

A PINWOOD DIALOGUE WITH DAVID CRONENBERG

The elusive nature of reality, and the way that perception is shaped by memory and imagination, is among David Cronenberg's key subjects. Working in the supposedly lowbrow genres of horror and science fiction (*Videodrome*, *Scanners*), and in the highbrow form of literary or theatrical adaptation (*Naked Lunch*, *M. Butterfly*, *Spider*), Cronenberg has created a remarkably varied body of work. A decade after his complete retrospective at the Museum, Cronenberg returned to Moving Image to discuss *Spider*, his adaptation of Patrick McGrath's novel about a schizophrenic whose tenuous hold on reality is threatened by fragmented memories of a family trauma.

A Pinewood Dialogue following a screening of *Spider*, moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (January 10, 2003):

SCHWARTZ: Please welcome David Cronenberg.
(Applause)

CRONENBERG: The thing is I didn't read the book [*Spider*] until later. Then I read a lot of Patrick [McGrath]'s stuff and I thought that he is a wonderful writer. But I was surprised to find how different the book really was to the screenplay. And to me, that was a good sign. I've said many times, in order to be faithful to a novel, you have to betray the novel. Because there is no dictionary that allows you to translate in any way. There's no such thing as a translation to the screen. You have to reinvent the thing completely, the two media are so completely different. And if you feel that you have achieved that, it's really an illusion. To make you think, "Well, it's almost like reading the novel." If you can do that, it's a kind of a miracle. But I don't even worry about that. And obviously, Patrick didn't worry about that, either, because he was very brutal in his reinvention of the character of *Spider*, and the basic structure of it.

This is how it went. In the book, *Spider* writes the novel. That is his journal. The novel is his journal. And that means that he's very literary and he writes beautifully. And he's very adept with words and very manipulative and so on. The screenplay that I read had *Spider* writing in his journal—in English; you could read it—and then it had voice-over. And it had, basically, *Spider* reading from the novel. And I

said to Patrick—and that was even before I read the novel—I said, "These are two different people. There's no way that the *Spider* that you've invented for the cinema could be the one who speaks this way, who has these perceptions, and, in particular, can be that articulate about what he's feeling and what's going on in his head."

So my solution was the usual one, which is just subtraction. I just got rid of a lot of stuff that was in that first draft—in particular, the voice-over. And I still wanted *Spider* to be writing, because I needed something physical for him to do that was obsessive and that let you know that he was basically taking evidence for a crime that he felt had been committed. So he was very obsessive, and I needed him to have something physical to do, but I didn't want to read what he was writing. So I asked Ralph [Fiennes] to develop his own hieroglyphics, kind of a cuneiform, that he could write very fluently—and I'm sure he still can. So he developed that because I wanted to be able to see him do it. And he has very distinctive hands; I didn't want to have some graphic artist's hands in there doing something. So that was all—that's Ralph's design.

SCHWARTZ: And the narration of his sort of muttering, incomprehensible...

CRONENBERG: You mean you didn't understand that?

SCHWARTZ: Maybe it was the sound system; I don't know. (Laughs)

CRONENBERG: When we showed the film in Cannes, they had French subtitles for every... (Laughter) They did. And the translator, Serge Gruberg, who's written books on me, is a very close friend. And I said, "Serge, you know, why did you do that?" He said, "The problem is, if he speaks and there are no subtitles, they think we made a mistake because they'll expect a translation." So there's a lot of stuff there; I think he invented some of it, Serge. (Laughter) Because you can't really understand all of that.

SCHWARTZ: Well, we'll show it with French subtitles next. That's got to be great.

CRONENBERG: Well, the French-subtitled version is *the* version! (Laughter) Well, that was something, I mean, Ralph and I—and in fact Peter Suschitzky, the director of photography—we all work in a very intuitive manner. And so I don't do storyboards. And certainly, for *Spider*, anyway, Ralph didn't do the equivalent of that, which might be a long rehearsal and preparation, and so on.

