*Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory/Revue canadienne de théorie politique et sociale,* Volume XIII, no. 1-2 1989

# "HOW'D YOU LIKE TO DISAPPEAR?"* THEORIZING THE SUBJECT IN FILM

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Jameson contends that the individual self has been annihilated by postmodernism since it is no longer a centred subject, yet this presupposes that subjectivity is impossible without a rigorous homogeneity of all ideological messages within a given context. But in the face of competitive interpellation the subject is seldom answering one uniform 'call,' but rather being hailed by multiple, competing messages all issued simultaneously. The 'disappearing self' criticism has become commonplace, but it fails to take into account the centring power of individual discourses, or the power of individuals to make choices regarding those discourses. While a unitary culture may have disappeared, unitary discourses constructing very specific subjects have only intensified. The category of the subject remains highly viable in large part because it has never been so hotly contested. (James Collins[1])

## Preface

Film has always had a major stake in what Collins terms "the category of the subject." Mainstream cinema forms the most recent and perhaps the most insistent chapter in the dominant text of the "hero" in Western thought. This has been both cause and effect of the common assumption that film has a unique capacity to "individuate" — to affirm what is unique and special about the human image (note, for example, the emphasis on

*Capt. Edelson to Steve Burns early on in *Cruising*

the "face" from Béla Belázs to Bergman). Yet, despite the panic privileging of the hero in current Hollywood cinema, the subject is as hotly contested in film as it is everywhere else. The essays that follow provide compelling evidence.

They also range far beyond the issue of the subject (hence defeating any simplistic attempt to introduce them). But they got me thinking about the subject in film — particularly in relation to identity and difference. And they have led me to explore how subject/identity/difference are reflected both in critical approaches to movies and in movies themselves.

## I.

In an introduction to his recent anthology *Deconstruction in Context*, Mark C. Taylor summarizes the historical development of the modern subject in terms of identity/difference:

> In the wake of Descartes's meditations, modern philosophy becomes a *philosophy of the subject*. The locus of certainty and truth, subjectivity is the first principle from which everything arises and to which all must be reduced or returned.... As God created the world through the Logos, so man creates a "world" through conscious and unconscious projection. In different terms, the modern subject defines itself by its *constructive* activity. Like God, this sovereign subject relates only to what it constructs and is, therefore, unaffected by anything other than itself. What seems to be a relationship to otherness — be that other God, nature, objects, or subjects — always turns out to be an aspect of mediate self-relation that is necessary for complete self-consciousness. The absolute knowledge made possible by the phenomenological reduction of difference to identity in subjectivity's full knowledge of itself realizes Western philosophy's dream of enjoying a total presence that is undisturbed by absence or lack.[2]

The apotheosis of Western "identity thinking" (to borrow Adorno's term) is Hegel's System, and Taylor's anthology traces the reaction of post-Hegelian thinkers to the System — culminating with Deconstruction and Derrida:

> Deconstruction is, among other things, a critical rereading of all Western philosophy in which Derrida tries to dismantle (the) tradition, *as if* from within, by tracing philosophy's other.... Like Heidegger, Derrida [maintains] that philosophy does not, indeed *cannot*, think difference.... Along with writers like Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, Bataille, and Blanchot, Derrida tries to think the unthinkable by thinking difference *as* difference, and other *as* other. This differ-

> ence, irreducible to identity — this other, irreducible to same, is an alterity that "exceeds the alternative of presence and absence."[3]

The movement charted by Taylor from the modern to the postmodern, the philosophical to the postphilosophical, establishes a continuum which characterizes notions of the subject in film criticism and films themselves — and which is very much in evidence in the essays that follow. On one end, we have the traditional sense of subjectivity (the hero) as the foundation of all that matters. (This position is repeatedly under attack by the authors below.) On the other end, we have the play of difference and radical alterity of which the subject is merely a part. (Here, no Hegelian *Aufhebung* can reduce the other to the self, difference to identity, the world to the will and constructive activity of the hero.) We also have a middle ground which gives rise to what I see as the prevailing story of fiction film: the subject/hero, adrift and de-centered in a world of difference, commits himself/herself to the elimination of otherness, to creating and/or identifying with structures, myths, and codes that come to be identical with the self. (The films of Peckinpah, most genre films — western, detective, gangster — and, in fact, most American films past and present tell this kind of story.)

