

ESTUDOS ANGLO-AMERICANOS

# **Body and psychological fragmentation in David Cronenberg's films: a merging of body, sex, and technology**

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Dissertação realizada no âmbito do Mestrado em Estudos anglo-Americanos, orientada  
pelo Professor Doutor Mark Poole

Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto

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## **Declaração de honra**

Declaro que a presente dissertação é de minha autoria e não foi utilizada previamente noutro curso ou unidade curricular, desta ou de outra instituição. As referências a outros autores (afirmações, ideias, pensamentos) respeitam escrupulosamente as regras da atribuição, e encontram-se devidamente indicadas no texto e nas referências bibliográficas, de acordo com as normas de referenciação. Tenho consciência de que a prática de plágio e auto-plágio constitui um ilícito académico.

[Porto, 2021/09/28]

Júlia Mazzoccante Borges



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## Resumo

A seguinte pesquisa se propõe a analisar, a partir de três obras de David Cronenberg, elas sendo *Videodrome* (1983), *A Mosca* (1986) e *Crash* (1996), de que forma o diretor canadense, muito conhecido por ser um dos precursores do subgênero de horror, *body horror*, retrata o corpo pós-moderno no que concerne não somente a fragmentação corporal, como também psicológica. Para tanto, é analisada de que modo o corpo pós-moderno, permeado pela comoditização e reificação de sua imagem, por um achatamento de suas profundidades, e por uma retórica que prega um corpo puro e limpo, é configurado na obra de Cronenberg. Como instrumento para essa pesquisa, foi proposta uma análise acerca de dois elementos cuja presença é constante na obra do diretor: tecnologia e sexualidade. Sendo assim, a partir da percepção de elementos tecnológicos variados, tais como mídias televisivas, cápsulas de teletransporte e veículos automotivos, interligados ou não ao erotismo e à sexualidade, é possível perceber o processo transformativo físico e simbólico aos quais o corpo e a mente dos personagens estão submetidos.

**Palavras-chave:** David Cronenberg; Fragmentação Corpórea; Body Horror; Corpo Pós-moderno.

## Abstract

The following research aims to analyze, based on three works by David Cronenberg, they being *Videodrome* (1983), *The Fly* (1986) and *Crash* (1996), how the Canadian director, well known for being one of the precursors of the horror subgenre, body horror, portrays the postmodern body in terms of not only bodily but also psychological fragmentation. Therefore, it is observed how the postmodern body, permeated by the commoditization and reification of its image, by a flattening of its depths, and by a rhetoric that preaches a pure and clean body, is configured in Cronenberg's work. As an instrument for this research, an analysis of two elements whose presence is constant in the director's work was proposed: technology and sex. Thus, from the perception of varied technological elements, such as television media, teleportation pods and automotive vehicles, whether or not interconnected to eroticism and sexuality, it is possible to perceive the physical and symbolic transformative process to which the body and mind of characters are submitted.

**Key-words:** David Cronenberg; Bodily Fragmentation; Body Horror; Postmodern Body.

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## Introduction

During the course of the last year, in which I have been writing this text on David Cronenberg, I was questioned a few times on why I chose this particular topic and this particular director to write about, and it was not an answer that came easily, especially because I myself kept asking me the same questions throughout the process. If there was one thing that became clear to me during the moments I was considering what to research and write about was that I wanted to write about movies and my passion for them, period. So, from there I could begin to consider the cinematographic works that not only contributed to my formation as an admirer of world cinema production, but also works that affect me subjectively.

In addition, it is necessary and relevant within academic research to justify the motivations behind an exercise as demanding as a Master's course. It is an exercise of discipline, of countless seminars, studies, readings, writings, exchanges, discussions, and meetings, to, in the end, create a work that not only dialogues with me on a personal level, but which must also represent something for the world taking into consideration the context in which it is being delivered. In this way, I had in mind that these two issues should be intertwined: something that moved me on some level and something that made sense within the space-time context in which the work was being written.

So, to begin with, I remember how excited I got when I watched my first Cronenberg movie. It was *Naked Lunch* (1991) and I remember thinking I have never watched anything like it before. I was astonished and especially attracted by the freakishness of it all. Gross, surreal but very appealing to me at the same time. And particularly I remember the thrill I had when I got to watch *The Fly* (1986) a few weeks later. The body horror transformation elements stroke me as gruesome as well as highly entertaining. And perhaps this says more about me than about Cronenberg.

Of course that, by the time I was watching it, at some point during the early 2000s, those special effects coming from the 80s were not to be taken as the most ground breaking ones I had ever seen before, even though, by the time of its release, the grotesqueness of textures, slimy skins, the goop, exposed fractures and extreme body (literal)

dissolutions, such as Stathis' (John Getz) disintegrating melted arm, were obviously to be considered mind-blowing make-up and special effects. Despite not being so shocking to me, as I, myself, as well as said by Nicki (Debbie Harry) in *Videodrome*, live in "over stimulated times" (00:10:33), in which people are constantly craving stimulation, everything seemed highly amusing and funny even.

In Cronenberg's 2014 introduction to Susan Bernofsky's new translation of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, the director mentions he was asked many times, during the publicity tour of *The Fly*, what insect he would like to be if he were to go through entomological transformation and he tended to answer he would become a dragonfly. Not in a sense that he would have the soul of a dragonfly flying heavenward, as was suggested by one of the people who questioned him about it, but rather in a sense that he would become "a simple dragonfly", and he followed, "and then, if I managed to avoid being eaten by a bird or a frog, I would mate, and as summer ended, I would die" (Cronenberg, 2014)<sup>1</sup>. Thus, in a sense, for him, if one is changing their body, then they are changing their whole reality, and so why not just embrace that reality for what it is? That is what, in *The Fly*, Brundle (Jeff Goldblum), in the merging between Brundle and the fly he is becoming, seems to be doing after he ceases to recognize himself as just Brundle: he embraces his transformation for what it is, his identity shift, he is becoming a human-fly, a Brundlefly. Surely, this may metaphorically relate to many aspects of human existence, though I tend to believe, perhaps naively or perhaps a bit enthusiastically, that this says a lot about my personal relationship with cinema. As a sort of lonely child and a teenager who felt quite often like an outcast, a weird one, constantly watching movies helped me not only to feel less alone, but in internalizing how weirdness and quirkiness were to be embraced, not as a negative feature but as just another layer of the self.

As Perlmutter (1979) stated:

The grotesque leers from behind the dark side of comedy and dreams (...) in cinema, images begin to live compulsive lives of their own, mad objectification of human imagination breaking loose from connections with the laws of human identity. Furthermore, the essential motivations of the cinematic experience –

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2014/01/17/the-beetle-and-the-fly/>. Accessed 20th August 2021.

sight and voyeurism – are amplified by the articulation of the primary psychic process and the suggestion of the forbidden and the repressed material of the unconscious that underlie the grotesque (pp. 169).

Therefore, for the author, movie depictions of the grotesque, as the 1932 *Freaks* by Tod Browning, hinge on a criticism of bourgeois convention and conformity as they nuance the freakishness of the “normal”. Similarly, for the author, the freaks portrayed in cinematic oeuvre such as the ones from Luis Buñuel or Werner Herzog are just props that help us question “the dichotomy between external reality and the mental construct of the world we have conspired to accept” (pp. 193), and which can begin to explain why I felt driven to write about Cronenberg in the first place.

David Cronenberg’s movies, in one way or another, are deeply associated with a postmodern condition of fragmentation and they tend to portray unfitting characters that fade in this position. The body, and the fascination with it, is a very common trope for postmodernism both as a cultural practice or as a critical discourse. In Cronenberg’s movies, thus, the viewer is encountered with one of the postmodernism greatest fears, the one of the disintegrations of the body, the viral body, and its invaders, or even the paradoxical relations between body and mind. This can be expressed in his movies through numerous different sources: viruses, invisible threats, mind control tools, drugs/medicine, technology systems, among others. In his films, we are drawn to subjects whose reality is reconstructed, shaped, and reassembled due to technology or technological influence. In the same way that these characters and their bodies become amenable to modification, their mentality and subjectivity are also subject to change, which affects even the way they experience their sexuality, with sex being another very recurrent topic in the director’s work.

In his earlier movies, prior to the 80s, he consolidated himself as one of the precursors of the so-called body horror movie productions, a subgenre of horror, “that has made a specialty out of the disturbance of the bodily interior – what she (Williams, 1999) calls a ‘terrorism’ of the blood and viscera” (Grant, 2000, pp. 2). More specifically, *Shivers* (1975), his debut film, *Rabid* (1977), and *The Brood* (1979) made him to be known as a director of “venereal horror”, in which the characters suffered the effects of desire and disease. In

my dissertation, I would like to investigate some of his more complex pieces: *Videodrome*, *The Fly*, and *Crash* (1996). Even though they did not abandon the wound-focused violence, nor the obsession created through desire, I was seeking for movies that would deal more, not only with the body fragmentation/violation, but also with the blurred boundaries between body, sex, and technology in a context of a techno-capitalist sphere. Therefore, I believe the core objective of this dissertation is to analyze some of the most recurrent aspects of the Cronenbergian oeuvre, here named as fragmentations of body and mind, but also to rethink this fragmentation as a symbolic transformative process of us being subjected to similar inquietudes of a societal technological life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Thus, chapter 1, as a whole, is dedicated to the studies of the body, and its postmodern configurations, as well as its uncanny features. In its first section, more specifically, *The Body Taken Apart*, I will give a more theoretical approach towards the theme as I clarify some aspects of postmodernity suggested by Jameson (1997) which permeate and, in a way, dictate what is representational of the body in a postmodern context. That being: a sense of flatness and superficiality; the waning of affect, configured by the rejection of depthlessness, of deep emotion, which configures the difference, for instance, between Edward Munch's modernist piece *The Scream*, a portray of despair and cathartic emotion, and the famous movie star Marilyn Monroe, or similarly, as I will suggest in my text, *Videodrome*'s character Nicki Brand and the pop icon who gives life to her, Debbie Harry, or Blondie, both commoditized versions of their own image. Besides these, I will also develop on Jameson's idea of pastiche, a "blank parody" (pp. 23) driven by the impossibility of creating original, fully innovative art, in a way that we are left with mimicry and imitation, which is tied to Baudrillard's (1981) notion of simulation and simulacra, a topic reserved to be discussed further in chapter 4. Moreover, I also chose to write on how the rhetoric of a clean, purified body analyzed by the Krollers (1998) is behind postmodern culture of excess and surplus matter as the cause for the disappearance of the body.

What makes all of this relevant to my take on Cronenberg's films is related to the well-known aspect of his creations to be very body-driven narratives, especially to what regards bodily deconstruction and fragmentation, as well as the rupture of inner and outer corporeal barriers. As Beard (2017) puts it:



His films are full of split or scattered subjects, but none of them can survive in what is inevitably revealed to be an emotionally and psychologically dysfunctional status. All of them yearn for a wholeness that can have no place in the (post)modern world. (pp. viii)

Therefore, all three films will, to a smaller or greater extent, encompass the annihilation of the body and a psychological fragmentation through the merge between body, sex/desire, and technology. In *Videodrome*, we encounter a protagonist whose body and mind have the sites for intruders' control and modification as Max Renn (James Woods) constantly hallucinates due to the influence of Videodrome signals in the same way that his body is under attack of boundaryless ruptures and transformations. In *The Fly*, the protagonist's body face extreme modification in the midst of his transformation from human to human-fly accompanied by his loss of humanity throughout the process. And, in *Crash*, we follow the wreckage of the body justified under a fragmented, lacking-of-affect mind of a group of people seeking sexual pleasure/fulfillment in car crashes<sup>2</sup>.

In chapter 3, I will turn my analysis to how sex figures as a key-element in all the three movies as far as new configurations of bodies as well as sexualities are concerned. In *The Fly*, for instance, some of the essential plot turns are mediated through sexual interests. Whereas for *Videodrome* and *Crash*, both comprise new alternatives for the nature of pleasure: generated by "screen/spectator relationship" (Creed, 2003, pp. 115) in the former, and generated by car crashes and the wound in the latter. Besides, I find it relevant to address, still in chapter 3, how Cronenberg's take on the female body is developed, as, in all three films analyzed, we find male protagonists though always accompanied by a woman supporting character. As put by Derry (2001),

If the stories of semiology and structuralism have taught us anything, it is that films and television programs must be analyzed not only in terms of what they contain, but of what they lack: often, these constituent lacks reveal the hidden functions of the works themselves. (pp. 6)

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<sup>2</sup> The three movie plots are contained in the appendix.

Therefore, here, as much as my intention was never to criticize or write hostile remarks on how Cronenberg depicts women in his movies, it would have bothered me greatly to finish my dissertation without turning a more direct attention to different perceptions on the abject body, including the female body as an abject one. It is widely known the fact that Cronenberg's body horror is permeated with gruesome viscosity which threatens the stability of a bodily union: flesh, sweat, goop vomiting, blood, guts; which Grosz (1994) points out as attesting "to the permeability of the body, its necessary dependence on an outside, its liability to collapse into the outside (this is what death implies)" (pp. 193), it represents a break of inner and outer barrier and limits so very common in the director's oeuvre. As the author continues to state:

This disquiet about the fluid, the viscous, the half-formed, or the indetermined has to do with the cultural unrepresentability of fluids within prevailing philosophical models of ontology, their implicit association with femininity, with maternity, with the corporeal, all elements subordinated to the privilege of the self-identical, the one, the unified, the solid. (pp. 195)

All of which also attest to the abnormal female body sublimated by the fear of the flesh. Since the female body's existence is particularly permeated by inner viscosity and corporeal fluids.

In addition, one of the theoretical frameworks within which I chose to examine Cronenberg's take on technology is Baudrillard's ideas on simulacra and simulation. For the author, contemporary society has replaced reality for "imaginary stations that feed reality" (1981, pp. 13) through a series of phenomena, including contemporary media, such as television and nowadays the internet. For instance, *Videodrome* is layered with the contrast between what is real and what is not, and between what is still a body and what is not. At some point, Max Renn, finds himself being able to insert a videotape into his stomach and he becomes part of this system of reproductive technology. In *The Fly*, human body is genetically fused with an insect body due to a technologic apparatus error. In *Crash*, human bodies are machinic deconstructed and reconstructed.

Also, it interests me to go further into how the dissolution of body/being leads to a state of what Baudrillard will call simulacra, or in other terms, how the body and the mind both

become so dismantled through technology that their original sense collapse and become extensions and products of technology and representation of reality. The fact is that, in all three movies, “the body becomes a spectral zone of interface with technology in which the notion of “interiority” is greatly shaken” (Capistrano, 2011, pp. 107). Thus, chapter 4 is then devoted to how bodily and psychological dissolution are attached to the hyperreal and the merging of human body with technological apparatus. In an attempt to show how to be free from the old flesh, Cronenberg’s characters get involved with techno-science materialized in the forms of TV apparatus, cars or even teleportation pods.

Lastly, I examine how the fusion human-technology does not limit itself exclusively in terms of bodily modification as it extrapolates to the realm of the mind. As Max comes into contact with Videodrome signals, he develops a cancerous brain tumor, which initially undermines the foundation of reality at a mental level. Simultaneously, the bodily changes that affect him, such as opening a hole in his stomach, or the transmutation of his hand into a weapon, are treated at the level of materiality and corporeal transmutation in a simultaneous movement in which mind and body are intrinsically connected. Moreover, his hallucinatory episodes are materialized in the form of objective visual alterations of reality as objects become flesh, breathing, soft creatures, and Nicki ceases to be a body to assume her New Flesh form, the one of an image. In parallel, psychological fragmentation and dissolution are portrayed in *Crash* in the form of a new psychopathology as an accepted norm within the characters and in *The Fly* through Brundlefly’s processual loss of humanity which occurs simultaneously as his carnal loss of human traits.

Finally, the dissertation concludes with brief remarks on the experience of writing about aspects of the postmodern body, especially considering the current context of an on-going worldwide pandemic. I also bring together some aspects of the three films analyzed with concluding comments and I indicate, based on aspects I noticed during the process of writing this dissertation, what would be interesting for a further and closer examination still considering Cronenberg’s oeuvre.

# 1. The Body Inside Out

## 1.1 The Body Taken Apart

In considering how much interest postmodernity has devoted to the figure of the body, especially towards what represents its fragmentation, and given the so many different definitions and approaches there are regarding what postmodernity entails, some of which being contrasting even, it goes without saying that focusing on one of these definitions that better suits my work is paramount to making my ideas as clear as possible. Following this purpose, I will be giving a closer look to what Fredric Jameson wrote in his book *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1997), especially the first chapter of it, which the author dedicated to how postmodernism reflects on the Cultural Industry.

Firstly, Jameson states that understanding what happened to culture after the 60s is one of the most important ways with which one can start understanding what postmodernism represents, for cultural reproduction, according to him, is one of the ways that sustain capitalism in a society. Thus, by moving into postmodernism does not necessarily mean that we are entering a whole new social order, but instead that we are evolving to a new stage in a capitalist mode of production, an even purer one.

Essentially, one of the main features constituting postmodernism relates to a rupture in the frontier which used to divide High Culture from Low Culture whose erosion was caused by the assimilation between culture and economy. In this sense, whereas in modernism there was a preoccupation with transcendence in art, postmodernism commoditized aesthetic production turning it all to a brand or a salable product. Even despite the many attempts to transcend or disrupt this system of large monopolies, such as through the illegal consumption of movies and piracy, the entertainment industry still manages to mold itself within new possibilities. Cultural industry works so many times as just another cog in the capitalist exploitation machinery and piracy, being an alternative to sovereign states and an attempt to break monopolistic control over entertainment and cultural commodities, then, it places itself as a new path that capitalists structures need to adapt to. And they have been, as far as possible, by taking full advantage of the internet

as a means of reproduction, as it is the case with streaming platforms like Netflix, which offers a relatively extensive catalogue, but with easy and quick access at affordable prices.

As an extension to this phenomenon, there is the creation of a whole new industry embracing aesthetic consumption, such as marketing and publicity. One does not need to go a lot further to check how much influence 2000s capitalists societies have under such markets. With the ascendance of social media like Instagram, through which it is possible to sell not only material goods, but a whole persona and lifestyle, in accordance to what Guy Debord (1983) called “the domination of society by ‘intangible as well as tangible things’” (pp.35), neuromarketing studies have emerged since the 90s to help predicting consumer behavior based on information processed by the brain, making it possible for sellers to identify the emotional impact of the product.

Thus, one of the most significant elements of postmodernity is a new sense of superficiality translated by Jameson as a sense of “flatness” or depthlessness. In order to explain that, he will compare the representation of shoes made by Van Gogh and an Andy Warhol’s canvas named *Diamond Dust Shoes*. Firstly, just like High Modernism, Van Gogh’s shoes on canvas were authorial, expressive, profound, whereas Warhol’s do not speak to the viewer, for the representation is cold, petrified, merchandized, a depth-lacking reification of an image.

I will step back a little in an attempt to show how this might be applied to Cronenberg’s oeuvre. In her essay *Death Drive*, Parveen Adams (2000) will defend her theory on how the characters from Cronenberg’s 1996 movie *Crash* are so swallowed up by the flatness of space they live in, that they lack any sort of desire whatsoever. In this sense, according to the author, in opposition to what many people think regarding Cronenberg’s film, characters in *Crash* are not moved by a voyeuristic desire, since the flatness of their environment is not able to accommodate any sort of desire, not even the voyeuristic one. Instead, they are dominated by the death drive. To do so, she articulated on how the characters relation to the Other is impaired by a lack of identification with it, which, in its turn, is caused by the flatness invested especially in the physical spaces of *Crash*. These Lacanian concepts will be developed and better explained on the following paragraphs.

Here, I will be following Lionel Bailly's guide to Lacan (2009), in order to state how closely related desire and the death drive are, in a way that, for me, characters in *Crash* are not really emptied of desire, though what they desire is the death drive. But, first, I will start by conceptualizing these two key points to the understanding of the Lacanian thought which will serve well my analysis throughout the text, particularly in what concerns the movie *Crash*, where these characteristics are pretty evident.

The first one of them is the Lacanian concept of desire. According to Bailly, desire is the manifestation of lack to the Subject, and is the by-product of language, or, in other words, desire appears when the subject is not fully able to express in words what is needed and cannot demand it from the Other, which, in accordance with Bailly, is represented by Society, the Law, or "the whole set of hypotheses within which the Subject is constituted"<sup>3</sup> and which is not dealt through projection and identification. For Lacan, this is fairly recurrent since, a lot more frequent than we expect it, language does not fully articulate our actual demands, so desire often grows from a psychological need, for instance, our desire towards love, a psychological demand particularly difficult to be expressed through language. Second, there is the concept of the death-drive. Bailly has placed the Lacanian concept of death-drive as a pleasure-seeking manifestation independent of an actual need, which goes beyond the pleasure principle, a realm where "we encounter that opaque surface which to some has seem so obscure that it is the antimony of thought (...) the surface that is known as the death instinct". Therefore, as Bailly places it, there is a pleasure-seeking feature in drinking a glass of wine, for example, and the difference between this and the death drive lies on the excess and in the fact that some people will actually drink up an enormous amount of wine to the point where they reach oblivion and destruction. Thus, as far as *Crash* is concerned, there is a difference between seeking pleasure in fulfilling a capitalist desire of consuming fancy collection cars, or even the pleasure of performing a sex act in a vehicle along with the possibility of being caught by

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<sup>3</sup><https://ia800709.us.archive.org/23/items/lionel-bailly-lacan-a-beginners-guide/lionel-bailly-lacan-a-beginners-guide.pdf>>. Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> January 2021.

a voyeur, and there is the formula of excess *jouissance*, in which what is sought is a “form of enjoyment derived from the usage of something in its legitimate (intended) way”<sup>4</sup>.

Therefore, the cars in *Crash* are not the most modern, the fanciest of cars, they are not products of capitalist desire, most of all because they are regular cars prompt to be destroyed. It is the destruction, the wreckage of it which attracts Vaughan (Elias Koteas) and his followers, and not the cars themselves, with the exception of the simulated car crashed acted especially by Vaughan and his partner Seagrave (Peter MacNeill), who fetishize James Dean and Jayne Mansfield deaths because of the cars they drive. As a car enthusiast himself, Cronenberg assumes in a 1996 interview how aware he was about the fact that the characters in *Crash* are not passionate about the car itself in a commodity fetishist way, so not giving James a “deliberately boring car” (Cronenberg, 1996)<sup>5</sup> could potentially destroy the meaning of *Crash*. On the other hand, *The Fly* and *Videodrome* are much more concerned with products and a more modern technological aesthetic. The pods used by Brundle are the ultimate products of science development, and the television signals caught by *Videodrome* are just an example of how technology and transmission have evolved to a point which surpasses, as mentioned before, cultural commodities in the form of illegal reproduction of TV programs and channels. Nevertheless, in all three situations, technology and/or technological apparatus are the ones responsible for characters’ downfall and death/near death, even though, as happens in *Crash*, death is the desirable end to be reached.

Moreover, Cronenberg uses a type of camera moving and placement which, at the same time which allows us to perceive that the cars are moving, do not allow the viewers to actually see these movements happening, as the director very often places the camera on the dashboard or in the hood of the vehicle in such a way that the viewer is able to see parts of the driver, the back seat and the road behind them at the same time but only fragmented frames of them, in a way that all one can see is “one side of the car body and

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<sup>4</sup><https://ia800709.us.archive.org/23/items/lionel-bailly-lacan-a-beginners-guide/lionel-bailly-lacan-a-beginners-guide.pdf>. Accessed 20th January 2021.

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jMS9xB2g2Z0&t=718s&ab\\_channel=JosephParfitt](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jMS9xB2g2Z0&t=718s&ab_channel=JosephParfitt). Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> April 2021.

an unvarying strip of open roads” (Adams, pp. 113). As it is possible to verify in the following picture frame:



Fig. 1. *Crash*. Flatness of scenery.

In the movie, we are drawn into a voyeuristic experience in which there always seems to be something to watch and observe, which is also handled by the movement of cameras that appear to simulate the presence of someone approaching. It is not by chance that James, a commercial director, is also professionally at the center of a representation/simulation way of living and ends up becoming intensely involved with a group of people whose relationship is very much based on observing, watching, recording, however, without almost never looking at each other in the eyes. The characters watch themselves through glasses, windows, mirrors, reenactments, and photographs of their accidents and recognize themselves through the narrative that is observed in the post-accident: in the scars, marks, and bodily transformations.