The preparation is very physical. I mean, actors are bodies. They're very embodied. Directors are kind of disembodied, most of the time. You're behind the camera. If you have a cold sore that day or your hair looks terrible, it just doesn't matter. But if you're an actor, those things really do matter, because your body is your instrument, and everything that touches it is important to you. It's not vanity; they have to be obsessed about their hair and their makeup and their clothes, and so on. So, as many actors do, but in particular as Ralph does, it's all an accumulation of details—get the clothes right, the nicotine stains on the fingers, and so on. And there's a lot of preparation that goes on before you start to shoot. But we realized the first day of shooting that we had actually never seen Spider walk. And of course, the language that Spider speaks is mostly body language; that's his main language in this movie. And so it was crucial. The first shot that we did, which was the shot of him walking down the street towards Mrs. Wilkinson's house, a crane shot—one of the main things that we were looking for was: is that the right walk for Spider? Because you're establishing it. There has to be continuity. And so it's all, it develops in a very intuitive, day-by-day kind of way.

SCHWARTZ: The first shot, the shot of the train station is just amazing. it's such a powerful image. Is that something that was filmed early on?

CRONENBERG: That was the last shot we did.

SCHWARTZ: Was it really?

CRONENBERG: Yeah. I used all my extras in that shot. (Laughter)

Well, in a way it's true. I find the feedback that I get from English people is terrific, because they really find this to be accurate in terms of the tone, the feel of maybe 1959 in the flashbacks, and the early '80s. But the truth is that you will never find the streets of London as empty as I shot them. Not in the '50s, not in the '40s, not ever. But I had extras dressed in period costume, and I had period cars ready to drive through the frame, and baby carriages, and stuff. And whenever I put them on the streets with Spider, it felt wrong. And I kept subtracting, once again. I said, "Well, let's get rid of that, let's get rid of that." And I would end up with Spider alone. So that was when I realized that we were not just making a sort of first-person movie, but almost an expressionistic movie. That is, that was Spider's inner sense of isolation that we were showing, rather than what you would see if you were standing there on the street with him. So it's a kind of a double game that I'm playing, which is sort of cultural accuracy, but an expressionistic version of it. The wallpaper was incredibly important. There's lots of wallpaper in this movie. And we got tons of it. It's all vintage, authentic English wallpaper. Authentic down to being moldy and damp and drab and stained and all of that.

SCHWARTZ: You have talked about working with some of the same people and the cinematographer, editor. You worked with a lot of the same people—[composer] Howard Shore—but the production designer was different.

CRONENBERG: Yes. Carol Spier was trapped in Prague doing *Blade II*. (Laughter) I think she's still there. I think she *is* still there, because she's doing *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. She spent nine months there doing *Blade II*. So for the first time since we started on *Fast Company*, which was

a long time ago. (Scattered applause, laughter) I had a different production designer. And I had to audition production designers, which is something that I had gotten out of the habit of doing, because I just automatically would use Carol. So the advantage that Andrew Sanders would have over Carol would be that some of the stuff he wouldn't have to do research for, because he lived through that era in England. And so he could say, "No, no, the potatoes *were* that color, because I used to eat them and I remember them." On the other hand, Carol has an amazing way of somehow transporting herself into different times and places, so I have no doubt that she could've done a wonderful job, as well.

SCHWARTZ: You did shift the time period a bit from the novel.

CRONENBERG: Yeah. I can't even remember if Patrick had done it or I did. I think maybe we did it... Well, it was a collaboration, in any case. But there's a lot of stuff about the war in the novel, because the first part of it happens right after the war, so there're a lot of references to the Second World War in England. And I didn't feel there was room in the movie to deal with that; it's another subject. So I moved it a little further along, to the late '50s. I didn't really want to do a '60s movie, either. So there're no Beatles posters or anything. And I was just trying to find an era that was specific, but not so well-known to the world at large that it would distract from what was going on. And the early '80s, well, that was just the time lapse between when Spider would first go to his asylum and when he would get out at the age of 35.

