

# WHAT IS IT?

## Crispin Hellion Glover Interview

Sundance Daily Insider, January 2006

Multimedia auteur Crispin Hellion Glover is on a mission to rehabilitate the countercultural film to its proper place — in your face, where it belongs. In the beguiling, confounding, and dangerously Dada-esque *What Is It?*, premiering in this year's Park City at Midnight program, a cast of characters comprised mostly of people with Down's syndrome navigates a surreal landscape fraught with dying snails, gallivanting naked women in gorilla masks, and an anguished minstrel who longs to break free of his human shell and transform into an invertebrate. How does he achieve this? By injecting himself with a viscous, bubbling residue derived from salt being poured onto garden snails, naturally. What is it, indeed.

In the words of Glover himself — an actor best known for his quirky appearances in *Back to the Future*, *Charlie's Angels* and *Willard* — the film follows “the adventures of a young man whose principal interests are snails, salt, a pipe, and how to get home, as tormented by a hubristic and racist inner psyche,” explains Glover. *What Is It?* originated as a short film, but has since gestated into a feature-length work after years of tinkering and restructuring. Two sequels will follow: *It Is Fine! Everything Is Fine* and *It Is Mine*. The late actor Steven P. Stewart, a cerebral palsy sufferer who appeared in *What Is It?*, wrote the script for *It Is Fine!* and appeared in the film prior to his death. Glover funded the first installment with his paychecks from the *Charlie's Angels* movies.

Glover discovered his actors through the help of his friend and *What Is It?* co-star Adam Parfrey, the countercultural publisher of Feral House Books, who introduced Glover to the Institute for Applied Behavior Analysis, an organization providing managed living and job opportunities to people with developmental disabilities. “Every person I met that had Down's syndrome wanted to be in the movie and had great enthusiasm for it,” Glover explained. “I do believe that art is a therapeutic thing for all people, especially those who are living apart.” Like the photographic works of Diane Arbus, *What Is It?* aims to humanize and engage with that slim segment of the population from which most people choose to avert their gaze.

Fellow provocateurs (including Vincent Gallo) might bite your head off for even suggesting apparent outside influences, but Glover readily admits that Arbus's work was a major influence for his trilogy. “There's a feeling you get when you look at her photographs,” Glover said. “A dread that's extremely powerful — and it has nothing to do with Down's syndrome or the external or physical elements one might associate with Arbus.” Not stopping there, Glover proceeds to recite other major influences on his films: Tod Browning, Luis Buñuel, Joseph Campbell, Federico Fellini, Werner Herzog, *Fata Morgana*, Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Stanley Kubrick.

But what resonates from Glover's film is entirely unique. *What Is It?* feels quite simply like nothing else out there right now, which is something the director hopes will catch on with his audience. “I know this is not a mass-market type of movie that most of the general public is looking for,” Glover said. “But *What Is It?* was made to begin a dialogue that isn't around right now. There hasn't been a counter-cultural film movement since the late 1970's and I think that's of great concern to the culture. It's disturbing that there is no counterpoint. To ask questions is an extremely important thing — that the title of my film is a question points towards that.” ■