Also, the lack of depth of the three-dimensional setting leads to a difficulty on identification from the viewer towards the movie on Lacanian terms of identification, to whom there is the assumption that each individual is defined upon their relation to the Other. That will be because, according to Adams, space is an effect of the relation between one and the Other, and in such relation lies the mechanism of identification.



Which leads to another important postmodern feature according to Jameson: the waning of affect. For him,

The great dominant experiences of drugs and schizophrenia, would seem to have little enough in common anymore either with the hysterics and neurotics of Freud's own day or with those canonical experiences of radical isolation and solitude, anomie, private revolt, Van Gogh-type of madness. (pp. 21)

Hence, it does not necessarily mean that Jameson disregarded all subjectivity but rather that now feelings, or as he himself prefers "intensities", as a Lyotard's reference, are "free-floating and impersonal" (pp. 22), which open path for a new type of feeling: euphoria. Fisher (2018) matches this impersonal and peculiar feeling of *euphoria* to what Baudrillard named *ecstasy* and its oppositional *dread*, both very present in the postmodern society lexicon, being the latter ascribed to the schizophrenic terror of being trapped into cybernetic network and denied of a private projection. Both dread and euphoria are the biproducts of what Jameson referred to as the "death of the subject" (pp. 25), or the end of individualism, and the conjunction of both feelings at once is put by the author as the "postmodern sublime" (pp. 45)

Therefore, following the death of the subject, postmodern societies will submit to the practice of *pastiche*, a mimicry similar to a parody but without its comic and satirical qualities. According to Jameson, it is no longer possible to be fully innovative, so we are left with imitation. The author states that literature and cinema are no longer the artistic forms that most encompasses the cultural logic of capitalist postmodern societies, but rather the assimilation of video in our daily lives, including commercial television. I also dare to add the omnipresence of smartphones, but mostly focusing on social media and the uninterrupted flow of images constituting the order of simulacrum, term borrowed from Plato by many postmodern theorists, such as Jameson and Baudrillard, to refer to an "identical copy for which no original has ever existed" (Jameson, pp. 23). The dissolution of the audience is suffered as only the rapid and momentaneous matter. Instagram tools now are developed in a way that allows people to create memories which only last 24 hours and, by being able to archive and hide some of the photographs kept in their feed, people now can shape their representation of a past and edit their past self,

reinforcing not only fragmentation, but also people's perception of past and future, which is a feature even closer to human experience pre-social media, leading to the conclusion that social media is nothing less than a pastiche of life. For Baudrillard, the proliferation of images has made the world untrustworthy, combined with excess of information which devours its sense of meaning. For instance, a lurid number of people nowadays have the illusion of getting informed by reading memes posted online. The spread of misinformation in the so-called post-truth era, for instance, is a symptom of the hyperreal, a real that is more than real. How the notion of simulacra acts upon postmodern individuals and to what extent this is reflected on Cronenberg's cinema will be further developed on chapter 3 of my text. As for now, I would like to focus my analysis on the postmodern body itself.

## 1.2 Leaking Surfaces

As a director whose perspectives, narratives, imageries are very body-oriented, Cronenberg's characterization of the body is a metamorphosing, transforming one. It is a body subjected to alterations, invasions, disintegrations, disappearance. In Barbara Creed's article *The Naked Crunch: Cronenberg's Homoerotic Bodies* (2000), she stated that this desire of becoming free from the fear of flesh and the boundaries of the body is a common trope in this director's movies, as well as the image of the body "in relation to the fluid nature of bodily boundaries with emphasis on the fragile limit between inside and outside, between the proper and improper body" (pp. 84). Hence, the contrasting difference between hard mechanical metallic surfaces is met and intertwined with soft organic surfaces leading to a rupture, a suspension on the limits separating what is interior to what is exterior. For instance, in *Videodrome*, we see hand with a gun attempting to tear a TV screen made out of a venous skin pellicle<sup>6</sup>; In *The Fly*, human flesh invaded and genetically modified by an insect intruder; In *Crash*, the contrast between flesh softness and hard metal, human fluids touching leather car seats.

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<sup>6</sup>And if torn, what would come out of it? Human fluids or wires and electrical circuit?

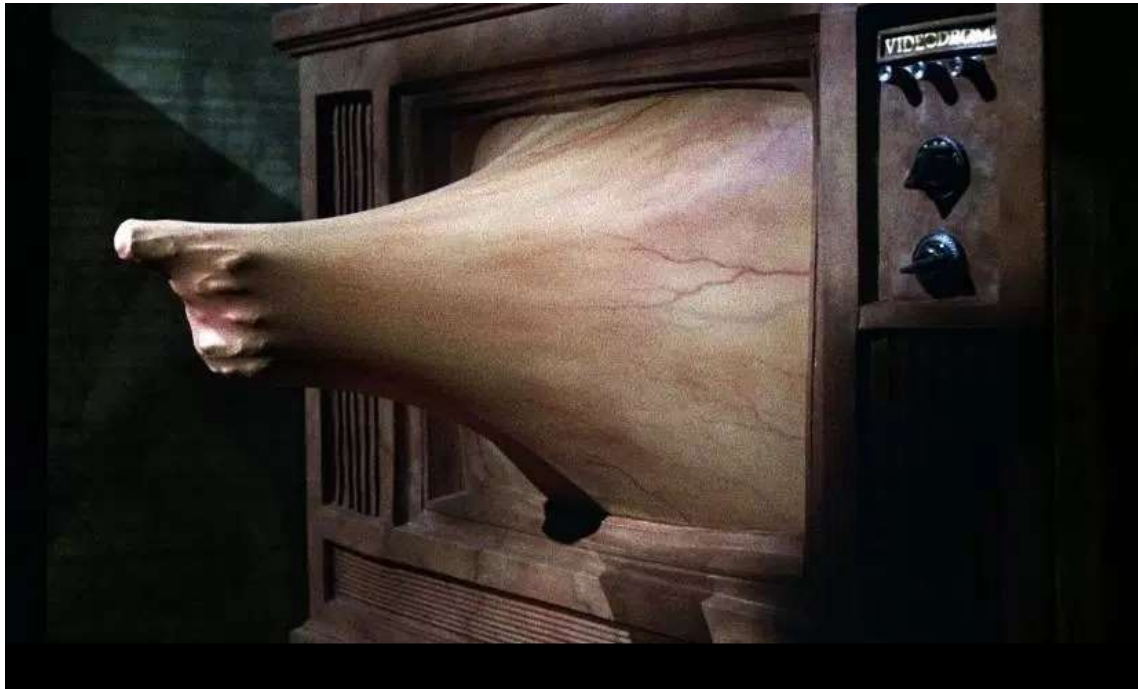


Fig. 2. Television screen made of flesh in *Videodrome*.

The book *Body Invaders*, by Arthur and Marilouise Kroker, includes a collection of texts first published in 1998 and images thematically focused on the studies of the body placed in a postmodern condition. Being brought to public in the late 90s, *Body Invaders* is focused on the discussions derived from the 80s AIDS epidemic and its aftermath. Its introductory article from the same authors, *Panic Sex in America*, deals specifically with the, at that time, recent American obsession over a politics of clean bodily fluids, such as a urinal politics, which aims the legitimization of the body as a new instrument for surveillance, or, as the authors called it, “the widening spread of a panoptic power apparatus” (pp. 11) by taking advantage of an immunological discourse.

Following the standards of an immunological politics established in the early 90s, the unattainable goal of absolute body purity and fluids cleansing reflected overall on the disappearance of the body, for everything condemned to the filthiness of the body was put in a place of a *surplus matter*. According to the authors,

The rhetoric of clean bodily fluids is really about the disappearance of the body into the detritus of toxic bodies, fractal subjectivity, cultural dyslexia, and the pharmakon as the terror of the simulacra in the postmodern condition. (pp. 11)

In this manner, the illusory idea of a clean body at the expense of a sick, impure, contagious, leaking body led to the conception of a body as a terrain for control and politics of power. Thus, mostly after the AIDS outbreak, to have a sick body would be also a certificate of sexual misconduct and depravity. For years now, blood and urine exams have been used as some sort of attestation of good reputation and conduct, for instance, cases of a mandatory request for toxicological examination in an employment selection process, which serve both as a confirmation of a body quality, as well as evidence of aptitude and reliability, based solely on fluids analysis. In fact, throughout the years, some critics, such as Leayman in 1987, have considered Cronenberg's *The Fly* and even *Shivers* (a pre-AIDS outbreak film) to be "a metaphor in this age of AIDS" (Apud PHARR, 1989, pp. 43). Despite Cronenberg never assuming the metaphor to be real (even though he claims to understand where the assumption comes from), this is due to how the movie ties both bodily transformations, as the initial phases of Brundle's transformation caused him to have skin lesions very similar to the sores, rashes, and Kaposi's sarcoma proper of a body's immune system weakened by HIV, and decay related to sexual activities/sexual desire. Brundle's motivations towards prematurely experiencing teleportation in the pods were of sexual nature, as he was driven by "lust, drunkenness, jealousy, anger, pride" (Pharr, pp. 43), and the transformation he undergoes take place in what is the real *mise-en-scène* of the movie: "the flesh" (pp. 41).

In accordance with Linda Ruth Williams in 1999, the showing, by body horror genre, of the inside out of a body results in the body not being a private space any further, since there is the breakdown of what is internal and what is external (Apud GRANT, 2000, pp. 1). Thus, being Cronenberg one of the forerunners of body horror, a genre which, in the words of Wilson (2011), has an "extreme attention paid to the various sufferings of the body-on-screen"<sup>7</sup>, or which, according to Grant, "is a cinema of the violation and destruction of the body" (pp. 1), his movies contain, as a trope, the deconstruction and dismantling of the body-on-screen. Therefore, the very image of a leaking, taken apart, inside out body is paramount to the build-up of a horror genre that plays with the fear of our own body, leading viewers to the agony of watching a body pushed to its limits, or, as

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<sup>7</sup><https://www.perlego.com/book/800773/the-politics-of-insects-david-cronenbergs-cinema-of-confrontation-pdf>. Accessed 18<sup>th</sup> April 2021.

Williams has argued, showing on screen our physical insides is “pushing the spectacle of interiority to the limit to find out what the limit is” (Apud GRANT, pp. 1). Similarly, as mentioned above, it is common for Cronenberg’s films to have a fluctuation between the boundaries of inner and outer.

In *The Fly*, for instance, the teleportation pods created by Brundle work by disintegrating and reintegrating the body somewhere else. On his attempt to experiment them on a living creature, one of his baboons is teleported though its body is completely turned inside out which, amidst the characters' repulsion reaction, serves as a sort of warning about what could happen if the scientist tried to do the same. When teleporting with a fly, the metamorphosis of the two bodies and their joining into one break the barriers between human and animal and begin to generate a hybridization of the two. Then, Wilson credits Brundle’s inability to recognize his bodily transformation (which will only occur, in fact, after three thirds of the movie) to his inability with the body and flesh in general. Also, there are a few clues throughout Brundle’s character presentation which indicate that he has had no social life of himself previously to his encounter with Ronnie. So, that could probably add to the reason why the machine failed to teleport animate beings, because both, Brundle as well as the computerized system, lacked knowledge of the flesh, or better saying, the desire of the flesh. To this, Wilson states:

This misrecognition of his own condition, and the act of casting his renewed vitality and libidinal excess as a theological triumph, is viewed by Brundle as the successful removal of ‘impurities’ generated by a life lived without attention to the body.

In this sense, as a result of the teleportation, Brundle starts to feel great physical strength, resistance, sexual appetite, which he credits to a possible cleansing caused by the disintegration of his body atom by atom and consequent reconstruction of it. According to him, he has never really given himself a chance to be himself, and now that he is getting this chance, he is able to become the best version of himself, or, in his own words, “human teleportation...molecular decimation, breakdown and reformation...is inherently purging...it makes a man a king” (00:44:58), and his desire from this point on is invested in transcending “society’s sick gray fear of the flesh” (00:48:27).

When asked by a lady he has just met at a bar if he was a bodybuilder (he left a man with an open fracture in his arm while arm wrestling), Seth answers that he actually builds bodies, by deconstructing them and then pulling them together again. In the process of Seth's body deconstruction into becoming something else, something not-human, as the DNA test results of his "hair" will indicate, the scientist comes to the realization of his body parts really coming apart, fluids start squirting out of his hands and ear hole, nails start coming off, and insect hair that seem impossible to cut off start to grow out all over his face. Amid Brundle's metamorphosis, some of his body parts began to fall off and he kept them in the bathroom cabinet: his teeth, his ear, some flesh piece that resembles a penis, and other dysmorphic pieces of what used to be a human being. He called them "Artifacts of a bygone era. Of historical interest only." (01:15:20), as part of the "Brundle Museum of Natural History" (01:16:12).

In her 1993 book *The Monstrous Feminine*, Barbara Creed, in a chapter in which she discusses the oeuvre of Julia Kristeva as a primary source for discussing the representation of women as abject in horror films, will reach for a definition of what monstrous is by seeking ancient historical and religious notions of what abjection is, for horror films appear to be nothing else but an illustration of the abject. As she wrote, "the place of the abject is the place where meaning collapses" (pp. 09), and one of the ultimate forms of abjection is the corpse, because when dead, the body no longer performs the duty of expelling the surplus of a bodily experience, the excrements, urine, blood, pus, now the surplus is the body itself, a dead body, cold, hard, useless, a body without a soul. When citing Kristeva (1982), Creed mentions how horror movies very often build their terror based upon the frontier between the abject body and a clean one, which would be the so-called "proper" body. This is a characteristic Cronenberg seems to be very fond of, especially when revisiting his early movies *Rabid*, *The Brood*, *Scanners*, *Videodrome*, *The Fly*, for example. Nevertheless, in all three movies chosen in my work, there can be noticed the presence of the abject body and abject desires. In *Videodrome*, the transformation of the flesh occurred in Max Renn is due to forces beyond his control, his bodily transformation occurs as part of his exposure to *Videodrome* signals, and, according to Cronenberg, "the most accessible version of the 'new flesh' in *Videodrome* would be that you can actually change what it means to be a human being in a physical

way" (Apud MEDEIROS, 2016, pp. 80). In *Crash*, the abject body, and an atmosphere full of body mutation experiments, scarification, tattoos, pins, rugged tissue, prosthetics body parts are what is desirable. Thus, it is an experience that encompasses a merging between technology (mostly in the form of cars) along with the deconstruction of the body. Lastly, in *The Fly*, the abject body is repelled by the Other, though initially desired and considered valuable by its possessor. In Wilson's analysis, the entire movie goes around Brundle's attempt to negotiate and take hold on his transformative fate, to which he named "a disease with a purpose" in an attempt to make sense on what he was going through, namely being the "purpose" his process of inhabiting a new flesh of his own.

As characters in Cronenberg's movies are undergoing mutation, transformation, deconstruction, and inner as well as outer change, they are, as well as abject, grotesque bodies, as proposed by Bakhtin (1984), they are "a body in the act of becoming" (pp. 317). According to him, as it is a non-finished body, rather a becoming one, a created and creating figure, its grotesqueness lies in the parts in which it is transgressed, in its "convexities and orifices (...) the bowels and the phallus" (pp. 317). Therefore,

the artistic logic of the grotesque image ignores the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which leads excrescences beyond the body's limited space or into the body's depths. (pp. 317 – 318)

The three films analyzed present different versions of this grotesque body. In *Videodrome*, although, at least initially, the dictions take shape at the mental level materialized in hallucinations, the epitome of these hallucinations occur in the opening of Renn's abdomen and in the possibility of inserting objects in it, such as a weapon or a VHS tape or even of if you insert elements from your own body, such as his hand, or from the body of a third party, such as the Convex's hand. Following Bakhtin, "the grotesque ignores the impenetrable surface that closes"(pp. 318) which leads to the deconstruction of internal and external body barriers, making it possible to enter the body through a crack that, after being opened, does not even expel any type of fluid or blood, almost as if already healed or as if it were always there. In *The Fly*, similarly to Bakhtin's hyperpolization of a nose, to whom it is a body parts possible to "detach (...) from the body and lead an independent

life" (pp. 317), Brundle loses various parts of its body along the way, especially its extremities, such as nails, penis, ears, leaving behind open holes and goo, through which it expels not human blood but insect fluids, similar to those disgusting white liquids from when we kill cockroaches with slippers. Lastly, in *Crash*, there is the exploration of the orifices, not only the genitals, and particularly the anal orifices, and the creation of new orifices through which it is possible to break through the body. Bruises and wounds are treated not only as such, but as perforations through which it is possible to break down the barriers between the external and the internal.

If one considers fragmentation to be one of the key elements of postmodernity, the same may be applied to the conceptualization of the body for this period: an element of rupture and dissolution. The postmodern trajectory has been responsible for the increasing extinguishment of the body, or, in the words of Arthur and Marilouise Kroker, what we are left with is a body "traced by language, lacerated by ideology, and invaded by the relational circuitry of the field of postmodern power" (pp. 20). In other words, what there is is only the illusion of a body built upon a unity, though this body, which was so extensively susceptible, mostly due to capitalism and technological development, has reached a level of effacement. Following Baudrillard, "the stage of the body changed in the course of an irreversible technological progression" (pp. 101), a statement that can be invested and justified from a wide range of examples, varying from artificial tanning, which is directly tied into the capitalist hegemony, the usage of prosthetic members to cloning and the modelling of a doubled body through the reproduction of its genetic material and the exteriorization of the mind achieved by psychotropic drugs. Both the influence of technology on the body and the exteriorization of the mind will be more detailed discussed in accordance with Cronenberg's films in following sections of this work.

For that matter, according to the Krokers, the dissolution of the body due to the subordination by postmodern rules has been responsible for "a semiurgy of floating body parts" (pp. 21), which can be revealed by numerous rhetorical realms, leading to a realm of subordination and that only prove how the body has already disappeared and was turned into a simulacra. Without going too much further into details about all the rhetorical groups, some of them are very relevant to my analysis on Cronenberg's view



on the body, to whom the body is the first act of human existence and, when questioned about his fascination towards the theme, he replied

For me everything comes out of that: philosophy, religion. Everything comes out of the body and the fact of human mortality. It's natural that my film would focus on that. (Cronenberg, 2016)

The semiotic rhetoric of the body, for instance, deals with the *outering* and externalization of body parts, which Cronenberg's oeuvre was able to extensively portray<sup>8</sup>. In this sense, for Creed (1993), "the dichotomy of pure/impure is transformed into one of inside/outside" (pp. 48), and, in addition to the fact that the uterus and the female body in its specificities have been stigmatized by the patriarchy in relation to the impurities of their bleeding organs that seem to be much more connected to nurture and animals, Creed states that what is horrifying about an external uterus is due to nothing more than its natural functions, for it "houses an alien form, it causes alterations to the body, it leads to the act of birth" (1993, pp. 49). Subsequently, the technological rhetorical group is about subordination to technology, responsible for turning the body into both an essential tool used for scientific and technological development and, at the same time and paradoxically, into a superfluous tool for maintaining the status quo; and the scientific rhetoric responsible for body modifications in an aesthetic and health care sense.

Cronenberg seems to be interested in bringing the disunity of the postmodern body into his oeuvre. He is held accountable for being one of the forerunners of body horror cinema, bringing to his movies some images of body transfiguration and transmutation which, back in the 70s and 80s, were considered shocking by the overall public, causing a not so often positive reception from the audience at that time<sup>9</sup>, who considered many of his movies, but especially his initial ones, to be offensive and unsettling. He, as a director,

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<sup>8</sup> In *The Brood*, Dr. Raglan advise patients to externalize their inner hostilities, which causes from carcinogenic lesions on their skin to an outside womb depicted as a monstrous cancerous growth. To that event, Creed (1993) addressed its abject feature to notions of what is considered abject for Christianity, what is interior rather than exterior, in a belief that what moves one towards sin comes from within.

<sup>9</sup> It could be taken as an example Cronenberg's 1988 interview on People to People about the release of his latest movie that year, *Dead Ringer*. The interviewer named the movie "disturbing" many times during the interview and she seemed to be provoked even by the fact that the twin brothers who are gynecologists were male characters.

especially considering his movies prior to the 2000s, was very keen of depicting the exposure of body interiority and elements that should be contained exclusively in the inside of the body. This abject experience can be seen in scenes where heads exploded, and brain mass flew everywhere (*Scanners*); a gun made out of flesh take over a hand (*Videodrome*); internal gastric fly fluids were regurgitated by a human man (*The Fly*); a new penis-like organ emerged from an armpit thirsty for human blood (*Rabid*); an anus-like talking typewriter was one of the characters (*Naked Lunch*); and so on. Quoted by Smith (2000), in relation to how he conceives this about his own work, Cronenberg stated in his 1996 interview for Rodley that:

It's not disgust. It's fascination, but it's also a willingness to look at what is really there without flinching, and to say this is what we're made of, as strange and as disgusting as it might seem at times. I'm really saying that the inside of the body must have a completely different aesthetic. I could conceive of a beauty contest for the inside of the human body. (pp. 69)

According to Douglas Kellner, in his article named *David Cronenberg: Panic Horror and the Postmodern Body* (1989), it is argued that Cronenberg's cinematic oeuvre does not quite attend to the dualism of body and mind, in fact, as he himself already stated in interviews, he does not believe in any difference between body and mind. By using the movies I chose to analyze as examples of this assumption, *Videodrome* presents the possibility of a telematic invasion submitting both the body and the mind of the ones affected. There, the transformation processes of both the body and the mind are done synchronously, so that the protagonist's contact with the Videodrome signals causes hallucinations in him, which, in turn, are responsible for a carcinogenic brain alteration. At the same time, the same hallucinations derive physical and bodily alterations that alter the character's corporeality. Also, in *The Fly*, a path error within a technological-scientific experiment, attempting to overcome the limits and barriers of space and time, caused a DNA alteration responsible for Seth's body transmutation, which, consequently, was also able to alter many of his human cognitive capacities. In *Crash*, there is a remapping of the body which is deconstructed and built up again through the merging of flesh and technology, in this case, the car, which does not perform the merely characteristics of a car per say, it is now used as a sexual partner/stimuli, always outside the flesh, and the act of sex brings

merely a glimpse of the unity of the body and the machine. By doing so, characters were able to face a universe of enormous possibilities and a new outlook on life, envisioning and admiring these new bodily forms and corporeality, reconstructing their own identity, and yet, at the end of the film, characters are still seeking death as the ultimate orgasm, as implied by the last lines Ballard says to his wife, Catherine (Deborah Kara Unger), after checking she is not so badly hurt, “maybe, the next one, darling” (01:34:58). To that ending, Cronenberg stated it to be a very hopeful ending, a happy ending even, not in a very standard perspective though, because, for him, personally, the idea of dying and possibly going to heaven is a subverted and cruel notion of hope, for it is not possible and realistic, in opposition to what happens in the final scene of *Crash*, where characters are aware of their desires, and for that matter they are able to keep their ideal end in perspective, even if it is a destructive end.

Cronenberg’s early films mostly were a clear portrayal of what the Krollers have put as “venereal horror” and a panic of body invaders taken to its most literal form, as it is possible to see in *Shivers*, in which the parasite is spread almost like a virus and its appearance resembles some kind of excrement. That is a perfect combination for a society of waste, to have a mixing of an aphrodisiac venereal disease to which people become zombie-like attracted to, the materialization of the missing-matter in the form of a monstrous creature invading an immaculate environment of a hotel, piercing the bourgeois ideal of a perfect clean body and crossing lines with what the Krollers wrote about the tragic sense of contemporary human sexuality, where:

Sexual activity is coded by the logic of exterminism, where consciousness is marked by an intense fear of ruined surfaces, where the body is invested (as a passive host) by a whole contagion of invading parasites. (pp. 14)

By following the authors’ line of thought, due to the large amount of rhetoric of the body, what we are left with is the death and disappearance of the body leading to the consequent appearance of the panic bodies. These panic bodies live by the power rules of postmodernism and present themselves in a dual and paradoxical logic: a combination of hyper-exteriorization and hyper-interiorization, meaning that an excess of a rhetoric attached to the body made it “a thing” in itself, with no ontological meaning other than

that, ending up stuck in a second-order simulacra and in a simulation of meanings. The panic-body is thereby simultaneously full of energy, though exhausted and inert, it is permeated by a language of self-exterminism, self-liquidation and self-cancellation.

