

The Decline of the Intellectual Barbarians

- A brief, comparative study of *Le Déclin de l'empire américain* and *Les Invasions barbares* -

1. Introduction

Le Déclin de l'empire américain (1986) - or *Decline* as I will refer to it from now on - was a surprise hit when it came out. Not only in the province of Quebec, to the inhabitants of which it targeted a lot of its cynical humour, but also in large parts of the rest of the world. It became increasingly obvious that it had some sort of general appeal that went beyond the expected success of a film with sex as one of its strong focal points. Perhaps was it the criticism of the not too well defined titular "America" that attracted movie-goers (provoked or intrigued as they might have been by the suggestion that their beloved America was facing a decline). Or maybe it was the notion of women being as sexually aggressive as their male counterparts that stirred up enough interest to lure the public to the theaters. The fact that the film was a more or less successful attempt to merge light-hearted comedy with more serious themes, such as the importance of history or the disintegration of love-based relationships, might also have been a contributing factor.

In any case, it definitely struck a chord with a lot of people back then – a sign as good as any that it was a sign of the times, a film that captured the spirit and concerns of the contemporary society without ignoring its roots or its future.

Decline also came across as a story both with and without an ending. When the end credits tell us it's time to say goodbye to the characters we are left with a certain satisfaction (in the sense that secrets finally have been revealed and confronted and that all the talking that's been done throughout the movie has had its consequences), but also with a sense of uncertainty as to how certain relationships will end, what will happen to the character Claude who is apparently ill, how the friendship of the whole group will be affected etc.

Apparently the writer/director, Denys Arcand, had no plans to "finish" the story as he revealed during the 2003 Cannes Film Festival: "I never gave a second thought to these characters after I finished *Decline*" (Conlogue, p. 11). However, seventeen years later the situation had changed significantly: "I tried to write a film about someone who is going to die. And I always ended up with these dreary scripts. And then, two years ago, (in 2001) I thought, what if I write a story with these characters? [...] [They are] people who are bright, lucid and funny. They would want to laugh. They would want to defy death, which is what we have to do" (Conlogue, p. 11).

The result was the critically acclaimed *Les Invasions barbares* (2003) (from here on referred to as *Invasions*), a biting, moving, comic tragedy which reunites almost all the characters from *Decline*, still played by the same actors.

Centering around the imminent death of Remy (one of the central characters in *Decline*) and the friends and family members affected by the situation, *Invasions* is essentially both something completely new and fresh, with a different take on some of the themes presented in *Decline* and another kind of narrative tone, but also with many clear similarities with the first film. I will now go through some of these differences and similarities in order to establish the extent to which the two films can be seen as parts of a whole and how well they stand up against each other quality-wise. The division between similarities and differences is of course not entirely clear. A similarity can often contain a difference at the same time and vice versa, but the following is a rough structure that isn't entirely unmotivated.

2. The similarities

The similarities between the two films are of course far too many to describe here, but these are some of the more important ones:

The intellectual elitism

The characters are all highly educated academics who have more or less successful careers. They seem to consider it one of their assignments in life to enlighten the less educated, often by imposing ideas and opinions on them and often by assuming that they know nothing of history or politics. When Denys Arcand himself was asked the question where a young person should seek knowledge, his response was: "Il y a les études, il y a la lecture. J'ai étudié l'histoire à l'université, ça m'a appris beaucoup et ça a formé ma pensée à bien des égards. [...] On peut aussi poser des questions comme tu fais maintenant, consulter les gens qui pourraient avoir des réponses" (Brunet, p. 22). These experiences and convictions of his shine through in scenes like the numerous ones in *Decline* where Remy, Pierre and Claude explain the facts of life and history to the considerably younger Alain almost completely without verifying whether he's already familiar with the answer or not. They can also be seen clearly when, again in *Decline*, he contrasts the sophisticated discussion had in the circle of friends against the sluggish comments made by Diane's uneducated lover during his visit after the whole ensemble has started on the dinner they've been preparing during the whole movie up to that point. In *Invasions* it is mostly the hospital staff that have to endure the main characters' endless lectures and wisecracks, but also Diane's estranged daughter. In both films these secondary characters seem quite happy with the role of the listener that has been assigned to them. Perhaps is Arcand so convinced of their ignorance that he assumes that they don't even realise when they're being bullied.

