

Program notes for **Pinewood Dialogue with David Cronenberg** and screening of ***Naked Lunch***

January 11 & 12, 1992

Series: Long Live the New Flesh: A David Cronenberg Retrospective

NAKED LUNCH

20th Century Fox, 1991, 117 mins, 35mm print courtesy of 20th Century Fox.

Written and directed by David Cronenberg. Produced by Jeremy Thomas.

Photographed by Peter Suschitzky. Edited by Ronald Sanders. Original score by Howard Shore. Production design by Carol Spier.

With Peter Weller (William Lee), Judy Davis (Joan Frost/Joan Lee), Ian Holm (Tom Frost), Julian Sands (Yves Cloquet), Roy Scheider (Dr. Benway), Monique Mercure (Fadela), Nicholas Campbell (Hank), Michael Zelniker (Martin), Robert A. Silverman (Hans), Joseph Scorsiani (Kiki).

By David Schwartz, Chief Curator of Film

Although the novel *Naked Lunch* has always been described as unfilmable, a David Cronenberg adaptation of the Burroughs book was inevitable. The book's hallucinatory imagery, its vivid depiction of mutating bodies that sprout new organs and orifices, its multitudinous rebellions and transformations of the flesh, its confrontation with conventional ideas of sexuality and death, its depiction of fractured identity in a futuristic world in which the individual is controlled by impersonal corporations and mysterious conspiracies, and its use of drug addiction as a metaphor for the power struggles-these concerns have been central to Cronenberg's cinema.

What is most remarkable about Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch*, considering the book's status as an underground literary masterpiece, is just how much of a Cronenberg film it is, a coherent and singular creation that is clearly inspired by the novel but completely different in tone and style. Rather than attempting to reproduce the novel's Bosch-like fantasmagorical approach, Cronenberg has taken a step back from the book to make a linear narrative film about the creation of *Naked Lunch*, offering a vision of writing-and by extension, all artistic creation-as a hallucinatory, obsessive, deeply personal process in which inner demons are brought to life in an

almost unconscious, dreamlike act. Writing becomes a cinematic metaphor expressing Cronenberg's desire to make "the mental physical," to turn the body and mind inside out and empty their contents onto the screen.

Cronenberg is an *auteur* in the purest sense of the word, a director whose personal stamp is instantly recognizable, whose films express a coherent and singular vision of the world. The same themes and obsessions are explored from film to film, albeit with a growing depth and maturity, and with a growing interiority. While the early features, *They Came From Within (Shivers)* and *Rabid*, were broad social satires without fully dimensional characters, the later films are increasingly subjective and psychological: *Videodrome* is a first-person film, seen entirely through Max Renn (James Woods), and much of the action of *Naked Lunch* takes place within the mind of the main character, William Lee (Peter Weller). *Naked Lunch* demonstrates just how successfully Cronenberg has achieved his desire as an artist to create a "strain of viral cinema" that is clearly his own.

From *Variety*, January 1, 1991:

William S. Burroughs' notorious, and notoriously unfilmable, novel *Naked Lunch* has landed in the right hands. Stretching himself with each new work, David Cronenberg has come up with a fascinating, demanding, mordantly funny picture.

A cult novel since its publication in 1959, Burroughs' non-narrative novel represented the literary equivalent of a Hieronymus Bosch painting, a profane, outrageous explosion of riffs dominated by drugs, gay sex and a surreal evocation of society's control mechanisms.

At the center of this chilly emotional spiral is William Lee (Burroughs' alter ego and early pseudonym), an insect exterminator in New York City circa 1953. Lee (Peter Weller) lives in quiet squalor with his wife (Judy Davis) until, on a bug drug high, he accidentally shoots her while playing William Tell.

Breaking into a hallucinatory state, Lee escapes to the realm of Interzone, an imaginatively demented rendition of Tangier heavily populated by artist addicts,

homosexuals and secret agents where he is able to begin writing, even if what he is writing are 'reports' over which he seems to have no actual control.

Weller is a superb Burroughs stand-in, strongly holding centerscreen while not actually doing much. Supporting cast is diverse and outstanding. Dissuaded from actually shooting in Tangier by the outbreak of the 1991 Gulf War, Cronenberg's team has memorably created an artificial world almost entirely on stages.

The Pinewood Dialogues, an ongoing series of screenings and discussions with significant creative figures in film, television, and digital media, as supported with a generous grant from The Pinewood Foundation.

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