

Mob culture

By [John Petrakis](#) in the [October 2, 2007](#) issue



"I'm not a fan of heist movies, where the mechanics of the heist are lovingly detailed . But criminality and people who live in a state of perpetual transgression—that is interesting to me."

—David Cronenberg

For decades, Canadian director David Cronenberg's name has been associated with films that straddle the line between horror and the macabre, including such creepy classics as *Scanners* (1981), *Videodrome* (1983), *The Dead Zone* (1983), *The Fly* (1986) and *Dead Ringers* (1988). In the 1990s his interests shifted to symbolic tales of emotional fragility, including his bizarre adaptation of William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* (1991), and *Crash* (1996), which dealt with the erotic possibilities of car accidents. Lately he has entered the underworld to explore the nature of violence and sin on a semirealistic level, with *A History of Violence* (2005), about a hit man who tries to leave that life behind, and now with *Eastern Promises*.

The film focuses on members of the Russian mafia, newly arrived in London, who are seeking absolute power, one rape and murder at a time. The lead male character is Nikolai Luzhin (Viggo Mortensen, from *A History of Violence*). When we first meet him, he is a driver for the only son of a powerful Russian family, but it seems clear from his demeanor and ability to stay cool under pressure that bigger things lie ahead for him. He gets detoured when he falls for Anna Khitrova (Naomi Watts), a

midwife who has been traumatized by the death of one of her patients (Tatiana Maslany), a girl who has some connection to Nikolai and his superiors. It is this connection, clarified by the young girl's voice-over throughout the film, that drives the drama.

Other roles of note include the German actor Armin Mueller-Stahl as Semyon, the sweet-talking but brutal head of the powerful Russian family; French actor Vincent Cassel in a remarkable portrayal of Semyon's violent and moronic son, Kirill, a drunken hothead who is ill-prepared to inherit the crown of his aging father; Irish actress Sinéad Cusack as Anna's strong but frightened mother; and legendary Polish director Jerzy Skolimowski as Anna's stubborn Uncle Stepan, whose claims that he used to work for the KGB ring hollow.

It is not incidental that Cronenberg has gathered such an international cast: the racial, cultural and economic diversity of contemporary London plays a key role in the film's story and message. Though Nikolai would appear to be an evil man who is only too willing to maim and kill to secure his position, when confronted with his own complicity in the subjugation of young innocents, he hesitates, which in his violent world can be a fatal mistake. This hesitation leads to a showdown in a Russian bath that shows that Cronenberg also knows how to direct a no-holds-barred action sequence.

The biggest problem with *Eastern Promises* is the same one that hamstrung *A History of Violence*—an inability to close the deal. *A History of Violence* went from a fascinating tale about redemption to a semicomical examination of mob culture in a matter of minutes, destroying much of the film's promise. *Eastern Promises* doesn't land with quite the same thud, but it seems nervous, even timid, about making any final statement about Nikolai's spiritual awakening, in part because it gets bogged down by a series of subplots that never should have been introduced.

But the ride through the first two acts is enjoyable indeed, especially in a mesmerizing section having to do with tattoos and the role they play in Russian mob culture. Of particular interest are the stars that are tattooed on knees—a sign indicating that one never need kneel in front of any man. The question, which Cronenberg comes tantalizingly close to answering before pulling away, is whether Nikolai's ambivalent feelings about sexual slavery, revenge killings and the slaughter of the innocents might bring him to his knees.