The cynical sense of humour

Many video stores seem to have placed *Decline* in the comedy section, and indeed it has many funny moments and a general sense of dark humour throughout, but it is by no means a straight-forward comedy. Neither is *Invasions*, which boasts an even darker brand of humour, mostly caused by the tragic situation at the core of the story. We laugh, but we do so knowing well that there are thick layers of bitterness and cynicism embedded in the "jokes". Both films use the humour as a catalyst for

more serious messages and they also, in both cases, make us laugh at embarrassing things we can relate to in one way or another. In *Decline* it is mostly focused on the sex, whereas in *Invasions* it is sex and death, but the style remains the same.

The reversal of traditional gender roles

As Stanley Kauffmann noted in his review of *Decline*, it is "a nice touch [that] it's the women who work out and shower, it's the men who cook as they await the women" (Kauffmann, p. 28). In many other films, especially those that focus on the relationship between men and women, such a reversal of the traditional gender roles would have been unthinkable. But Arcand seems to enjoy to play with our expectations and turn them upside down. In *Decline* it is also the women, contrary to popular perception, who seem to have been more adventurous when it comes to sex. For example, Diane mentions the submissive games she plays with her lover, two of the women casually mention having had sex with other women and Dominique vividly retells her sexual encounter with a Sicilian policeman. In *Invasions*, we notice that it is Remy's son Sebastien who, despite his initial reluctance, turns out to be the most caring and nurturing character of them all, while Diane's daughter Nathalie – in the traditional male role – is independent, tough, self-centered, emotionally detached and strong. We can also see quite clearly that it is Pierre and to some extent Claude who are more emotionally affected by the Remy's situation than the women are.

The narrative and dramatic structure at the beginning and the end

Both *Decline* and *Invasions* seem to be similarly structured, especially when it comes to the beginnings and the endings of the two films. *Decline* opens with a long tracking shot where Diane interviews Dominique for a radio show. They walk a long distance through hallways and via an escalator. Stanley Kauffmann writes that "the long opening roll is authoratative: the aritecture tells us a good deal about the slick seriousness of the place, and the shot ends with two people who are also slickly serious" (Kauffmann, p. 28). This tells us right at the start that despite the sometimes

light-hearted sexual rants that are to follow, the film carries a serious message about contemporary society which is also reflected in its title. Everything after this scene confirms many of the theories and themes that we are first presented with through the interview.

Invasions also opens with a long tracking shot. This time it's not even edited; it's just one long take. We get to follow a nurse walking along a crowded hospital corridor. People and machines are scattered everywhere and the level of stress and misery is obviously high. The medical staff the nurse encounters on her way to Remy's room don't seem to be concerned with the chaos. This is everyday life for them. So again, we're presented with a serious opening shot, which sets the tone for the rest of the film and which is a sharp comment about the current state of society. It is still decaying, even though the focal points have shifted slightly this time.

Both *Decline* and *Invasions* end on a serious note too, with many plot threads left unresolved. In the final scenes of *Decline*, the circle of friends seem almost to be at the brink of disintegration, partly because of the recent revelations, but also because of their fatigue and frustration with their own lives and society in general. Pierre says: "Moi, j'ai l'impression qu'on saura jamais le fond de l'histoire" (Arcand, p. 173) and Claude's gloomy reply to Diane's "Ca va?" is an uninspired "Ca va" (Arcand, p. 173). Among other uncertain things, we know nothing of what will happen to Remy's relationship or what will become of Claude's illness.

Equally dark and uncertain is the final scene of *Invasions*, where Sebastien is on a plane back home with his fiancée, neither of them happy and Sebastien pondering his own near-infidelity only hours before. We don't know what will become of their relationship and we don't know what will become of Pierre's seemingly unhappy marriage or Diane's shaky relation to her daughter. Neither film is without hope at the end, but they're both at a point of melancholy and uncertainty about the future.