According to the Krokeros, now the dissolution of the bourgeois ego follows a reversed logic in comparison to what Franz Neumann's political essay *Anxiety and Utopia* (1957) predicted about the panic invested in the "enemy without". For the Krokeros, on the other hand, we are facing the panic invested towards the "enemy within", in their words:

A whole contagion of panic mythologies (AIDS, anorexia, bulimia, herpes) about disease, panic viruses, and panic addictions (from drugs to alcohol) for a declining culture where the body is revived, and given one last burst of hyper-subjectivity, as the inscribed text for all the stress and crisis-symptoms of the death of the social. (pp. 27)

Moreover, the anxieties invested in panic addictions and panic viruses are also part of the postmodern power and its abilities to both control and repress. Thus, the fear of the venereal disease and AIDS is susceptible to be mistaken by the fear of sexual freedom, which in turns is susceptible to be mistaken by the fear against women's liberty and empowerment, and gay rights, for instance. All of which can be turned into a repressive discourse of sexism and homophobia, in an attempt to diminish some minorities rights. The Krokeros mentioned Talcott Parsons (1978), a social theorist, in relation to what he called "cynical health" (Apud KROKER, pp. 29). For him, even health has lost its natural existence and has become both a tool for the disappearance of the body and of social control. A lot has happened since the first publishing of these ideas, for it was a time where the body focused on was not event compared to the body subjected to such high levels of exposure one has to endure in order to fit in the *status quo* in the 2020s. The cultural excess and medias of exchange are constant regulating tools of the digital body in the form of social media profiles. Therefore, the panic of body invaders, such as viruses or postmodern plagues, is but a symptom of a society full of bodies constantly invaded by power and by the ongoing, limitless aestheticization of the body. Self-evidently, XXI century societies are experiencing just that like never before, through the influence of social media which dictates a panoptic exposure having us navigate through the limits of

imprisonment and invasion, we negotiate the constant exposure of elements of our personal sphere to an invisible crowd, not to mention the most obvious correlation between the long present panic of body invaders and the menace of Covid-19 that reached its peak during the writing of this text.

Hence, we are opening ourselves to a logic of intermittent comparison, which in turn makes us susceptible to a symbolic and generalized means of exchange that helps us even base our choices regarding what should be done in relation to our own body. This can be expressed in several ways. The search for health that, in the mid-90s, could be considered as a transgression of capitalist normative consumption, that is, a possible boycott of fast foods or by just quitting drinking Coca-Cola, today is transposed, and combined with an old discourse of search for an ideal body and eternal youth. In this sense, on social networks, there is a whole universe available of people willing to create content based on formulating healthy habits, and engaging in physical activities, healthy and functional diets, skin care and dermatological procedures, not to mention surgical investments in order to portray and sell a healthy lifestyle.

Thus, in the order of simulacra, the unattainable body standards disguised as a preoccupation invested in health does not go that far from what the Krokiers named “good health without a body” (pp. 29). For instance, the fact that so many people take advantage of a health discourse as an excuse for fat shaming is just a component of another layer of a society of control. Another facet of the same issue lies on the ground that social media monitoring serves the purposes of producing marketing to keep the gears of the capitalist world running. In this sense, in the face of dataism and technocracy, information has become a “regulatory of energy in a new cybernetic order of politics” (pp. 31), in a way that the digital selves, no matter how genuinely committed to influencing their followers and to make a change, they are still maneuvers in the exchange value of influence, self-affirmation and self-creation.

### **1.3 Uncanny Bodies**

It is without a doubt that the “uncanny” speaks from a place of something frightening, it is in the order of the weird happenings passible of causing fear to the ones affected by it,

though Freud (2003) engaged in setting specific differences towards what should be considered merely frightening and what should be placed in the realm of the “uncanny”.

Firstly, one must go back to the semantics of the word. Its original derived from the German word *unheimlich* and its most common direct translation to English is put as the “uncanny” or the “eerie”. Nevertheless, etymologically, its most appropriate equivalent would be the “unhomely”, that is to say that what belongs to the uncanny is what was once familiar and now it has become unfamiliar and therefore frightening, for it has left the realm of the known. But the question is: how does the unfamiliar relate to the scary? As it is a fact that not everything that is new is necessarily uncanny, so what does define it?

If one considers the relation of the word *unheimlich* with its semantic opposite *heimlich*, a few things must be taken into consideration when understanding its signification, for it is a word that holds some ambivalent meanings. For instance, if one considers the fact that *heimlich* is passible of two different definitions, the first being that of the homely, familiar, and comfortable, whereas the other relates to “what is concealed and kept hidden” (pp. 132), thus, the “uncanny” could be placed in the notion of what was supposed to be kept a secret, something that should be hidden and no longer is.

Also, in a specific sense within its unfolding of meaning, there is one that speaks to “the secret places on the human body, the pudenda” (pp. 133), so a strong example of the “uncanny” then relates to the uncertainty on whether an inanimate object, that, as a rule, should be lifeless, is in fact alive or not. If taking this concept to a more contemporary experience, one could cite as a clear example what it is called “the uncanny valley”. This encompasses the discomfort caused by the similarity between men and machines found in humanoid robots. According to this theory, the more a robot looks human, the more unease one might feel towards its appearance.

As in relation to Cronenberg’s oeuvre, a great deal of the uncanny elements contained in the films lies in the transformation of supposedly inanimate objects into breathing living creatures. This could be seen in *Naked Lunch* with the talking, anal-like typewriter, or in *Videodrome*, when Max Renn embraces the expanding, soft, breathing television where Nicki Brand’s image is being televised. Besides, one great motif responsible for producing

“uncanny” effects is the one of the “double” (the *Doppelgänger*). The myth of the double captures a whole universality of significances which refers back to a numerous of sources, such as Greek mythological narratives, when, for instance, Aristophanes in Plato's *The Banquet* called the division of the hermaphrodites in two derived from the rage of Zeus. This division caused the bipartition of what was once one being into two separate ones, creating men and women with a duplicity in their nature. Throughout the years, many were the possible representations of the “double”, according to Freud, in a more psychoanalytic-driven perspective, the ego could project to the outside world what it rejects in itself, in the form of a (physically) similar person, and this might be perceived as something “uncanny” and even dangerous. In Cronenberg's films, some nuances of the double myth may be recognized: the fact that two very similar people might be considered identical and, from this assumption, they would share thoughts, feelings, sensations, mental processes, as it is seen in the *Dead Ringers*' twins, Cronenberg's characters from its 1988 film, who were Siamese and got surgically separated as children, but who are so alike and so connected that thought to share a common nervous system; or even, If the double myth dictates the split of one into two, then, in *The Fly*, we encounter a reversed twist, the joining of two into one, man and fly together in one single new body.

According to Freud, the “uncanny” is nevertheless connected to a castration complex and the fear of being repressed. If the syntactic analysis of the word is to be considered, “uncanny” as being the very opposite of “homely”, what was once familiar to the psyche now it is not because it was invaded by the fear one might have of being repressed. Also, psychoanalytic speaking, to the neurotic man state, female genitals as well as the womb might contain something of the “uncanny” for the uterus is the original home, the familiar place, the safe breach from where everyone derive from. Thus, the recurrent appearance of vagina-like slits in Cronenberg's oeuvre, as mentioned before in cases such as *Videodrome* and *Crash*, has an analogous association with the “uncanny”. Also, it is without a question that the studies on the “uncanny” can perfectly relate to Cronenberg's fixation on human prosthetic pieces, as the prosthetic members from the characters of *Crash*, such as Gabrielle (Rosanna Arquette), the phallic organ which grew in the armpit, resulting from a surgical intervention, as shown in *Rabid*, or even the surgical instruments

made to operate mutant women from *Dead Ringers*. Finally, in *Crash*, we see what Manuel Cambor (1999) would call an unfamiliar discursive space, “unfamiliar” in the very sense of Freud’s *unheimlich*, due to the absence of a domestic environment/life to the characters and the creation of a world that seems detached in space and time, as mentioned before in this text.

Furthermore, in his introduction to an analysis on the weird and the eerie, Mark Fisher (2016) will start by posing these two constructs as coming from a similar place as the *unheimlich* - or the “unhomely”, as the more appropriate English translation of the word would suggest (rather than “uncanny”) - though Fisher calls the attention for the fact that these two modes should not be crowded out by the “uncanny” as Freud’s essay has initially suggested. According to him, the three modes – the weird, the eerie, the “uncanny” – all come from the same realm: a concern with the strange. Although, unlike the “uncanny”, these other two modes do not have an agenda with the horrific and/or scary. Also, in disregard to the unfolding of events that led Freud to assemble a relation between the *unheimlich* and the castration anxiety, Fisher will not take the weird and the eerie as means of “processing the outside through the gaps and impasses of the inside”<sup>10</sup>, as it is common to a psychoanalytic perspective. Rather, according to the author, the weird and the eerie will make the opposite move and they will allow one to perceive the inside from the perspective of the outside.

So, if, conceptually, Freud’s *unheimlich* deals with a strangeness within a domestic/familiar realm, the weird, on the other hand, brings, from the outside, an element which does not belong to the familiar and which is unreconciled with it. Ergo, the eerie is likewise connected to the outside, though this one is closely related to a landscape environment rather than to a domestic one, for instance it is an eerie sensation which is applied to wondering what entity or agency was responsible for the stone circle at the Stonehenge. Besides, the eerie seeks to answer questions related to the agency of strange happenings (or to answer: “Who did this?”).

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<sup>10</sup> <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1WcZvF0tW42qo1GUylGDnSht2tHp67q2b/view>. Accessed 12<sup>th</sup> February 2021



Fisher will argue that the weird has a component of perturbation attached to it, as if one were talking about something that should not exist in a specific context, but it does. In this sense, he claims that what is used as a conception to make sense of the word at the time something weird happens perhaps is what is out of place and should be considered. Plus, the author associates the weird with the grotesque, saying that it is rare to find something to be considered grotesque that could not also be considered weird. For him, similarly to the weird, the grotesque represents something that does not belong and therefore is out of place, though the latter has a different point usually attached to it: it provokes some sort of humorous laughter.

Personally, that speaks to me perfectly in relation to many of Cronenberg's movies, especially the ones that encompass his early career. His debut feature film *Shivers* depicts body horror scenery at its best. It is as scary as it is disgusting and laughable. In *The Fly*, Seth Brundle, at some point during his man-insect transformation, starts to puke a white goop that helps him dissolve food and make it possible for him to eat it, as he says, referring to himself in third person:

How does Brundlefly eat? Well, he found out the hard and painful way that he eats very much the way a fly eats. His teeth are now useless, because although he can chew up solid food, he can't digest them. Solid food hurts. So like a fly, Brundlefly breaks down solids with a corrosive enzyme, playfully called "vomit drop". He regurgitates on his food, it liquifies, and then he sucks it back up. (01:09:44)



Fig. 3. Acid vomit used by Seth to dissolve his food.

Throughout the movie, we can see this vomit a few times, and it becomes crucial for some of the later ongoings, as when Brundle dissolves Stathis Boran's arm by vomiting all over it, a scene that, using Fisher's own words to describe the grotesque, involves "laughter as much as revulsion". Moreover, it is possible to fit *Videodrome* in what Fisher will call "a cognitive weird". According to him, there is a type of weird which relates to confusions in the ontological level. That could be applied, for example, in the level of characters, if one character is supposed to be at one level, the simulation level we could say, and it is not, this could cause an ontological confusion and could lead to a sense of weirdness. It is what happens with Professor Brian O'blivion<sup>11</sup> (Jack Creley), a character who only appears from inside a television set, and who initially seems to be broadcasted live, but all his appearances on tape were recorded before his death. What is pretty uneasy though is the fact that, in some of his appearances, he seems to be directly speaking to Max, calling him by his name, a character who did not even know Prof. Brian O'blivion when he was alive, all this giving a great sense of weirdness. Plus, this is also related to the cognitive estrangement which makes us, the viewers, just like the main character Max, question what could be real and what could be a hallucinatory event, moreover, making us question, at the end of the movie, our own perception of the world: what is real and what is a simulacra? To that feeling, Fisher will say that it "takes the form of an unworliding, an

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<sup>11</sup> To whom Mark Fisher (2018) will refer as a literal "performance of theory" (pp. 5), for it is a character who is a theorist himself.

abyssal falling away of any sense that there is any ‘fundamental’ level which could operate as a foundation or a touchstone, securing and authenticating what is ultimately real.”

As far as the eerie is concerned, an opposed feeling is brought to us in comparison to that of the weird. If when talking about the weird, one might be talking about a presence of something that does not belong, in the eerie, one would face a contrast between what is present and what is absent. Therefore, to put it simply, the eerie is constituted by an unfamiliar feeling one has when, in Fisher’s words, “there is something present where there should be nothing, or is there is nothing present when there should be something.”. In other words, the eerie comprises an idea of something not solid enough, gaseous in a way. I believe Cronenberg’s 1996 movie *Crash* fits an eerie experience for its sense of flatness. We, as viewers, are denied from a series of information throughout the film, including an inner life from the characters. Many of them do not really seem to have a domestic life, or any life other than that controlled by their collective motor crash fetishism, so we are left with gaps and cracks to possibly dig in. Even if considering James Ballards’ life with his wife, the minimum knowledge we have about their lives is limited to the fact that they live in an apartment overlooking the highway, as we can see them on the balcony at the beginning of the film, and that they both work in some type of office, nothing else. The movies comprise an absence of information about the city. Cronenberg, in a 1996 interview on *Crash*<sup>12</sup>, said that though Ballard wrote the novel to be placed in London, the cars cited did not feel like London cars at all, they are much more like American cars, and since Toronto looks like a North American city, the director felt it would be a nice place to shoot *Crash*. There is also an absence of information regarding a place in time, in relation to the characters and, above all, characters many times seem to lack an emotional response that would be expected in situations such as car accidents or having a relative, like a wife, injured in a car crash. So, this numbness and detachment at some points leave us with an eerie feeling that there is something missing where it should not be.

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<sup>12</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jMS9xB2g2Z0&t=718s&ab\\_channel=JosephParfitt](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jMS9xB2g2Z0&t=718s&ab_channel=JosephParfitt). Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> April 2021.

## 2. Deadly Sex: Sexual Displacement in Cronenberg's Oeuvre

Once the dialogism between leaking versus contained/pure/clean bodies has left individual terrain and become an excuse for controlling forces, the discussion of the body as a panoptic control tool constantly comes up against its paradoxical relationship with the autonomy one has over their own body. In recent years, although there is a noticeable advance in Western societies regarding the maintenance of individual rights and with respect to individual autonomy over the body itself, with more active discussions over legal abortion and the legalization of drugs for example, the cleanliness of a body is still very much connected with social stigma and to “a hyperdeflation of the body to the quality of its internal fluids” (Kroker, pp. 11). In confirming what Foucault had stated in *The History of Sexuality* (1976), the Krokors noted that political power mechanisms are a product of biological discourse, for when dealing with health care issues, the idea behind it actually refers to the survival of species, therefore, it is hard not to establish an instant correlation between the rhetoric of clean bodily fluids mentioned by the Krokors in 1998 and Covid-19 pandemic in 2020-21. Nowadays, the simply act of wearing a mask surpasses the fact that it is just a sanitary measure (an important one indeed), it is also seen through the lenses of a moral gaze, being an indicative of collective consciousness, even the act of eating in public and going to restaurants has been transformed into an act of exposing oneself. Besides, considering the context of countries more affected by the ongoing and the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, such as Brazil, from where I am writing my dissertation, the huge social stigma and discrimination over certain ethnic backgrounds due to a possible link with the origins of the disease as well as the dehumanization of those who have the disease and their transformation into a mere host for a spreading virus contribute to the undermining of social cohesion and serve as just another reflex of how Western power politics may be enhanced by a clean body politics, in which there must be now a more rigid control over genetic material testing and vaccination sanctions.

According to the Krokors, the fear of a collapsing immune system in American societies leads to what they name panic sex at the *fin-de-millennium*. The tragic sense carried out by what human sexuality has become in postmodernity is that people are supposed to live by fearing body contamination. In this sense, for the authors, natural sex has suffered a triple alienation: First, as Foucault (1976) defends, one of the results generated by the

process of transforming sex into discourse was the disappearance of organic sex, for one must pass through the discursive apparatus in order to acknowledge and recognize their own sexuality; Then, there is the alienation of the womb resulting from the technification of reproduction; And lastly, the consequent shifts on what to expect from sex due to the redoubling of the body created by the excess of media images, which was previously mentioned by using porn as an example of the commoditization of sex. One of the consequences for sexuality in the postmodern condition is the buildup of a “cynic sex” (Kroker, pp. 15), in which the body is negated, and desire is substituted by a sex without organs, a computerized, virtual sex experience in which there is not the need to be with a body in order to have sexual relations anymore, “a sex without secretions as an ironic sign of our liberation” (pp. 15). For instance, on Roger Ebert’s review on *Crash* from March 1997, he says that the movie can achieve its pornographic aesthetics in form though not in result, for it is “like a porno movie made by a computer: It downloads gigabytes of information about sex, it discovers our love affair with cars, and it combines them in a mistaken algorithm.”<sup>13</sup>. Besides, there is a sense of repetition throughout the film, the viewer faces many different sex scenes, being most of them inside cars, or at least in a machinic environment. If, in *The Fly*, desire for the flesh is possible to be programmed in a computerized machine, in *Crash*, desire never seems to be fulfilled to the point of a final satisfaction, as well as in *Videodrome*, for instance, where, ruled by a culture of excess, characters’ pleasure is never really achieved, they are always in need of more and more transgression, and sex seems to be performed as just a mimicry of what is presented in pornography. Hence, for the characters in *Crash*, this is to be seen in the constant re-enactment of the car crashes and the constant repetition of sex scenes. Plus, during a conversation, James points out to Vaughan how much satisfaction he gets from all that new situation he is placed at, though he does not quite know why that is. As a reply, Vaughan said:

You’re beginning to see that for the first time there’s a benevolent psychopathology that beckons towards us. For example, the car crash is a fertilizing rather than a destructive event, a liberation of sexual energy, mediating

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/crash-1997>. Consul. 14 march 2021.

the sexuality of those who have died with an intensity that's impossible in any other form. (00:52:46)

In his 1999 interview with Serge Grünberg named *I Have to Make the Word be Flesh*<sup>14</sup>, Cronenberg was questioned about the amount of sex contained in his work, called by the interviewer “something that I wouldn’t define as pornography, but something which is at the limit of what has never been shown or heard before”. In his reply, despite the fact that Cronenberg’s movies do not contain scenes as graphic as other acclaimed movies, or even do not contain language so much more taboo than that found on television, especially nowadays, the Canadian director took a stand in relation to the fact that his movies might be considered very sexual, or more openly are criticized for their sexual content by defending that the position of a true artist is to transpose, from what is real and from the truth, the fallacies and repressions from which society is built. In his words:

Society exists on pretense, on structures, on repression. I mean, in the Freudian formula, civilization is repression, and I think that whatever one might end up thinking about Freud or not, this is still a very crystal hard understanding that, in order for civilization and civility to exist, there must be a repression, there must be structures that conceal. And yet if you’re an artist, a serious one, then you have the desire to strip those things away, not just to entertain, not just to play around the façades, which is what most cinema is, at any given time as well. And you are then in danger of telling the truth, of going behind the façade, a break in the agreement, you know, a break in the agreement of civility and civilization. And that is not forgiven very easily.

For that matter, the director's intention seems to be less connected with the intention to deliberately shock society's good manners and more directly related to exposing new propositions of body and sexuality which one is not allowed to suppose simply because they denote a deviation from the neurotic civilization norm. In this way, the ambivalence of these new bodies contributes to the construction and reconstruction of what it means

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<sup>14</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h0y516xe0T4&ab\\_channel=jos%C3%A9alber](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h0y516xe0T4&ab_channel=jos%C3%A9alber). Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> April 2021.

to be a human being, for according to Creed, "Cronenberg's bodies are always the site of both horror and pleasure" (2000, pp. 85).

On Freud's (1920) first essay on the theory of sexuality, he starts by assigning meaning to what he will call the "libido", as a correspondent to sexual impulse, as he addresses some common misconceptions, of the time, related to this sexual impulse: that the libido is absent in children, that this impulse may not be manifested in individuals of the same sex and that this interest is connected to the intention of forming a union between the individuals. It is also made a differentiation between what is the sexual object, in other words, the focus of desire, and the sexual aim, which would be the actions taken towards the object of desire. Freud discusses a number of sexual acts that will deviate from what was the norm by the time, considering that these writings date from the very beginning of the 20th century, and bearing in mind the poetic fable correspondent to what people were used to believing in regard to sexual impulse, the idea that men and women are halves of the same whole and that they should gather as one, get married, and procreate in a loving relationship, it makes understandable how controversial and shocking these writings and thoughts were for the time in question.

The author also discusses a numerous of these so-called deviations, from bisexuality and homosexuality to sodomy and zoophilia, many of which are contained in Cronenberg's oeuvre. As is being discussed in this work, a common practice for the director is to work with the possibilities of the body as well as with the possibilities of interaction between people through technology or sex, or both. In all three movies analyzed in this work, it becomes clear the strong presence of sex and sexuality as a tool that guides characters' behavior and attitude, though it is quite often a transgressive and/or deviating sex according to societal norms, and these details will be further specified throughout this section.

For instance, a common feature for Cronenberg's portrayal of sexual intercourse is the somewhat uncertainty on where exactly penetration is taking place or even a suggestion that anal sex is being performed by characters. According to Freud, sexual infringement on any other part of the body other than in a vaginal cavity denotes an anatomical transgression and an intention to dominate the sexual partner beyond the fact of

representing a total separation between sex and procreating. So, in *The Fly*, the story revolves around a love story between the two protagonists, and it's possible to say that there is a bit more orthodox idea of sex in a way, or at least before Brundlefly's transformation process. However, this sex is also responsible for making Veronica pregnant with a possible baby-monster. Or, in *Videodrome*, besides Max Renn's rear-entry sex scenes with Nicky, the infamous fisting scene when Barry Convex (Leslie Carlson) penetrates his hand into Renn's abdominal cavity is placed by Grant as a "rape scenario" (pp.03), with the twist that the new cavity is capable of dissolving his hand and transforming it into a phallic extension of his arm, as occurs too at the end of *The Fly* with the regurgitant liquid coming out of Brundle's stomach hitting Stathis's arm. Creed (2000) stated that:

His representation of the body in the context of abjection – that is, a body without stable boundaries – challenges phallogentric myths of the body which seek to confirm the body as a classical, discrete, harmonious form – the outer sign of our inner perfection as human beings (pp. 85).

In these terms, the common presence of exposed bodily fluids (*The Fly*) and the violation of the body's limits through the penetration of new orifices, as occurs, for example, in *Videodrome* (abdominal cavity) or in *Crash* (Gabrielle's leg scar penetration) express, again, how the limits we establish for the body and for the boundaries separating the internal from the external are fragile, in addition to pointing to a break in socially established paradigms that denote the limits of the body as something to take note of, in contrast to the social panic anchored by a rhetoric of clean bodies and contained fluids, as defended by the Krollers in their theory on the division of pure and impure bodies through an unattainable idea of absolute bodily purity, as developed in the previous section of this text.

Even though it contained only a few timid frontal nudity scenes compared to the eroticism and exposure of many of today's films, *Crash* shocked audiences at the time by making suggestions of a transgressive sex. In the work, actions are molded from the exercise of desire, and it is from a common desire that the characters meet and connect in their own way. Despite this, the people present there are armed with what can be called an



apathetic and disconnected subjectivity, commanded only by an intense libido. The film presents a new possibility of sexual practice crossed by the tragic and the machinic, it is an automobilized, impersonal, and sometimes violent sex. The *Crash* body is a molded, sutured, stitched, patched, metallic, tattooed surface, permeated with scars that appear to be susceptible to reopening. In addition, there is an aesthetic that accompanies the characters' detachment: their clothes are in neutral and gray tones, Helen (Holly Hunter) wears lingerie in metallic and iridescent tones, Vaughan's face is usually very pale, almost dead-like and contrasting with eventual blood coming out of his face, the environment is uncharacterized in a way that makes it difficult to identify exactly which city they are located in, and there is still no well-defined temporal sequence, it is not possible to clearly identify the passing of days, how many days elapsed between one event and another, or whether it is a Monday or a Sunday, therefore the film is both timeless and placeless, a generic metropolis, unidentified.

