

flash crash

Less than a year after *A Dangerous Method*, **DAVID CRONENBERG** returns with *Cosmopolis*, an adaptation of Don DeLillo's eerie meditation on class, wealth, and death. **SCOTT MACAULAY** talks with the writer/director about bringing DeLillo's prose to the screen.

In his 1977 novel *Players*, Don DeLillo told the story of a crumbling marriage amidst terrorism on the New York Stock exchange. In the 1973 *Great Jones Street*, he portrayed a wealthy rock star escaping the solar of his own fame by walking off his tour and hiding out in a downtown Manhattan apartment. And in *Mao II* (1991), he sent a reclusive, blocked novelist away from the world of cultural production into the zeitgeist of Middle East political violence. The emotional affect of a hypermediated society, the ways in which personal relations are shaped by the white noise of science, finance and violent spectacle — for over four decades, DeLillo has been graphing, anticipating and transmuting the psychic substructure of modern life into his own distinct literary rhythms. DeLillo's novels embrace big themes while also — and increasingly in his most recent works — limning the poetics of uncertainty. His protagonists are conflicted, their animal instincts confused and rewired by the historical forces around them.

DeLillo's slender, almost minimalist 2003 novel *Cosmopolis* tells the story of Eric Packer, a newly married billionaire asset manager watching his giant bet against the Chinese

yuan play out on the computerized world stage. But in the book's 209 pages, all Packer wants is a haircut. Driven in his stretch limo, Packer inches across a Midtown Manhattan disrupted by a presidential visit, a rapper's funeral and protests (anti-globalist in the book's 2000 setting and now, by viewer inference, Occupy Wall Street). In his sleek adaptation, David Cronenberg hews closely to the book's narrative line and dialogue. On his journey, Packer is visited by his already resigned wife (Elise, played by a lovely Sarah Gadon); a randy art dealer (Juliette Binoche) and a pie-chucking political prankster (Mathieu Almaric). And then there are the death threats pinging in via security detail headset from a mysterious nobody, Benno (a

pitch-perfect Paul Giamatti).

In extraordinary casting, Packer is played by *Twilight* star Robert Pattinson, who brings both a cruel detachment and a gallows vulnerability to the role. Like all the actors here, he handles DeLillo's dialogue — which, on the page, doesn't sound like it'd work at all onscreen — extremely well. Indeed, the subject of Cronenberg's movie is as much “the DeLillo book” and that dialogue as the story they tell. From the novel, Packer to his chief of technology, Shiner:

“All this optimism, all this booming and soaring. Things happen like bang. This and that simultaneous. I put out my hand and what do I feel? I know there's a thousand things you analyze every 10 minutes. Patterns, ratios, indexes, whole maps of information. I love information. This is our sweetness and light. It's a fuckall wonder. And we have meaning in the world. People eat and sleep in the shadow of what we do. But at the same time, what?”

I spoke to Cronenberg about the process of adaptation in general and the specifics of turning *Cosmopolis* into a film.

Cosmopolis comes out via Entertainment One on August 17.

HOW THEY DID IT

PRODUCTION FORMAT ARRIRAW Log C.

CAMERA ARRI ALEXA.

FILM/TAPE STOCK Recorded to S.two uncompressed recorder.

EDITING SYSTEM Avid Media Composer version 5.5.

COLOR CORRECTION Eworks with a custom version of Autodesk Lustre Log C at Deluxe Toronto.



ROBERT PATTINSON IN *COSMOPOLIS*.

I'd like ask you first, since you've adapted *Crash*, *Naked Lunch* and *M. Butterfly*, to talk a little bit about your process of adaptation in general. What draws you to literary works? And are the kinds of things that drew you to *Cosmopolis* different or similar to the things that drew you to some of your previous adaptations? Well I don't really know what draws me to things. [Laughs] I don't have any rules, you know? It's all just subjective. After the fact, I suppose one could look at, let's say, *Crash*, *The Dead Zone* and *Naked Lunch* and connect them to some of the qualities of *Cosmopolis*, but to me, that's critics' work, an analyst's work. *Cosmopolis* was brought to me by Paulo Branco, a Portuguese producer. I had read other stuff of DeLillo's but I didn't know *Cosmopolis*. So I read it, and then two days later I said, "Yeah, I think I'd like to do this. But I need to see if it's really a movie." I literally spent three days just transcribing the dialogue from the book and putting it in screenplay form, and then another three days filling in the gaps — the scene descriptions and stuff. In the course of doing that, I left out things that I felt wouldn't work on screen. I did that intuitively, so there was a process of selection there. It wasn't just mechanical. At the end of it, I read my screenplay, and I said, "Yeah, it is a movie, and it's one I'd