The criticism of contemporary society

"The decline (of the American empire) to which the film refers, is linked to the search for personal happiness, and the demand for individual rights associated with this search (particularly the right to enjoy pleasure) override collective rights and concerns" (Loiselle/McIlroy, p. 72)

This is Denise Pérusse's interpretation of the main theme in *Decline*. In other words, her point is that the members of society have become very self-centered, depraved and focused on their own enjoyment. It is no question that it is mainly sexual enjoyment that is their goal, since the film's characters barely talk about anything else. The only other area that seems to interest them is literacy/history/education. This seems also to be in the process of breaking down and/or disappearing. Even though the characters themselves seem to be aware of and disgusted by the latter form of decline (that of history and literacy), they seem to revel and participate in the decline of the former (sexual depravity and ego-centricism). In either case, it is clear that both forms of decline are considered by Arcand to be both clear and regrettable. There is no joy in watching either. In *Invasions*, the social criticism is equally present. This time, however, it is targeted at everything from 9/11 (the "barbarian invasions" themselves, as depicted on a tv-screen in the hospital), the commercialization and abandonment of the church (not even the priest himself seems interested in anything but the economical value when he has to sell religious relics from the now mostly empty churches), the health-care system (where everybody seems to be open to bribes and where nothing seems to work) and the police (completely corrupt and disillusioned as they are in the film) as well as the lack of knowledge of history and sexual depravity from *Decline*.

Sometimes, in both films, Arcand's socially critical agenda seems to take over completely and reduce the characters to pawns in his game of social politics, so it is quite clear that these themes are of great importance to him.

3. The differences

Despite the many similarities between the two films there are also quite a few differences. These are some of the more interesting ones:

Intellectual vs. emotional

"It's an affecting film and a wise one, but at times seems a mite too caught up in its own cleverness" (Rozen, p. 32). That is one somewhat fitting description of *Invasions* written by Leah Rozen in her review of the film. *Invasions* is indeed a bit too caught up in its own cleverness at times, but that part of the description is far more applicable to *Decline*. Where *Decline* is an emotionally detached tale of sexual depravity and moral decay, at times almost repulsive in its clear-cut, unemotional intellectual reasoning, *Invasions* is most definitely a film that aims for our hearts and souls. Not only is the theme of disease and death very emotional in itself, Arcand also makes a strong effort to add subtleties to the characters. No longer are they mere carriers of the film's cerebral message as in *Decline*, they are now characters in their own right. If one reads the screenplay of *Decline*, having erased the character names, it would at times almost be impossible to identify which character is which. That's the extent to which they lack personality and emotional depth, whereas in *Invasions* we get plenty of opportunity to get to know both the old characters (obviously Remy through his central function in the story, but also Diane through the trouble she's having with her daughter and Pierre through his dead-end relationship and also through his friendship with Remy) and the new ones (Sebastien struggles with the complicated father-son relationship he has with Remy, he pushes the limits of law and morals and he is faced with his own attraction to his childhood friend Nathalie, who in turn has her eyes opened by the new experiences that force their way into her drug-addicted everyday life). Both films are more "talky" than most, with extensive dialogue in almost every scene, but *Invasions* also has room for tense silence on occasion and when the characters speak, they mostly do so to convey personality and emotion rather than pure intellectual thought or sexual anecdotes as in *Decline*.

Optimism and control vs. weariness and dependancy

Although society disappoints them in many ways, the characters in *Decline* are mostly positive, happy and in control of their own destinies. They take every opportunity to enjoy sex (and there seem to be plenty of them), fine wine, good food and other aspects of the "good life". They actively grab life's pleasures as they cross their paths (note for example how Claude immediately tries to seduce Mario) and not much seems to go against them, despite of course the consequences of Remy's disloyalty.

When they reunite in *Invasions* however, the situation is very much different. They still try to keep their spirits up, joking like before in an attempt to recreate those happier times. There is no way of denying the effects of the passing of time though. As Ray Conlogue expresses it in reference to *Invasions*: "Time has passed, hair has thinned, faces are lined. The libido flickers" (Conlogue, p. 11).

Faced with this new situation, Remy and his friends are struggling to find their place in the world.