SCHWARTZ: Now, I just feel so much Samuel Beckett in the film. And you've talked about Ralph's haircut being somewhat modeled on Beckett. But also, just a lot of the tone of the film—particularly with the three men, the scene out in the field. I mean, there were just a lot of times I feel like you're adapting Beckett.

CRONENBERG: Yes, well, stealing. (Laughter) Stealing from him. It's not in the novel, of course, and it's not really in the screenplay, but just the way it was described in the screenplay—I started to think very much of those shots of Beckett walking through the streets of Paris with his notebook, and

that great hair, and those great cheekbones. And yet somehow looking like a vagrant. And it didn't occur to me, really, until after we finished editing the movie that Spider was in fact a reasonable kind of nightmare emblem of an artist. That is to say, he's writing obsessively about his life, about things that have great passion and meaning for him. And yet he's writing in a language that no one can understand, he's completely not understood. And that is kind of the nightmare of any artist, that he should do that and have no communication with anybody. I've had moments... (Laughter) I've had moments where I could come out here and there'd be nobody sitting here, (Laughter) and I'd just be talking to you. So the Beckett connection was even closer. But I also did think that Spider could be a character from, well, you think of *Krapp's Last Tape* as a play, but also some of his novels, more than the plays. But we also were thinking of that austerity and that purity of what Beckett was doing. And that came from the character of Spider, who has none of those distractions that we have from the existential realities. He has no friends, he has no network that derives from work that he does, no art, seems to have no religion. He really just has what he's carrying on his back and in his hand. And so that, too, felt very Beckett-like to me, just in terms of that austerity.

SCHWARTZ: And you were not really interested in exploring schizophrenia or mental illness, I mean, the way that, last year's Oscar-winning best film, *A Beautiful Mind*...

CRONENBERG: Did that explore it? (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: Well...

CRONENBERG: I missed it. (Laughter) I missed that part. (Applause) Well, I have to make a confession here. I got a letter from a woman in London, Ontario, who was very upset, because she had read something on the Internet where I'd actually bad-mouthed *A Beautiful Mind*, which I normally don't do in public. I mean, in private, of course, I'm very terrible on movies.

SCHWARTZ: You think you can come to America and berate our...

CRONENBERG: I think someone in her family was suffering from schizophrenia. And she said that the movie *A Beautiful Mind* had done more for the image of schizophrenia and schizophrenics than all the sort of stuff that the Canadian Schizophrenia Society had ever done. And I have yet to write her back the letter that I have composed in my mind, which is exactly, that—that I didn't really think that that movie was dealing with schizophrenia at all. And I have a feeling that anybody who lived with that would agree.

I have been on panels with Patrick [McGrath], and I would say this: Ralph asked me if he could—he wanted to meet schizophrenics, and he wanted to meet psychiatrists, and go to asylums, and so on. And I said, "Absolutely, we'll help you do that. But I'm not really that interested in it, because I'm not wanting to do a clinical study of a disease." To me, Spider represents the human condition. And that's what I'm interested in. And I don't want to give the audience a chance to distance themselves from Spider and say, "Well, he's schizophrenic, so it's something wrong with him; and *I'm* not that." Because I really wanted the audience to become Spider by the end of it, to really be in his head.

And then Patrick had said, "What David said he didn't want to do is exactly what I did want to do in my novel." Patrick was raised at Broadmoor Prison for the Criminally Insane, because his father was a medical superintendent there. And it's a huge Victorian estate, in northern England. And he said that schizophrenics and axe murderers were his pram pushers—is the way he put it. So he was very concerned, in particular, that his father would find—speaking of Oedipal stuff, that certainly there is in this movie, as well, he wanted his father to give his seal of approval to the clinical aspects of schizophrenia. Well, my approach was completely different. I said, "We've got to be free to allow Spider to develop in any way that we feel works. And I don't want to have a list of symptoms that we're checking off and saying, 'Okay, we've covered the hallucinations, we've covered this, we covered that.'"

