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Less than a year ago, this critic put figurative pen to page and reviewed maverick macabre maestro David Cronenberg's decidedly non-horror film A DANGEROUS METHOD, and made the case for the claim that it was indeed just another extension of the same themes of the transformative loss of control that has permeated every DC movie since 1975's THEY CAME FROM WITHIN (a.k.a. SHIVERS). That same belief will now drive the review for his latest heady film, COSMOPOLIS (opening across Canada June 8 with a U.S. theatrical yet to be announced), a vaguely dystopian picture set in a bizarre version of the turn of the millennium, based on the satirical novel by Don DeLillo and starring TWILIGHT heartthrob Robert Pattinson in a decidedly non-tween-fetish-idol role.

After its premiere at this year's Cannes Film Festival, critical response was mixed, but name me one Cronenberg picture that has not met similar reception. COSMOPOLIS is evidence of a director pouring his intellect and soul into a film that is even colder, more calculated, impenetrable and alien than any other genre film he has ever attempted before. It makes RABID look like an episode of YO GABBA GABBA. It makes the psychological miasma of SPIDER seem like THE BIG BANG THEORY, the sex/car weirdness of CRASH play like SMOKEY AND THE BANDIT. It's a difficult film to like, and demands its audience immerse itself in its insect-like intellect and quietly unfolding, aloof narrative. It most certainly is a difficult film, but for serious fans and scholars of the director's unique and unwavering world view, it is both essential and immensely rewarding.

Pattinson (who is excellent in a difficult role) plays a dead-eyed billionaire named Eric Packer, a finely tailored humanoid who is like capitalism itself made flesh. As COSMOPOLIS opens, we see Packer and his chief of security (Kevin Durand), clad in sunglasses and leaning against the wall of a corporate tomb, discussing the folly of his plan for the day—to climb into his hermetically sealed stretch limo and make the treacherous journey across town to get himself a haircut. The coif trim itself is a rudimentary MacGuffin to get the film, and the limo, moving and to give the audience a light at the end of its chilly chrome-plated tunnel, but COSMOPOLIS is of course about much more than follicular tidiness. As his air-tight, soundless machine—with its ample amenities, flashing light boards and various gadgets—cruises at a snail's pace through the streets of Manhattan (really, a not-disguised-at-all Toronto), we learn through endless dialogue that Packer is in a spot of trouble. As he stops and picks up various associates along the way, we are told that he has lost much, if not all, of his vast fortunes due to a vaguely detailed miscalculation of the yuan, and that his ill-advised trip into an increasingly ferocious anti-capitalist protest hell is in fact a suicide mission of sorts—a venture into his own personal Heart of Darkness.

While sex is ample (one scene in particular ranks among DC's most erotic, and even the great Juliette Binoche engages in coupling with Pattinson) and the violence brief but shocking (eyeballs are gouged, a hand is shot open), COSMOPOLIS is a horror film of a different sort. It's a slow-burning exercise in dissolve and penetrating dialogue that takes about half an hour to gel into its mathlike rhythms. It's a gently disturbing and brilliantly designed (production designer Arv Greywal's work here, both in the limo and outside of it, is superlative) picture as well, and it has more than one sequence of daft, dark, hilarious absurdity, including a show-stopping bit where one of Pattinson's sweaty female employees masturbates with a water bottle while he receives the world's longest prostate exam (the prostate figures heavily into the narrative) and a scene of dead rats being flung at diner patrons by howling anti-establishment types (giant rats also appear, and the rodent itself is a major motif).

COSMOPOLIS is most assuredly a film that audiences with only passing exposure to Cronenberg may reject. But like A DANGEROUS METHOD, which on the surface played like Merchant Ivory with a sex drive, it is simply another tale of the folly of man, the idiocy of society and the illusion of the norm. Its character breakdown is perhaps less slimy, but no less profound than that of Seth Brundle's or Max Renn's, maybe even more so because it relies on the mind and the word over the prosthetic and gory. In other words, this is vintage David Cronenberg, but an even more sophisticated, refined version.