Their bodies now betray them and the sight of Pierre's young, beautiful girlfriend beside him, for example, is almost a cruel joke. He indirectly acknowledges the fact that he through the relationship tries to cling to passed times when the friends mockingly discuss his girlfriend's appearance. Pierre also appears to be weary of life and seems to have given up the idea to make a change. When Sebastien, after an argument between Pierre and his girlfriend asks if everything is ok, Pierre simply sighs and says "well, this is how it is". Diane makes a feeble try to reconcile with her daughter, but when she is dismissed she just remains silent. With age, the characters have also lost control over their own destinies. It is now the uncaring hospital or the younger generation that set the rules.

When Sebastien speaks the older characters listen and obey. Nathalie too dictates the conditions on which she is to participate in anything related to the older generation. The same goes for Pierre's young girlfriend.

Naive and pure youngsters vs. bitter and hardened youngsters

In a sharp and bitter comment on today's young generation, Arcand has decided to portray the "youngsters" very differently in *Invasions* compared to how they appeared in *Decline*. In *Decline* they were mostly bright-eyed and naive. The character of Alain was, as previously noted, almost solely used to let Remy, Pierre and Claude show off their great experience. He barely had a personality and seemed bewildered and shocked by most of what the others said. However, he was also pure, seemed good-hearted and was ambitious. The other young characters in *Decline* were mostly similar, although most of them were only shown in the context of the lecture hall, where they eagerly consumed the knowledge conveyed by the main characters.

The youngsters of *Invasions* are, although better connected with their own emotions than the older generation, a bad omen for the future. Sebastien is very materialistic, has no qualms when it comes to bribes and is quite narcissistic. He is caught up in his own corporate world and appears to have little faith in humanity or ambition to adopt other values. Nathalie is a hopeless junkie who, according to her own words, is not to be trusted. The young police officers are cold, cynical and disillusioned. And the students of the university (all except one girl) are completely unaffected by Remy's fate and even accept money to fake emotions and concern.

The paradoxal fate of Claude

Although he is just one character, I think the change Claude went through between the two films is worth mentioning, since it in some regards is the opposite of that of the others. In *Decline* Claude was the marginalized and "homeless" character that everybody liked to pick on and mock for his sexuality. He defended himself well, but he was ultimately unsuccessful in his attempts to find a solid ground to stand on. His relationships were brief and even more superficial than the others and his advances on Mario were met with indifference. He was also obviously ill, and the audience were led to believe that it was probably something fatal, possibly AIDS.

In *Invasions*, where everybody else seems quite unhappy and have barely progressed by a single inch in life, Claude is happy, has found the man of his life and has a job that gives him time for other things, good money and academic stimulation. He is completely healthy and seems to deal with his age very well, without struggling against it or worrying about it.

The complexity

One last difference that I would like to briefly bring up is that of narrative, moral and emotional complexity between the two films. *Decline*, despite its underlying social criticism and inventive narrative style, is fairly straight-forward. After the introductory sequence which presents the themes that will be repeated over and over during the rest of the film, we are presented with a lengthy first act that alternately shows the women in the gym and the men in the kitchen. Both groups talk almost exclusively about sex and they stay in the same mood the whole time. Nothing really happens either physically or emotionally. In *In the Shadow of Hollywood* (2000), Arcand tells us about an encounter he had with a Paramount Pictures executive: "He (the executive) liked my film (*Decline*) and said that anyone who can do a twenty minute scene with four men in a kitchen without making it boring really knows his *métier*". That may well be, but the sequence doesn't have much complexity, either on a superficial or deep level. More or less the same goes for the second act where the characters stay in the cabin and continue their talking, even though the dramatic tension increases somewhat in this part.

Invasions, on the other hand, is a whole different story. As mentioned before it has emotional depth and complexity. It shares the structure and mood of *Decline* at the beginning and toward the end, but in between it has a multitude of subplots (the drug community, the work of Sebastien's fiancée etc) and themes (to the point of almost giving a scattered impression). There are no clear messages or answers and we get thrown back and forth between different emotions.

