reality" of David Cronenberg is something that is deliberately shrouded from the audience of *A History of Violence*, a knowing rejection of the kinds of assumptions about him that widely circulate, and a self-conscious adoption of the kind of cinephiliac narrative strategy that the filmmaker most often avoids. Fanned by the subjects and themes of his films, Cronenberg's public persona is that of a reserved "nice guy" whose inner life seems darkly perverse. Shortly after the release of *A History of Violence*, a news story began to circulate on the Internet entitled "Cronenberg's Public Sex." The article claims that the director hoped to place Mortensen and Bello at ease for the film's two sex scenes by performing them with his wife in front of the cast and crew. Complete with quotes from a "freaked out" Mortensen, the hoax, which was subsequently debunked by the *New York Times*, played upon a widely held public perception of Cronenberg's deviant take on human sexuality. Indeed, sexuality is a crucial component of the director's work. Beard notes running themes of "omnisexuality," the malleability of sexual roles that pervade all but a small handful of Cronenberg's films (2006: 11). Indeed, sexuality is one of the most thoroughly mined avenues of investigation in Cronenberg scholarship. Frequently, that scholarship has highlighted a perception that the director's work reveals what Robin Wood diagnoses as a fear and hatred of human sexuality, and few filmmakers have made sexuality so central to their thematic concerns as

Cronenberg in films like *Dead Ringers* and *Crash* (1985: 216-217). In an interview with Chris Rodley, he explained the relationship of sex and death in his work: “sexuality is one of those very basic issues. Life and death and sexuality are interlinked. You can’t discuss one without in some way discussing the others” (1992: 65). It is not surprising, therefore, that the pivotal issues regarding truth and masquerade in *A History of Violence* are played out so clearly not in the instances of killing, but in the film’s twinned sex scenes.

In *Weird Sex and Snowshoes*, Katherine Monk suggests that Cronenberg’s films “give the woman the dominant role” during sex scenes, and this is certainly true of *A History of Violence* (2001: 143). The first of these scenes occurs early in the film, preceding any suggestion that Tom Stall is not who he claims to be: a small-town diner owner. Immediately following the scene in which Jack is terrorized by Bobby after gym class, the film shifts from the scary reality of high school to an erotic fantasy of the same. Meeting her husband outside the diner on the darkened main street of Millbrook, Edie takes Tom on a date intended to make up for the fact that “we never got to be teenagers together.” Back at their home, Edie comes to bed dressed in a cheerleader outfit, and the central theme of masquerade is placed front and centre by the film. “What have you done with my wife?” Tom asks, maintaining his role as husband and father in spite of Edie’s role-playing. Still in the performance, she cautions him, “Quiet, my parents are in the next room,” and when he replies, “you’re naughty,” it is clear that he has entered the game she is playing. The extended sex scene, with its focus on mutuality and a shared fantasy, is highly ironic in retrospect. Edie is playful when she tells Tom “you are such a bad boy,” but it is only later that the depths of his badness will be fully revealed to her. Similarly, the post-coital scene, in which the couple spoons while talking about the depths of their love for each other, is filled with moments of dark foreshadowing. “I’m the luckiest son of a bitch alive,” says Tom, basking in the glow of his loving wife. “You are the best man I’ve ever known. There’s no luck involved,” she replies, a sentiment that will, by the conclusion of the film, be revealed as an unwitting lie.

In the film’s second sex scene, Edie no longer believes her husband to be the best man she’s ever known, but instead suspects on the contrary, that he may, in fact, be the worst. The moment that “brings the sex-violence nexus to the boiling point,” as Manohla Dargis suggests in a lengthy *New York Times* article about this single scene, occurs after the departure of Sam, when Edie has defended Joey by performing the role of the sobbing wife (2006). Again, Cronenberg introduces sexuality into the film by coupling it with masquerade and role-playing, but in this scene that pretense is quickly abandoned. As Edie moves to go upstairs, she is followed by Tom who attempts to talk to her. When she is pinned against the wall at the foot of the stairs, Edie whirls on her husband, slapping him in the face. He responds by grabbing her by the throat, suddenly and dramatically reverting back to his Joey identity. She recognizes this instantly, sneering at him, “Fuck you, Joey.” They continue to fight on the stairs, he strangling her, she slapping him again, until, unexpectedly, she pulls him closer to her and kisses him. What follows is a rough sex scene on the stairs, Edie and Joey’s sexual encounter quite at odds with tenderness