Beyond that, *Crash* also presents us with other deviations to the sexual aim, so-called by Freud, denominated sadism, and masochism. For the neurologist, what is peculiar about this perversion lies in the fact that quite often the person who engages in causing pain to others in sexual activity also enjoys receiving it. In the movie, in addition to the fact that the script unfolds from the accompaniment of this peculiar group of people who share the same fetish (getting excited from crashes and car accidents), it is interesting to note here the presence of Catherine Ballard, James' wife, who, despite seeming to be attracted to this new universe, is the only person in this group whose body has not yet undergone a transformation, a rupture. At one point though, when having sex with Vaughan in his car, the performance and the sexual act performed is aggressive, from its beginning when Vaughan places his hand around Catherine's neck, until the moment after the sex, already in another environment, in which James tenderly caresses her marked, purple, and bruised body, while Catherine remains lying on the bed, tearful.

Her character appears to have gone through a slower and more gradual transformation, but her process is marked by a repetition that takes place at the beginning of the film and then towards the end: the second scene in the film encompasses a dialogue between James and Catherine in which they casually question themselves about their extra-marital sexual performances of the day. When questioning James about his secretary, whom he

had sex with earlier, he recounts the fact that she did not come, to which Catherine replies "poor darling, maybe the next one" (00:06:36). This foreshadows the very last lines of the film, in which, after going through a car chase where James is behind Catherine's car, she ends up in an accident on the highway and her car is thrown off the road. Upon going to meet her and realizing that she had not suffered much damage or been hurt enough, James repeated the same phrase "maybe the next one, darling" (01:34:58). This repetition appears to be an expression of this shift of view and experience, for "the next one" first was an orgasm, later it became a wound, and perhaps even the ultimate wound, death, and it stands as the very opposite to what Beverly (Jeremy Irons), a character in Cronenberg's *Dead Ringer* says: "Pain creates character distortion, it's simply unnecessary." (00:25:33), since getting hurt as a result of car crashes stands as both the foreplay and climax of their sexual arousal, the last stage probably being death. This shift perfectly embodies what Baudrillard theorized about J. G. Ballard's *Crash*, regarding how *Crash* presents us with new possibilities and ideas for something which was for so long established, for him, the marks and wounds to which characters were subjected to are but an "artificial invagination", and:

The few natural orifices to which one usually attaches sex and sexual activities are nothing next to all the possible wounds (but why "artificial"?), all the breaches through which the body is reversibilized and, like certain topological spaces, no longer knows either interior nor exterior. (pp. 114)

Yet for Adams, what is seen in *Crash* is not a perfect portrayal of the Lacanian view upon sadism, because for him sadism usually acts upon an indestructible and wholesome body. In the movie though, according to the author, characters are closer to de Sade's conceptualization of sadism, in which he says, "lend me the part of your body that will give me a moment of satisfaction" (Apud ADAMS, pp. 103), for the characters' bodies are mutable and amenable to be dismantled into pieces and joined with the metallurgy of the accident, as put by Baudrillard, creating a new flesh through the semiurgy of scars and wounds.

In addition to *Crash*, other Cronenberg films also feature sexual relationships marked by sadomasochism, in the case of *Videodrome*, the female protagonist, Nicki Brand<sup>15</sup>, shows interest in sexual practices that use violence to enhance sexual pleasure, she likes getting cut and perforated during sex, and, at some point, she puts out a cigarette on her own chest. So, due to this characteristic of hers, she is easily attracted by what Videodrome proposes. What is interesting to observe however is how the very nature of this clandestine broadcast is brought to us, Cronenberg's audience, since we are the ones watching a movie named *Videodrome*. It is common for the Canadian director to attempt having the viewer try a first-person experience with his protagonists, in a way that we ourselves also are not aware of whether we are watching Max Renn's hallucinatory events or not, we too are susceptible to question what reality is and what is not, and more importantly, this doubting and questioning come to our understanding (or lack of) through the same media: a screen. Therefore, by the time Professor O'blivion states "The battle for the mind of North America will be fought in the video arena: the Videodrome" (00:35:25), we, as *Videodrome* spectators, are taking part in this battle of the mind and we are trying, as Max is, to make sense of the world through media and through the simulacra it is created by it. Thus, in a way, with the cinematic experience being a voyeuristic experience, we, the audience, as pointed out by Goldberg (2008), are also held accountable for this sadomasochist experience, for we are kept passive throughout this whole experience, or, as Capistrano stated, we are subjected to "the obedience to the image and to the spectacle, a submission to another body that is, in this case, Cinema itself." (pp. 108). In this way, when Barry Convex, one of the people responsible for Videodrome, and ex-partner of Prof. Brian O'blivion, asks Max "Why would anyone watch a scum show like Videodrome?" (01:01:02), what is being asked may very well serves us, as the *Videodrome* audience, or as Cronenberg's audience in general. Moreover, when discussing the transgressions of the "sexual fit" in pornographic genres, Berkeley Kaite (1998) mentions how the negotiation of looks is paramount to the buildup of visual imaginaries and seductiveness, she quotes Paul Willemen who wrote "when the scopic drive is brought into focus, then the viewer also runs the risk of becoming the object of the look" (1998, pp. 152). It is interesting to notice that, in *Crash*, even though it is

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<sup>15</sup> It is worth mentioning what her name suggests by the joining of Nicki, as in "cuts" and "incisions", together with Brand, as in "branded", "marked", "bruised".

considered to be of a rather sexual content, the characters present throughout the film a very detached look. For instance, in the first scene when Catherine is with James, on their balcony, discussing their sexual affairs of the day, they barely look at each other, it is as if they are in fact avoiding this eye contact which denounces the couple's twisted notion of intimacy. Whereas Vaughan has a more fixated and intense look on his face, he too does not often fix his eyes on someone else's eyes or face, even in the case of a possible sexual partner, he usually focuses on specific body elements of representation, like during his first meeting with James at the hospital when he strangely checks on his wounds and bruises.

While the issue of sexuality is quite evident in the other two films worked on, in *The Fly*, for a casual spectator, the sex element can be overlooked as a key element of the story. The fact is that, as in other Cronenberg films<sup>16</sup>, in *The Fly*, a corporeal understanding and an element of transformation of the flesh permeate two important elements, which are a certain sexual awakening and a greater attribution of agency to characters. As discussed earlier, Brundle's initial and failed attempts to teleport animate beings are due to the fact that his computer does not have sufficient knowledge about flesh and body. However, based on the premise that he, as a scientist, is who dictates all the commands to the machine, it would be fair to state that the lack of knowledge about the flesh is actually of his own. In his words, he explains to Veronica that he has not "taught the computer to be made crazy by the flesh" (00:26:14), and, in a way, that is just because he has dedicated all his life to his scientific discoveries and his career, and no attention was given to his personal and nonetheless sexual life. Once he can overcome this issue by becoming more sexually active and by getting to know his and Veronica's bodies better, not exclusively in a scientific way, he is able to program the computer properly to make the pods work.

Once he overcomes that and gets teleported along with a housefly, his own transformation begins with one of the first signs of it being the great sexual stamina and disposition his body endures. To him, being disintegrated and reintegrated again made him purified, as if he had left behind whatever might have been holding him back. His

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<sup>16</sup> *Shivers* (1975) deals with a venereal disease created by a scientist whose belief that the world had become over-intellectual and therefore distant from his primal and sexual instincts motivated him to spread a worm responsible for leaving whoever possesses it craving for sex.

unmasking as Nietzsche's *Übermensch* becomes clearer when he explains to Veronica in a soliloquy kind of talk, in an almost manifesto for the *Übermensch*, that these changes he is going through will allow him to pursue his "personal potential" (00:44:18) he has been neglecting all those years passed and that now he can feel the "power (...) surging inside" (00:47:33).

In any case, it becomes implicit then that what was withholding him from succeeding in his scientific development was possibly a repressed sexuality and a lack of knowledge about the flesh. For instance, when he questions a woman he has just met at a bar why she does not want to enter the pods, he mentions to her that this would make her feel sexy, and when Veronica suggests that he might be sick, his answer to her is that she must be jealous of his freedom and his release. Therefore, in the beginning of his transformation process, especially when he becomes more aware of it happening, Seth seems to adopt Cronenberg's view upon diseases, in relation to which he stated

It's my conceit that perhaps some diseases perceived as diseases which destroy a well-functioning machine, in fact change the machine into a machine that does something else, and we have to figure out what it is that the machine now does. Instead of having a defective machine, we have a nicely functioning machine that just has a different purpose. (Apud WILSON, 2017, pp. 85)

Similarly, Brundle seems to start accepting the changes he has been going through at some point and he receives Veronica at his house with an unconcerned utterance as he shows her what is underneath his blouse and asks "what is it?" (01:08:09) to which he himself quickly replies "I don't know" (01:08:11), almost as if saying it does not really matter. Or even, continuing, he explains he must have been stricken by a disease with a purpose, "maybe not such a bad disease after all" (01:08:25), since now he is coming to know his new abilities as a man-fly: climbing walls, jumping high, no need to use teeth anymore and so on. Then he says he knows what the disease wants, "It wants to... turn me into something else. That's not too terrible, is it? Most people would give anything to be turned into something else." (01:08:47). Furthermore, a confrontation of meaning is echoed in *Crash* through the subversion of significations: cars obey another purpose, not exactly they serve as an instrument for commuting, their meaning surpasses its function

to a point where what it represents is taken to a whole new level. The same with sex, as, according to Vidal (2013), “in the technological world of order, the body and its animal functions are so repressed that they are virtually non-existent”<sup>17</sup>, in a way where collision, violence, transgressive sexual activities and possible death are the subterfuge found as a way of dealing with Jameson’s waning of affect and the emptying of meaning caused by a lifeless and mechanical condition.

## **2.1 . Female Bodies: Cronenberg’s Female Characters**

When writing about theories that involve the study of the postmodern body, being a woman and always attempting to be aware of what concerns a more feminist perspective within academic research, I also see the need to raise this discussion in my analysis of Cronenberg's films that I proposed to write about, by agreeing with Christine Ramsay (1998), who claims that “idealized forms of masculine subjectivity have operated implicitly in the realm of the given as the natural ‘normal’ order of things, feminist and gay discourses have spoken from the margins of this order” (pp. 230). Although none of the three films I chose for my research contain female protagonists, all three feature female supporting actresses whose presence is primarily important in guiding and/or shaping male behavior in the plots. Hence, there are many theories on the postmodern body tied up to the figure of the male body and the desires of a normative hegemonic patriarchal culture but there are considerably fewer theories involving this same postmodern perspective but in relation to the female body.

Furthermore, it is still important to note how the Krollers assign to the female body the characteristics of having always belonged to the realm of a postmodern body, for women’s bodies have always occupied a place of being targets, submitted to the gaze and control of a patriarchal structure of power. In their own words:

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<sup>17</sup><https://www.perlego.com/book/1998105/death-and-desire-in-car-crash-culture-a-century-of-romantic-futurisms-pdf>. Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> July 2021.

Women's bodies have always been forced to dwell in the dark infinity of the limit and transgression as serial signs: exchangeable and reversible poles in a power field that can be hyper-subjective because it is also hyper-simulational. (pp. 24)

That being put, I feel the necessity of developing with a little bit of further detail, not only how the body is portrayed in Cronenberg's cinematic oeuvre, but, also, how this is done considering the female body as well. Cronenberg's choices upon the female figures in his films have drawn attention over the years and have been extensively questioned, both in the negative and in the positive way. Thus, I would like also to give some extra attention to women's characterization in the three movies I chose to guide my analysis on Cronenberg, for they are to some extent similar. All three main female characters from *The Fly*, Veronica, from *Videodrome*, Nicki Brand, and from *Crash*, Catherine Ballard are self-made, intelligent, witty, attractive, and independent women. Interestingly enough, even though they are never protagonists to the plot, Cronenberg's female characters, in special from the three movies mentioned, appear to be of greater complexity than the male ones whom they accompany, or at least on the surface, because they never get a chance of development during the movies.

As a means for theoretical contextualization, in her 1994 book, *Volatile Bodies*, Elizabeth Grosz sought a new form of feminist analysis upon the figure of the female body by comparing the various dissonant thoughts theorized by male philosophers throughout history that, however relevant, do not fully encompass women's body the way they do whenever the male structure is concerned. According to her, nowadays, Cartesianism represent a site for many problematic assumptions regarding the treatment of the female body. What Descartes accomplished with his theories upon the mind and body dualism is the separation of soul from nature, which did not come without certain problematizations, for instance, the fact that not rarely people struggle to make sense on how the body responds to certain psychological behaviors and vice-versa.

Nevertheless, Grosz states three main remnant Cartesian theoretical consequences to be regarded contemporarily when considering feminist theories of body. They are: the reductionist view of the body as an object of the natural sciences, or as being just an extension of the natural order, which in turn disregard to some extent an

acknowledgment of the fact that the body is also built taking into account inner complexities, such as consciousness and perspectives; the body as an automaton, an instrument at the service of consciousness, which, by considering the body as a possession of ours and taking into account the misogynist context Western societies are for long inserted in, also give way to patriarchal conceptions legitimizing some kinds of abuse and coercion of the female body; lastly, the body as a medium to externalize internal demands, which discredit the specificity and concreteness of the body, for in this way it becomes just a vehicle to the minds necessities and commands. For Grosz though to have a pre-determined conception of the body as something static gets in the way of transforming social realities and changing structures of oppression, especially gender-wise. For her,

Insofar as feminist theory uncritically takes over these common assumptions, it participates in the social devaluing of the body that goes hand in hand with the oppression of women. (pp. 10)

In opposition to a dualist view upon the body, more contemporary theories initiated by Spinoza's monism, according to which body and mind are viewed inseparably from each other, and further developed by Foucault and Deleuze-Gattarri, for instance, are taken into her account when discussing the female body. In spite of being bi-products of a patriarchal discourse in which the body is taken as universal, though it clearly configures the figure of a male body, these theories serve best to Grosz's conceptualization of corporeality in a feminist perspective.

For a long time, the studies on the body have argued that our subjectivities were so very close related to the constraints of our body limits to a point where Foucault has argued how, opposing common-sense belief, it is not the body, which is the prison of the soul, instead it is its very opposite. In other words, we can only make sense of ourselves by considering the cultural inscriptions in which we are inserted in, since the body is the result of countless power relations, which govern the subject's body configuration and that, according to Grosz,



power is the internal condition for the constitution and activity attributed to a body-subject. It is power which produces a 'soul' or interiority because of certain type of etching of the subject's body. (pp. 149)

In considering the contemporary body – a post-human body - just as discussed by Baudrillard, if the distinction between real and simulation has dissolved and turned into a precession of simulacra, the postmodern body has endured a dissolution regarding what is posed as natural and real or fabricated and artificial. It is now possible for the human species, amid an environment full of rapid transformations all the time, to engage in the transformative processes of their own body, making it and remaking it in accordance with their cultural context. It has, then, become a difficult task to set the limits on where the technological extensions start and where they finish.

For my work, I will borrow this notion of a body in perpetual disintegration and fragmentation, just as Grosz stated:

Corporeal fragmentation, the unity and disunity of the perceptual body, becomes organized in terms of the implied structure of an ego or consciousness, marked by and as a secret and private depth, a unique individuality. The civilized body is constituted as a use value and its dimensions and capacities become purchasable commodities, capable of selective augmentation, replacement, or transformation. (pp. 141)

In this sense, our bodily dimensions become commoditized, and "everybody is marked by the history and specificity of its existence" (pp. 124), especially women who have historically had to submit to numerous demands for bodily adaptation in order for their bodies to become adequate, and appropriate to their particular social context. For the author,

Especially under the forms of disciplinary normalization prevalent today, power, according to Foucault, utilizes, indeed produces, the subject's desires and pleasures to create knowledges, truths, which may provide more refined, improved, and efficient techniques for the surveillance and control of bodies, in a spiral of power-knowledge-pleasure. (pp. 146)

And, moreover, as well as desire and pleasure are disciplinary power maneuvers in our Western society, sex, and sexuality work as instruments for body regulation, in special, for women. Here, I believe it lies the core of my female characters analysis in Cronenberg's oeuvre, since the three main female characters I would like to analyze here, those being Nicki (*Videodrome*), Veronica (*The Fly*), and Catherine (*Crash*), are tied to protagonists through sexual relation/interest.

### **2.1.1 Videodrome**

In *Videodrome*, I would like to focus my attention on Debbie Harry's character Nicki, who is a radio personality working in a radio station giving advice to people who call her and who gets to know the protagonist, Max Renn, in a TV show in which both were invited to comment, along with Professor O'blivion, on media content and its influence on society. From the start, her figure is immediately oversexualized, because, even though she is wearing a high collar, mid dress, her appearance is questioned on live television by Renn when he asks "so why did you wear that dress?" (00:10:45), and explains that it is highly stimulating, for it is a red dress "and you know what Freud would have said about that dress" (00:10:59). Right after it, he invites her to have dinner with him that night which makes the interviewer, who is also a woman, highly uncomfortable and out of her place.

Throughout the first moments of the film, it is possible to follow Max looking for new content for his porn channel, he is looking specifically for something tough, a more hardcore sex content, "something that will break through" (00:05:55), no matter if it is a violent and degrading content, it is even better if it looks like women are getting really hurt and tortured, as it happens in *Videodrome*, that is exactly what attracts him. The movie seems to embody the male gaze in many levels, from its very initial scenes, for example, when Nicki appears working on her show, giving advice to desperate women crying over a lost love and whispering in a sensual way calling them "lover"<sup>18</sup> or through his secretary role, a beautiful young woman who acts motherly towards him doing way

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<sup>18</sup> Nicki Brand is an illustration on how people get seduced by the imaginary on media and was assimilated by it, she then became herself a part of it, a commodity and a consumable product, no wonder she is named Nicki Brand, a second possibility of interpretation for her name, as her sexuality is commoditized.

more than she is supposed to, she wakes him up and goes to his house to check on him (quite similar to what Veronica does on *The Fly*), or even on Max's first hallucinatory event caused by Videodrome in which he is hypnotized and seduced by Nicki's giant fleshy mouth on television screen. In the words of Berkeley Kaite:

The eyes do not just receive; they take in and they do this through the light they shed. In this way, the figurative eye is both feminine and masculine: like the eye of the camera, it is an aperture which admits light: as a metaphor for looking, however, it is aligned with a masculine trajectory and the ability to extend vision to the spectacular. (...) In this predatory way, there is power in the workings on the gaze. (pp. 153)

Therefore, when Max is willing to turn his channel into a more intense, hardcore broadcast of pornography, what it is implicit is that he as well as his audience (very likely to be mostly a male one) cannot get enough satisfaction or pleasure through softcore pornography anymore, for it is not sufficient for them to escape the bore of a mundane world, so they crave a more intense stimulus. It is widely known the fact that commercial hardcore pornography acts upon women and their image with a total disregard for their body, well-being and even safety, to the extent that it has become more and more a condemned practice since it has a huge contribution to how men objectify women even more, and to how it permits the perpetration of sexual aggression towards female targets. In fact, this seems to run through Max's sexual experience, as Nicki, the person with whom he has sex with, appears, in many situations, to be nothing more than a projected hallucination, in several moments remaining unclear whether she is a real woman or not. As we get to know Max better, he is a man who slaps his secretary on the butt in their workplace, and his attempts at foreplay with Nicki are mediated through pornographic images portrayed in Videodrome, while in *Crash*, characters seem to relate sexually to one another in an alienated and detached manner.

In addition to it, towards the second third of the film, Max faces the opening of a vaginal slit in his abdomen which, interestingly enough, renders him a much fragile and susceptible character or, as Badley (1995) puts it, "the male subject is hystericized, positioned as female and forced [my emphasis] to give expression to the Other" (Apud

RAMSEY, 1998, pp. 260). As an example of it, towards the end of the movie, the almost religious fundamentalist character Barry Convex inserts a VHS into Max's abdominal-vaginal slit in a rape-like scenario, to which Ramsey quoted Linda Badley who wrote:

Max is implanted with the video Word (male gaze), made New Flesh and finally his own assassin. Thus the gender battle is revealed to be part of a larger issue of power. The film explores the interface of gender, politics, and medium. (Apud RAMSEY, pp. 261)

To better analyze the significance of this scene, I would like to illustrate it through the lenses of a cyborg. If we understand the cyborg body through the lenses of one of the concepts first precursor, Donna Haraway, with her book *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), cyborgs ought to be understood as living beings as well as metaphors and narrative constructions. She wrote substantially about the possibilities of socialist feminism, more specifically related to how it engages with science and technology in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century capitalist societies. In this context, she theorized the postmodern body as being comprehended by the figure of the cyborg, creatures derived from the machine and organism joiner, as the formulation of an "ironic metaphor". The cyborg is, thus, as she herself puts it, "a matter of fiction and lived experience" (pp. 06) and we, living in a mystical world, embody our own carnal existence as being nothing but a chimera. According to the author, the cyborg is a creature who is unfettered and freed from the concepts of unity that bond and represent Western societies, because it does not connect to the oedipal narratives ruling the Western individuation, and it is therefore "a creature in a postgender world" (pp. 08). So, in a sense, a cyborg figure eliminates the dichotomies invested in genders, in rational and irrational, in organic and inorganic, which is ironic, for, at the same time where the cyborg is a biproduct of Western capitalist's societies and its structures of domination, it is also a creature inscribed in a subversion of the narratives of domination, control and classification. The cyborg can be created anywhere, it is a creature disentangled from the normalcies of Western narrative which unite the individuals in the form of a society: the unions of family, gender, rationality, history.

By following what Baudrillard had stated about postmodernism being a place in time for a manifestation of a hyper-reality and our common inability of distinguishing what is real

and what is simulation, Harraway places the cyborg as a creature who is both fictional and real, in a context where “the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion” (pp. 06). As technology is a major factor for the built up of a technocratic world, it affects our private spaces, as well as the way we convey personal relations and intimacy, thus the development and broadening of use of technology and technological devices daily contributed to several boundary breakdowns, including the dissolution of human and animal and human machines limits of separation.

Therefore, if Renn is increasingly becoming a cyborg, a human-tape-recorder, a creature whose body barriers are being breached over the standards of Western capitalist societies, then here Cronenberg fails to portray gendered differences, at least based on how Haraway had envisioned them. In a sense, the author’s intention was based on an attempt to theorize a hybrid status detached from binary sexuality. The creation of a cyborg is transgressive, and, as Harraway herself wrote, it is not without negative feedback that a narrative is constructed in which cyborgs are not essentially our enemies, because they disregard the presence of our creational fathers as inessential, even though they result from a patriarchal and military context. One of the central ideas of this thought is that gender differentiation is structurally and socially guided by the organization of a patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist structure of domination and power. In *Videodrome*, though, the process of becoming a cyborg, a man-machine, may come across with what it means to be the embodiment of masculinity as a sign of power versus a feminization of the one who is being penetrated as a sign of weakness and submission.

The original myths of a phallogentric society shape the perception of identity through the means of language with which these myths are foretold and passed along, shaping women’s self-perceptions, and controlling whatever possible deviation from the norm by inserting taxonomies of feminism. In this way, the well-known designation of the female body as a body responsible organically for procreation and for the responsibility resulting from that procreation is now revised, for according to Harraway, “bodies are maps of power and identity. Cyborgs are no exception (...) The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment” (pp. 65). Even though procreation is indeed the furthest thing from the minds of the characters in these three Cronenberg movies, since what they are seeking lies solely on transformation and/or escape from their human condition, still I

agree with Ramsey (pp. 263-234) that, in Cronenberg's films, especially the ones being analyzed here, it does not really seem like characters are undergoing a transformation from their human state to some new form of existence belonging to a higher mode, as Haraway would say about cyborgs, but rather that their humanistic and civilized persona embodied by their masculinity is being questioned and challenged.