4. Two parts of a whole?

Judging by the similarities presented above, it seems clear to me that there is a strong ideological and superficial "bone structure" that runs through both *Decline* and *Invasions*. We recognize the characters through their elitist attitudes and cynical humour. They have grown older in *Invasions*, but are still identifiable. In most cases, except for Claude's, their personal evolution is a natural extension of what was suggested in the first film.

There are also more general structures and themes that unite *Decline* and *Invasions* – they are both critical against contemporary society (painting a pretty bleak picture of the current situation in both cases), they are both presented with an interesting dynamic between light-heartedness and seriousness, they both start and end more or less on the same note and they both rely heavily on dialogue.

The interesting part though, is that it's not only the similarities, but also the differences that unite the two films. As I have pointed out above, *Decline* is considerably more cerebral while *Invasions* is leaning strongly toward the emotional. *Decline* is also more straight-forward while *Invasions* is quite complex. This, in my opinion, reflects life itself very well. When we are younger, life is simpler and since we generally aren't as deeply involved in relationships or have duties then, we can focus on pure intellectual thought combined with pure light-hearted fun. As we grow older though, things become harder, more emotional (since we have to face the consequences of our actions) and – as we learn to see different sides of things - more complex. They also become more interesting and rewarding. Life becomes richer and more varied, for better and for worse. We also get what is coming to us. If we keep on running along the same tracks we will face the natural consequences. Claude is very caring but misunderstood. He fights to change his situation and in *Invasions*, he has reached many of his goals. Remy on the other hand, realizes too late that he should have written a book and changed his life. It was clear already in *Decline* that he would prioritize his womanizing habits for many years to come.

Therefore I think *Decline and Invasions* fit excellently well together. The characters go through the same evolution as we do. They might not always like it, and death is of course a part of it that is hard to deal with, but the fact remains that the unity of the two films paint a very interesting and true picture of human life.

5. Which film is better?

Since the two films fit so well together, it should be a hard task to decide which one is better. But it isn't. To me, *Invasions* is far more successful than *Decline* is in what it sets out to do. *Decline* wanted us to think and laugh. It worked. But *Invasions* takes on the extremely difficult task of trying to connect with our experiences and emotions, to touch us with a story of believable human beings faced with a situation that is so inhumanly difficult to deal with and humanly natural at the same time, to make us laugh and then cry and laugh and cry at the same time, to make us look around us and see injustices and cruel realities as well as hope, togetherness and inspiration. It challenges us to think and feel and not turn a blind eye to any side of what life throws at us. And it succeeds amazingly well in all the above. That, in my book, is worth more than a gold star.

The Revolt of the Flesh

- A Short Essay on the oeuvre of David Cronenberg -

The struggle for acceptance and identity

Few filmmakers have had to defend their work as much as David Cronenberg. Not only against critique targeted at the alleged lack of quality in his work, but also against misunderstandings. It is not uncommon for filmmakers to be misunderstood - the very visual

nature of films make them the subject of frequent subjective interpretation - but in Cronenberg's case the public's faulty approach has been a rule rather than an exception. The main and most obvious reasons for this are the similarities between typical Cronenbergian themes such as the metamorphosis into frightening creatures and those of straight-forward horror films. One should bear in mind that such similarities are nothing but coincidental, although they have been acknowledged and put to satirical use by the always darkly humoristic Cronenberg. Regarding the first film he made that was interpreted as standard horror, *Shivers* (1975), Cronenberg said: "*Shivers* was a very liberating and very cathartic experience for me. It was not at all degrading" (Handling, p. 173). Horror had become an aiding factor and not an obstacle for Cronenberg in his efforts to get his ideas out to the public. This meant that he would always have an audience, even though that audience might not always be prepared for the cinematic trip they were about to take. As the years passed though, a more or less clear pattern started to emerge that the viewers could recognize. It became increasingly evident that Cronenberg, proving to be an auteur in the traditional sense, returned to and deepened the understanding of the same themes in more or less all of his films. Here follows a brief outline of a few of these Cronenbergian themes.