really like to make." So that's how it worked. And that six days was it for screenwriting. [The script] never changed, and it's all from the book. I might've added one or two lines or comments just to clarify some things, but that's it. It's a unique adaptation in a way, because in some books the dialogue doesn't feel like it belongs in the mouths of actors. It's literary and it works on the page, but it's not something that you'd really want to hear somebody speak, and so, you change it. In this case, I really wanted the dialogue [to remain the same]. In fact, that was one of the main attractions, to me, of the book. I really felt, "Wow, I'd really like to hear

good actors speaking this dialogue and see what happens." None of the other adaptations worked in this way. And that doesn't surprise me because each project is completely unique.

DeLillo is often thought of not so much for his plots, but for his almost oracular quality, his ability to pinpoint the broader macro forces that guide our lives. Were you interested in, if you will, the philosophy or worldview of DeLillo, or just the more material elements of this particular story? Well I think much of what he expresses in *Cosmopolis* he's expressed before, certainly in terms of the rhythm of his particular kind of dialogue, which I do think of as sort of Pinter-esque in the sense that it's real on one level — you know, Americans do speak like that — but then also stylized as well. And then, in the way it presents itself, even if it's not directly philosophical, it has philosophical implications. I really liked that about it. [His dialogue] seems simple in some ways, and then it's incredibly dense and complex at the same time. In terms of plot, well, I did like the restrictive structure the book presents. One day, one street in the life of,

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GO BACK & WATCH

THE SWIMMER In this 1968 Frank Perry drama, Ned decides to swim home via a chain of friends' backyard pools. Each stop reveals gradually more troubled truths and relationships.

AMERICAN PSYCHO An investment banker's downward spiral from wealth to self-destruction is at the heart of Mary Harron's 2000 adaptation of Bret Easton Ellis's novel.

MANHATTAN BY NUMBERS In Amir Naderi's 1993 indie, a broke, alienated reporter walks the length of the city looking for the money to pay his back rent.

self in a hotel room in Spain, and he chose to do all the scenes that were about people alone, about the character alone, which meant all the masturbation scenes. I sensed that he was someone who would be very comfortable with the material, as well as someone who would be very energetic as a presence on screen. My films are a lot about people who don't make choices, characters who are struggling with taking action in his life. And it benefited the film to find an actor who was all energy and all activity. I've got a question for you. What were the biggest challenges in telling your story in terms of finding the narrative in what is essentially a found-footage documentary?

FRANCE: The trajectory of how the AIDS treatment activism movement goes from 1987 to 1996 is a very indirect route with an ultimate dead end in which they realize that everything they spent the last six or seven years doing was in the wrong direction, had produced catastrophic failure, and cost lives and money. And then, they had to find the proper path and get themselves onto it. And that was really tough to tell economically in such a short period of time. How to tell it in a way that actually transmitted that point to an audience, that this was a late, second act readjustment? That was tough. It was a real challenge to find the visual language to be able to do that, without resorting, as the majority of documentaries do, I guess, to somebody appearing from today on the screen to tell you the whole thing. Which would've been the easy way.

SACHS: One of the things that is interesting about now — that was also true then — is that people are picking up their cameras, and that they are engaged in trying to tell their stories. And I think, in that way, our films are also very similar in that we attempted to tell our stories. I know you also separate yourself from the story, but you actually make visible a story that had become invisible in a lot of ways. I think [filmmaking] and activism have kind of merged in a certain way. And that gets me back to this idea that there is something different happening right now, that there's a kind of waking up: Our stories are valuable, they are possible to be made and there's support for them if we look for it and if we fight for it. And there's something extremely powerful and political about doing so when we come from a history in which are stories are not wanted.

FRANCE: I think you're right. But I should add that I don't consider myself an activist.

SACHS: But whether you consider yourself or not, your film is a form of activism.

FRANCE: Well my film is a story of activism, I think. And if that story sponsors and spawns future activism, I think that's the power of the story itself. But, I think even as an almost nonparticipant in the story that I told, at least from back in that time, I needed to make sense of that time. Maybe that's a function of where we are in our lives, that it becomes essential to look back and tell not just the story, but the meaning of the story and to situate it in the larger human context. You know, before I started working on the film, I traveled around the publishing world for years with a proposal to tell this story as a book. And I was told repeatedly that there is no market for gay stories. There is no market for AIDS stories. It's rejected history. And I think that that's changed. I don't know that you and I have changed it with our films — maybe we're just lucky to have made these films at a time when it was changing — but I think that that appraisal of the so-called marketplace is passé. I think we can hammer through that now in a way that we couldn't before. ▼

FLASH CRASH

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primarily, one man.