displayed by Tom and Edie earlier in the film. Indeed, many critics read the scene as a rape. Robert S. Miller, for example, situates the scene, in which Edie seemingly consents, to a cinematic history that includes *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *The Fountainhead* (1943), films in which powerful men ravish the women that they love (2005). For his part, Cronenberg maintained in interviews that the scene was not a rape: “Will the scene on the stairs be perceived as a rape?” because it’s not supposed to be a rape, it’s supposed to be a very complex act on both their parts” (Murray, 2005). The complexity of the scene is highlighted by the divergent readings that it generates. During the course of the scene Mortensen is transformed from Tom to Joey and, once he has finished, back to Tom, a performance that highlights the Cronenbergian association of sex and death to a tremendous degree. The sequence drives home the point that, stripped of all the illusions, Tom is a mere fiction, and Joey is the authentic personality. Reduced to primal urges in the face of sex and death, Joey is revealed to be no more Tom than Edie is still a cheerleader. The first sex scene demonstrates how people can agree to wear masks, while the second emphasizes that masks can only obscure the truth for so long.

Yet the stairway scene raises a few questions just as it provides answers about the identity of Tom/Joey. Notably, it asks the audience to reconsider their understanding of Edie, and of her particular desires at this point in the film. Monk argues that “all sex in Cronenberg movies is transformative, and usually in a bad way” (2001: 236), and this seems particularly true in this scene as it pertains to Edie. As the film plays with the conventions of the film noir, the two most noteworthy generic absences are the revelatory flashback and the femme fatale. A common trope within the genre, the femme fatale is a noteworthy absence from *A History of Violence*, problematizing its noir-ish aspirations. Yet, in the rough sex scene we are shown a very different vision of Edie Stall than has been presented up to that point in the film. Significantly, she manipulates the local police officer with a cunningly calculated performance that she is able to turn on and off like any classic noir heroine. More importantly, in turning her battle with Joey into a violent sexual encounter, Edie herself is transformed from loving and supportive wife into what Dargis terms “a gangster’s moll with a taste for a little rough trade” (2006). In an extremely insightful commentary on this scene, Dargis highlights the way that Cronenberg places the camera in the most voyeuristic position possible, distancing the viewer from the sex, but also forcing the audience to reconsider not only Joey, but Edie as well: “In a story of blood and vengeance, Mr. Cronenberg asks us to look at those who pick up guns in our name, protectors who whisper they love us with hands around our throats. And then, with this scene, he goes one better and asks us to look at those who open their hearts and bare themselves to such a killing love” (2006). Dargis highlights Edie’s moral culpability revealed in this scene, a position that is suggestive of the classic femme fatale who betrays the noir hero, thereby sealing his fate. If Edie seals the fate of anyone, it is that of Tom, the man who first betrayed her with his lies. In accepting the truth about Joey, Edie dooms the part of him that is Tom to irrelevance. Whatever else happens, now that the truth is known the fantasy of “the best man I’ve ever known” holds weight no longer. And, at the

same time, her own moral assuredness is thrown into question. Certainly, the quick shot of Edie rocking herself in her bedroom, her back badly bruised, indicates that she has quickly lost the taste for rough trade identified by Dargis.

The tension between fantasy and reality that lies at the heart of these two scenes is, obviously, crucial to the structure of the film as a whole. Indeed, one could plausibly suggest that these scenes are the most important in the entire work. As Cronenberg himself described it in an interview with Serge Grünberg, “We called that married sex and gangster sex. But the married sex is also a fantasy, where they decide to play roles to excite themselves, roles that they never played with each other. So, the whole question of identity in sexuality and violence in sexuality is there in those two scenes’” (2006: 173). It is significant, therefore, that neither scene was included in the earliest drafts of the screenplay. According to an article in *Written By*, the magazine of the Writer’s Guild of America, Josh Olson added the scenes in a deliberate effort to give the film more of a Cronenbergian feeling: “I wanted it to be a Cronenberg film. I didn’t see any way to come up with biological mutations in this story. There weren’t any sex scenes in the original draft. I knew he’s good at dark, violent sex. So I told David I want it to feel like a Cronenberg film, and I was going to write a sex scene that would fit his oeuvre” (Stayton, 2006). Yet in attempting to tie the script more closely to the style of the director who was now attached to the project, the issue of masquerading surfaced once again. According to Olson, Cronenberg himself had reservations about this new direction in the screenplay. “He said, ‘I don’t want it to be too “Cronenberg.”’” (Stayton, 2006). In drafting a pair of scenes intended to cut to the core of his director’s personal style, the screenwriter is warned off by that same director. In writing scenes that will reveal the true spirit of his characters, Cronenberg suggests a desire to conceal his own nature in the process by not making a film that relies too much on his personal trademarks. If Olson was playing at writing in the “Cronenberg style,” it is also apparent that the filmmaker himself was very consciously trying to play the role of Hollywood director-for-hire, and downplay the signature elements that would make this film an auteurist work.

