

THE INDEPENDENT

Cosmopolis, David Cronenberg, 105 mins (15)

Join this billionaire on his rendezvous with death, truth and impenetrable darkness (in a nice car)

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David Cronenberg's *Cosmopolis* is a very stylish work. It should be, because it's a film largely about style. Its theme is the heartless, even sociopathic detachment with which today's hyper-rich lead their hermetically cushioned-in lives. The problem with stories satirising decadence is that what they satirise can end up looking seductive. What's to stop *Cosmopolis* becoming as vacantly chic as the world it depicts?

The answer is Cronenberg's ironic intelligence – although this is so finely tuned that it's hard to pin down quite how it works. That's why some of his most provocative films – among them, *Crash* and *eXistenZ*, both of them echoed here – are among his most misunderstood.

Cosmopolis courts the same fate. The source is Don DeLillo's 2003 novel about a young billionaire financier, Eric Packer (Robert Pattinson), who spends a day riding across Manhattan in his state-of-the-art limo. He's ostensibly after a haircut, but in reality – as his reckless financial speculations threaten to sink both him and the entire global economy – he's heading for a rendezvous with death, truth, the impenetrable dark beyond his world's luminous spectacle. He is, you might say, cruising for a transcendental bruising.

Cronenberg hasn't so much adapted as transcribed the novel: he's trimmed its incident but left much of DeLillo's hyper-stylised dialogue. The film records Packer's progress across town, his car moving with regal slowness because of various obstacles: among them, a presidential cortege, the funeral of a Sufi rapper, an angry demo directed precisely at people like Eric. Occasionally Eric picks up passengers with whom he engages in serious, sometimes abstract discussion. An elegant woman (Juliette Binoche) joins him for businesslike sex – then rolls around coquettishly while discussing the viability of Eric's prospective art purchases. Hirelings discuss numbers, currency fluctuations, the "microtimed" nature of post-modern knowledge, in the case of Vija Kinsky (Samantha Morton), Eric's "head of theory". Another woman (Emily Hampshire) comes on board in time to witness Eric's daily rectal exam – which makes for a grotesquely comic flirtation, Eric leaning over her like a tortured Francis Bacon nude.

Eric's ultimate appointment is with Benno Levin (Paul Giamatti), an angry ex-employee who embodies an abandoned pre-digital culture. En route, there are other stops to make, including several dreamily happenstance encounters with Elise (Sarah Gadon), the wife that Eric hardly knows.

Here's what I mean about style: see *Cosmopolis* in a cinema with good sound, and listen to the way that Gadon's silky, incantatory voice is recorded so that it's like a physical object, filling the

space around it. This might seem merely an effect, but it's intrinsic to the outright difference of this film. *Cosmopolis* uses sound and silence brilliantly. The limo is a space capsule drifting weightlessly through town, excluding all external noise – which implodes into the car the second its doors open.

The car is at once throne room and coffin, its black leather interior as fetishistically realised as anything in Cronenberg's car-sex drama *Crash* (look at Binoche's stiletto propped post-coitally on the console). Outside, the world's disorder scrolls frictionlessly by, like a live stream of a pageant happening in another universe.

The limo is Eric's psyche, which can only remain security-sealed for so long; by and by, the world and his own mortality will get to him. But the car is also a stage for an ambulant chamber drama: this is the most overtly theatrical film Cronenberg has made, a series of heightened two-handers, culminating in the apocalyptic showdown with Giamatti's Levin.

As for what *Cosmopolis* says about the current financial abyss, I'm not sure it's that interested in pursuing the diagnoses of DeLillo's book. What the film does explore, mesmerisingly, is the riddle of how to turn a book about a limo ride into an experience that is itself a ride – or rather a glide. Such is the film's out-and-out otherness that Robert Pattinson – who puts up a strong, wryly amused show as the savagely blank Eric – himself becomes a stylistic element among many. This is a surpassingly odd film that some will reject outright, but I was totally won over. *Cosmopolis* may, like Packer's limo, be an elaborately conceived but essentially vacant vehicle – yet it has a master at the wheel.