### **2.1.2 *The Fly***

The filmic discourse provided by Cronenberg quite often does not allow its audience to grasp a more profound subjectivity upon its female characters, placing them as secondary to the plot, on the other hand, we are in touch with aspects of an embodied masculinity and the changes the male characters are submitted to. As mentioned above, fragmentation, transformation and bodily invasion of these men may lead them towards a rupture of their civilized manhood as they can eventually end up as monstrous or menacing creatures. In *The Fly*, Brundle's body is penetrated by an outsider, a fly, through the means of a technological instrument, in a way that his body has become vulnerable to the invasion of both animal and mechanical forces. In accordance with Kac-Vergne (2017), hypermasculine science fiction films tend to praise a hegemonic masculinity by showing their masculine and quite often reborn body, as portrayed in *The Fly* when Seth leaves the pod completely naked, enveloped with smoke and filmed from the bottom up causing him to look taller and bigger than before. For the author, "indeed, Seth's rebirth initially appears as a hegemonic regeneration and masculinization, underlined by the enhancement and display of the male body"<sup>19</sup>, as he acquires muscles and physical strength besides the fact that his garments, that used to be all the same since he did not have a social agenda to accomplish, have now changed to a leather jacket, a "fetishistic expression of virility". Still, even though I agree with Kac-Vergne when she says "*The Fly* presents hypermasculinity as a transient and delusive fantasy that leads only to violence and decay", I am not convinced that, as she states, Cronenberg is using science-fiction as a critique on hypermasculinity and that is because, as will be developed further in this section, there doesn't seem to me to exist a deeper and more analytical thought about

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<sup>19</sup><https://www.perlego.com/book/916474/masculinity-in-contemporary-science-fiction-cinema-cyborgs-troopers-and-other-men-of-the-future-pdf>. Accessed 13<sup>th</sup> August 2021.

issues that involve dealing with androcentric and institutionalized masculinity in the movies of Cronenberg.

In *The Fly*, in one of the few more romantic-driven narratives filmed by the Canadian director, the couple is formed by the promising scientist Seth Brundle and a competent journalist Veronica who does not actually receive a spotlight throughout the film. The plot develops in a male-centered perspective through which the audience will watch Brundle's ascension and downfall. In Cynthia A Freeland's comments on *The Fly*, she stated that it is a very traditional male-driven narrative, in which "the male acts, the woman feels" (1996, pp. 213). In fact, Veronica shows herself very empathetic to Brundle's flaws since he complies with the role of being a brilliant man, who however making mistakes, is still deserving of our pity, although his mistakes were driven by irrational jealousy, infantile behavior and a lack of self-control costing his lifelong career project. Moreover, for the author, "her suffering functions as a cue for us in the audience guiding us to react 'appropriately' to Brundle with sympathy and pity" (pp. 212)

Also, while in the process of transforming himself into a human-fly amid the loss of his bodily integrity, which coincide with the loss of his humanity, he attempts to place Veronica in the pods for her to go through bodily transformation as well, with the intention of making her go through the physical elevation and sexual eagerness to which he was submitted to, but here he acts as if she was just one of his guinea pigs, or better saying, laboratory baboons, with a complete disregard for her as a subjective being with power of choice, he demands from her, as if she had no autonomy over her body, something which could lead her towards death. In relation to this amoral compass, Smith will compare both *The Fly* and *Shivers* for their illustration of a disease which will cause sexual liberation. For a considerable period of time, during Brundle's corporeal transformative process, he does not seem to face preoccupation of any sort in relation to his new flesh. Quite on the contrary, he declares his freedom and liberation from societies fear of flesh. Smith will call it a "moral horror" whilst "physical and moral horror compound one another as Seth's loss of control over his body (as a result of disease) is echoed by Roni's loss of control over her body (as a result of Seth's denial of her autonomy)" (pp. 77). This very much correlates to what Freeland states about the fact that nothing is really said during the film regarding the huge loss Veronica suffers career-wise.

She should have in hand journalistic material whose importance could represent the culmination of her professional career if not for Brundle's twisted outcome, which sends the message that women, before being professional creatures, must be emotional creatures and must allow sentimentality over men guide their future aftereffects. Here, neither one of the men she was or is involved with seem to carry any real consideration of what Veronica really wants, says, or aspires to. At a different level, but also relevant to consider, there is the figure of Sthatis who, unable to seriously consider her wishes towards their breakup, continues to go to her house either to hang out even when she is not around or to spy on her and her new affair.

Also, *The Fly* comprises an abject feature of Creed's monstrous-feminine theory, the monstrous womb. Towards the second half of the movie, the climax is, beyond Brundlefly's own bodily transformation, reserved to the possibility or not of Veronica being pregnant with a human-fly baby. As she discovers her pregnancy, she starts wondering whether is safe for her to have the baby or not, as she dreams with her childbirth scenario (it might be interesting to mention that Cronenberg himself is the doctor delivering the baby in her dream), the creature who comes out of her womb is a monster-like baby, a gooey maggot figure. As Creed wrote, the relation between women and their closer bond with nature and natural events, such as menstruation, sex, birth, is, for many years passed, considered the quintessentiality of the grotesque and "from the time of Hipocrates to Ambrose Pare, it was generally believed that monstrous offspring were created by the maternal imagination" (pp. 45). According to the author, the representation of the womb in horror films has been one of the abject since these organs has been appropriated by patriarchal discourses as a way of marking the female body as animalistic, impure, and grotesque. In *The Fly*, despite not really going all the way with her pregnancy (at least not as far as we get to see), Veronica dreams about the delivery of her baby and gives to the audience one of the most loathsome scenes of the movie, where the giant maggot-baby comes out of her spread legs in a hospital, as Creed puts it:

It is true that female scientists rarely create monsters in an artificial environment. Why should they? Woman possesses her own womb. Interestingly, the theme of woman giving birth to (physical) monsters from her own body has been explored



by a number of recent horror films – possibly in response to recent debates about scientific experiments in cloning and reproductive technology. (pp. 56)

Nevertheless, after dreaming with the possibility of delivering a creature-baby which would suffer as well as Seth, the man she loves, Veronica decides, without an iota of doubt, to have an abortion as soon as possible, an event prevented by Seth, who, in his outmost act of selfishness and disregard for her body and life, “rescues” her from the clinic where she was discussing the abortion along with a doctor. Moreover, at the end, when Seth is going through his final transformation process, in which his body no longer appears to have any signs of a human figure, Veronica shoots him, which, to a less attentive and discerning audience, may have looked like a final act of empowerment, but which, however, is just another pious and nurturing attitude of hers whose overall concern lies on protecting and caring the man she loves.

### **2.1.3 *Crash***

Cronenberg’s films post 80s tend to portray horror caused by the disruption of a secure, rational, bourgeois status, usually represented by male characters. In *Crash*, the ultimate male image lies in the figure of Vaughan, who not only simulates James Dean, but seems to embody the twisted traditional role of the rebel without a cause, emasculated in the spectrum of a gang leader, the one who dictates the rules of the game.

Unlike Vaughan, a “tough, influential vehicle-controlling masculine leader” (Forman, 2001, pp. 117) and whose philosophy seems to guide him towards some sort of purpose, even though this purpose might be dying and being liberated through the “benevolent psychopathology that beckons towards us” (00:52:52), James finds himself in a position of emptiness and emotional disconnection. He is presented to the audience as a Caucasian male with a status in the workplace, though still emptied of male achievements and/or expectations carried out by a capitalist elite. For instance, I will borrow an example used by Forman to illustrate it and then go a bit further. In the beginning of the film, when engaging in sex with a secretary during work, James is called by someone from the crew through the door which makes him to stop rather than to use of his authority at work to afford him some extra minutes in a way that “the authority to which he might lay claim is forged in rapidly eroding forms – such as the traditional heterosexual couple and

unchallenged male dominance in the workplace” (pp. 115). Similar examples permeate the rest of the film, such as his lack of reaction and/or significant emotion towards situations in which his wife’s life is being threaten by a car chase with Vaughan, or when Vaughan hits her during sex even though she is almost crying.

James’ (lack of) reactions mimics how basically all the characters in *Crash* respond to life, in a lifeless way, and the same goes to the female characters. Even though women in the film are equal participants of the bleak and detached world of *Crash*, as it is captured, for example, by the coldness with which Helen reacts to her husband tragically and accidentally dying in a car crash, they are still, to some extent, fulfilling pre-established female roles of nurture (Catherine is the one who usually cleans her husband’s wounds) and seduction (Gabrielle embodying a femme-fatale figure at the car shop, seducing the car salesman).

For Forman, “women are not absent, but they are subjected to a narrative exscription that is made all the more explicit as the relationship between Vaughan and James intensifies” (pp. 122). So, in *Crash*, we are surrounded by masculine tropes articulated in an imagery of virility: cars, violence, anal sex (with no foreplays), gendered positions; and permeated by a homosocial bond. Here, females are just being carried out, they are just playing along and getting a ride in the story. Vaughan shares a relationship with his partner Gabrielle whose personality, though intriguing, leans on a never developed mysteriousness, since, once again, as a female character, she does not get to be developed. Similarly, there is James’ partner, Catherine, whose lack of voice and opinion towards this new configuration of the couple’s life could easily be misunderstood by the audience as just another figure of numbness floating across the universe of *Crash*, when, in fact, she seems to be playing a role within a heteronormative exercise of submission to the structure of a marriage in which having an extramarital relationship (or an open relationship) may seem part of a female liberation, but which is actually nothing more than a masturbatory instrument for the male figure involved. Or, as Ramsay (1999) puts it when counterpointing critics who see in *Crash* a radical and transgressive oeuvre, the film is “anything but the familiar round of straight white masculinity annihilating itself and others in a fury of masturbatory excess” (pp. 59) in a phallic and narcissistic treatment of the body and its possibilities.

Whereas *Crash* withholds what, to an inattentive eye, would be a perfect characterization of cyborg bodies, altered, manipulated, composed, scrambled, transformed by metallic structures and technologies, its cyborg characters, especially the female ones, are far from Haraway's ideation. To sum, according to the author, the gender split as a patriarchal heritage could finally be subverted in cyborgs, for they are held responsible for a wider fusion of human-animals and human-machines. This fusion can diminish the pre-established standard gender roles, which could cause the rupture with the so long orthodox systems of power and domination endured against the female body, the animal body, the bodies of people of color, and other minorities such as the working-class bodies. Hence, this is a unitary and universal myth, therefore exclusionary and limiting. It is based on an organicism that demands only the purified death and rebirth of the body and not necessarily its regeneration and modification. Within a base of new concepts that advance step by step to the concepts of the technocratic world, what is proposed by the author is that they should be rewritten, no matter how deep and intrinsically inserted in our imagination they are.

### 3. “Words Begets Image and Image is Virus”

*“What if the machines were alive? –  
but something more radical:  
what if we are as ‘dead’ as the machines?” (Fisher, 2018)*

#### 3.1 We Are Simulacra

Jean Baudrillard starts his book *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) by conceptualizing what he calls the “hyperreal”. According to him, in the ontological search for the answer about what is real and what is not, in postmodernity, society will face a real “without origin or reality” (pp. 1), in a context where there is no longer a sovereign difference between the source and the reproduction. What exists however is a place where reality and illusion converge, which becomes very clear if just looking at everyday life examples today: in the latest models of virtual reality headsets; artificial intelligence apps like Replika, a chatbot that uses a neural network to hold human-like conversations; photoshopped photos used to maintain increasingly unattainable beauty standards; a NFT virtual work of art by Beeple sold for 69 million dollars; or even social media, a virtual non-place<sup>20</sup>, where the representation of who we are is more effective and admirable than our true self, reaching a point where we lose our true referential point and start simulating who and what we ought to show rather than who and what we are. In relation to this, Baudrillard stated that:

A hyperreal henceforth sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the Real and the Imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence models and for the simulated generation of difference. (pp. 03)

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<sup>20</sup> Anthropologist Marc Augé published in 1992 his theories about *non-places*, a still prevailing analysis of modern spaces, in opposition, by concept, to the notion of anthropological spaces. According to Augé (1992), non-places are directly linked to new experiences and ordeals of solitude. As well as the terminology defines a spatial area, so it tells us about the relation people have with this space, and, for the author, non-places create, amongst other aspects, solitary contractuality. Hence, as non-places it is possible to cite places that create mass groups, such as commuters, passengers, shoppers; for instance: public transports, hotels, supermarkets, big shops, airports, train stations and above all wireless internet. Places where one could spend so much time in, even giving an illusion of belonging, a glimpse of being part of something, but that, in fact, is nothing more than a solitary transitory spectrum of our modern lifestyle.

On this matter, the possibility of repetition is key to the concept of simulacra owing to the fact that, according to the author, the real is produced from models of control and “it is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, not even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real (...)” (pp. 02). For the author, it is clear the difference between dissimulating/pretending and simulating, whereas the former state does not threaten what is to be considered “the real”, in the latter the principle of reality might not remain. For instance, the author writes about how iconoclasts, contrary to common belief, are the ones who truly assign the real annihilating power of images, since their reproduction can subtract the power of what is being reproduced, and, therefore, they were able to predict the “omnipotence of simulacra” (pp. 4) and its ability, for instance, of effacing God, through the effacement of the image of Jesus, for what it is, the possibility of Him being nothing beyond his own representation, being reduced to it.

While representation is the equivalent of the sign, simulation is opposed to representation, as it is the utopia of the principle of equivalence, or, in other words, it is the death of the reference. For instance, if we look on how pornography, especially the commercial kinds of it, is inserted on our everyday lives, it is certain how mainstreamed and commoditized the representation of sex has become, to a point in which it can compete with reality, for how many people and couples are dissatisfied because of the pressure of having an unreal porn-like sexual life/performance. When watching pornography, we are looking to a simulation of sex, which, in the words of Baudrillard is “fascinating more on a metaphysical than on sexual level” (pp. 28), though this simulation is but the abstraction of what one desires it to be, we look for a representation of the real by looking into the hyper-real rather than to what is reality itself, which leads to a blurry notion of what sex is supposed to be/feel like, leading to a death of reference. In *Videodrome*, for example, this is pretty much what we encounter, when looking for more rough and tough sex videos for his show, Max is being seduced by the power of this representation, just as it happens with Nicki’s red dress when they first met at a TV show (also a representation of reality in a kind of staged scenario), red is just a color, but in that moment it is also a representation of desire for him, which lead him to invest in her, asking her out, in the middle of a broadcast interview. Thus, the procession of simulacra is the procession of turning meaning into meaningless, and presently reality becomes irrelevant

for it has been replaced by symbols and signs. The phases of the image are put like this by the author:

it is the reflection of a profound reality;

It masks and denatures a profound reality;

It masks the absence of a profound reality;

It has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure **simulacrum**. (pp. 6)

As an example of a perfect hyperreal model, there is Disneyland. Baudrillard writes that the park works as a micro-representation of America itself in just one place. It is a “play of illusions and phantasms” (pp. 12), full of fantasy and childlike elements, that exists as a maneuver to simply hide the fact that what is outside is in fact what is real, to mask the idea that adults are elsewhere as if childishness was not everywhere to be seen. For him:

The impossibility of rediscovering an absolute level of the real is of the same order as the impossibility of staging illusion. Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible. (pp. 19)

On her 1991 response to Baudrillard, Hayles (1991) wrote about the accountability of boundaries surrounding every simulation. She mentions, for example, the great deal of people who live in the rural area without getting much access to technology; or even the fences and the parking lot surrounding Disneyland which sets the limits between reality and illusion; or still the cables attached to virtual reality headsets, which will separate real and virtual experiences. So, while broadly agreeing with Baudrillard’s conceptions on the hyperreal, it is also important to consider in this discussion how, in accordance with Hayles “only when these boundaries do not exist or cease to signify that one has left the simulation and entered reality, does the dreamscape that Baudrillard evokes shimmer into existence.”<sup>21</sup> Still, despite agreeing with her, and still agreeing that it is possible to be outside the domain of technological influence, especially if we shift our perspective from a Western mindset, unquestionably, technology has been more and more encroached on the blissfully ignorant. Perhaps, after 30 years passed since Hayles’ answer, we, more often than we certainly would like, begin to enter the fictionality realm

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/55/forum55.htm>. Accessed 12th March 2021.

in which, following Hayles, “it is possible to elide the materiality of the world and thus to erase the gap between simulation and reality”. Nowadays, mostly now in 2021, in the post-truth era, reality has been transcended by the havoc of fake-news, responsible for dictating major societal issues, such as political or public health issues, as it may be seen in the difficulties of establishing and notwithstanding following the health protocols proposed by the WHO in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic.

I believe Baudrillard’s work to be fundamental to my analysis on Cronenberg. Thus, *Videodrome* seems to take theoretical terms used by Baudrillard and transforms them into something less figurative and more feasible. In many moments, in *Simulacra and Simulation*, the term “hallucination” is written to express the masked idea one has about what one believes to be the real and the reality. Baudrillard mentions that we live in “a world of simulation, of the hallucination of truth” (pp. 8), or again, that everywhere in a postmodern society “the hyperrealism of simulation is translated by the hallucinatory resemblance of the real to itself” (pp. 23). In his 1983 movie, Cronenberg creates a protagonist who starts to suffer from hallucinatory events after being in touch with Videodrome signals, capable of creating hallucinations that are determined by the nature of the images seen on screen.

In *Videodrome*, we follow Max Renn, the owner of a television station in Canada ironically named CIVIC – TV, on Channel 83, an apparently B-side channel which focuses on showing softcore pornography. In the process of trying to find new content, Max is presented to Videodrome by one of his employees, Harlan (Peter Dvorsky), who explains that it consists in a series of videos, supposedly coming from Malaysia, with no apparent plot, that were hacked by a satellite dish, in order to be shown on Renn’s channel.

Very much intrigued by such a random violent Tv program, which later Max found out to be not acted at all, he goes after the famous Professor Brian O’blivion<sup>22</sup> believing he might be responsible for it. But he becomes aware of the fact that even though O’blivion takes part in television programs and speaks directly to the viewers, Max included, he died 11

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<sup>22</sup> Not the actual name of the character, but a chosen one. The character states that he chose this name for himself, as in the future everyone will choose its own name to appear on television. This is possibly read as how people are becoming nothing but their own image, and so becoming, as everything on television, ephemeral and easily forgotten.

months prior to that date because of a Videodrome tumor. In this sense, the character himself is a simulacrum, for, by outliving his corporeal existence, he is based on a reality which no longer exists, in other words he is not “exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself” (Baudrillard, pp. 06). All Brian’s appearances are taped videos he had done many years ago. According to Bianca O’blivion (Sonja Smits), her father’s intentions on participating in the creation of Videodrome were good at the time as he saw it “as the next phase in the evolution of man as a technological animal” (00:41:56), though his partners took it to create a perverse plan, something that Brian wanted to avoid and that ended up having him killed. As his hallucinations get more serious, Max is contacted by Barry Convex<sup>23</sup>(Leslie Carlson), former Brian’s partner and Videodrome producer, and current owner of Spectacular Optical Corporation<sup>24</sup> whose intentions were to use Max to murder everyone involved with the network, to whom Barry and his corporation fellows believe to be morally corrupted people due to the influence of television broadcast. In fact, Spectacular Optical Corporation, as well as Harlan, are themselves part of the hyperreal realm since they are mere simulations without origin or reality. In fact, the former is a NATO weapons manufacturer whose interest is on annihilating television viewers and the former is one of its employees.

From the second half of the movie on, Max’s hallucinations are so intense and more common that it is sometimes hard to acknowledge whether happenings are indeed connected to reality or not, following what Brian O’blivion had stated before “there is nothing real outside our perception of reality” (00:43:54). Also, when O’blivion, the person responsible for creating Videodrome transmission as part of his studies, states that “television is reality and reality is less than television” (00:35:51), he seems to share Baudrillard’s notion about the hysteria of postmodern society: “that of the production and reproduction of the real” (pp. 23). Nonetheless, by substituting “television” for “social media”, this becomes even truer nowadays. According to the author, “hyperrealists fix a real from which all meaning and charm, all depth and energy of representation have

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<sup>23</sup> Convex lens, in opposition to concave lens, provide converging light rays facilitating a more focused image. Convex’s intention in the movie is to bring a more funneled sense of morals to the world by spreading Videodrome signal to those whose mentality is dirty and sick, leaving them at the mercy of cancerous hallucinations and ridding the world of those people.

<sup>24</sup> The significance of the name is due to, as being an eyeglasses seller, the company, literally as well as figuratively, is interested in altering people's perception of reality.



vanished in a hallucinatory resemblance” (pp. 23). For Creley’s character, there will be a point in time in which objective reality and real life will be replaced by television and he dedicates his life and work to maintaining this prediction, starting with the creation of a shed, The Cathode Ray Mission, that receives homeless people and invites them to marathon hours and hours of television broadcasting in exchange for food and a place to stay. Closely to what Prof. O’blivion defends about television, Baudrillard will call it a “medium of deterrence” (pp. 50), which does not even carry an image anymore, unlike cinema. Television is nothing but a screen that lacks imaginary forces and lacks the retention of a historical myth. Therefore, the reproduction and the aestheticization of historical events, for instance, even if this reproduction is claimed to be as faithful as possible of the real events, it will still be contributing to the forgetting of history. For Baudrillard, TV is a “miniaturized terminal that, in fact, is immediately located in your head – you are the screen, and the TV watches you” (pp. 51), similarly, for Prof. Brian O’blivion, “The television screen is the retina of the mind’s eye. Therefore, the television screen is part of the physical structure of the brain” (00:35:36), and very much alike our contemporary experience of being fed with adverts on our phones provided by the listening mechanisms incorporated in our devices.

In an interview given to the German channel 3sat<sup>25</sup>, Cronenberg discusses the misconceptuality of attaching *Videodrome* to the notion of technology being essentially inhuman or that is something imposed to us, for him though, technology is but a part and an expression of ourselves, we are even more in the process of merging and fusing into it. According to the director, the idea of a hand turning into a gun, as it occurs in the movie, is not much distant from the idea that a gun is an extension of the fist, or that the phone is an extension of our hands and voices, and I will add, that our smartphones nowadays are the extensions of our memories (or just our memories themselves, for they have been detrimentally affected by the increased use of mobile phones) or even so that our social media profiles are an extension of our identities, or even our very identities, since, for many, social media is the place where many people feel their most real version. Again, when receiving a Lifetime Achievement Award at the Venice Film Festival 2018,

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<sup>25</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0UZPGhZRA9U&t=964s&ab\\_channel=TeoTosone](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0UZPGhZRA9U&t=964s&ab_channel=TeoTosone). Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> April 2021.

Cronenberg discusses the future of cinema and comes across the discussion of new developments to the industry such as drones, to which he comments on drones as a marvelous achievement for cinematic productions, a technology whose connection with human beings is undeniable, just like any other technology it possesses human characteristics in them, as he says "Technology is an extension of our bodies and our brains. That means the technology will be both wonderful and horrific at the same time."<sup>26</sup> All of it encourages us to play the game of capitalist desire in the maintenance of the status quo.

As far as the deconstruction of the body is concerned, the more advanced technology becomes, the more bodily changes will take place, with cloning being an example which is at the vanguard of scientific development. For Baudrillard, clones are the materialization of the double myth, the creation of one who is a living mirror-image of oneself, "the matrix of an identical individual" (pp. 95). In this case, simulation is taken to its extreme, in a sense that it is more than just a prosthesis lying on the exterior of a body, combined with its original form. Now, simulation has reached a point of no return since it is intrinsically part of the micromolecular parts of the human cells. As it is written, "then it is the end of the body, of its history, and of its vicissitudes." (pp. 100).

In Cronenberg's oeuvre, a body which is constantly being transformed, modified, and even annihilated is extensively portrayed in multiple ways<sup>27</sup>. His movie *The Fly* deals with the unfolding of the death of a body, a molecular, internal, structural one. A modification so vast that infiltrates the realm of the *esotechnical* and reached a dead end. When analyzing what cloning would be like, Baudrillard called the process a "cancerous metastasis of its base formula" (pp. 100) and referred to the process as being "the end of the body, of its singularity called body, whose secret is precisely that it cannot be segmented into additional cells" (pp. 97), which seems not to go a lot different than the process through which Seth Brundle is going when becoming a human-fly. Following his partner's, Veronica, refusal to go through the same process of him, by entering the

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<sup>26</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wOJdxQs1LU&ab\\_channel=vprocinema](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wOJdxQs1LU&ab_channel=vprocinema). Accessed 6<sup>th</sup> March 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Videodrome's (1983), Crash's (1996) and ExistenZ's (1999) portrayal of a prosthetic body; Rabid's (1977), Dead Ringers' (1988), The Brood's (1979) portrayal of mutant bodies; Shivers' (1975), The Fly's (1986), Videodrome's (1983), Naked Lunch's (1991) portrayal of the grotesque body, for example.

teleportation pods, as she acknowledges that something might have gone wrong, based on his hysterical and sort of aggressive behavior, he goes:

You're afraid to dive in the plasma pool...You're afraid to be destroyed and re-created. Think you woke me up about the flesh? You only know society's straight line about the flesh. You can't penetrate society's sick gray fear of the flesh...Drink deep, or taste not the plasma spring. See what I'm saying? This is not just sex and penetration, but penetration...beyond the veil of the flesh. A deep, penetrating dive into the plasma pool. (00:48:13)

Also, if one considers *Videodrome* as a psychotropic agent catalyzed through the power of images, then it is a mental modeling altering a body from the inside.