I was thinking about this film as a film about the economy, the world we live in right now, and I thought of other films about economic distress. You can go back to *Bicycle Thieves* and earlier, and the stories are fairly clear. Today's economic forces, with globalism and computerized trading, are so abstract. What were your thoughts about dramatizing or addressing this world? It's, of course, irresistible to connect the Occupy Wall Street movement with the protestors in the movie and in the book, but the book was written about 12 years ago. So DeLillo was anticipating that, but in a way, the movie and the book are not really about world economics at all. It's about one very successful guy, who is very self-destructive, and is really, in a way, looking for death on a couple of levels, including financial death. So it's his economic catastrophe, which is self-induced. The movie doesn't really deal with world economics; it doesn't really deal with the euro, for example. I think it has the resonances of that, but when you look at it clearly, it's really this one guy. I mean, you could imagine that this movie was happening at a time when the world economics were actually rather healthy, and in fact when DeLillo was writing it, that was the case, really. It's only by analogy,

I guess, or by metaphor or resonance that it's about world economics, but literally, it's about the economics of this one guy.

In terms of the dialogue, did you work with the actors to create a consistent tone, or did you want the different actors to bring their own interpretations to how they would handle the words? Part of the pleasure for me was to see how different actors would cope with the specific rhythms of Don's dialogue. The one mandate—and I never had to express it, it was obvious—was that you don't change the dialogue. You say the script. Basically, you say the novel. But, given that, there's incredible scope for invention and texturing and everything else. So part of the pleasure was to seeing how someone like Juliette Binoche would handle that dialogue playing it with Rob Pattinson. Two very different actors from very different traditions and yet, they're in a car together batting that dialogue back and forth. Yes, of course you, as a director, have to make sure that all the actors are in the same movie. And certainly when you have Juliette parachuting in for just two days of shooting and Mathieu Amalric parachuting in for one day of shooting, there is the possibility that they might be hugely, wildly off the mark. You could play it very broadly and comedically and so I had to, as I say, make sure they're all in the same movie. But within that arena, there's a lot of scope for variation. I mean, it's a series of little duets but the range and the tone is very different in each case.

So much of the book is not dialogue but third-person internal monologue that contains its own significant dramatic beats. For example, here's a passage near the end: "He thought about his wife. He missed Elise and wanted to talk to her, tell her she was beautiful, lie, cheat on her, live with her in a middling matrimony, having dinner parties and asking her what the doctors said." Did you try to create your own beats for lines like those? Sure. I can give you a very definite example. When I first met Don in Estoril, he said, "I was wondering how you were going to handle Benno's journal. And the way you handled it was, you left it out." And I said, "Yeah, because it's something you can't do cinematically." I mean, just doing a voiceover doesn't do it, and having somebody read the journal over the movie is kind of pathetic, I think. But what I do give you is Paul Giamatti. I give you his face, his voice, the way he moves. The scene in the restaurant where [Eric and Elise] split

up, where Elise tells him that they're finished, it's in Rob's face, you know? It's the sadness, the confusion, the vulnerability you haven't seen up to that point. You realize he really doesn't know how to talk to his wife, to talk to a woman. He doesn't know how to deal with her. He wants to, but he can't. And I think that delivers the same thing in a cinematic way as those lines that you were reading to me. And you have to have a confidence that that [these moments will] happen because you do it through your casting, the lighting, and how close you are on the faces when the [actors] say these lines, or how far away you are, or whether it's a two shot or not. You find cinematic equivalents. And then, at the same time, the movie does not replicate the book. It's impossible to do that. The media are so completely different. They seem similar, but they really aren't. I learned that very quickly on *The Dead Zone*, where people felt that the movie replicated the book, but it didn't. It's actually incredibly different from the book, but it's the tone that feels right — the New England winter, the loneliness of the Chris Walken character, his face and so on. It felt like an equivalent, even though literally, it was really not. And so, you have to have faith in that process when you're adapting. You have to accept that—and I've said this ad nauseam, so you'll forgive me—but in order to be faithful to the book, you have to betray the book. That's the one rule, I find, that has been consistent in all of my adaptations.