The idea of concealing the truth about oneself is central to arguments about masquerade generally. The masquerade is a concept that was introduced to explain gender differences by Joan Riviere in a 1929 article entitled “Womanliness as Masquerade.” Arguing from a psychoanalytic position, she suggested that the feminine mask concealed the female’s theft of the phallus: “womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask” (1986: 38). For Riviere, there was no essential difference between “genuine womanliness” and the masquerade, the two were mutually bound. In opposition, masculinity was assumed to be fixed and authentic, so that any use of the masquerade in the masculine tradition was assumed to lead to processes of the feminization of the male masquerader. This notion aligns nicely with a figure like Joey Cusack, who, in adopting the mask of Tom Stall, allows himself to feminized to a large degree, opting for a life of quiet passivity with a wife who is the real breadwinner and head of the family. Nonetheless, Riviere’s conception of gender difference has been largely displaced by subsequent scholarship. Distinctions between biological sex and social gender laid the foundation for rethinking masculin-

ity and femininity as roles, the performance or enactment of a persona that is separate from the actor. This separation of the individual from behavior was favored by sociologists like Talcott Parsons, who argued that feminine and masculine gender roles were complementary. However, this conception was criticized by feminist scholars who saw a system of domination in Parsons's notion of complementarity, and who argued for a conception of multiple gender roles, rather than a solitary, fixed gender role. Judith Butler's notion of gender as performative, that is to say that gender is not something that we are, but something that we do, emphasized the social construction of gender in a more radical form. For Butler, the performance of gender is an artifice that does not mask a natural or true identity. This is at odds with the conception of the masquerade, which suggests, as Harry Brod has observed, that "behind the façade of the mask lies the *real* face, to be revealed when the masquerade is over" (1995: 17). Of course, Brod's conception fits *A History of Violence* more accurately than does Butler's, for when the film draws to a close, it is the real face of Joey Cusack that is the last image that we see before the screen fades to black.

It is possible to read *A History of Violence* as a film that is very acutely concerned about the masculine masquerade, and the transformation of Tom Stall from an inauthentic and therefore feminized man to someone who represents a naturalized form of aggressive masculine violence. In his essay on Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*, Steven Cohan details the way that Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant), by masquerading as George Kaplan, is transformed into "a full-fledged male hero who acts rather than reacts" (1995: 44). Cohan argues that the 1950s was a period when masculinity was seen to be in crisis, an era in which men had become weak as a result of a dependency on others, consequently placing the nation in danger during the Cold War. In this light, Thornhill's over-attachment to his mother and secretary are cast as a problem of national significance, and one that is only resolved when he willingly adopts the Kaplan persona, saves the girl, vanquishes the villain, and thus averts a threat to America's national security. The question arises: given the connections established between Cronenberg's film and the Hitchcockian tradition, should we read *A History of Violence* in light of *North by Northwest*? That is to say, if Roger Thornhill typified the 1950s male as an urban advertising executive in need of toughening up, does Joey Cusack represent the 2000s American male as a man of action who needs to be re-awakened? Or, on the other hand, is *A History of Violence* in fact a warning about rousing that sleeping beast?

North by Northwest is largely unambiguous in its politics. All the consequences of Thornhill's turn to action are positive, and he is rewarded for his willingness to take command of the situation in which he finds himself. Tom Stall, on the other hand, loses everything because of his decision, whether considered or instinctual, to exert control over the threats to his life and to his family. Most critics see in *A History of Violence* some form of critique of the contemporary United States, and, particularly, its cultural love affair with violence and its geopolitical instincts toward imperialism; however, it is not always clear precisely what these critics think the film is saying. The *Washington Post's* Desson Thomson suggests that the film "is essentially forcing us to confront troubling questions. Is killing excused by moral

imperative? Where does heroism end and vigilantism begin?” (2005). But he offers no suggestion as to what answers the film might offer for these sorts of questions. He extends this confrontation away from the purely abstract and textual, providing it a real world impact when he suggests that *A History of Violence* “forces us to confront our Pavlovian conditioning to violence, whether we are watching real military campaigns with living room detachment or whooping and hollering for fictional ones” (2005). Similarly, for *Rolling Stone*’s Peter Travers, the film offers “a study of how we wrap our Jones for violence in God, country, family, and any other excuse that’s handy. You know the drill. So does George Bush” (2005), and for Amy Taubin, selecting the film as the best of 2005 in *Art Forum*, “The insanity is institutional, implicating us all” (2005b: 24). In short, these critics see in Cronenberg’s film some sort of indictment of American society as a whole, each agreeing that the film is saying *something* about the important issues that it raises, even if the conclusions drawn are somewhat vague.