In a sense, there is little to choose between the first and the third options. Whether the subject's world begins or becomes self-identical, it exists principally in the realm of the Imaginary, of mirroring and imploding identity/other relationships.[4] This "story of the Imaginary" could also be termed the story of "colonization," in which the subject appropriates everything non-identical to himself. (I specify gender advisedly, since the subject — or self-centered story is inevitably male.)

There is a flip side to the story of colonization, in which the subject becomes appropriated to some hegemonic social and institutional "other" (*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Hair* and a spate of recent war movies such as *Full Metal Jacket* and *Gardens of Stone*). This might seem to subvert the traditional role of the subject. Yet, to a large extent it merely substitutes the subject with the Subject (manmade, man-centered Society). And to the extent that institutional colonization is presented as deplorable, it recuperates the centrality of the small "s" subject through tragedy. (Romantic hubris is replaced by equally romantic angst.) Most important, the system of collapsing identity-other relationships remains in place; genuine alterity and difference are excluded.

Historically, the colonization story has been the basis for prolonged debate over the worth of individual films. The question has been whether stories of appropriation are self-reflexive or merely ideologically determined. Does the film/filmmaker know what he/she/it is doing (hence are we being given a well-conceived lesson on social mores), or are we just confronted with another unconscious reproduction of dominant culture? This, of course (like the issue of self-reflexivity), is largely a matter of intentionality, yet again centering the "subject" — now as auteur rather than hero.

## II.

In recent years, death-of-the-author theorizations have caused radical reformulation of the auteur theory.[5] Moreover, structuralist and poststructuralist critical strategies have helped shift the focus away from the (male) protagonist(s).[6] Nonetheless, in much current criticism, the subject-hero still remains the source of meaning for individual films, reflecting the larger assumption that the subject is the origin and locus of meaning in society. (This is virtually *always* the case in journalistic film reviewing, but I am talking here of academic discourse.)

The essays that follow provide useful examples, almost always in a highly critical light. For instance, Snyder has trouble accepting a Jungian interpretation of *Cruising* by Nancy Hayles and Kathryn Rindskopf which sees Stuart (the killer) as the "shadow" side of Burns (the cop). In the context of this interpretation, "The tragedy of Pacino's [Burns's] quest is not that he fails to engage the shadow, but that in our society he cannot integrate it within himself to become a whole person."[7] At least two assumptions underlie this reading of the film: 1) everything "out there," if properly seen, is merely a reflection of the subject (the entire Jungian apparatus of shadows, personae, animuses, animas, etc. is designed to "operationalize" this assumption); 2) the ideal is for everything "out there" to be properly consumed by the subject so that he/she can become "whole." Here we have a psychology of the subject which is more than equal to Taylor's modern philosophy of the subject. The extent to which otherness is collapsed into the subject-as-source is even implied in the authors' use of Pacino's (the actor's) name rather than Burns's (the character's). Just as society is merely a reflection/shadow of Burns, the latter, we may assume, is merely the reflection/shadow of Pacino.

Snyder's dissatisfaction with the Jungian collapse of the other into the subject is matched by Testa's displeasure with certain Freudian/structuralist strategies employed by Robin Wood.[8] Wood, as Testa explains, establishes a set of binary oppositions for the horror genre, one of which is the "Monstrous/Normal." The "monstrous" is repressed "natural desire" and "a mirror of the repressed aspects of the self." The goal, as for the Jungians, is some sort of recognition and reconciliation. The linkage of Freudian criticism with structuralism ends up recuperating the transcendental subject which structuralism was instrumental in dismantling. The binary oppositions of structuralism, which serve among other things to construct subjectivity, become subsumed *within* subjectivity — i.e., within a larger, all encompassing self-other dichotomy. One might argue that this kind of mirroring does injustice to Freud as well as structuralism, since the former fissured the Cartesian subject beyond the possibility of reconciliation and simple mirroring. (Hence the centrality of Freud for Lacan, who fissured the subject further, and also cracked the mirror [stage].)