A silent, mental, already molecular (and no longer specular) body, a body metabolized directly, without the mediation of the act or the gaze, an immanent body, without alterity, without a *mise-en-scène*, without transcendence, a body Consecrated to the implosive metabolism of cerebral, endocrinal flows (...) (pp. 101)

According to Baudrillard, in a chapter he devoted to an application of his simulacra and simulation theory to Ballard's book *Crash*, from a classical perspective, "technology is the mortal deconstruction of the body" (pp. 111), but in *Crash*, in opposition to a rational functionalist view would put, technology will no longer serve just as a functional medium. It will no longer be believed to work as an extension of the body, as a mediator destined to "become the organic body of man" (pp. 111), but it will be placed as "the extension of death" (pp. 111). In this sense, the body is blended with technology also acquiring its violent dimension under the spectrum of "a sexuality without a reference and without limits" (pp. 111)

In Cronenberg's *Crash*, technology is mainly present through the images of cars, that in turn have their image almost entirely represented by their own destruction and collision. For Baudrillard, "it is the same: any shock, any blow, any impact, all the metallurgy of the accident can be read in the semiurgy of the body" (pp. 112). The wounds, openings and holes suffered in the body by the car crash cause the creation of new possibilities in the

body constitution, unfolding innumerable new sexual organs that could satisfy people like James Ballard. For instance, one could cite the episode in which James penetrates the leg wounds of Gabrielle, a long vertical scar she possesses in the back of her thigh, not coincidentally very similar to a vagina cavity, an analogy used by Cronenberg in other films, such as *Videodrome*, in which the protagonist, in one of his hallucinatory events has a vagina-like wound opened in his stomach.



Fig. 4. Gabrielle's vagina-like leg scar.

As many other authors point out<sup>28</sup>, there is an ambiance of detachment in *Crash*, no apparent positioning in time and/or space, characters do not seem to have a significant domestic life, or a personal life other than that driven by the pursuit of the Accident. The car as an object has its signifier changed for it is no longer an object utilized merely for transportation, used to move from one place to the other, there is a whole new meaning attached to it. "(...) there is no longer a private and domestic universe, there are only incessant figures of circulation, and the Accident is everywhere, the elementary, irreversible figure, the banality of the anomaly of death" (pp.113). Moreover, this detachment is connected to the hyperfunctionality of this universe, in which depth is lacking in all dimensions (affect, space, time, language).

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<sup>28</sup> Roberta Jill Craven (2000), and Parveen Adams (2000), for instance.

Baudrillard wrote that *Crash* was the first novel concerned with the specificities of a symbolic universe and its simulation, which is well transmitted in the film too. Everything that happens there is supported by the desire to simulate celebrities' deaths caused by automobile collisions and it is essential to Vaughan's process that he films, records, and photographs these attempts and simulations. It is there that lies the ultimate merging between technology, sex, and body fragmentation.

### **3.2. Technology as a Means for Dissolution**

Much of my research on Cronenberg, as well as much of the research on him in general, revolves around, not only the body as a research instrument, but also the body taken by the massive influence of technology and technological apparatus. In fact, if Cronenberg's earlier movies, the ones prior to 2000s, were to be released nowadays, what was considered a sci-fi futuristic idealization, they would now be much closer to a palpable, feasible reality, so much closer to what we have been experiencing today as far as technological advancements are concerned. Which is probably why Cronenberg's oeuvre has been so broadly a study object not only in cinematic fields, but sociological and cultural areas as well. With that being said, I would like to develop a section dedicated to how technology influences and orients the various body transformations and mutations in the three Cronenberg movies I chose in my study.

#### **3.2.1 Videodrome**

The idea for *Videodrome* emerged from Cronenberg's own experience in the 60s where access to films and television was scarce, most of all because television programs were not available at all times, so whenever there was nothing on, one could receive signals, mostly late at night, in which very mysterious and intriguing images and sounds coming from somewhere else, probably the USA, would appear on the TV set. In his interview available on Youtube entitled "Cronenberg on Cronenberg", the interviewer comments on how this idea of having access to a forbidden hidden channel strikes him as something rather powerful and contemporary for there are such possibilities even after the advent of the internet and dark net, to which the Canadian director agrees explaining how many

people think nowadays that he was able to have anticipated the internet with *Videodrome* by showcasing interactive television which could respond directly to you.

The notion of a media with which one could interact with resembles a great deal of what Marshal McLuhan wrote in 1964 in his book *Understanding Media: Ten Extensions of Man*, where he understands media through a technological deterministic lens whereupon technology shapes cultural and social aspects of society and thus, he understands media as an extension of human faculties, as is said in his introductory pages:

Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man-- the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society. (pp. 5)

For him, to consume electric media is to undergo a shift on how previous technologies are now going to be translated into information systems and how this will represent a change on how we are able to outer our inner consciousness. One of his primary constructs to be discussed here is the one of hot and cool medium, which, for McLuhan, indicated a differentiation basically amongst how much sensorial involvement a medium would require or not. Therefore, "a hot medium is one that extends one single sense in 'high definition'" (pp. 07), such as prints, radio or movies, or, in other words, mediums which provides sufficient data in good quality so it would not be necessary for the receptor to interfere much or to participate a lot, whereas a cool medium is quite the opposite, for instance, television, speech or the telephone whereby the time taken as cool ones. It is easier for us, in 2021, to grasp that idea in regarding television if we take into consideration how poor the quality of television broadcast was at the time this theory was written, in such a way that it would require more sensorial involvement and an active relation for the spectator to have a full experience with it, so "hot media are, therefore, low in participation, and cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience" (pp. 07). Of course, what was being theorized in the 60s could only begin to really anticipate such advancements as supposedly interactive TV shows like the 2018

*Black Mirror* episode *Bandersnatch*, a non-linear script in which the main character's actions are decided by the spectator through choices to be made by clicking on certain options with the remote control, or even VR technologies that not only involve sight and hearing but also balance and equilibrium to a point where many people claim to feel sick and nauseous when using it. These include advancements that caused the shift between linearity and contemplation to interaction and thus belonging.

Notwithstanding, it has become increasingly more difficult to establish a clear differentiation between hot and cool medium. If we take our smartphones as examples, making calls has become one of the least used functions of our cellphones, and it has become an instrument from which it is possible to even watch movies. This sensorial experience is constantly molded through the numerous possibilities, we can touch the screen in which the movie is being played, there is vibration, there is the possibility of using headphones, of zooming the screen, changing its format ratio, adding subtitles, speeding up and so many others to the point where the latest technology is very hardly homogeneous. Such experiences though come closer to what *Videodrome* proposes because technological devices in the movie will not always serve the purposes which they were made for, such as Max Renn's television that at some point will act like a breathing, soft, wavy entity which it will be almost possible for him to stick his head into, or a VHS tape he holds and it is turned into a flesh, bleeding object.



Fig. 5. Fleshy VHS.

It is without a doubt that Cronenberg's *Videodrome* was inspired by Marshal McLuhan's theories, in fact the Canadian director has never denied its influence on his work, to such extent that the introductory lines from *Understanding Media* are quite like what Prof. Brian O'blivion say, with him being credited by many to be the very personification of McLuhan himself. The author wrote:

After three thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary and mechanical technologies, the Western world is imploding. During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man-- the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as we have already extended our senses and our nerves by the various media. (pp. 03)

Similarly, what Prof. O'blivion preaches is that society will be addicted and dependent on technological devices such as televisions to a point where they will become organically a part of our brain. For him, as mentioned in the previous section, by watching *Videodrome*,



a video with such images capable of causing hallucinations that are mixed up with reality, it will become impossible to distinguish between the two. The new world prophesied by Prof. O'blivion is a world ruled by media in which there are, and there will be even more, junkies who would become addicted to consuming television, as is seen in the O'blivion's shelter for TV addicted people, as Bianca O'blivion said "TV will help patch them back to the world's mixing board" (00:30:19).

The fact that, for Prof. O'blivion, "public life on television is more real than private life in the flesh" (00:42:11) is proven by the fact that he was already dead 11 months prior to his contact with Max and nobody, except for his daughter, was aware of this. By taking a closer look, this is a perfect and literal representation of the four stages of simulacra presented by Baudrillard: it is an image which, not only reflects basic reality, but also masks its presence as well as its absence to a point where there is no correlation to reality any longer. Plus, the very fact that the public watching *Videodrome* is unsure whether Max's hallucinations are real or mere delusions denote how our own reality is blurred by cinema as technological hallucinations. In this manner, Cronenberg's idea there was aligned with what the Krollers have theorized about the disappearance of the body:

The postmodern body is penetrated by power and marked by all the signs of ideology. Indeed, when power actually produces the body and when the body itself becomes conditional for the operation of a fully relational power, then the postmodern body is already only a virtual afterimage of its own simulated existence. Virtual sex, virtual eyes, virtual organs, virtual nervous system: that is the disappearing body now as the cynical site of its own exteriorization (and immolation) in the mediascape. (Kroker, pp. 18)

Thus, if the postmodern body is a constitutive part of a subordination scheme where power penetrates and rules our existence "through a media scene" (pp. 21), in *Videodrome*, the irony of it consists in the fact that this penetration is done by electrical power and actual technological devices. Plus, it is worthwhile to notice how Debbie Harry being chosen for the role of Nicki Brand does not seem like a random choice, considering how the singer built up her career under a persona characterized by the name Blondie. The new-wave and punk icon of the 70s was not only the voice of the band Blondie, but

she was Blondie herself, a name chosen amongst the many names men used to call her and which characterize a range of “prescribed personality values that were applicable to girls and to women” (Harry, 2019) <sup>29</sup>she declared in an interview provided to Nathan Diller, for the online medium Washintonian. Thus, Blondie, as well as Nicki, represent a pastiche of what seductive, femme fatale women should look like disguised in the form of a constructed persona. Therefore, what happens to Debbie Harry’s character in the movie is her literal disappearance through the mediascape, as she apparently just ceased to exist in reality, and began to appear exclusively inside Videodrome transmissions and Max’s delirium, thus she is seen exclusively through the screen of a TV and her body is but a medium or an extension to the TV and vice-versa. McLuhan’s view upon mediums and therefore technological devices being extensions to the human body matches Cronenberg’s, as previously discussed in section 3.1, and in the author’s words,

(...) this image of a unified ratio among the senses was long held to be the mark for rationality, and may in the computer age easily become so again for it is now possible to program ratios among the senses that approach the condition of consciousness. Yet such a condition would necessarily be an extension of our own consciousness as much as a wheel is an extension of feet in rotation. Having extended or translated our central nervous system into the electromagnetic technology, it is but a further stage to transfer our consciousness to the computer world as well. (pp. 67)

In the same way that, towards the end of the movie, Max carries a flesh-gun that is an extension to his hand literally, there is Bianca, who says she is her father’s screen. Her role is merely to communicate what her father did not tape or to speak on his behalf in order to his business and his life plan to move on. As far as Bianca is concerned as a character, nothing is told about her private self, no particular information other than facts concerning her father’s Videodrome project, therefore, her body is but a screen, a showcase, an extension of her dead father’s recording tapes.

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<sup>29</sup> <https://www.washingtonian.com/2019/12/02/debbie-harry-takes-readers-behind-the-character-of-blondie-in-her-new-memoir/>. Accessed 18<sup>th</sup> August 2021.

### 3.2.2. *The Fly*

As well as in *Videodrome*, it does not take much to perceive the relational correspondence between body and technology in *The Fly*. The very first lines of the movie take place in a party for the scientific community and Seth is supposedly answering a question Veronica had asked him, as he goes “what am I working on? I’m working on something that will change the world and human life as we know it.” (00:02:03). Shortly after, we come to know that he hates vehicles because he has always felt motion sick when commuting and, not as a mere coincidence, the project he has been working on is a teleportation machine so people could move from one place to the other immediately through it. It was an instrument, as many technological devices we encounter nowadays, intended to purposefully be pragmatic and make people’s lives somehow easier. Here, similarly to *Crash*, we are presented with scenarios in which the core signification of cars is twisted, since, in the former, there is a character who is unable to deal with the functional service provided by the automobile, for it makes him sick to his stomach, to the point where he feels stimulated to create alternative methods for commuting, and, in the latter, characters subvert the signification of cars and use them as a means to achieve their merging of sex, technology and death.

Furthermore, Brundle’s discoveries and apparatus would apparently have worked fine if it were not for his reckless and premature trial due to a drunken outburst amid a frustrating situation with his partner. Unaware of the fact that the environment, which was supposed to be completely sterilized, was being shared between him and a fly, Brundle causes the machine to disintegrate both bodies and reintegrate them again in the other pod but now fused as one, due to a rereading and reinterpretation of both DNAs. With the modeling of a new creature, a monstrous breed of a human-insect coming to life, some authors, like Michael Grant and Jonathan Crane (2000), compared Brundlefly’s metamorphosis process into a self-made body with Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, though this time the scientist is fused with his own creation and he himself is the creature to be feared. In Crane’s text *A Body Apart: Cronenberg and Genre*, he stated that:

This time, however, the battle does not take place across the icy Arctic or among the rugged scarps that surround Frankenstein’s mountain aerie. This time, the

battle takes shape in one flesh as Brundle must decide whether to become something irrevocably new or remain all-too-human. (pp. 57)

Though I do not really agree with it as being just a matter of deciding on whether to transform into a new creature or not, for me, what remains as utterly different between the two is the fact that the scientist's creature in *The Fly* is absolutely co-dependent on its creator and vice-versa, for now they share the same body and Seth's subjectivity becomes hostage to the insect's animosity, as the very title of the movie comes to suggest. In this way, whereas in *Videodrome* we are encountered with possibilities for the body to change its corporeality into new body-machines alterations and alternatives, in *The Fly*, technology is a means through which the body becomes amenable to a human-animal constitution. It may seem at first a little extreme to take this metamorphosis process from outside the diegetic space of a Cronenberg film, though discussions involving non-organic means of procreation and the alienation of the womb have long permeated analysis regarding the fragmentation and disruption of the postmodern body. On one hand, we see a well-intentioned medical-scientific community in making the means of reproduction easier and accessible to mothers for whom organic conception is not possible, and on the other, a moral questioning which runs through juridical and religious advocacy on how to regulate reproductive technologies and how to delineate women's autonomies over their own bodies. According to the Krokers, women's bodies are the primary target of postmodern body invasion occurring through contractual neoliberalism that legitimizes a greater autonomy upon the body, so, for them, it occurs first through medical subordination resulting in the alienation of the womb, for "when the ovaries go outside (...), it is also a certain sign of the grisly technological abstraction of alienated labour into the alienation of reproduction itself" (pp. 97). It is no wonder that the telepods created by Seth are very womb-like, in a perhaps unintended movement from the scientist to create a womb simulacra as a symbol for the generation of a new human being, molded through genetic destruction and re-creation, when the "mad" scientist, in a *couvade* position, attempts to take the woman's place of generating a life, or, as Helen W. Robins (1993) named it "womb-envy"<sup>30</sup> (Apud LOREN, 2011, pp. 154),

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<sup>30</sup> The term was directly used in reference to Cronenberg's *The Brood* (1979), where Nola's character appears with her womb projected from her outside, looking like an enormous cancerous-growth;

when there is a feeling of high impotence in the male figure generated by the inability of physically generate life.

In an interview named "*I have to make the world be flesh*"<sup>31</sup>, provided to André S. Labarthe, when asked about birth in his films, especially considering *The Fly* as an example, Cronenberg stated that, though there is evidence pointing to it, for instance, the fact that the telepods resemble eggs, he does not really consider it to be a birth, but rather a re-birth, in a sense of a transformative process. For him, much more interesting is the creative rebirth of a person rather than the biological aspects of birth. Therefore, when Brundlefly starts losing his body parts as they keep falling from the surface of his body and consequently he starts to keep these body parts in the bathroom cabinet named the "Brundle Museum of Natural History", he does that, according to Cronenberg, not to remind him of who he was, but rather to have a memoir of whom he is becoming, what Brundlefly is doing at this point is to put things on perspective and seeing his transformation process through different aesthetic lens.

### **3.2.3. Crash**

Indeed, what Cronenberg does is to make technology a medium that, combined with our body and/or mind, is capable of creating something new and in *Crash* this is no different. This point of fusion between body and technology is done through cars, as Vaughan stated, his project involves "something we're all intimately involved in: the reshaping of the human body by modern technology" (00:40:08). It may seem like, in the 2000s or when the film was made, the car is not really seen as the utmost technological breakthrough of the last twenty years, since we ought to deal with numerous technological advances that surround us and that are developed daily such as computerized systems and artificial intelligence. But the truth is that neither it was when the film was made, in the mid-90s, regular cars also would not be recognizable as a high technology artefact, especially if considering the amount of 80s and 90s sci-fi movies featuring flying-cars<sup>32</sup> as the most logical advancement for a considerably near future. It

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<sup>31</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h0y516xe0T4&t=692s&ab\\_channel=jos%C3%A9alber](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h0y516xe0T4&t=692s&ab_channel=jos%C3%A9alber). Accessed 20th April 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Some examples of it being: *Blade Runner* (1982), *Back to the Future* (1985), *The Fifth Element* (1997).

is interesting to notice that Vaughan and Seagrave reenacted deaths that refer back to the 1950s, that time in American history when capitalism was a beneficial force, when cars were a luxury and a status symbol and not a necessity. And for Cronenberg, with whom I agree, the motorcar is incredibly high-tech, as he states:

Because of the way it has absolutely altered human existence and our perception of what power we have or don't have. It really has compressed time and space and it really also, especially in America, but I think in every country, it represents, to a certain extent, a sexual freedom and power, and so the car is a very potent representative of technology. (Cronenberg, 1996)<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, the cars in *Crash* (with the exception of those used for crash simulation) are not collection, extravagant or even charming cars, they are rather regular, bland models, usually gray which enhances the feeling of them being nothing other than a rough, cold, hard, machinic, metallic surface. According to Ludow (2012), "a form of sexual intercourse takes place between us and our technologies (...) the technologies do not enhance us. We combine with them to form something new"<sup>34</sup> which directly relates to what Cronenberg does in *Crash*. The movie does not deal with passion for cars in any way, as mentioned before in this text, I follow what Adams stated with regards to the fact that characters in *Crash* do not lack a flux of desire as Baudrillard defended, but rather they seek the death drive and so they desire to become something else through car wrecking, either a body reshaped and reconstructed, like Gabrielle, or a dead body, like James Dean. In this sense, in one of Catherine and James' first conversations still in the hospital, after his own car accident which was responsible for killing Helen's husband, it starts to become clear the fact that, in that reality of theirs, a damaged body is treated as somewhat valuable, not disposable, as Catherine says she wishes corpses were kept lying around for months for people to see them, to say their goodbyes to them.

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<sup>33</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iMS9xB2g2Z0&t=805s&ab\\_channel=JosephParfitt](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iMS9xB2g2Z0&t=805s&ab_channel=JosephParfitt). Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> April 2021.

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.perlego.com/book/873093/the-philosophy-of-david-cronenberg-pdf>. Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

This process of bodily reshaping is also addressed when Vaughan and James go and get tattoos on their bodies, as a millennial form of body modification, tattoos could also be considered forms of body mutilation. Or, as Cronenberg puts it:

I've seen some very middle-class people with eyebrow rings and stuff like that. I think they would be mortified if you said it was self-mutilation, or very primitive, or related to scarification but without the ritual tribal structures that justify it. It's a huge, not-so-far-underground culture (Cronenberg, 1996)<sup>35</sup>.

Tattoo meanings range from pure aesthetics nowadays to iconography and cultural mores as a symbolization for socially belonging in a group, in *Crash*, Vaughan calls them “prophetic tattoos” (01:17:20) in a way that it is a prophecy both in a personal and universal level, for his project of reshaping the human body as we know it is not really a destructive plan but rather a fertilizing one.

Therefore, despite the characters seeming all too often aloof and disconnected, Vaughan’s interests and desires, for instance, are sustained through the multiplication of meaning invested in a transformative process caused by technology. After getting their tattoos, Vaughan passionately licks and kisses James’ naked stomach where the new marks and wounds inscribed lie fresh and possibly bloody, in a scene that anticipates their sexual intercourse. Or, when they first met at the hospital, Vaughan stares closely at James’ bruises and wounds particularly fascinated by the metal pins perforating his leg. In the same 1996 interview, Cronenberg will assume a position on explaining how sex and technology are portrayed by Ballard in a quote I find important to be transcribed fully. He says:

I think Ballard was really anticipating a psychology of the near future, a psychology of people being disconnected, disassociated, unable to connect emotionally and even sexually, and therefore being put in what I consider to be the classic existentialist position which is to realize that there is no meaning in life unless you assign it (...) there are no absolutes, even sexuality which we think of as being

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<sup>35</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jMS9xB2g2Z0&t=718s&ab\\_channel=JosephParfitt](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jMS9xB2g2Z0&t=718s&ab_channel=JosephParfitt). Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> April 2021.

something absolute, it's biologically given to us, no longer has meaning, because now you can have babies without sex, so then what has sex become? It doesn't have that meaning anymore. There might be a time in the near future where you don't even need human beings to have babies, so sex suddenly is at this very powerful force with no purpose, and it's therefore necessary to redefine it – What has it become? Is that a performance? Is it weaponry? Is it art? Is it a commodity to be bought and sold? What has it become? And so, in their own way, my characters are doing that, they're trying to reinvent their lives, reinvent sexuality, reinvent emotion, and to reinvent, in a way, love as well (...). (Cronenberg, 1996)

Unquestionably, technology has shape and has been shaping the way people live and interact with each other, and no less important, the way people engage sexually. Over the last 30 years, people, in general, have become more aware of their sexuality and sex life due to an easier, faster access to information and a greater openness to dialog regarding issues of sexuality, sexual health and sexual freedom, for example, inside and outside the net. As mentioned above, in *Crash*, the automobile serves as a trope for technological advancements and a convergence point between sexuality and the machine. As the majority of sex scenes in the movie happen inside an automobile, private realms of intimacy are brought to public spaces through dehumanized characters who share in common Jameson's postmodern conceptualization of the waning of affect. Also, the greater amount of sex scenes happens from behind with characters not facing each other denoting their laconic and cold lack of intimacy.

Moreover, little by little, throughout the film, as the cars come to life within the narrative, like when James and Catherine watch the car ballet from the balcony, where they move in an uninterrupted flow and are watched like a spectacle, the characters' bodies become machinic while cars gain a more humanized status. On roads increasingly crowded with vehicles, the characters behind the wheels are invisible people whose course and route are never known. Furthermore, when leaving the hospital, Helen mentions how there seemed to be ten times as much traffic as before, and she says: "I had the extraordinary feeling that all these cars were gathering for some special reason I didn't understand" (00:21:42), as if they fulfilled a personal and human demand for union/socialization, and were a thinking force and acted independently. Simultaneously, machines in the form of



cars and car parts begin to take up the place that supposedly should belong to the human realm. It is worth noticing that Helen's husband's name is not even once mentioned, and his persona is never grieved. When James asks Catherine about him while at the hospital, their conversation is as follows:

Catherine: The other man, the dead man, his wife is a doctor. Dr. Helen Remington (...)

James: What was her husband?

Catherine: A chemical engineer for a food company.

James: Where's the car? (00:09:13)

So, despite this man, the dead man, not appearing to be able to generate any kind of condolences, James and Helen visit the shed where their cars, with total loss, that is, dead, were discharged and there they assume a certain kind of grief for the cars but not for the drivers. Thus, as their bodies get to be even more transformed and mechanically adapted, which might be verified, for instance, when Catherine asks "how can you drive, James? You can barely walk" (00:15:34), we are left with what Haraway wrote: "our machines are disturbingly lively, while we ourselves are frighteningly inert" (pp. 11). Then, in a way, as their crashed bodies look like crashed cars, machines are repairable and/or replaceable, for them to perish sometimes is not just a matter of human choice.