And yet, as so often happens when your instincts are right and focused, I have had lots of confirmation that it feels like a very accurate

depiction of schizophrenia—which embodies itself in completely different ways in people; it's not just one very specific set of symptoms. I had a woman come up to me after a screening that we had in Toronto. And she said to me, "How did you know about the bathtub?" And I said, "What do you mean?" She said, "Well, I have one of those at home. My son's 23, 6-foot-5, schizophrenic. And when he takes a bath, that's how he looks. That's what he does, that's how he holds himself." And she said, "You must've done research." And I said, "No." I mean, in the script, it says, "Spider lies in the bathtub." And it was just, Ralph's and our understanding of what this character would do, what a bath would mean to him, how exposed and vulnerable he would feel. And just the way we lit it and the lens that we used, and the music that Howard Shore composed for that scene—all of that ended up, for her, delivering a sort of clinically accurate version of what she was living with, with her son. So there are many ways to accuracy. And that seemed to be one of them.

SCHWARTZ: So many of your films create a subjectivity where we're in a world that's really the world of the main character. And you do it, I think, in subtle ways, I think through camera placement, through—the sound design in this film is very subtle, but, I think, really takes us inside Spider. If you could talk a bit about cinematically how you created this.

CRONENBERG: Well, once again I say, it's kind of intuitive. I don't really know what lens I'm going to use before we shoot, and I don't know how I'm going to choreograph the scene before we shoot. So it's really a matter of feeling your way through the scenes one by one and experimenting. It's hard to say. There are a lot of technical things I could say. We used a very low-contrast Fuji film stock, which is not normally what Peter Suschitzky and I would do. And that tends to make the shadows more grey, not very dark—and the brights are kind of muted. And then I used very wide-angle lenses for close-ups. They're wide-angle in the sense that you don't normally use them for close-ups—21 millimeters and 27 millimeters—which sort of keeps the background in focus, as well as the face. Not the normal portrait thing that you would do. You'd normally use a long lens that would throw the background out of focus. So it makes Spider blend

into his own background, in a way. And this is all rationalization after the fact, I freely confess. But it just felt right when we were doing it. Although there is a sort of an analytical thing that I... Well, it was intuitive, as well.

There were a lot of effects that would be what we call special effects in the script originally, and even more in the novel. And they are the kind of things that people would think that I would really like to do. But in fact, I only like to do that stuff if it works. Special effects is just like lighting or editing or anything else; it's just another thing that you use if you need it, not something, I think, to be obsessed with. So for example, there was a scene where the boy cuts into a potato, and it starts to bleed. And, of course, it's his mother's blood, because he thinks she's buried under this potato patch. And so it's a very legit kind of hallucination. But it would be very obvious to an audience that it's a hallucination and that it's not real. And I had the guys make the potato. They showed it to me; it exploded the first time they showed it to me, got blood all over everything. (Laughter) This is normal for effects guys. And then they were very, very sad—melancholy, I'd say (Laughter)—when I didn't shoot it. But the thing was that it was...I realized by that time that it was from some other movie.

The movie gradually reveals itself to you. And it doesn't mean that you don't know what you're doing, but it does mean that you're kind of creating a complex living thing. And you want it to surprise you and push you around and tell you what it wants to do and what it doesn't want. Characters do that, too, when you're writing. And you normally let them, because that kind of life is very hard to find, and when you've got it, you don't let go of it. So the movie was kind of telling me what it wanted to be.

So the main hallucination in this movie is, of course, Miranda Richardson playing Yvonne. And I felt, if it's a subjective movie, then when Spider thinks something is real, we must also. And those other effects/hallucinations, we would know that they were not real. The other thing is that when Spider is confused, then we're confused. And if you're going to really be rigorous about it, then that's the game you're playing in this movie: "It's okay, I'm really going to do this." And it was very difficult for Gabriel Byrne playing Bill. He said it was the most difficult