Though Testa's point of disagreement with Wood does not emerge from precisely the same issues discussed here, his general disapproval is based on Wood's tendency to reduce the "other" to the "same" — Cronenberg's work to Wood's cine-structuralist categories. In contrast to Wood (and other genre critics), Testa takes as a point of departure the excess and instability of Cronenberg's work — the remainder that lies outside simple identification and generic appropriation.

## III.

The films discussed in the following essays reflect the same tension between preserving the foundational subject and "thinking otherwise" that exists in current film criticism. The films of Cronenberg, it would seem, are highly paradoxical in their embodiment of this tension. While his work thematizes the dissolution of mind/body (subject/object) relations, and delights in a kind of Bataillesque excess, the structure of his films often remains subject-centered. (Intriguingly, Cronenberg cites Descartes — whose *cogito ergo sum* marked modern philosophy's embrace of the subject — as a "gloss" on his vision.)[9] To illustrate my point, I will focus on five recent films: *Scanners*, *The Brood*, *Videodrome*, *The Fly*, and *Dead Ringers*. (I omit *The Dead Zone*, which would normally be grouped with these films chronologically, not only because it is an adaptation of a Stephen King novel but also because Cronenberg did not script the film.)

*Videodrome* offers the most complex example, and Testa helps highlight the complexity. On the one hand, *Videodrome* is rooted in the tradition of the "*Kammerspielfilm*," in which the inner state of the hero dominates the story. On the other hand, the film works on a principle of reversal, whereby Max-the-subject (producer) is revealed to be Max-the-object (product/victim of seduction). Max's subjectivity turns out to be an illusion, a point reinforced (as Testa notes) by the fact that, as pornographer, Max does not make films, he merely collects and purveys them. He is thus constructed by what he sees, not by his own actions and intelligence.

Moreover, *Videodrome* sets up then destroys a psychology of the subject, at least as far as Max is concerned. As Max begins to become infatuated (personally rather than merely professionally) by the videodrome signal, we assume that its S & M imagery is merely a reflection of his own repressed and perverse inclinations. However, once we discover that it is the signal itself rather than the imagery that attracts, the notion of self-other mirroring is demolished. (In fact, in focusing on signal rather than image, Cronenberg marks the difference between movies and television, between projection and transmission.) Finally, there is the sustained dissolution of all body/mind, subject/object, Max/world distinctions as hallucination, implantation, "rewriting," and simulation erase identifiable boundaries.

Yet while *Videodrome* thoroughly undermines Max's subject position, it reconstitutes it elsewhere. On the one hand there is the corporate sub-

ject, Spectacular Optical, which has all the attributes of the rational Cartesian subject writ large: agency, intentionality, self-determination, originality, and, especially, the ability to reduce the other to the self. Spectacular Optical is, clearly, the Panopticon reconstituted (as is the tv, whose role becomes reversed in *Videodrome* from seen to omnipotent seer). Cronenberg could not have given us a more "Identical" representation of the institutional Self which turns *Videodrome* at least in part into what I have described earlier as a flip-side colonization story.

On the other hand there is Brian O'Blivion — the subject as guru: the "last man" in a world of corporate takeover. (The fact that his presence is posthumous merely underscores Cronenberg's insistence on reconstituting the subject after it has seemingly been killed off.) The struggle between O'Blivion and Spectacular Optical makes Max's disappearing subjecthood the battleground for other, colonizing, subjects. Even if we read the end as Max's devolution beyond O'Blivion and Spectacular Optical into pure self-destructive hallucination — even if we see (with Testa) that his subjectivity is entirely reversed, becoming the tv reality that was originally "objective"[10] — we have yet one more instance of subjectivity disappearing only to reappear somewhere else. (Moreover, the entire final sequence, as Max's reversed hallucinations, becomes entirely subject-centered.)