The body is at war with the mind

"The body will kill the mind eventually; the body's death will kill the ego-subject. In this respect, in its inevitable decaying and dying, the body is therefore always the enemy in the end." (Beard, p. 31). This is what William Beard writes about Cronenberg's approach when focusing on *Shivers*. The same can, however, be said about almost all of Cronenberg's other films with the possible exceptions of *Fast Company* (1979) and *M Butterfly* (1993). The body is uncontrollable and impossible to ignore. It constantly reminds the mind of its existence

and by changing itself into grotesque forms it also demonstrates its power. In *Videodrome* (1982) it literally opens up at the command of others, which can be seen as the ultimate loss of control for the owner of the body. In *Rabid* (1976) the heroine is also the villain since her body craves blood and attacks other people without her consent. The bodies of those infected by her attacks eventually die, as she is also bound to do, which is a triumph over the mind that thereby is destroyed. In *Scanners* (1980) the main characters are blessed with incredible mental powers that are also a curse. Again the mind dies at the hands of the uncontrollable body, which in this case often strains itself beyond all limits and explodes. In *eXistenZ* (1999) the body doesn't destroy the mind, but it remains its enemy in the sense that it constantly misleads it and confuses it to the point of insanity. The characters are physically hooked up to a system that is addictive and thereby enslaves the mind. In *The Fly* (1986) it is the "hero" himself who starts the process of manipulating his body. Nevertheless it soon goes out of control and the body takes charge of the events, rebelling against the mind and changing and decaying to the extent that the mind no longer exists unless the body allows it to. All this reflects our fears and frustration with many things concerning our bodies. Cronenberg captures the real-life horrors of physical sickness, multiplies them by at least ten, and brings them to the screen as striking caricatures of our everyday concerns. Death is definitely on the agenda, since it is often the end result in Cronenberg's films. The process of getting there, through mutation, disease and violent rebellion of the flesh even more so. The impact of this has been strong, but not always welcomed. As Peter Morris writes: "The critical view that Cronenberg's films contain only contagion and death without offering positive alternatives has continued as an influential one" (Morris, p. 76). This illustrates how well Cronenberg has been able to connect with people's fears. The audience is fascinated enough to see the films and identify with the issues presented on screen, but

they also crave a solution. What else could you expect after having been shown evidence that the filmmaker fully understands and correctly analyzes the problem at hand? This doesn't seem to be of interest to Cronenberg though, who as an artist is concentrated on illustrating and amplifying reality in the form of fiction instead of providing answers. And who can say that blood-sucking tentacles protruding from the armpits is not a powerful amplification of reality?

Sex is scientific and violent

Sex is another central theme in Cronenberg's work. It isn't just any kind of sex though, but something often disturbing, violent and/or scientific. When speaking of *Dead Ringers* (1988), which is about two identical twins who work as gynaecologists and sleep with their patients, Cronenberg says: "Here it is: the mind of men – or women – trying to understand sexual organs. I make my twins as kids extremely cerebral and analytical. They want to understand femaleness in a clinical way by dissection and analysis, not by experience, emotion or intuition" (Rodley, p. 145). When they have sex in *Dead Ringers*, the characters do it with a certain emotional detachment, more as an experiment than an act of love. On occasions there are even surgical tools involved in the love-making. Similarly, the characters in *Crash* (1996) are obsessed with sex, and their approach is very much scientific. Car crashes is their kind of thing, and they get aroused by watching crash test videos showing crash test dummies smashing against a brick wall, all the time observed by scientists in white coats. Here, the sex is also violent which reflects the nature of the car crashes. Some of the sex scenes bear similarities with rape scenes, which also is the case in *Stereo* (1969). In *Rabid*, the violence has the upper-hand, but the sexual overtones are quite clear, especially since the main character is played by former porn-star Marilyn Chambers. William Beard writes:

"The film [*Rabid*] looks at the body of this object of desire [Chambers], delves into it, produces a creative cancer sexualized mutation inside it, and turns the body into a compulsive, uncontrolled and uncontrollable sexualized weapon" (Beard, p. 52). The link between the violence and the sex is thereby remarkably strong. It is almost like two sides of the same coin and can be seen as either violent sexuality or sexualized violence. Perhaps Cronenberg is pointing to the fact that sex and violence both share power as an important ingredient and that this binds them together. Power is also a part of science in the sense that the scientist tries to gain control over his subject by understanding how it works. In any case, we again see powerful visualizations and amplifications of everyday issues in Cronenberg's work and it is clear that the sex-science-violence unity is a recurrent theme that means a great deal to him.