role he'd ever played, and he's played a lot of roles. But it was because a lot of the time—maybe most of the time—he's not playing a character, he's playing the fantasy projection of another character. And that's very difficult to do. Where do we see the real Bill, you know? Little bits and pieces kind of come out. And the main scene, of course, was the scene in the woodshed, where he says to Spider, "Why are you so angry with us?" And there you see... It was very interesting also—in Toronto, when we screened it, people laughed at that line. And I would never have anticipated a laugh at that line. And then I realized, of course, that if you really believe that Bill has murdered his wife, Spider's mother, and replaced her with this slut from the pub, why is he asking, "Why are you so angry with us?" I mean, it's obvious why the kid's angry. Then the audience got quieter and quieter, and they began to realize that, oh, my God, maybe that isn't really true; maybe this is the real Bill that we're seeing, not the demonic Bill who can kill his wife and then have a swig, and bring her home and not seem to worry about what the neighbors would think, and expect the kid to just kind of accept this woman. But that's what happens if you're really doing the subjective thing. But, as I say, it makes it difficult. If you see the movie again, it will become quite a different movie, I guarantee it.

SCHWARTZ: Let's take some questions from the audience. (Repeats audience question) did you ever have a motivation in your head for Spider killing his mother?

CRONENBERG: Killing his real mother, or killing Yvonne? Well, we don't know that what you see at the end is the real story. It's possible that Spider's mother isn't dead. It's possible that Spider's mother left the family, and then, as children tend to do, Spider felt guilty that he was responsible and it was his fault, and then he developed a fantasy that he murdered her. So we don't know what the truth is. just because Spider thinks he's got to the truth doesn't mean we necessarily know. There could be a *Spider II*. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: We'll see the exploding potatoes in that one. (Repeats audience question) If you could talk a little bit about the sound design in the film and music as well.

CRONENBERG: Well, it's very spare. (Laughs) It's a very quiet movie, which I suppose these days is a rarity. And so you hear things that are important to Spider. What you've got with Spider is a man, a fully developed human being, who has very few things to put his energy, his human energy, into. So he puts it into what he's got. So his notebook is incredibly important to him, and his cigarettes and his cigarette papers; and his pace is very deliberate. And it never occurred to me to not let the movie be anything but Spider's pace, even though it's, you know, not a traditional kind of movie. And likewise, the sounds and the smells are all very important to Spider. They're all very significant. And it means a lot of quiet. And just the sound of his feet scabbling on the gravel has significance to him, too. So that was really the shape of the sound, was that it should be very, very quiet, so that small things would take on great significance.

And the music is... I mean, Howard Shore had just finished composing the music for *Lord of the Rings* that he won an Oscar for. And then *Spider* was his next movie. So, they're very different. (Laughs) Very different scores. And we didn't have, you know, two hundred African choir boys and things like that. (Laughter) And *Lord of the Rings* did. But it didn't matter because that was the name of the game. It was not that we didn't have what we needed; we did, we had exactly what we needed, which was very small, delicate, intricate stuff that had great resonance for Spider. And so the whole design of it was subjectivity. That was the thing, that the silence can be as provocative and profound as any noise. And that's not used very often in movies these days, but it was the basis of *Spider's* sound.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Okay, in terms of the composition of the shots, you said you didn't do storyboards, but how did you determine your compositions?

CRONENBERG: Look through the lens. I mean, not to be evasive... It's really a sculptural procedure for me. Making a movie is very tactile and physical. I want to touch the actors, and I need to smell the location, and... So to do storyboards is a very abstract thing. To me, it's very—it's like a kind of disembodiment. And I need to be embodied, it's a very physical thing for me to make a movie, so I

want that stuff around. And that's why I—some actors don't like this, but I don't do rehearsals, because to me it all changes when you get on the set and the real stuff is there. Miranda, I only learned after the fact, was a little upset about that. She would've liked some rehearsal. But I don't think she needed it, frankly. So it's all impromptu. I mean, in a strange sense, a lot of what I'm doing is found art. I've put a lot of work into the look of the place, the building of the sets, or the choosing of the locations, and the costumes and everything. But then when I'm there, it's kind of like I'm making a documentary of what we just did, or what we're doing. So it's all impromptu.