The dominance of the subject is more conventional and less complex in Cronenberg's earlier films *The Brood* and *Scanners*. In the former, everything begins with the individual. Not only is Dr. Hal Raglan the originator of the Somafree Institute of Psychoplasmics, but far more important, his therapy — getting patients to externalize their anger physically — locates all change in the psyche of subjects ("I'm angry therefore I am"). The film becomes populated with projections/offspring/replications of self, which destroy all otherness. In *Scanners* (whose title refers to people capable of exerting mental control over minds and matter), we again have an originary male, Dr. Paul Ruth, who not only invented the drug which makes scanning possible, but who is the father of both the protagonist Cameron Vale and the antagonist Darryl Revok. (Ruth's subject-hood is made blatantly transcendental when Revok refers to him pointedly as "Our Father" in a discussion which includes reference to other religious notions such as incarnation.) Again, agency and change emerge from the minds of subjects ("I scan, therefore I am"). We also have the emergence of corporate selves (Consec and Biocarbon Amalgamate), anticipating *Videodrome*, but the film grounds itself far more in the individual than in the corporate subject, culminating with a good old American-style "scan-out" between Vale and Revok. As in many of Cronenberg's other films, the subject position may shift (Vale seems to be incarnated in Revok's image at film's end), but this is much more a reconfiguration than a deconstruction of subjectivity.

*The Fly*, Cronenberg's penultimate film (as of this writing), centres the subject even more completely than *The Brood* or *Scanners*. Seth Brundle is a self-sufficient loner. He may have corporate sponsorship, but this is

clearly the result of his genius. His metamorphosis is almost entirely the result of his own actions: he invents the teleportation process, assembles the mechanism, then is foolish enough to fall in love, get jealous, get drunk, and undergo teleportation without sufficient precaution. There are, of course, a few things which qualify his autonomy. He admits to contracting out a lot of the equipment manufacture, the fly is aleatory, and the computer takes over and becomes a gene splicer when faced with two different organisms in the pod. The most promising of these in terms of decentering Brundle is the fly itself. Given the fact that it names the film, the fly could suggest that the aleatory is, in fact, the real hero and that, for all his seeming dominance, Brundle ends up displaced.

However, virtually everything in the film works to confirm identity and eliminate difference in a way that ensures the domination of the subject. For instance, the goal of teleportation is to reproduce identity — to make the identical reappear in another place. And, the confirmation of success for Brundle is his own reproduction. Paternity, which is so important in a film such as *Scanners*, becomes male self-birthing.

Moreover, even though the fly (otherness, difference) becomes implicated in (Brundle's) identity, otherness is consistently treated as negative. Even the computer tries to splice difference (the fly and the human) into one. Then "Brundlefly" — initially a relatively delightful mixture of identities — gradually sloughs off Brundle and becomes fly. This becoming other, in turn, is seen as the source of horror within the movie.

The result, of course, is the destruction of the fly by the last vestige of Brundle's identity/humanity. He emerges from the telepod 99% insect but manages to use one of his appendages to direct a shotgun (held by his former lover Ronnie) to his head — begging, in effect, to be blown away. She reluctantly obliges, and the film's title becomes ironic. As visible and as seemingly dominant as the fly has become by the end, the film's conclusion is brought about by purely human action. Brundle, refusing to become other, affirms his human subjecthood — and his central agency within the film — right to the finish.

One way to "de-subjectify" *The Fly* is to take it all for laughs — as a comic postmodern commentary on "the fall of a great man" and a satire on the male subject with his urge for self-transformation and religious transcendence. Certainly the story is absurd, and there are moments in the film when Cronenberg clearly acknowledges the ridiculousness of both his hero and his tale. However, the ending, though conceptually hilarious, is not emotionally so. It comes across as horrible and, most of all, "tragic." More specifically, it comes across as the tragedy of the lost subject, of lost identity, of lost humanity. As such, it makes *The Fly* by far the most melodramatically humanist of Cronenberg films examined here — a real retreat from the complexities and (at least surface) postmodernity of *Videodrome*. On the other hand, the absurdity of the tragedy, and in fact of the entire film, marks *The Fly* as impossible humanism. It opens a gap between come-

dy and bathos, concept and feeling, that cannot be closed. Perhaps in spite of itself, *The Fly* ends up asserting a difference, "changing the subject." In this light, the title would prove more than just ironic.

