

A History of Violence

A Minimum of Thought

"A whole load of 'Aw' with not a lot of 'shucks,' updated only by a little cunnilingus."



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If David Cronenberg's **A History of Violence** were an actor, it would be "indicating" all over the rehearsal hall and Lee Strasberg would slap it in the face. What is the most significant affect

it indicates? Why, that Viggo Mortensen's Tom Stall is a wonderful, gentle man married to a wonderful, sexy *mom*, with wonderful, normal, loving children in a wonderful, small American town. How do we first begin to know some of this? Young daughter has a nightmare. Gentle Daddy comes to comfort her. Big brother is a sensitive sort, so soon he too is up in the middle of the night to talk away his little sister's monsters. Then Mommy appears in the doorway, and now the whole family is gathered around to tend to the family's little darling. Get the idea?

If not, then watch how Tom and wife Edie (Maria Bello) part from each other for their workday with the gaze and kiss of young love. That night, she waits for him outside the diner he owns and takes him on an unexpected romantic getaway. What's the surprise? She emerges from the bathroom in a cheerleader outfit to offer him the quintessential teen sex they never had. Does it get any better than this? The only thing missing is John Mellencamp. And in case you're not too quick on the uptake, the indicating gets more indicative: in the afterglow Tom tells Edie, "I'm the luckiest son of a bitch alive," and Edie tells Tom, "You are the best man I know."

Okay, got it? Now you know what George and Mary Bailey got up to the next time he accidentally stepped on her bathrobe. But since Capra's corn was a lot more comedic, this setup of smalltown America is a whole load of "Aw" with not a lot of "shucks," updated only by a little cunnilingus.

By the way, did I mention that Tom Stall is a gentle man? Mortensen, an honest actor doing his honest best, unfortunately *plays* gentle so hard he seems practically inert. From moment to moment, you can almost see him snuff out any vital flame in the character and replace it with the passive, bemused expression that is supposed to indicate "gentle." This is not entirely Mortensen's fault — he has no character to play. Josh Olson's pedestrian screenplay has about four lines of dialogue that rise above banal verisimilitude or hammy cliché, or that reside anywhere around the face but on the nose. Tom Stall, as written, is as flat as a page of script punctured by the holes of a few violent eruptions. Play *that*.

The sad truth at the bottom of the Emperor's new Kool-Aid that most critics seem to have drunk in writing about Cronenberg's latest is that except for, most significantly, Bello's performance, there is nary an authentic moment in the film. And the false notes begin in the very first shot. The slow pan of a rural motel room's small front porch, containing two slightly askew chairs, ends when the room's two occupants emerge. The younger one, as

he passes, apparently feels the need to straighten one of the chairs. In the script? Maybe. But probably an actor's small bit of business that, perhaps, he discussed with Cronenberg, though just as likely he added on his own and Cronenberg approved. The question is, however, what purpose does it serve? The answer, as for so much else in the film, is none. The gesture is not grounded in anything more that we come to learn about the character and his partner, which is nothing beyond their pulp fiction near non-dimensionality as monstrous brutes.

There are many such ungrounded moments of inauthenticity, and more significant, too. When we learn that Tom Stall is really Joey Cusack, an ex Philadelphia mob enforcer and hit man, what is left out is that apparently he was a Delta Force commando too, because he dispatches foes with the kind of martial speed and technique unbeknownst to Philly (the Pig) Solazzo or any baseball bat-or pistol-toting Gambino family thug we've heard of. In contrast, the film is momentarily smart and real when the sensitive, Stall family son, Jack, replies to his locker room nemesis and bully, essentially, Why don't we consider my ass already kicked and you proven the stronger, and the two of us just move on? But the film desires that Jack be in rather more confused conflict with his father over the use of force, so after Tom reveals his capacity for violence, Jack can no longer restrain himself with such fragile and witty condescension to the moment, and the next time he's bullied he erupts in a violent display against two foes that is only a notch less impressive than those of his father. To which one can only respond, Yes, I understand. I've had that fantasy too. Now getting back to the believable...

Worst of all is, perhaps, the most bogus scene of violence-erupting-into-sex ever committed to film. Bello's Edie Stall, alienated by the lie of her husband's life and her marriage, nonetheless still loves her husband and intercedes with the family-friend Sheriff to forestall an investigation into her husband's identity. After the Sheriff leaves, Tom is moved by this to reach out, literally, to his wife for reconciliation. Edie recoils. Anger and desperation escalate into flailing arms and hands, and suddenly Tom has his hand violently against his wife's neck, shoving her up against the wall of the staircase. Now, everything we know of Edie up until this point, and everything we will see of her after, suggests that she would be completely repulsed by this presumably unprecedented outburst of violence against her. Indeed, not only is there no reason to believe that the violent and the erotic have ever commingled in her psyche, there is no reason to imagine that if they ever could, it would happen now, when her uncertainty about her husband's true nature is so great — so great, indeed, that, with Tom, in the light of his recent violence, now out of control and choking her, she would most believably be terrorized and determined to flee. Instead, though, Tom ends up banging Edie on – and against – the stairs. At the sight of which one silently cries out — or should — bullshit! At the end of the act, Edie leaves in revulsion, so we are left to imagine that it was only the erotic allure of violent assault that momentarily drew her to the man whom, though she loves, she otherwise right now disdains and fears. And this understanding of her behavior would be based on what that we know of her character? The only coherence to be found in the scene is in the understanding that the union of sex and violence is an *idée fixe* in Cronenberg (**Crash**, anyone?) — an idea that he imposes on the film, on the scene, and most falsely, on at least one character in violation of any determinable truth the character contains.

In this respect, as in so many others, **A History of Violence** is filmmaking as data

programming. Enter an American "small town"; a picture-perfect family; an ideal Dad; a community where, according to the Sheriff, "We take care of our own"; a little sex right from the start. Hardcode a lot of heavy duty violence into the program and you have all the content needed for an implied and profound commentary on America. The commentary is implied only in that there is enough data for the viewer to infer whatever the viewer is inclined to infer. Thus, reviewers have asserted that the film is "concerned" with violence or, in a much more refined overlay of the graphic proceedings, a "meditation" on violence. Tellingly, none of these reviewers attempts to state the nature of the concern or the product of the meditation. Because the only similarity **A History of Violence** has to meditation is its superficial likeness to Bodhidharma staring at a wall seeking a state of no-mind. What passes for thought in the film can be found in uninspired exchanges like the one between Tom and Jack after the latter goes postal on the school bully. Says Tom (howlingly), "In this family, we do not solve problems by hitting people!" "No," replies Jack, "in this family, we shoot them!" The utter simplemindedness of this dialogue — in itself, but also in light of the events being contrasted and the fully loaded circumstances of the film's most extreme violence — is almost beyond worthwhile, certainly interesting, predication.

The howlers only grow as the climax draws near, in which we get William Hurt offering a deliciously hammy performance — the one Ed Harris would have given had he fully committed. Someday I hope to see the film it belongs in. If one has ever read a certain breed of comic book, or a graphic novel of the kind that is, in fact, the source material for **A History of Violence**, one can easily imagine the shadowy inking and stark angles and the deep-focus panels that could storyboard the scenes in the film. And for lean dialogue, every aspiring screenwriter can find no better, superior model. But them bones got no meat, though if you gnaw on 'em enough, you lose the ability to tell. It's like they say in programming: graphic novel in, graphic novel out.

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