It's just, "Okay, Ralph is standing at the wardrobe. He's writing. What lens will I use? Let's look at this, let's look at that. Yeah, that looks really good." And then my cameraman gets excited and he says, "Well, we could just put a shadow here." I encourage my cameramen to not do what cameramen love to do, which is to do relatively naturalistic lighting. If you show a room to a director of photography that he's going to shoot, he immediately looks for sources of light; that's the first thing he does. Well, and if you're designing it, he'll say, "Well, can we have a skylight? And can we have another window over there, and can we have some practical lamps over there?" Because he's looking for sources of light to make it real—even though it's all fakery, of course. And you'll notice that there's a lamp beside Spider's bed and it's never lit. Now, normally, they'd go right for that. And I said, "We're never going to see that on, because it doesn't work; this is England." (Laughter) And so after a little resistance, Peter really got into it, and would use colors, gels. And not to get... I don't want to get too cute about it—and I certainly didn't want to give the audience cues about what was fantasy and reality by making some scenes very green or yellow or whatever, so we didn't do anything like that—but there're some scenes in Spider's room, for example, where the light is coming from a wall. It's just a solid wall with no light fixtures on it; light could not possibly come from there. Once again, it's a subjective... My excuse was to say, it's the way he lights it in his head. So those are some of the ways that I was working.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yeah. More than any other filmmaker I can think of, your films, at least to me,

always really create the sense of unease and anxiety.

CRONENBERG: You know, I was watching CNN today, and I felt the same way. (Laughter) They're great. Fabulous.

SCHWARTZ: Okay, so at what point in the production did you decide to have Spider, as an adult, present in some of the memory scenes?

CRONENBERG: Speaking of unease I suppose, also. Well, it was in the script. Now, Patrick seems to remember it one way, which is that he only had Spider present in his own memories in one scene, and then I asked him to extend it to the whole movie. And I don't remember that; I thought it was like that to begin with. But that's in the nature of a good and sort of fluent collaboration. When it works well, you can't remember, almost, who came up with what. So I really don't know which way it is. But I always liked it, and I always thought it would work. And the only other time I've done something quite like that was in *The Dead Zone*, when I have the Christopher Walken character present in his own visions. That was something that was not in the novel, and I had come up with. But this is different. But it seemed to me to be the perfect cinematic way to, first of all, give you the memories and Spider's reaction to those memories—how he was feeling, remembering those things at the same time—but also to show you how we are present always in our memories, that we are interfering with them. A journalist said to me, "When Spider's present in his house, looking through the window and lurking in the corner, it's like a director being on a film set." And I said, "Well, I hadn't thought of it that way," but it's exactly what it means, because he's redirecting his memories, he's cutting them, he's rewriting them, he's choreographing them. The understanding of memory from this movie—which is mine as well, but Patrick's also—is that memory is always a created thing.

There's a lot of creative energy that goes into remembering. There's no version of memory that's an absolute, like a film that would stay the same decade after decade, and people could look at it and all agree that they're seeing the same thing. Probably with a film you wouldn't get that, anyway. But we're constantly revising our memories and

inventing them and reinventing them. And I'm sure many of you have had the experience of having something that you thought was a memory, and then later your sister or your mother tells you that you weren't there then, that, in fact, that was a kind of a family communal memory that was laid on you so many times that you started to think you actually remembered it. But it's been part of you for years, so is it not a real memory? This is the question. And then when you realize that memory is identity, there cannot be any identity without memory, that suggests that we are constantly revising our identities, as well. And I think that is also true.

SCHWARTZ: One of the things that really makes this work is the child—the actor who plays the young Spider is just remarkable. Could you talk about finding him, working with him?

CRONENBERG: With *Harry Potter*, they said they looked at nine hundred kids. I couldn't do it, not nine hundred. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: So you took the first one.

CRONENBERG: 36. We looked at 36 boys. And Bradley [Hall] was... it wasn't immediately totally obvious, but... And he was also a lot younger than what Patrick had imagined Spider as being as a boy, but I said, "No, he has to be—it has to be before puberty. I mean, everything changes if he's thirteen or fourteen, if he's a man; if he has hairy legs, I don't want him." (Laughter) It's got to be boyish little knobby English knees, in those short pants. So Spider was ten, basically, or he had to be an actor who could play ten. And the woman who did the casting in London specializes in kids. And she had discovered Jamie Bell, who was in *Billy Elliot*. That was her big claim to fame. And she knew all the sort of kids. And Bradley had done very little, almost nothing. He sort of belonged to a drama club and had done some little theater and stuff; he hadn't really been in front of the camera. And it was a fantastic transformation for him, to see him. I mean, we were all very... we loved Bradley.