*Dead Ringers*, Cronenberg's most recent film, though much different from *The Fly* in subject matter, is quite similar in its method of centering the subject and eliminating difference.[11] As with its predecessor, *Dead Ringers* clearly emphasizes the agency and choice of the unified subject — somewhat paradoxical given the fact that subjectivity is split between twins. The whole gruesome medical career(s) of Elliot/Beverly Mantle can be attributed to a childhood incident in which they are snottily rejected by a young girl in their attempts at sexual exploration. In response, they become gynecologic misogynists — and what could be seen as a crucial tautology from a decentered, ideological point of view (gynecologic control of women's bodies *is* a form of patriarchal misogyny) is reduced to the mere personal idiosyncracy of two warped but brilliant, coherent, and initially self-determining heroes. The insistence on grounding events within the twinned psyche of Elliot and Beverly repeatedly blunts anything resembling an institutional analysis of the medical profession and makes the film claustrophobic in its rendering of an almost exclusively "inside" world.[12]

Having securely grounded the action within subjectivity, *Dead Ringers* then works, *Fly*-like, to collapse the multiple into the one, the other into a single subject. This occurs most blatantly when the potentially differentiating aspects of split identity are sacrificed to the principle of *identicality* — present in the fact that the Mantle brothers are identical twins, in the use of one actor (Jeremy Irons) to play both men, and in the loss of all seeming difference between the twins by film's end. (The collapsing of brothers into one recalls the incarnation of Cameron Vale within Darryl Revok's body at the end of *Scanners*, as well as Revok's sardonic comment just prior to the final confrontation: "After all, brothers should be close, don't you think?")

The loss of difference is underscored metaphorically near the film's end by Elliot's and Beverly's identification of themselves as Siamese twins (brothers not merely similar but joined as one). Their sameness becomes both metaphorical and actual through their union in death.

Throughout the film the relationship between Elliot and Bev is threatened by anything nonidentical. Professionally, Elliot's differing career development creates tension. Personally, Claire (and, by extension, woman as anything other than scientific or sexual object) is a source of danger. The most obvious response to the threat of Claire(Woman)-as-other is elimination. She and more peripheral women are gone by the end of the movie. Less obvious but more important is the appropriation of women — a process which becomes "identical" to the elimination of difference between Elliot and Beverly.[13] The appropriation of women is implicit, as I have suggested, in the Mantle brothers' profession: as gynecologists they

have taken over woman's body, woman's reproductivity. (Claire implies her loss of proprietorship when she has to ask one of the twins early on: "Tell me about my uterus.") The paternity of *Scanners*, become self-birthing in *The Fly*, now becomes usurpation of maternity. Claire, who is incapable of bearing children, must come to the Mantles for her fertility — first professionally, then sexually. (Within the sterile male economy of the film, she never does acquire the capacity to reproduce.) More subtly, men take on the role of women. Beverly or "Bev" is established early on as the feminine partner of the twins — not only by name but by being the stay-at-home as well as the more sensitive, more vulnerable, and, of course, weaker twin. Then Elliot becomes "Ellie," as *he* becomes vulnerable and weak — victimized by Beverly's own victimization. At the end, there is a "female" coup as Beverly emasculates Ellie. Each now occupies a gynecologist's chair — the former site of women — and women are no longer necessary, even as surgical instruments. In the film's final gynecological procedure, birthing has been replaced by a symbolic separation of Siamese twins — an act which does not differentiate as new life ("separation can be a terrifying thing," one of the twins attests), but collapses into shared death.

One might be tempted to read some of the above as not only profoundly but self-reflexively insightful into the ways of patriarchy and the oppression of women. However, we must recall the film's thoroughgoing avoidance of institutional and ideological analysis. Moreover, the film appears to offer no validation of women, no sense that there is something *wrong* in all that is going on. After all, the little bitch at the beginning starts all the trouble, and Claire is a nymphomaniac druggie, too horny to distinguish between two different lovers. (All that "redeems" her is her desire to become a real woman by bearing children.)[14] The Mantles may be slimeballs, but they so completely control the show that there is no position within the film from which any critique can be launched. Added to that is the essentialist insistence that women (in addition to being bitchy, horny, addictive, and obsessed with motherhood) are emotional, vulnerable, and weak. Finally, there is the same retreat at the end of *Dead Ringers* that we witnessed at the end of *The Fly* — into pathos that suddenly renders the offensive main male character(s) pitiable and tragic. There is, in short, nothing I can see to indicate that the film is any less pathologically misogynist than the world it depicts.