Obsession governs our minds

One of the main doorways leading to the Cronenbergian world of mutation and sexualized violence is obsession. It is through the fixation on something or someone that the characters start discovering their bodies and desires. When trying to describe the characters' motivations in *Crash*, John Costello writes: "In the absence of Meaning, fetishizing the car's capacity to redefine the human body is a kind of ACME Instant Metaphysical Catharsis kit" (Costello, p. 82). There is always a reason to why the characters get caught in their obsession, but once they are there the reasons lose their meaning and the obsession itself is what becomes important. The characters in *Crash* are there for the "Metaphysical Catharsis kit", but they are no longer aware of that. Their eyes have been opened to a reality within our reality and the rules of the new reality have become the norm and the centre of attention. This allows the Cronenbergian themes to flow freely and be accepted by the

audience. In *Videodrome*, the main character Max gets obsessed with the show Videodrome and only thereafter starts to slip into its world. In *eXistenZ* the characters quite literally enter a whole new universe, but it starts out with the obsession with escapism, the idea of finding something different and fleeing the normal world. So in a sense they are consciously seeking obsession. In *Dead Ringers* the twin doctors are obsessed with the idea of learning the secrets of the female anatomy and in *The Fly* the main character is obsessed with the idea of teleporting live organic matter from one pod-like booth to another.

The concept of obsession also opens up for the possibility of insanity, which is an appropriate premise for anything Cronenbergian. The theme of obsession is not only a gimmick to get away with his antics though, because we see it coming back time and again even when it is not strictly needed to get away with the often far-fetched stories. It is a theme in its own right, which goes hand in hand with Cronenberg's own obsessive relationship with his work. He once said: "I felt very private about the work I was doing, and the projects I was thinking of were just not communicable to anyone else" (Handling, p. 166).

We are all male monsters

The world of David Cronenberg is almost exclusively seen through the eyes of the male characters. Even when the main character is female, as in *Shivers* and *Rabid*, the male perspective remains intact since the females are sexualized and kept at an emotional distance. However, the male viewpoint does not force upon us an idealized representation of the male characters. It's rather the opposite; the males are monsters struggling with their own monstrous sexuality or just plain monstrosity. In *Stereo* the men are unable to control their violent sexuality – or their scientific curiosity for that matter – and perform what

appears to be horrific sexual experiments on victimized women. William Beard captures this in a description of a scene in *Stereo*: "[...] a regressive attraction to oral/maternal satisfaction has been fended off with a symbolic violence which then translates into the suggestion of sadistic violence against a sexualized woman. *Dead Ringers*, here we come" (Beard p. 5). The "*Dead Ringers*, here we come" comment is particularly accurate since the very same theme is again brought up in the aforementioned film to even more disturbing effect. Max in *Videodrome* is also a sexual monster of sorts, and the world is definitely seen through his eyes, especially towards the end of the movie. The same applies to *Naked Lunch* (1991) and to some degree in *Crash*.

The films are pieces of a puzzle

There should be no doubt in anyone's mind - anyone who has seen more than a handful of films by David Cronenberg, that is – that we are dealing with an auteur with a very clear identity and strong integrity. Some might complain that films like *Shivers* and *Rabid* are too similar to B-movie trash to be taken seriously. That may or may not be true, but regardless of the quality of each individual film, the fact remains that they together form a picture of a highly personal vision with clearly recognizable hallmarks, most of which we can see traces or firm imprints in nearly all of his films. The body, the flesh, the struggle of sexuality through violence and science, the concept of our mortality being made painfully clear and straight-forward. Our disgust with ourselves. All this and considerably more is explored in movie after movie. And if we see them as parts of a whole, and then look at Cronenberg's body of work as a jig-saw puzzle nearing completion, then maybe, just maybe we might find a few of the answers many of us are looking for not only in Cronenberg's work, but in life itself.