And he just developed into a professional. You could see it happening. By the end of the movie... And he watched Ralph very carefully, because, of course, they were in a lot of scenes together—even though they never speak, of course, because

they're the same person. And by the end of the movie, he wouldn't let the props guy, rewind the string for take two; he would rewind it himself, because he had a very specific way, and it had to be rewound... And many good actors are like that. As I say, the things that they deal with, like props, are very personal to them, and they don't really want props people coming in and messing around with them.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) The question is, are there any scenes, either in the novel or the screenplay, of objective reality that's not Spider's reality, because there are scenes in the film where Spider wasn't present? Was the Oedipal stuff triggered by the sight of seeing the mother kissing Gabriel Byrne outside the window?

CRONENBERG: Well, those are two separate things, although they of course connect. So let me answer the first one first. I asked Patrick to get very specific in the script about what level of memory or imagination we were dealing with—for the crew, primarily, because the script...after all, it's sort of an inchoate art thing. It then becomes a blueprint for the crew. So you want everybody to know where we were. So we had three levels. We had memory; we had infected memory; and then we had imagination. And memory was something where Spider, as a boy, was present, and was not hallucinating. So scenes with him with his mother, when she's putting on lipstick, or, talking to him about the spiderwebs and so on, that would be memory. Infected memory is when he is remembering what he thought he saw as a boy, but he was hallucinating. And that would be all of the scenes where he sees Yvonne replacing his mother. And shockingly enough, if you see the movie again, when you see Yvonne, think of her as Mrs. Cleg, and you'll get a completely different story. You'll get a story of a marriage where there's some difficulties, the normal kind—he drinks a little too much, maybe he's not happy with sex with her. She decides, for whatever reason, to dress a little for him, and maybe go out to the pub and have a few drinks with him, and not be so prudish about his drinking; and then she gets drunk with him, then they come home arm in arm and they have sex together. That's Bill and Mrs. Cleg, the happy version. But by this time, Spider doesn't want to see that version. That's the Oedipal problem. We'll get

back to that. Then there's imagination. And those are scenes where Spider could not be remembering, because he wasn't there. And that includes a lot of stuff, including the murder of Mrs. Cleg. So it's not really a structural flaw, let's say.

I was talking to the director Patricia Rozema. She said, "Wait a minute that a structural flaw is the key to the whole movie?" (Laughter) I said, "Well, not exactly—" You could look at it that way. Because she was thinking there was a mistake being made: No, wait a minute, he couldn't possibly be remembering this, because the kid isn't there. But in fact, that's meant to be meaningful—as is the fact that I have the same actress playing these three roles, which is another sort of subjective trick thing. Normally, when you have an actor playing multiple roles, it's to show how versatile the actor is, and so on. But in this case, it has a point, because Spider is fusing together people in his life. The woman in the pub that we see first, who exposes her breast to Spider, is not Miranda Richardson. And you might not have thought of it, because you don't know at that point that she's going to be a very significant character. But in fact, it's another actress.

And the idea is—where the Oedipal stuff actually starts, it's hard to say. Usually with birth, I think. (Laughter) And though I'm certainly not a rigorous Freudian... And in fact, we do kind of cross the line with the Oedipal thing, because technically, Spider should be murdering his father so he can have his mother. But his mother happens to be Yvonne—and so that makes problems. So that's why he murders his mother, Yvonne, because she supplanted his mother, Mrs. Cleg. Just to answer that question that I didn't actually get to (Laughter) before. And that was something that I did change, actually, because I think Patrick, even as he wanted to be rather clinical in his approach to schizophrenia, also wanted to be kind of rigorous in his approach to Freud. And he, I think, did initially have Spider thinking he was killing his father, and then accidentally killing his mother. And I thought that was too coincidental and too perfectly Freudian and Oedipal, and also didn't make sort of logical sense. The boy is threatened by this creature, Yvonne, and has already imagined that she was a co-murderer, a co-conspirator. So he has every

right to murder her, as far as he's concerned. So that was another change.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Okay, well, the idea of a character who's able to step outside of his memories creates a complicated relationship—it adds some element of objectivity, so it's not completely subjective film. Which is similar to the way that we're unraveling the film as an audience.