As we move from Cronenberg to Joyce Wieland, the subject can be theorized in a substantially different way. Armatage approaches Wieland and the issue of the subject in terms of feminist theory. In particular, she focuses on Teresa de Lauretis's revision of the notion that "the personal is political" — not to romanticize the individual in political terms (à la "engagement," "commitment") but rather to emphasize the fact that the construction of the subject in relation to language/discourse is inherently political. In the case of women, the subject is constructed outside of or against language, in "silence," and in a problematic relationship to

(dominant) discourse. Armatage's feminist emphasis on the "social subject" is radically different from the male obsession, in the other films/filmmakers under discussion, with the transcendental subject. In fact the feminist revision of subjectivity offers a release from the absolute identification of the subject with male issues of autonomy, power, and appropriation.

The subject as a construction in/against language offers an interesting point of access to *Rat Life and Diet in North America* (1968), Wieland's remarkable "allegory" of gerbils escaping their U.S. prisoners, crossing the border into Canada, and triggering a U.S. invasion. The film offers two contrasting levels of discourse which, in the context of Armatage's discussion, can be hypothesized as feminine versus masculine. The feminine is the domestic (and reflects Wieland's commitment, discussed at some length by Armatage, to insert the uniquely feminine into cultural discourse). It consists of the kitchen table, family pets (gerbils, cats), gardens, the natural environment, and perhaps most important, the nonverbal immediacy of both the film's action and the film(ed) world. Superimposed in the form of subtitles and intertitles is the realm of language (the Symbolic, the Name of the Father), which concocts a comically absurd narrative or allegory out of the domestic realm. Gerbils become rats, cats become jailers, arbitrary borders (U.S./Canada) are erected. Language also gives the film a title which has nothing to do with the images and action. On the level of allegory, the film may be "about" oppressors and oppressed, but far more important, it reveals oppression to be the very condition of its own existence as *narrativized* rather than free-flowing imagery.

The film, then, is about itself as a signifying practice, about the manipulative, artificial nature of narrative, and about the forced subsumption of feminine visual/domestic discourse within male verbal/militarist discourse. (The content of the allegory — oppression, rebellion, invasion, mixed in with contentious leftist ideological statements — is clearly male-aggressive.) In the largest sense, it can be seen as a film about the construction and appropriation of female subjectivity. The fact that *Rat Life* was attacked as allegory and as a trivialization of political issues (the Vietnam war) seems somewhat ironic. Wieland's use of allegory does not trivialize politics, it politicizes narrative, discourse, and art. Moreover, it suggests that the fundamental battle zone of imperialism is not Southeast Asia in the 1960s (or Central America in the 80s), but rather the process of subject and discourse formation in male society.

Because the subject is a site of discourse for Wieland, the free Cartesian/romantic ego is nowhere to be seen in *Rat Life*. The personal-as — political maxim is, indeed, revised, and subjectivity forfeits the kind of discrete identity and autonomy that characterized Cronenberg's heroes and progenitors.

When we move from *Rat Life* to William Friedkin's *Cruising*, we are not only back in the realm of the male, macho individual, we are thrust into a film in which (self)identity is an obsession. (Snyder will address much

of the following from a different perspective.) Consider the following bits of dialogue, all from a five-minute stretch early in the film:

> "Capt. Edelstein?" "*Edelson*." "Ah, sorry."
>
> "There are more guys out there impersonating cops than there are actual cops."
>
> "Well, frankly, the victims appear to be the same physical type. Which is to say they all look like you."
>
> "These [hotel] killings have a similar m.o. But we've also been finding parts of bodies floating in the river. We don't know a damn thing about these torso victims. We don't even know who the hell they are yet. But it's my hunch that they were done by the same two guys who did these two killings up here."

In each of these instances, difference is in some way denied, identity affirmed and/or imposed. The last two statements are actually comical in their blind insistence. To say that victims "appear to be the same physical type" as someone is not at all to say they all look like that person. And to conclude that the torso murders (about which Edelson admits to knowing nothing) are performed by the same person who kills people and leaves them whole in hotel rooms is pure wishful thinking.