Is that a deliberate betrayal or a betrayal you understand or notice after the fact? It's nothing that you have to strive for. You just realize, as I did while trying to create a screenplay, that there are certain things that are simply not cinematic. They will not work onscreen. And, it's only experience and your own sensibility that tells you what those moments are that won't work. You don't beat yourself over the head trying to make them work when, in fact, they never will work. You just say, "Okay, can't do that," and you go on. And then, you end up creating something quite different from the book. I mean, that's inevitable. That's the other thing. If you do it with integrity, then it's an honorable mutation of the book, let's say, but it's not the book. They don't replace each other.▼

CULTURE HACKER

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I decided to expand the course I teach at Columbia University, *Building Storyworlds*:

the art, craft & biz of storytelling in 21c, into a book. In the class I discuss the building of storyworlds within a media-saturated environment where the relationship with those formally known as the audience is rapidly changing. Written within the Twitter framework of 140 characters at a time, the book shares insights that I have been gathering during the last 15 years. Intended to provide a look into the process of creating immersive storytelling experiences, the book will only exist in a scarce 140 copies. The limited run is being handmade, making each book a unique version. Placed at the bottom of every page is the phrase, "Set this book free please retweet using #sw21c." Released under a Creative Commons license, the book will make its way back into the digital world as "tweets," but only if readers feel they are valuable enough to share by taking the time to retweet them. The ongoing results of the experiment are available at <http://buildingstoryworlds.com>.

"Storytelling is no longer top down. You don't need permission nor does your audience. #sw21c"

Over the last few years, I have embraced a rapid prototyping approach to my projects. It is not about waiting for permission or being tied to perfection but rather the continual growth of ideas. The concept is to treat story as software and to use it as a method of R&D (research and development). While writing a book within the limitations of Twitter is a simple exercise, it is informing the design of projects I am developing with my writing partner, Chuck Wendig. For instance, an area of concentration is how the scarcity of smart social objects can become abundant through communication with a wider audience by utilizing social interactions, storytelling and gameplay. (See my column "Listen As Your Story Talks to the Internet" in *Filmmaker's* Winter 2012 issue). By releasing a book in only 140 physical copies and encouraging readers to set it free, we'll see on a small level the behaviors and patterns of how something moves from scarcity to abundance.

Even though these types of storytelling experiments are currently scarce, the hope is that by sharing the results we can make them abundant. In the end it is about a series of little bets, each one moving you closer to what is hopefully a big collective breakthrough.

Interested in experimentation?

• *Open Design Now: Why Design Cannot Remain Exclusive* by Bas Van Abel, Lucas Evers,

Roel Klaassen & Peter Troxler

• *Little Bets: How Breakthrough Ideas Emerge from Small Discoveries* by Peter Sims

• Learndoshare.net – an open resource for collaboration and social innovation ▼

INDUSTRY BEAT

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Philip, which is set over a year in New York and which he plans to shoot in Super 16mm. In the meantime, Perry is hoping he can work as a Hollywood script doctor to pay the bills.

Likewise, Aaron Katz, director of *Dance Party, USA*; *Quiet City*; and *Cold Weather*, is ready to move on to a bigger project. He's trying to set up a million-dollar-plus 1920s-set cat burglar/con-artist movie called *Darling Agnes*. "It's definitely a challenge," he says. "But one thing that works in our favor is we've made movies where we were able to do quite a lot with not a lot of resources, so I think that earns us a little bit of trust."

Still, Katz has faced plenty of skeptical financiers who believe he's not ready. "They say the new script is great, but this is a big leap," recounts Katz. "They want things to be incremental." But Katz has persevered, and even though it's been three years since shooting *Cold Weather*, he's now "cautiously optimistic that we can make it happen," partnering with producer Mynette Louie and Sara Murphy of Cooper's Town, Philip Seymour Hoffman's production company. Meanwhile, Katz continues to live in Pittsburgh, far cheaper than staying in New York, and makes a modest living cutting movie trailers for arthouse distributors like Kino Lorber and Zeitgeist Films.

Louie, a producer on DIY hallmarks *Mutual Appreciation* and *Children of Invention*, is also optimistic. "I feel that it's only a matter of time and circumstance (and desire) that some of the more talented filmmakers of the microbudget set will graduate to bigger budgets," she says, citing the fact that many of the directors she's worked with now have representation at major talent agencies. (Katz, for example, recently signed with UTA.) She also points out that industry-wide concerns — such as diminishing box office returns and piracy — may make the industry more open to up-and-comers who can make good films for cheap.

By coincidence or not, Katz and Perry happen to be good friends, taking vacations together and sharing their strategies and frustrations. Like many of his colleagues, Perry says they're both "confused" about what is the right middle step to propel them forward. "Why does it happen to people