CRONENBERG: I see your point. And as I say, you cannot photograph an abstract concept, so you have to photograph people and things. And when I said it's impossible to do an actual sort of translation of a novel, that's part of the problem. Because even a very bad novelist can give you that interior life by doing an inner monologue. It just works in literature very well. And I think a huge part of that is the fact that consciousness depends very much on language. At least higher consciousness, as we experience it. Language is so much a part of that. And if you're doing something that is outside of language, like photography, it's very difficult to find a way to suggest subjectivity, really. So it's kind of a toss-up. But since you seem to think it worked well, (Laughter) I'm going to say yeah, you're right. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Well, I guess we haven't talked much about Miranda Richardson. But if you can talk about how she got attached to the project, and just what it was like working with her.

CRONENBERG: It's one of those lovely little stories. I had tried to get Miranda in a movie before, and it hadn't worked out. And then I met her in Toronto briefly, but hadn't really spoken to her much. And so when I flew to London to first talk to Ralph and Catherine Bailey, a producer of the film, we naturally started to talk about who would play these roles. And I said, "What about Miranda Richardson?" And they said, "Well, that's amazing that you say that." I said, "Well, why is that?" And they said, "Well, in the four years in the wilderness, before we had a director, we did a reading of the script." And this is something that's often done when people are frustrated; they have a script they think is good, and they can't get the movie made. They'll have a little reading on a stage like this, or in

a pub, or in somebody's house. And the actors will get their friends to sort of read. This is not for money. And often, it's not even for an audience; it's just to see how it sounds. And they got Miranda to do that reading. So I said, "Well, was she any good?" (Laughter) They said, "She was fantastic." So I said, "Well, why don't we get her?"

And so we did. And almost lost her, because this movie almost fell apart many times, including in preparation, just from the normal torture of independent-film financing. And we almost lost her to another movie, because she had committed to some other movie. And then she decided she would blow that movie off and do ours. She knew it was going to be better.

Miranda's great. She's so good. I said, "Why didn't I just hire three separate actresses, for all you've done? You're so good that a lot of people didn't realize it was the same actress until almost the end of the movie, or, in fact, even into the credits at times." And that goes beyond the game I wanted to play. If you go maybe three-quarters of the way through the movie and not realize it's Miranda playing Yvonne, and then you do, that's sort of perfect. But if you don't realize it, then it kind of defeats the purpose of having her be the same person. (Laughter)

And she was asked in panels... And as I say, this is stuff that—because I didn't find it necessary to have this discussion with her, but, because I assume that actors know how to act, if they're professionals, and it's not my job to teach them how. You often read about directors, torturing their actors to get performances and doing this and tricks, and, firing guns and stuff. But you know, unless you're dealing with non-actors, who do need some help, my assumption is they know how to do it. They know how to torture themselves really well. (Laughter) You don't have to do it for them. And Miranda said, "Well, I couldn't play these people as different aspects of the same person." An actor cannot act an abstract concept. So she would play them as separate, real people. That's the way she did it. And she said that the hour-and-a-half or so in the makeup chair, and then change of costume, and then, the pointy brassiere thing for Yvonne were all she needed, really, to segue from one character into another. Just that little bit of time and

those changes, because actors do feel all that stuff. A lot of actors say, "If you just give me another pair of shoes, I'll be a different character." So that's how she did it.

CRONENBERG: Thanks very much.

SCHWARTZ: Well, thank you, and please come back when you do *Spider II*, or whatever your next film is. (Applause)

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