Keeping things (self)identical, especially for Edelson, is also a way of keeping things separate: cops and killers, good guys and bad, and ultimately self and other. This separateness works not to preserve or affirm the other, but to "identify" it in order to neutralize its threat through appropriation, elimination, or submission. Edelson, the cops, and dominant culture appropriate and eliminate: by jailing, ghettoizing, killing. The gays submit — becoming the other through dress and violent behavior.

This latter is, of course, a form of self-other mirroring, as subjects, insecure in their own identity, reaffirm it by seeing themselves in everyone else. Sartorial doubling is the most pervasive form, Steve Burns's (the cop's) strange fascination with Stuart (the presumed killer) is another crucial example. The subject, even more so than in Cronenberg, seeks always to be the origin of relatedness; "what seems to be a relationship to otherness . . . always turns out to be an aspect of mediate self-relation" (Taylor above).

Although identity and the subject are more obviously and more obsessively privileged in *Cruising* than in any of the other films we have discussed, *Cruising* is also the film most given to the play of difference that makes simple identification impossible. We never discover for sure who *any* of the murderers are, they remain plural despite Edelson's attempts to make them one, Burns may actually be a murderer himself, and attempts to provide a simple Jungian mirror-reading of characterization inevitably fail.

In fact, by film's end, subjects are part of a never-ending process of dispersal — the culmination of a film long proliferation of murdered and dis-

membered subjects. Moreover, dispersal is accompanied by completely illogical re-materialization. Everyone and everything show up everywhere. The subject-position of the killer(s) even surfaces (perhaps) in Steve Burns, as he lives next to the viciously murdered Ted Bailey.

The complexity of subject dispersal/rematerialization becomes clear in the third-from-final sequence, when we see from the rear an unidentifiable figure, in cop/gay uniform, walking toward a leather bar. Is it Burns (it is the "same physical type")? If so, since his undercover masquerade as a gay is over, does this mean he has *become* gay? Or has he become the killer, now out cruising? Is it a killer who is *not* Burns? Is it a cop? Is it a cop who is gay who is a killer (which brings us back to Burns!)? All we can really assert is that it is an image, walking and dressed like a human, which may or may not be possessed of any of a number of possible subjects.

This recalls the prevailing condition of another Friedkin film, *The Exorcist*, where Regan is the place of possession, the locus of indeterminable subject positions which, though collapsed by society into one (a Demon), is in fact the "demon" of Difference. *The Exorcist*, in turn, helps gloss the eerie moment in the penultimate scene of *Cruising* when Nancy, Burns's lover, begins to don the cop/gay heavy-leather gear that Burns has cast off. She, like Regan, like the mysterious figure seen from the back, like Burns, becomes the possible site of anything. Her identity is not her own, and she is unprotected even by gender or sexuality from the play of decentered subjectivity that has issued from an all male world.

The deconstruction of the subject is completed in this penultimate scene, partly through Nancy but principally through Burns. After a period of estrangement caused by his undercover work, Burns has returned to Nancy's apartment and announced "I'm back." The implicit assertion that he has regained his former identity (i.e., "*I* am back") is quickly and thoroughly undercut. As Nancy plays dress-up in the other room (stealing Steve's recent — and only remaining — identity), Burns is busy shaving and cleaning up. As he looks in the mirror, he clearly fails to find the reassuring image of a former self. (This scene evokes an earlier scene of Burns looking in the mirror, applying makeup for his undercover work, and echoing Edelson's prophetic question: "How'd you like to disappear?") Instead of a vibrant former self there is an utterly blank look — a face without *personality*, a dead subject.[15] His gaze then shifts so that it is looking directly at us. Not only is subject-ivity destroyed but so is all concomitant mirroring — through the absence of the mirror reflection. We do not see it (a clever and necessary detail on Friedkin's part). Burns *can't* see it (there can be no self-image for a dead subject). And, it ends up being replaced by us, who are as invisible to Burns as his own mirror image.