Cronenberg has discussed the “interbreeding of genre, myth and realpolitik” (Taubin, 2005a) in *A History of Violence*, a political disposition that goes well with the readings offered by these various critics.

In discussing the film with the press, the director maintained that the film

does have political undertones, or overtones, although it’s not overtly political. Those are things that Viggo and I discussed a lot when I was trying to convince him to do the movie. You have a man who’s defending his family and his home against bad guys with guns. It raises the question of retribution. Is anything justified when you’re attacked? It’s also hard not to notice that George Bush uses American Western movies as a model for his foreign policy —Osama bin Laden wanted dead or alive (Johnson, 2005).

Cronenberg’s willingness to accord the film political overtones is something of a radical departure from past statements about his films in which he has demonstrated disdain for political filmmakers. Importantly, in his interview with Grünberg, conducted after the Cannes screening of *A History of Violence* but published only after its release, Cronenberg said of the film,

I think that politics has no place in art, because you lose the subtlety. And when you lose the subtlety, you are losing the human reality, because it is very subtle and complex, and I can see that in politics you maybe at times cannot afford to be bogged down, because you would be forced into action if you had to address every complexity. But this is art, you know, and this isn’t propaganda, this isn’t a political statement, this is an artistic statement (2006: 174).

How can we reconcile these very different statements about the film? One way would be to assume that in his 60s, David Cronenberg, an “apolitical” filmmaker who, as Peter Morris has pointed out, once seemed deeply in accord with William S. Burroughs’s suggestion that political change was pointless as it merely substituted one system for another, has reversed his earlier sentiments and turned to a form of political engagement with his work (Morris, 1994: 27). This is the approach

taken by many American critics who see in *A History of Violence* a specific critique of the Bush administration's international policies. Yet, if we choose to believe that Cronenberg is speaking honestly to Grünberg, it would seem that the other possibility is that the film is not really political in the sense that the critics are making it out to be, but is merely masquerading as a critique of U.S. culture. Cronenberg himself has emphasized the way that critics tend to misread his work because they are focused largely on the present: "Reviewers are very plugged in to what's happening now. The connections they tend to make are of the moment" (Rodley, 1992: 128). Following this logic, it is possible to see Cronenberg as a filmmaker who is masquerading as political, who is providing critics with a story upon which they can write their own political interests without an actual commitment from the director himself. In this way, Cronenberg adopts another mask, one that allows his film to pass as something that it might not be, much as Joey passes for such a long time as Tom. If this is the case, the question remains: is there a truth to this film behind its various forms of masquerade?

To help answer that, it might be worth considering one final act of masquerade presented by the film: the way that Canada stands in for the United States. If there is one thing that critics were in unanimous agreement about as it pertains to *A History of Violence*, it is the fact that Millbrook does not seem in any way to be a real American town. Not unlike David Lynch's Lumberton, North Carolina, in *Blue Velvet*, Millbrook is the America of "Norman Rockwell and Quaker Oats commercials," featuring "a pair of cartoonishly good-looking normals, living with their CGI-perfect children" in "a Capra picture, perhaps, with Viggo Mortensen as Jimmy Stewart" (Foundas, 2005; Hoberman, 2005; Ebert, 2005). The false sense of America created by location shooting in Canada has been a Cronenberg hallmark for some time. In an interview with Anne Billson, he suggested that this displacement made his work more eerily dreamlike: "The streets look American, but they're not, and the accents are American, but not quite. Everything's a little off-kilter; it's sort of like a dream image of America" (Morris, 1994: 106). In *A History of Violence*, it is not entirely clear that Cronenberg is even at great pains to mask the substitution of Canada for the United States. Pointedly, when Joey drives from Millbrook to Philadelphia on his way to confront Richie, the montage includes a highway sign with the speed limit posted as 90 km/h. Of all the second unit footage shot for the film, it is difficult to imagine that the road sign wound up in the finished movie simply through a lack of attention to detail. Indeed, it is perhaps easier to believe that, like Tom when he kills Leland, there is a part of Cronenberg who wants to be found out, who toys with this mask in the hopes that his true identity will be freed to rise to the surface.

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