Also, the film relies on a *mise-en-scène* permeated with a grayish and saturated palette where characters, when not transiting from one place to the other, are located in garages, racetracks, roads, car shops but almost never in their own places or in their own bedrooms, Vaughan, for example, mentions to live in his own car, and Gabrielle, when entering Vaughan's office, says to him "here you are at the nerve center" (00:38:47), right after she takes a couple of rolled cigarettes out of a pocket-like compartment in her prosthetic leg. Thus, here, once more, technological advancements, which should serve the purpose of reinvigorating society by fulfilling its needs and lacks, serve to enhance the proportions of how release and fertilization, as Vaughan calls car crashes, happen through decline and disintegration.

## 4. Psychological Fragmentation

Cronenberg's cinematic trajectory upon the body also runs through mind-body dualisms, in a sense that, not only body fragmentation may be psychologically traumatizing, but also the opposite becomes true when psychological fragmentation starts to interfere in bodily integrity. This becomes clear even in his earlier movies, such as *Scanners*, and it has its occurrences, in a smaller or greater extent, in the three movies chosen for this work.

According to Derry (1998), "Cronenberg understands that human beings are often alienated not only from their bodies, but from their bodily processes, which take revenge upon the soul" (pp. 333). Thus, the non-delimitation of the body is also true if considering its correlation to the mind and to our psychology, so that just as with technology, scientific advances can result in bodily modifications, the mind can also be disrupted, in the forms of visual hallucinations caused by a tumorous growth (*Videodrome*), complete loss of humanity (*The Fly*), or a death-pursuing hedonism/desire (*Crash*).

### 4.1 Posthuman Identity: The Dismantling of the Self

Even though Lacan's concept of Subject has acquired a very layered definition throughout the years, one of its keynotes, as far as the elaboration of this concept is concerned, is the one referred by as The Mirror Stage. This goes along with the idea of the first time a child will recognize itself as an "I self" and its consequent separation from an I self, by the establishment of a connection with the image seen in a mirror. I believe it to be an interesting correlation with a scene where Seth Brundle checks himself in the mirror during one of the more hardcore stages of his transformation into a human-fly. He attempts to perform human-like actions that were once common to him, such as using an electric shaver to cut off his new "beard", now composed of insect material, without success. He then realizes his nails are falling off his fingers and starts to remove them with his teeth, while looking at himself astonished through the looking glass, as if getting to know and better understand the particularities of this new body and flesh, the new "I". For Kac-Vergne (2017), the extreme close-ups in this particular scene contributes to an atmosphere of fear and disgust as the spectator faces the hybridity of human-insect as a blending experience, along with the fact that mirror scenes are:

Both moments of diegetic self-awareness for the protagonist and moments of distance for the spectator, when identification is broken by distanced monstration or disgusting proximity.<sup>36</sup>

This is the starting point of rupture between an image in which he sees himself strengthened by the transformations he is going through and the image of what he really is. If according to Lacan, quoted by Bailly, the Mirror Stage is “an alienating experience and the beginning of a series of untruths”, since what the baby is looking at is a lure, itself in the form of a material object and image, opposed to the reality of its body, thus it is only when Brundle sees his deteriorating body reflected in the mirror that he can measure the aftermath of his transformative process and from that moment on he is able to embrace his new body reality along with its new features, he ceases to be just a different Brundle and he is able to become Brundlefly.



Fig. 6. The Mirror Recognition.

According to Lacan, during The Mirror Stage, a toddler, when first seeing itself in the mirror, will be able to recognize itself in it and conceptualize its own existence through

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<sup>36</sup><https://www.perlego.com/book/916474/masculinity-in-contemporary-science-fiction-cinema-cyborgs-troopers-and-other-men-of-the-future-pdf>. Accessed 13<sup>th</sup> august 2021.

the image it is being seen. The baby now stops seeing its body as just a collection of fragments and begins to perceive its reflection as a whole body, a whole being, and itself as a less perfect version of that reflection. It is the first time that the child will make sense of its existence outside its internal frames, here it comes the ability of perceiving itself within the outside world, though it is just an image, a signified, an idea, and images belong to the Imaginary order. Because The Mirror Stage is prior to language acquisition, and since language is how one makes sense of the world, the ideas that come with the acknowledgment of the self seen through the mirror are only “half-baked” ideas, for they have not yet been associated with a signifier which comes along with language.

Bailly will comment on how children with cerebral palsy or with severe motor disabilities will suffer from extreme difficulties, for, because of the lack of language, they will find trouble in conceptualizing space. In 1971, Werner Herzog, the well-known German director, produced and directed a very sensitive documentary called *Land of Darkness and Silence*, which deals with the examination of deaf-blind people and their struggles, and a couple of years later he directed *The Enigma of Kasper Hauser* (1973) which deals with a similar issue and whose plot was based on a true event of a man who has grown up isolated and chained, which caused him to not properly develop basic human abilities, such as speaking and walking. In the case of the former example, even though most people suffering from this condition are either born with one disability or the other and end up getting blind or deaf towards the late years of their lives due to old age, a small portion of that group is born like that. Amongst them, Herzog had the opportunity to film Vladimir Kokol, a 22-year-old boy, deaf-blind by birth, who had never received any special training, not even from his family. No stimuli at all and no attempt to awaken the boy made him grow up without being able to establish communication, but not only that, because of the lack of any type of language, even though he has no cognitive or motor disability, Vladimir could not walk and could barely eat any solids. Considering that language is contained by elements coming from both the Imaginary and the Symbolic, the signifieds and signifiers combined, the ideas and the representation of them altogether, then, for me, Vladimir’s case is an exemplification of a person who had never reached the Imaginary realm, for he did not have what Bailly calls “the primal intellectual act of self-recognition”, neither has he being able to manifest the Symbolic, which is represented,

amongst others, by language, his experiences are in the realm of the Real, unreached and unreachable through language and inexpressible in language. Going after an example that dealt with these principles inside out helped me to understand a little better the RSI relationship proposed by Lacan.

Also, as far as the Imaginary is concerned, *le petit autre*, or the mirror image seen by the baby, the object of desire, allows it to establish identification or rejection towards another person, as well as creates an imaginary projection in relation to the mirror image of the self. Whereas *le grand autre* indicates a radical otherness which is beyond the Imaginary and which cannot be resolved and dealt with through identification. It belongs to the Symbolic order. – “The Other is Society, the Law, etc. – the whole set of hypotheses within which the Subject is constituted” (Bailly) – it is an illustration of the fact that the Subject is part of an order which predates its birth and is exterior to the self.

In relation to the last concept of the Lacanian RSI, the Real is the most difficult one to define, paradoxically making it the easiest to be defined. To cut things short, the Real comprises all that resists symbolization, it is what escapes us, as Bailly states, “it is the bit that the signifier fails to capture”. If something may be perceived to us by the means of the signifier, on the other hand, what cannot be perceived and cannot be signified belongs to the realm of the Real, and it stays in a state of non-being.

In his explanations about “desire”, Bailly says that Lacan will place it in between need and demand, that means that from the need of something, us, humans, are compelled to make a demand in order to fulfill and satisfy that need or the lack of something. Since the only way through which a demand can be made is by using language, and, as we know it, language is never fully able to express what we mean in its completeness and to convey meaning in its totality, there is always a part of our request that is left behind. According to Lacan, this is where desire stands, as being the byproduct of language. In Bailly’s words, “desire appears at the margin where desire is torn from need. Demand is spoken and yet what you ask for is never what you truly want, as what you want is something that remains hidden from your consciousness; so it is with the acquisition of language that desire arises” (Bailly, 2009, pp. ?)

Moreover, desire appears to be more in relation to the fulfillment of psychological needs rather than the physical ones, for they are the hardest to express and mainly to vocalize. After all, for Lacan, all our demands come essentially from our constant demand for love, which is an unutterable demand. In the duality of need and demand, the demand for love goes beyond the one of asking for what one needs. Particularly, for Lacan, love is “giving what one doesn’t have” (Lacan in Bailly, pp. ??), in this sense, when a child asks for something, it is usually asking for an inessential extra that will be interpreted as an effort put to satisfy it.

Taking in consideration that desire then comes from an inability of expressing what one wants, when sexual drive is taken into consideration, this becomes even more apparent, since sexual activity is not an essential aspect of our survival, so it becomes a feasible demand, in a sense that it can be put into words, though it is not easily justifiable, and it becomes difficult to be formulated. This idea is linked to the Lacanian concept of *jouissance*, correspondent of a pleasure fulfillment disassociated with the discharge of a physical need, in other words, “jouissance is the enjoyment of a sensation for its own sake” (Bailly, 2009, pp. ?). Nicki’s love and attraction for pain denotes how she works as an emotional help for anonymous people reaching her at the radio station program but in reality what she seeks is the wound, as she burns herself with cigarettes, and lets physical body enters the Videodrome arena in exchange for a never-ending life of pleasurable pain. In a similar scheme of a suffering so fulfilling, yet never able to fulfill enough, characters in *Crash* look for pain without really fearing it, as they do not even fear death. In an attempt to achieve orgasms, to achieve pleasure for its own sake, Vaughan and his followers aim for scars, wounds, bruises, cuts, crashes that will make them screens of their own machinic *jouissance*.

Cronenberg’s oeuvre is bounded by recurrent elements, such as the mutation of the human body, the consequent transformation of human psyche, and vice versa. Also, sex represents a constant presence throughout his filmic production<sup>37</sup>, though I might state that *Crash* stands as one of his most erotic movies, having it even recurrently received by

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<sup>37</sup> *Rabid*’s (1977) penis-like organ thirsty for its victims’ penetration; *Shivers*’ (1975) sex-crazed zombies, for example.

the critics the status of “pornographic”. In Manuel Camblor’s 1999 text called *Death Drive’s Joy Ride: David Cronenberg’s Crash*, he mentions that in *Crash*, the character’s *jouissance* arise from craving the merging between sex and machinery. According to him “the group operates as a sort of orgiastic coven whose members are united by the erotic thrills they derive from everything related to automobile wreck”<sup>38</sup>. Also, for Camblor, the uncanny element of *Crash*, considering the Freudian reading of the German word *unheimlich* and its proper translation to “unhomely”, relies on the fact that the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real, in Lacanian terms, stay unbalanced for, in *Crash*, narratively speaking, we are rendered with a series of signifiers that relate to other signifiers rather than to a signified, as there is, according to the author, “no recognizable closure, no bliss in domesticity, no “paradise found” and no validation of traditional social protocols”, only a numerous of sex scenes motivated by a desire so alien to the audience: the car crash. In this sense, we are encountered with what Camblor will call an “anti-film”, one that transgress regular and familiar narrative standards. So, in *Crash*, there is “no recognizable closure, no bliss in domesticity, no “paradise found” and no validation of traditional social protocols”, and we find what the author called an unfamiliar discursive space, an undoubtedly an unfamiliar narrative with cars being an unhomely element, as they are seen not as they are supposed to be seen.

Thus, when discussing the presence of the weird in Lovecraft’s work, Fisher (2016) mentions that, despite having its character’s frightened, in Lovecraft’s oeuvre, the readers are not usually scared, what both, the characters and the readers, share in common is actually the presence of a fascination. For Fisher, this so-called fascination shares its meaningfulness with Lacan’s notion of *jouissance*, considering the fact that, for both of them to exist, satisfaction must be somehow connected with suffering, in a way that negativity is sublimated by an enjoyment, in other words, masochism. In his explanation, Fisher says that the work of *jouissance* “transforms an ordinary object causing displeasure into a Thing which is both terrible and alluring”<sup>39</sup>, which strikes in its conceptual resemblance to what cars represent in *Crash* (1996). At some point towards the middle

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<sup>38</sup> <http://www.othervoices.org/1.3/mcambolor/crash.php>. Accessed 12<sup>th</sup> March 2021.

<sup>39</sup> <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1WcZvF0tW42qo1GUylGDnSht2tHp67q2b/view>. Accessed 12<sup>th</sup> February 2021.

of the film, while driving, Vaughan gives pictures of famous car crashes and injured people in car accidents scenes to James, to which he replies “it’s all very satisfying...not sure I understand why” (00:52:19), and, as a reply to his comment, as already mentioned before in this text, Vaughan tells him that they share a benevolent psychopathology proper of the future, and as he continues, he states that the car crash is not destructive, but a fertilizing event which liberates sexual energy. Furthermore, in his explanations related to what the Thing consists of, Bailly states that it is a concept figuring beyond any representation, and, according to the Freudian conception of it, *Das Ding* is characterized by something unimaginable but whose absence is contradictorily striking. Still, it constitutes what one desires, and it is the biproduct of the search for *jouissance*, thus, as being an object of transgression, it usually ends in self-destruction and, as Bailly writes, it might be the object of the death drive.

According to Baudrillard, one must resist the temptation to read *Crash* as a representation of a perversion. For him, it is no longer a matter of a death drive, for there is no flux nor desire involved. In that environment created, there is no dysfunction as it is a universe ruled by the Accident, with a capital A, a semiurgy for the “elementary, irreversible figure, the banality of the anomaly of death” (pp. 113). In a reversed logic, here “the Accident (...) gives form to life, it is the Accident, the insane, that is *the sex of life*” (pp. 113). Bodies and technology in *Crash* relate in a symbiotic way, inextricably connected. In some points, Helen’s underwear pieces are metallic and iridescent, or even Vaughan’s skin tone seems to be gray, pale, and dead-like. In *Crash*, according to Baudrillard, sex is but a symbolic exchanged diminished by all the other possibilities opened (quite literally) by the wounds created through the accidents and crashes. On the other hand, in accordance with what Hayles (1991) stated, a point of view with which I better share, in *Crash*, “desire is not absent. Rather it is reconfigured and intensified”<sup>40</sup>. In this sense, just as mentioned in the previous paragraph, there is desire and their search for a fertilizing event, even if it is a violent one. In order to defend the idea that *Crash* presents a space where Death is in fact the object of desire, Adams will set a difference between the kind of desire presented in *Crash* from what could be mistaken by some sort of masochism or sadism. To set these aspects apart, she will use the word “wound” as a reference to how the sexuality

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<sup>40</sup> <https://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/55/forum55.htm>. Accessed 12<sup>th</sup> March 2021.



presented in the movie is like. In *Crash*, unlike Lacan's idea of sadism, in which the focus of interest acts upon repetition and, therefore, indicates a need for recovery, so that the body could be hurt again, in *Crash* the aim presented is based on a round-circle echoing an ongoing process of hurting and healing, it is rather a process leading towards a specific end: death, or, as the author puts it, death at the center of a new form of desire.

Then, Smith discusses the various ways with which Cronenberg touches the merging between sex and horror throughout his career. According to him, there are at least two familiar ways in which horror can be approached, being the first of them through the exposition of the contrast between what is humanly and humane, or, in other words, what we consider to be intrinsically connected to humans, with what is not (or at least not considered to be, by us humans). In this type of horror fiction, the viewer is led to sympathize with the moral schemes of a human society, the ones who truly suffer, and who face the horrors of an inhuman menace. On the other hand, Cronenberg's oeuvre do involve, to a great extent, human characters suffering and being threatened by monstrous, though, in many ways we are led to take a different perspective.

As an example of it, Smith will use the 1979 movie, *Shivers*. It involves humans getting attacked by a sluggish parasite eager for human sexual activity, though this time the viewer is not taken to simply sympathize with the human-victims in an anthropocentric scheme in which human nature is automatically deserving our commotion. Cronenberg opts for a more unusual perspective, by not letting us be a part of the protagonist's suffering and drama (or any other character for that matter), our gaze takes the parasite perspective, so to speak. Another way of (dis)constructing horror is followed in *Crash*, even though this is not taken as a horror film. Smith enhances how *Crash* subverts psychological patterns by presenting us with characters whose desire is only transcended through "pain, excoriation, trauma, and ultimately death – all of it mediated by the technology and materials of the car (metal, glass, rubber, foam, leather, plastic, and so on)" (pp. 72).

Thus, in the final scene of *Crash*, we are presented with the couple, Catherine and James, on a supposed chase on a highway that ends with the coalition of their cars and with Catherine being thrown off the road. When asked if she is hurt, she replies that she is

alright and then we are presented with the vagueness of the film's last line "Maybe the next one, darling...Maybe the next one" (01:34:58). The strange unpredictability of this line comes with an image of sexual tenderness of the couple caressing each other on the shoulder lane, added to the fact that his line possibly means that James is not relieved that she is well but rather hopeful that next time she will not be, that she will die next time. Moreover, this transgression of conventional standards leaves us no other option but to observe an inhuman perspective, one in which partners do not share standard and conventional ideas of partnership, care, affection and safety, but symbolically represent an alternative psychology in which bodies are instruments, almost mechanical-like, they stand as ways of achieving a possible transcendence from the Accident.

## **4.2 Exteriorization of the Mind: Hyperfiction and Madness**

### **4.2.1 *The Fly***

As was mentioned a few times previously in my text, body and psychological transformation match the encounter with a consequent crumbling subjectivity as well as the progressive loss of humanity and of a diminished moral compass expected socially from the characters. Thus, this chapter will be devoted to a more profound analysis of these aspects in relation to each of three movies studied. In section 2.4 of my text, I examined into what Smith named as Cronenberg's (a)moral monstrosity, where, in *The Fly*, for instance, it is represented, amongst other aspects, by the inhumanity revealed by Brundlefly towards his partner Veronica throughout his transformative process, and, in this section, I will start by returning to Smith's theory linking the horror proposed by Cronenberg with a particular human psychology, apart from familiar norms, a psychology led by dehumanized characters who act in contrast to what we acknowledge as being humane or socially accepted. In this sense, the following quote from Robert C Soloman (1992) presented by Smith is appropriate to represent the way Cronenberg presents us with horror in his films:

The revolting and disgusting is attractive in its own right... because it reminds us of something essential about ourselves. We live in a sanitized society, in which

even criminal executions have been whittled down to a clinical, private injection...

[horror reminds] us of our most basic vulnerabilities. (Apud SMITH, pp. 70)

Therefore, as Smith comments, what horror normally deals with is the break from anthropocentric perspectives, it is the contrast between humanity, the familiar aspects of our understandings as human beings, and inhumanity. In *The Fly*, Brundlefly provides us with the questioning:

(...) Have you ever heard of insect politics? Neither have I. Insects...don't have politics. They're brutal. No...compassion. No...compromise. We can't trust the insect. I'd like to become the first insect politician. (01:17:02)

At this point, he is willing to find an intersection point between the two categories he finds himself in, by bringing to his life, as an insect, one of the paramount aspects of social organization brought by the social contract, a societal life organized and ruled by political organizations. Even though this desire to be standing in a place in between both existences is communicated, Seth never really gets the chance of performing or being ruled by an insect politics because the closer to an insect he gets the more he wants Veronica to step aside and to be distant from him, especially because of his fear of being unconsciously aggressive towards her, as the more animal-like he gets, the more his Id overcomes his Superego and he starts acting based upon instincts rather than rationality. Again, this may be resulting from the anthropocentric moral scheme Smith discusses, one which is always "unambiguously establishing the human as the center of dramatic, moral and emotional interest" (pp. 71), since, according to Wilson (2011), the core value of this transformative event does not exclusively encompass the transformation itself, it, moreover, establishes a connection with the ideological structures behind it, which mediate such body modifications.

Also, these ideological structures, the human ones, simply do not conceive any humanization of such animalistic creatures as insects are and deny instinctive reactions as being part of an acceptable norm, or at least, the human norm. Following what Wilson argued, as well as Cronenberg seems to be showing, the transformative process is fairly neutral in its effects, what will shape the concepts of it being negative or positive is how it affects the subject in relation to the social structures the individual is inserted in. In fact,

this organization, despite being a rather arbitrary one, is responsible for structuring social consciousness in the way of molding what is acceptable and what is not, it is what decides if a transformation one is going through is a mere transformative process or rather a transgression.

Furthermore, I agree with Wilson when he says *The Fly* differs from Cronenberg's initial films in relation to the way they are filmed and consequently in how a less clinical distance from the characters/protagonists render them with a more humanistic perspective. Whereas in *Rabid* and *Shiver* we appear to be following a venereal disease worm's point of view, while it crawls from one victim to the other, with no particular focus on any of the characters' subjectivity, in *The Fly* we are able to sympathize with a scientist who is both the creator and the victim of his downfall. Because of it, the menace with which he must deal with seems to also affect us, the audience, in a greater level, leading us towards a more empathetic perspective in relation to his dehumanization/transformation process.

#### **4.2.2 Videodrome**

The initial point from which the plot of *Videodrome* starts being developed is tied in with the desensitization of a society who "crave stimulation for its own sake" (00:10:34) and the efforts taken by two main forces portrayed in the movie: Barry Convex, a villainized character seeking some kind of moralist revenge towards people who keep looking for snuff, pornographic, violent content and who should somehow be punished by means of having their own mind controlled in a distorted censorship maneuver attempting to fight moral corruption. On the other hand, for Professor O'blivion, Videodrome is an agent of change, a transformative tool which serves to connect technology and human experience in a way of merging them into the new flesh. Both efforts are named by Wilson (2011) as "two distinct sets of disciplinary structures"<sup>41</sup>, for, despite political and personal differences, both use technology as a means to achieve what they want by applying it to Max, a sensationalist broadcaster who disregard how harmful live torture could be for television viewers. For Wilson:

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<sup>41</sup> <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/800773/2>. Accessed 18<sup>th</sup> April 2021.

The fact that both establishments use Max as their programmable assassin means that despite their political differences (broadly speaking, left and right wing, respectively), both institutions represent inverse articulations of the same kinds of disciplinary structures, resulting in the same kinds of restrictions on those subjects who must endure them.

As the movie goes on, we become aware that the ongoing events might be just partially true and real as Max's corporeal experience might be "half video hallucination" (00:36:12). Nevertheless, we are too, as spectators, deprived of any factual certainty in relation to what reality is, since we are unaware of any external context other than just what Max himself sees with his own eyes, getting often confused on whether happenings occur into an objective diegesis or in Max's distorted mind. In the film, prior to his contact with Videodrome, Max had already been far desensitized by media as he starts his journey throughout the movie seeking his blind interest in a form of media totally alien to him which allegedly would help him break through and access those who were already tired of mainstream, softcore pornography. As so often happens in our daily lives in 2021, in *Videodrome*, media and technology were used as means for transcending the mundanity of the real world and, as Max seeks what is behind that kind of production, which would primarily be "for perverts only" (00:12:35), following how Harlam describes it, the protagonist is repulsed as well as completely seduced and intrigued by it.

By expanding Marxist's notion of reification, Jonathan Crary (2016) established an expanded analysis on how culture may contribute to a coercion over everyday life, and over even one of the most mundane and natural human experiences: sleep. According to the author, the most "irreducible necessities of human life – hunger, thirst, sexual desire, and recently the need for friendship – have been remade into commodified and financialized forms." (pp. 10). For him, also, pornography comprehends an electronic industry capable of providing an illusionary model of control which would influence a 24/7 consumption through the illusion of pleasure attached to a need for an ongoing repetition. In his words,

Television was only the first of a category of apparatuses with which we are currently surrounded that are most often used out of powerful habitual patterning

involving a diffuse attentiveness and a semi-automatism. In this sense, they are part of larger strategies of power in which the aim is not mass-deception, but rather states of neutralization and inactivation, in which one is dispossessed of time. But even within habitual repetitions there remains a thread of hope—a knowingly false hope—that one more click or touch might open onto something to redeem the overwhelming monotony in which one is immersed. (pp. 88)

Thus, what Max is attempting to bring to his audience as a product is the fulfillment of its never-ending need for satisfaction through the means of substantially new forms of a cyberspatial transcendence allowing a deflation of meaning either of sex as well as of human treatment per se, given the fact that he is aware Videodrome might very well be real and not an enactment.

