The life force

By Jeffrey W. Bailey in the December 27, 2005 issue

When two violent criminals show up at Tom Stall's diner, he is forced to take action. He overcomes the assailants, obtains their gun and kills them. Widespread news coverage tells the story of this peaceful family man who halted the killers and their spree of violence.

David Cronenberg's film ***A History of Violence*** doesn't end there. Only days after the incident, three Mafia members show up at the diner, now packed with a lunchtime crowd, and one of them seems to know Tom (played by Viggo Mortensen). He says they are glad to have finally found him after all these years. They have come to take him back to Philadelphia for some "unfinished business."

The film succeeds not only as a taut, well-crafted thriller, but as a profound meditation—worthy of Augustine, René Girard and even Richard Dawkins—on the cyclical nature of violence. Cronenberg (*Dead Ringers*, *The Dead Zone*) continues his explorations of identity and violence by probing Darwinian determinism: Do only the fittest survive? Is violence an inescapable feature of human life?

But there is another thread to the film. Before violence enters Tom's family, the viewer is presented with a picture of the ideal American family in an idyllic town, with autumn foliage framing rustic farmhouses and neighbors saying, "See you in church on Sunday!" Amid this idyll there are hints of a certain deadness. This life is controlled and safe, but it lacks energy and purpose. We observe Tom tinkering with his truck, which (playing on his last name) is stalled. He makes love to his wife, but the moment feels perfunctory and flat. Their teenage son, who is being regularly bullied at school, can only react passively and plaintively to the challenges he faces each day. The cumulative effect is a kind of lethargy suffusing the film's opening scenes.

The tone changes after the violence erupts. The son, apparently emboldened by his father's heroics, fights back at school, and increasingly discovers there is more inside of him. Tom and his wife come together once again, and this time the sex is forceful, passionate and even frightening. Later, even Tom's truck roars to life. Text

and subtext serve to underscore the questions: Is violence the true life force? Are we not fascinated by the use of force? Are not relationships, communities and even nations constructed and energized by primal acts of hostility?

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus was among the first to reflect on how violence contributes to social cohesion and political stability. Wars, for example, elicit unity and help resolve group differences. As Augustine reluctantly recognized (despite his critiques of the Roman Empire), war is tied to the cultivation of certain human virtues, such as courage and self-discipline.

The Christian who recognizes this reading of history is faced with an inescapable challenge: the Christian counsel against violence cannot be rooted in abstract truths of reason or the demands of natural law. The earthly city is parasitically nourished and sustained by violence. A countercultural way of peace must emerge, therefore, as an irruption into history, as a new way of thinking and acting that can be understood only as a direct consequence of the death and resurrection of Christ. A Christian must be able to look at the practices of violence—including the capacities for social cohesion they foster—and offer a counterpractice that is more true (if not yet fully realized) because of the new possibilities for reconciliation that exist as a result of Jesus' resurrection.

Considered in this light, there is a powerful scene toward the end of the movie. Tom returns home after making a journey which he hopes has put an end, once and for all, to the violence affecting him and his family. He does not know how his family will respond when he returns, however. Events have changed relationships. As he walks into the house, he finds his wife and two children at the table eating dinner; their eyes remain downcast while Tom stands there, waiting. Finally, after an agonizing few moments, his young daughter slowly gets up, retrieves a plate and sets it on the table in front of her father. As Tom sits down, his teenage son pauses, then slowly but deliberately passes him the food. Tom's wife looks up at him from across the table, and their eyes meet with expressions of pain and unanswered questions.

Here, with his family, is Tom's one hope for new life, redemption and reconciliation. Can a merely biological family withstand the weight of such hopes? Or do we need a different kind of family, and a different sort of meal, to bring about that hoped-for healing and redemption?