

Eastern Promises and the continuing decline of David Cronenberg

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Eastern Promises, directed by David Cronenberg, screenplay by Steven Knight

Eastern Promises is the follow-up to veteran Canadian director David Cronenberg's *A History Of Violence*. Both are films working in and around the gangster movie genre, unusual for a director best known for his horror and science fiction films, and both have made Cronenberg into something of a critical darling. And, in some ways, it's not hard to see why. Cronenberg is, at least superficially, better than a great many mainstream filmmakers in terms of his technique, his unpredictability and his ability to draw rich performances from his actors. This speaks not only to his talents—and he is talented—but also to the prevailing artistic weakness in Hollywood and so-called "independent" cinema.

No less an authority on film than Andrew Sarris called *A History of Violence* the film of the year in 2005. Both Roger Ebert and CNN have declared *Eastern Promises* a benchmark-setting work thanks to an unflinchingly violent scene involving a knife fight.

But rave reviews notwithstanding, these films are, in this reviewer's opinion, among Cronenberg's weaker efforts and represent a continuing decline for the artist.

The latest film, *Eastern Promises*, stars Naomi Watts as Anna Ivanovna, a midwife in London who one day discovers a Russian-language diary among the possessions of a young mother who died in childbirth. Because the young mother's baby survived, Anna decides to search the diary for clues to find the girl's family and return the newborn to them.

A business card found in the diary takes Anna to a Russian restaurant where she meets the kindly Semyon (Armin Mueller-Stahl), who urges her to bring the diary to him so that he can translate it for her. But Anna's uncle, also Russian, is already translating the diary and

has uncovered some disturbing entries. Semyon and his family, it turns out, are part of the Russian mafia and the young girl—a teenager—who wrote the diary was held prisoner by them, exploited and raped.

As the film progresses, a struggle between the mafia and Anna for possession of the diary will escalate, putting Anna and her own family in great danger. She will, however, find an unlikely ally in the mafia's chauffeur and "undertaker," Nikolai (Viggo Mortensen).

Apart from a few eccentric moments, *Eastern Promises* is a more or less conventional gangster movie. It has all the clichés one has come to expect of the genre. There is the reckless mobster who murders a rival gangster without the approval of his crime boss, the gruesome disposal of the bodies of murder victims and the outsider working toward becoming a "made man." But above all, *Eastern Promises* is drenched in blood.

David Cronenberg's work has always had its share of violence and gore. His film *Scanners* (1981) is famous for its scene in which a man's head explodes, the result of a telepathic attack. While there may not be as many violent scenes in *Eastern Promises* as in the director's earlier work or as are common in most mafia movies, the scenes that are included are incredibly graphic, bloody and gruesomely detailed. Because there are no guns in the film, only knives, the violence is intimate, at close quarters and all the more disturbing.

The scene that has attracted the most attention is a four-minute knife fight that takes place in a steam room. In this scene, Viggo Mortensen's character Nikolai is attacked with knives by two rival gangsters. Mortensen is nude for the duration of the fight.

Just what is all this meant to accomplish?

Cronenberg discussed the shooting of the steam room

scene in an interview with the *San Antonio Current*: ‘I would say to the stunt coordinator, ‘I’m not going to shoot this in an impressionistic, quick-cutting, Bourne-like way where you don’t really see anything. I want this to be very physical, I want to see all the bodies, I want it to make sense physiologically.’ Killing someone the way this happens is very hard work. I want the audience to experience all that.’

Killing someone “is very hard work.” Such are the insights we get from today’s cinema. Cronenberg goes to great lengths to show the physical details of several brutal on-screen murders. He is a director obsessed with the body and not infrequently its destruction or manipulation by various surgical instruments or more sinister devices.

This approach has made for some interesting work in the past. His horror and science fiction films of the 1970s and 1980s (*Rabid*, *The Brood*, *Videodrome*) are unique for the absence of supernatural elements in their stories. Monsters—usually obsessed, addicted, or otherwise “altered” human beings—are typically the product of the unethical, profit-driven experimentation of shadowy corporate figures or are otherwise naturally occurring physical mutations.

But this “biological” approach has also proved to be a limitation. Cronenberg may concern himself with the physical details in his movies, but little is made of the social conditions and relations from which they arise. This narrow focus has played no small part in his decline, which probably started or became noticeable in the 1990s with *Naked Lunch* (1991), *Crash* (1996) and *eXistenZ* (1999).

Eastern Promises is ultimately another disappointment. While a few genuine moments come through in the film—a young prostitute lying on her bed singing to herself softly and sadly is one haunting image—such humane glimpses into the world shown in the film are so rare as to feel out of place.

Finally, one leaves *Eastern Promises* wishing there would have been more about the teenage mother who wrote the diary. All we learn of her comes from brief diary excerpts read in voice-over. We hear that her father, a miner, was killed in a cave-in. She left a life of poverty in Russia with the hope of finding a better life in England, where she ultimately became a prisoner and plaything for the mafia. It’s unfortunate that such characters—such lives—exist only on the periphery of our

cinema screens while a fascination with the mafia so frequently takes center stage.

We do, of course, see the bloody details of the young mother’s death.



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