In Truffaut's 1966 adaptation of Ray Bradbury's book *Fahrenheit 451*, as characters are forbidden to read or to consume any type of literature, they become hostages of television consumption and therefore susceptible to forever ongoing soap operas and TV shows whose utility is nothing more than distracting the community from everyday life boredom, preventing it from the sadness knowledge, philosophy and fantasy may bring to a reader's existence. In Truffaut's film, a dystopian narrative takes the audience to a place where people are craving to be able to feel something, anything at all, though this feeling of incompleteness and melancholy is disguised by the so-called happiness of an alienated society who pretend to portray social harmony and stability. For a long time there, people were happy to be alienated with the numbness provided by television, it was a distraction from a meaningless existence and a shield from the sufferings of the world. In Prof. O'blivion cryptic monologues, the world's greatest televisionary discusses how reality and television are already merged, as the aspects of real life are mediated, thus a life inside media has become of greater importance than a life lived outside of it, as if there were no escape from that after all. Similarly, in the 1998 *The Truman Show*, Jim Carrey's character lives a fake reality full of positivity, color, smiles, gentleness and a constant blue sky, a life supposedly good to be lived as it works as a disguise from the turmoil of existence. In a mediatized, fake reality, which substitutes reality, as Brian O'blivion would say, "television screen emerges as raw experience for those who watch

it" (00:35:39), the creators of *The Truman Show* want to push Truman (Jim Carrey) away from pain, memory, uncertainty, rejection.

Similar to the firemen in *Fahrenheit 451*, who allegedly defend a book-burning politics for the sake of a life freed from suffering and existential questionings, in a life mediatized, we are not mimicking reality, for it has already taken its place, there is Professor Brian O'blivion and Christof<sup>42</sup> (Ed Harris), *The Truman Show* director. The former has dedicated his existence as a living being to record himself and therefore make his own existence last indefinitely through technology and media. The latter claims that there is nothing fake about Truman's life and, when questioned about his opinion on why Truman has never discovered what is behind his televised life, he stated "we accept the reality of the world which we are presented" (01:06:14). All that under the justification of providing Truman with a "normal" life, far from the real world, a "sick place".

Regardless of the fact that a discussion involving possible dangers of TV alienation might be a bit outdated nowadays, and was so already in the early 90s, with the widespread usage of personal computers and the internet, according to Crary, the power television has upon us has not disappeared but was merged into neoliberalism interests which permitted a "more methodical extraction of value from television time, and in principle from every waking hour" (pp. 84). In this sense, smart devices, supposedly fit to attend all of our necessities, now combine a wide range of hybrid digital technologies available to us 24/7 in a televisual form.

It is hard then not to associate this contemporary analysis on media with what was being presented by *Videodrome* back in 1983, where the movie serves as a metaphor for how dependent one might become of media technologies to a point where one's sense of reality becomes distorted. Even so, as mentioned previously in this section, audiences of *Videodrome* are too deceived by the very own diegetic *Videodrome*, since we too are losing our sense of reality when accompanying Max through his quest of figuring *Videodrome* out. In the film, to be a part of the technological realm of television is to be a functional part of the world. Thus, it is part of prof. O'blivion's life project to offer

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<sup>42</sup> Christof's name as an allegory Christ, as a part of the World's creation, in this case, Truman's world creation.

television signals to those addicts who do not have the condition to own a television set. The “derelicts” would go to the Cathode-Ray Mission, a large shed filled with TV sets, and they would get fulfilled with the free transmission, as if in a reverse rehabilitation.

Thus, whereas we seek television to satisfy our need for entertainment in an addictive form, as Crary states, the reward we get from it is one of numbness,

Moments after turning on a television, there is no detectable rush or charge of sensation of any kind. Rather, there is a slow shift into a vacancy from which one finds it difficult to disengage. This is a decisive trait of the era of technological addictiveness: that one can return again and again to a neutral void that has little affective intensity of any kind. (...) The hundreds of studies on depression and internet use show similar kinds of results. Even the quasi-addictiveness associated with internet pornography and violent computer games seems to lead quickly to a flattening of response and the replacement of pleasure with the need for repetition. (pp. 87)

Also, according to the author, once we are globally connected by a mass synchronization of the same or quite similar global media and, as we not only watch basically the same programs, football matches, and international events, but also listen to the same mainstream artists and experience politics through very similar lenses quite often, we started losing the potential of our individual memory. In *Videodrome*, Prof. O’blivion, whose presence was never physical and always taped and televised, believed human existence was faded to become technological as he claimed it was everyone’s destiny to be transformed into tapes and recordings which would also completely get in the way of our individual memory (therefore the name of the character) and decision-making powers. Even though Cronenberg states that “it is totally misleading to say that it (*Videodrome*) is a criticism on television, or that it is an extension of network”<sup>43</sup>, it is a fact that, in *Videodrome*, media and technology are responsible for a distorted take upon our

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<sup>43</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kcKMn3CZ1bk&t=197s&ab\\_channel=revokcom](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kcKMn3CZ1bk&t=197s&ab_channel=revokcom). Accessed 11th July 2021.



perception of the world and that, to be closer to McLuhan's idea of a "global village" may also mean to be paved with a reality of limited half-truths.

#### **4.2.3. *Crash***

Similarly to *Videodrome*, in *Crash* body transformation occurs due to a transgression first present in the mind for here we are presented with an alternative human psychology and its characters act upon an alternative mindset and desire. The movie might lose its strength through the means of repetition, since it gets to a point where the initial shock and strangeness of it is surpassed by its lack of new surprises, but maybe this is also part of its intention, an exploration on how desensitized we become after watching a sex scene after the other. Likewise, the characters themselves who seem to never get enough satisfaction, we too become participants of the bore resulting from endless media landscape. The characters develop an (un)conscious sexual desire attached to destruction, wreckage, and death they were able of watching in the media.

Out of the three movies presented here, *Crash* might be the one where it is most evident the characters' state of detachment. If *Videodrome*, as a capitalist goods, is able to provide its audiences with their most unimaginable desires, people in *Crash* make usage of an everyday technological apparatus, like a car, as a source for a twisted entertainment. Still, in spite of being the automobile their main source of technological consumption, the car crashes recreated by the group mimic and imitate highly mediatized events as Jayne Mansfield's and James Dean's car collision deaths. Apart from rejoicing themselves on streets, the group also finds some entertainment while watching crash simulation videos and, furthermore, at some points, James and Catherine arouse themselves sexually by narrating their extra-marital affairs and fantasies to each other in a porn-like narrative manner, reinforcing how attached they are to the power of representation. In Fisher's words:

Here we have it: a mediamatic repetition-compulsion culture in which trauma and mass communication have become indivisible, where any experience is inseparable from its mediatization. (2018, pp. 84)

As mentioned previously in my text, people, scenery, and time in *Crash* are presented as flat, cold, distant, and somewhat disconnected. Characters' aloofness quite often does not allow the audience to empathize or relate, as they do not seem to be impacted by trauma whatsoever, as James and Hellen, for example, are quickly driving again, when it doesn't seem to matter that the two have just been through a traumatic situation in which a car accident involving the two left one person dead, they are then released from the hospital and quickly returned to the streets, ready to drive again and to relate sexually. Whereas public reception condemned *Crash* for being a highly violent and pornographic film, there is no real graphic violence portrayed nor action elements and, as far as sex scenes are concerned, the majority of them accompany the coldness of the people involved in it making it hard for spectators to really engage.

With the car being a fraction of our private lives, in the form of a sealed metal box whose doors and windows remain closed if the driver so wishes, the necessity to bring to public such a personal aspect of an individual life, such as sexuality, combined with automobiles denounces the postmodern feature of a "world that offers spectacle but no emotion" (Craven, 2000, pp. 191) as well as a break in sexual boundaries. Even though, a sense of detachment was already a pre-existing condition in the Ballard's life even before James' car crash with Helen that led him to meet Vaughan, it was when they joined Vaughan's group that they could really experience the "psychodynamics of postmodern isolation" (pp. 194) where even though they are participants of a group with shared interests, there does not seem to exist any real connection and partnership between them.

It was already common for the couple to engage in sexual relations similar to porn-like narratives and to embrace them as a rule, even though they seem unable to achieve satisfaction, as their first dialog on their balcony seems to suggest. In all sex scenes in which the Ballards are together, there seems to exist an element of sexual quirkiness and erotic potential proper of porn productions: garter belts and sexy lingerie, erotic talk verbalizing their desires/fantasies, sexual stimulation in public spaces, such as a hospital room.

The almost tiresome repetition of sex scenes in *Crash* nonetheless reveals themselves as cold and detached with some grotesque elements like the ticking boxes of the sex scenes:

boy/girl, girl/girl, boy/boy; and I agree with Carven when she states that “characters’ unengaged sex acts reproduce their media-inspired concepts of intimacy based on physical contact, but, again, the act has no soul” (pp. 200). In this sense, they are attracted solely by the reproduction of iconic crash scenes but never their own. As Vaughan tells James:

I’ve always wanted to drive a crash car (...) a crash car with a history, Camus’ Facel Vega, Nathaniel West’s station wagon, Grace Kelly’s Rover 3500, just fixed enough to get it roll. Don’t clean it, don’t touch anything else. (00:51:08)

He says right before he shows James his collection of crash pictures, carried along with him in a document paste. James Dean’s and Jayne Mansfield’s death photographic registers comprise at that point the mediatic materialization of his desire. The equation of such shallow and distant relations joined with their mediatic (and by mediatic I mean technological) fascination, in the forms of cars, pictures, movies, television, culminates with the characters ready to accept collision between flesh and metal as orgasmic and fulfilling rather than authentic forms of human connection.

## Conclusion

Within the last year that I spent dedicating myself to this research, I have been committed to the investigation on how the cinema of David Cronenberg, especially with regards to three of his most complex films *Videodrome*, *The Fly* and *Crash*, is tied up in the postmodern condition, both as a reflex and as an exemplification of a social phenomenon. Specifically, that which concerns postmodern aspects related to fragmentation and how this is achieved, in Cronenberg's oeuvre, in relation to the merging between body, sex and technology.

For me, as a millennial who was born after the 80s AIDS outbreak, and therefore, despite acknowledging the gravity of it, I have not lived the panic it caused during any of my adult life, because I was left with the aftermath of it. For all that matter, we live the acceptance of body invasion by alien forces, but only if with the purpose of having it "cleaner" or purportedly modified. I will not assume that choosing this topic to write about while the world was, and still is, suffering from the COVID-19 pandemic was a conscious choice, though I may admit that, for the lack of a better word, it was an "interesting" combination. While reading the Kroker's theories on Body Invaders conceptualized back in the 80s, there was so much of it I could relate to our current reality it was curious. The fact that circumstances like this could be anticipated by 20 years by a cinematic oeuvre is just another sign that this condition we are currently facing is not going to end so soon.

The details that involved this research were many, it had to deal not only with what involved the postmodern in general, but above all with how the body element is figured within this historical-social context. As Cronenberg is widely known as perhaps the father of body horror, a genre that pays attention to graphic and even a little disturbing violation of the body and mind, it can be automatic to say that the director's works are directly related to the performance of a postmodern body, given its characteristic rupture and fragmentation. In fact, some research prior to mine have already engaged in this analysis. However, for me it would be important that this analysis was carried out taking as a principle the union between the factors: body, sex, and technology. Considering that the director is responsible for a relatively cohesive work, these three aspects turn out to be

frequent, to a greater or lesser extent, in most of Cronenberg's films, which in a way can facilitate their understanding.

Therefore, my work proposes the understanding that the body portrayed by Cronenberg in his works, in addition to undergoing a constant intervention by machines, it assimilates them, undergoes alteration from it and disintegrates. Such technological advances range from the most commonplace, such as cars, to instruments particularly belonging to the context of science fiction, such as teleportation pods. Technology may not only be an extension of our bodies, but it may alter them, sometimes to a point of no return as we increasingly become cyborgs. Even though all protagonists in the films analyzed reach their nadir because of technology, the movies do not really work as cautionary tales, as they do not seem to have any moral compass attached to them.

Thus, when Labarthe asked about the importance of rebirth in Cronenberg's films, as happens in *The Fly*, in an allusion to the moment when Brundle comes out of the pods naked, the director counterpoints it by saying that rather than birth/rebirth, it is a matter of transformation, transcendence even. Labarthe then comes with a Goya quote: "nightmares of the thought give birth to monsters", as a way of asking how, after basically all transformative processes in Cronenberg's oeuvre, we are left with monstrous creatures. To Cronenberg, as he says, monstrosity is relative, as well as reality, therefore the creativity entailed in existing, since we do not retain absolutes, is assigning meaning to human existence. When his characters go through change and become something else, thus, when Brundle becomes Brundlefly, when Max enters the realm of Videodrome and embraces the New Flesh or when James accepts that new psychopathology of the group, they are not more or less monstrous than we are, they are just accepting their new reality as it is. What is a pattern, at least for these three, is that all three conditions derived from transformative processes lead (or will do in a near future) to death. In one way or the other, as Cronenberg tells Gavin Smith, characters in *Crash* are the ones who seem to truly follow this concept he presents, the one of reshaping reality, as they propose a new way of living, even if it consists in pursuing death.

Just as technology works as an element of dissolution, sex, in Cronenberg's films, figures as an element that, in a way, attracts characters to a center of action and transgression.

Whether in *Videodrome*, from sadistic and voyeuristic practices, or in *The Fly* through the discovery of sexuality and the flesh, and later, from a virile sexuality resulting from an ongoing transformative process, or finally in *Crash* through a new configuration of sexual psychopathology that leads to sexual attraction to accident and wounds. Nevertheless, I believed to be important to dedicate a part of my dissertation to how female bodies are placed in the midst of male-centered narratives where sex acts as such an important unfolding for body and psychological fragmentation. Although the female characters present in the analyzed films no longer figure as representations of abject bodies, as was common in Cronenberg's early works, they appear as instruments in the phallic universes of representation. Despite appearing to be strong figures, enigmatic and participative, the women in the films merely serve as supporting figures for the unfolding of a narrative that is still very centrally focused on the figure of the male body, since the main female characters analyzed present a superficial subjectivity, represented by: a fetishized physical figure (Nicki), a motherly and forever caring figure (Veronica), or a sensuous and detached figure wandering around a universe of masculine technology and violence (Catherine).

I also observed in my work that the subject's fragmentation process is crossed by several transformational vectors and its reflection can be verified both in the body and at the psychological level. It is also possible to verify how the psychological transformation can be reflected at corporeal levels and vice versa. In Cronenberg's cinematographic experience, he makes us mimic the sensations of his characters through filmic articulations. Thus, when watching Max's mental confusion caused by tumors acquired from *Videodrome* consumption, we, as viewers, also lose control of our perception and rational judgment of what comprises reality or not within the diegetic universe of *Videodrome*. In *Crash*, we learn a daily routine of detachment and flatness from a voyeuristic observation. We observe the characters from a stable distance and are taken to a cinematographic experience in which we alternate between moments of disarticulation, dreariness, repetition, boredom, and lack of identification. In *The Fly*, we are able to create a tie for a character who is a victim of his intellectual brilliance and human weaknesses, and we assume his (grotesque) transformation not necessarily as the end of his existence, but as a shift in the configuration of his corporeal experience.

Moreover, it is worth mentioning how, in spite of all three movies being creations dated from the 80s and mid 90s (though Ballard's book *Crash* comes earlier), many of the concepts and ideas raised by Cronenberg cannot only be applied to nowadays societal context but also be expanded. As we are placed in a social context in which we are daily sunk by the exaggerated use of the internet and particularly of social media, contemporary capitalist societies are no exception when mind and psychological fragmentation comes into question. More than ever, perhaps, we are at the center of simulacra, where reality gets blurred as it becomes hard to be recognized amid fake news and the post-truth era. Moreover, we are also flooded with a distorted perception of others and of ourselves, from the moment we become able to digitally configure our persona, leading to the establishment of non-sensical beauty/life standards, to the engagement in medical procedures to look alike Instagram filters, and so on.

Therefore, what is interesting in David Cronenberg's work is how the representations of an abject-body, animal-body, machine-body, prosthetic-body, although horrible and even repulsive, serve us well as an allegory of our own body. We are constantly charged with ethical discussions of domination and power of the capitalist system and the postmodern condition that moves us to always question our levels of autonomy and control of a body that is ours, but which is often crossed and ruptured in a circular process of ceaseless transformation and dissolution. The idea that our individual body can be a site for panoptic control has really resonated in a context where we face a contrasting reality where so many people have declined the COVID vaccine with claims varying from the impossibility of being obliged to be bodily introduced with a substance to the fake-news-based delirium of possibly getting inserted with vigilance chips through the vaccine liquid (A possible future plot for a Cronenberg's movie).

Finally, whereas I feel so much has already been researched and analyzed concerning Cronenberg's ideas upon the body in the form of the body horror subgenre, probably due to how he has comprised a thematically consistent work throughout his career, during the time of reading and writing about his movies, I feel that some ideas might still be worth further investigation. As I mentioned in my text, in Cronenberg's films, especially the earlier ones, women are subjected to male figures and/or are placed as the site of horrific mutations, such as the monstrous mother in *The Brood*, or the abject womb also

in *The Brood*, but in *Dead Ringers* and *The Fly* too. And, even though, as I mentioned, Cronenberg has a very cohesive cinematic trajectory, his more recent movies are not so much anchored and protected by the body horror shield. Still, in one way or the other, if they have grown a bit distant stylistic-wise, they keep on following thematic tendencies, being body and mind fragmentation as well as sex and violence still very present. As usual, violence portrayals are often attached to institutionalized masculinity and therefore, as well as in Cronenberg's earlier movies, in his more recent ones, male characters still act violently based on a phallic authority of, for example, members of the mob. If in *Eastern Promises* (2007), unlike many of his films, we follow a woman protagonist, still she is subdued to an environment of extreme masculine force and power struggle where other women's bodies suffer directly from it in the form of raping and abortions. To sum, I believe it should be interesting to follow a more gendered-based analysis regarding Cronenberg's trajectory of body and mind fragmentation based on his female characters.



## Appendices

### Movie Plots

#### ***Videodrome* (1983)**

In *Videodrome* we follow the protagonist Max Reen (James Woods), who runs a television station named Civic Tv, responsible for broadcasting softcore pornography to its audience. When attempting to find more rough and extreme content, he is presented by Harlam, one of his employees, with Videodrome, a mysterious new content hacked by a satellite dish supposedly coming from Malaysia. The show portrays nothing more than gratuitous violence, torture, and sex scenes, something like a snuff movie, that seems too real to be just acted. The images portray mostly women, chased in a blood-red room, sometimes held, and pressed against a wet wall made from electrified clay, sometimes beaten, and whipped, but always tortured to the point they end up getting killed.

Almost simultaneously to Max first contact with Videodrome he starts a relation with Nicki Brand (Debbie Harris), a sadomasochistic radio host, who watches Videodrome and feels very attracted to it, she craves being a part of that show and intends on travelling to Pittsburgh, after finding out that is where the footage is actually coming from. Curiously, Nicki is never seen again, which causes Max to want to find out more about the mysterious program. Because of this, he contacts his friend Masha (Lynne Gorman), who is also in the porn business, in order to get more information about Videodrome. After some research, she advises Max not to get involved in the show anymore as it can be dangerous, because apparently nothing there is staged, but she also tells him that if he wants to know more about the show, he should go to Professor Brian O'blivion (Jack Creley), a philosopher and researcher of media that prophesies about the future of television and society when he appears in TV programs, but his image is always seen from inside another television, he never appears in person.

So, Max goes in search of Brian Oblivion in the Cathode Ray Mission, a shelter for people in need, which, in addition to providing food and bed, also offers television for addicts to watch. There, Max is unsuccessful in his search for Brian Oblivion, but he does

get a chance to talk to his daughter Bianca (Sonja Smits), who runs the place. Soon after he starts chasing the truth about Videodrome, he gets in touch with a VHS in which Prof. Brian Oblivion says the show is part of a socio-political domination plan. Very soon afterwards, Max realizes he is having visual hallucinations, so Bianca warns him that these visions are a result of the Videodrome signal that causes some of its viewers to develop a brain tumor. In addition, she says that whoever is responsible for spreading this signal would be Barry Convex (Leslie Carlson), former partner of Brian O'blivion, who intended to use the show as a weapon to eliminate anyone interested in seeing such a violent and obscene show as Videodrome. Also, Max becomes aware of the fact that even though Professor Brian Oblivion takes part in television programs and speaks directly to the viewers, himself included, he died 11 months prior to that date because of a Videodrome tumor.

Because he has been heavily exposed to Videodrome signals, Max ends up with an abdominal opening in which Barry Convex is able to insert a VHS and program him to murder Bianca. However, she finds him in time and reschedules him to kill Barry and his fellows instead. From then on, Max's hand is turned into a weapon apparently made of his own flesh, with which he manages to kill Barry. The final scene in *Videodrome* features Max lying in a room in front of a television, hidden and injured. The television then turns on and Nicki appears on the screen. She tells him that for his mission to be accomplished, he must abandon his old flesh and join her, which causes him to shoot himself in the head.

### ***The Fly* (1986)**

In *The Fly*, we follow Seth Brundle (Jeff Goldblum), a promising scientist whose latest project is to create a teleportation machine. He tells Veronica (Geena Davis) of his aspirations, a journalist with whom he starts to have a loving relationship. Seth shows her how his machine works by testing teleportation on a baboon, which, when being teleported to the other pod, ends up having its entire body structure turned inside out. In a conversation with Veronica, Seth has an epiphany as to why the pods did not work out. He realizes that the computer was taught to desire flesh, therefore, it was creating a synthetic version of the flesh to be transported and not the real flesh, so, in that sense, he could reprogram it in order to try it again with a second baboon, this time successfully.

After Veronica goes to the encounter with Stathis (John Getz), her boss and ex-boyfriend, Seth has a fit of jealousy and drunkenness and ends up testing the pods on himself before receiving more results that would allow him to safely test the machines on human beings. This time, he accidentally enters the pods along with a housefly, which causes the computer to break his bodily structure atom by atom and reconstruct it merged with the fly DNA. Progressively, Veronica and Seth get to realize he is becoming different: exaggeratedly craving for sugar and sweets, his body strength has achieved impressive results, his sexual appetite is endless.

As Seth becomes increasingly more aggressive, Veronica gets pushed away. His bodily changes start to get more and more intense as some of his body parts fall off and his skin changes texture and appearance. He then finds out that his is fused with a fly in a molecular-genetic level. At this point, his body is already deteriorating. In the meantime, Veronica finds out she is pregnant, and worried that she could deliver a baby-fly, she has nightmares with her labor in which a giant baby-maggot comes out of her. This is when she talks to Stathis about her decision of having an abortion. But Seth Brundle, who is already calling himself Brundlefly, rescues her from the doctor and tells her his salvation plan: to merge himself, her, and the baby in the teleportation pods so that the three of them can become just one. The plan is interrupted by Stathis, engaging in a corporeal fight with Brundlefly, who regurgitate goop in him, causing Stathis' arm and foot to melt from digestive acid. The film ends with Veronica mercifully shooting Brundlefly in the head, as his transformation process had already reached a point where he was no longer human, but rather a monstrous insect-like figure.

### ***Crash (1996)***

After getting involved in a car crash, James Ballard (James Spader) ends up meeting the doctor Helen Remington (Helen Hunt), who was in the other car involved in the accident. The crash caused her husband to die and the two of them, Helen and James, to end up in a hospital. There, James also met Vaughan (Elias Koteas), some sort of leader to a group of people who fetishize car crashes and who meet regularly to reenact famous and historical car crashes, such as James Dean's. After meeting these people, James and his

wife, Catherine (Deborah Kara Unger) join the group and engage in a routine of car crashes and sexual energy.

They get to meet other members of the group, such as Seagrave (Peter Macneil) and Gabrielle (Rosana Arquette), whose body is full of prosthetic and metallic members, and leather parts. When getting to know each other better, Vaughan tells James that his project is living according to the philosophy that a car crash is a benevolent psychopathology, a fertilizing event, and not a destructive one. The movie counts with numerous sex scenes where some of the main characters are involved, most of them happening inside of cars. Towards the end of the movie, Vaughan, James and Catherine engage in a car chasing on a highway, where Vaughan intentionally crashes his car, ending up dead, and Catherine gets hurt, laying down on a side of the road with James caressing her and whispering in her ear "maybe the next one, darling".

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## Filmography

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*Dead Ringers* [DVD] (1988). David Cronenberg. Canada, USA: Morgan Creek Productions, Mantle Clinic II, Téléfilm Canada, 20th Century Fox.

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*Naked Lunch* [DVD] (1991). David Cronenberg. Canada, Britain, Japan: Recorded Picture Company.

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*Scanners* [DVD] (1981). David Cronenberg. Canada: AVCO Embassy Pictures (USA and Canada), Manson International (International).

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