If, in the spirit of Cronenbergian humanism, we were placing our stake in the subject, this would be a sad case of identity loss. But the movie does not impel us to see it that way. In fact, in place of the subject, it opens

up new possibilities which have interesting ramifications for our own positioning within a cinematic/specular system. When Burns looks out at an image that will not/cannot look back, three interrelated things occur: the object of the gaze is eliminated; the subject-object, self-other circuit is broken; and the gaze ceases to be appropriative. Instead of looking at, we have looking out. This even tends to obtain when we reinstate the object of the gaze — as we must do in the case of Burns, onscreen, looking at us. His "looked-at" is also an "out-look." In this context, the gaze becomes not merely the confirmation of subjectivity through the appropriation of the other, not fixation in the mirror and the Imaginary, but a means of self-dispersal. Friedkin, in short, has opened his film and the specular onto the realm of Dis/Appearance.

He concludes his film accordingly, with the tantalizing image of a tugboat, apparently towing something that never makes it onscreen. Not only does the "tuggee" never make it, but the boat enters screen left, crosses through the picture, and exits screen right, leaving only a rope connecting something unseen to something unseen.[16] The rope becomes the consummate expression of Dis/Appearance: the presence of absence and the absence of presence. It also becomes the consummate celebration not of identity but of difference or the "spaces between" identity. (It is a temporal as well as a spatial celebration, affirming the difference of the "now" from the just-seen and the about-to-come-into-sight.) The fade to black moments before the (presumed) appearance of the tuggee eliminates the object of the gaze and frustrates narrative expectation and narrative closure, short-circuiting our spectatorial mechanisms of identification.

All this, in turn, defeats and reverses the insistence throughout the film on appropriation and (imposed) unity. Had the object attached to the tug been dragged on screen, it would have been triply appropriated: by the tug, by the movie, by us. Instead, "replaced" by a line that escapes on both sides of the screen, it bespeaks only dissemination. Similarly, the film frame, instead of remaining the place of appropriation, becomes the place of dispersal. Instead of suturing objects together (what the police seek to do with the torso victims) it serves as the border where dismemberment and excess occur.

*Cruising*, I would conclude, takes its title seriously — far more seriously than do its protagonists. For them, the verb is transitive, oriented toward direct objects and consequently toward places of rest (sexual partners, criminal offenders, gratification, law and order, the other-as-undiscovered-self). In the full context of the film, however, cruising is the *in-transit*-ive and intransigent play of difference which operates within, between, and beyond the categories characters attempt to set up. It erases the margins and exceeds the bounds — inviting us to Dis/Appear into a space where thinking difference as difference, other as other, becomes possible.

## IV.

The issue of the subject is very much caught up in the issue of reference and signification. The death of the subject in semiotics and structuralism has resulted directly from the replacement of reference with signification. The subject, forfeiting its transcendental character as someone standing outside signification, becomes constructed entirely in and through the play of signs (signifier and signified). More precisely, it becomes constructed through "shifters" "I," "you,") which create subject positions, not subjects.[17]

The films discussed above illustrate this quite clearly. The more realistic and referential they seek to be, the more subject-centered they remain. The more open they are to the play of signification, the less stable their subjects become.

Cronenberg's films again are paradoxical. As science fiction and horror, they could readily tend toward the nonrealistic and nonreferential and — especially as horror — toward the figurative and symbolic. Moreover, as mixed genre films, they might foreground their own status as signifying practices, playing with and against the practices (genres) they are citing. Testa's essay suggests that useful critical work can be done along these lines, and recent postmodern interest in Cronenberg emerges from the promise they seem to hold for such work. However, I am not sure they can deliver on their promise, because they constantly seek to anchor themselves in the real — partly by *literalizing* the significatory aspects of their story (Testa discusses literalization in *Videodrome*), partly by (overly) humanizing their characters. We end up *identifying* with characters as real, and we end up identifying with futuristic or horrific situations as virtually real. (A probable or possible real can be just as reference-able as a "real" real.) *The Fly* is a case in point. Brundle's transformation becomes so literal, so believable, that the metaphorical dimension tends to be lost.

(Of the Cronenberg films I have discussed, *Videodrome* seems to me the most inclined toward signification rather than reference, largely because of its focus on the mediascape of television.[18] Caught in the simulacrum, at least one subject, Max Renn, gets deconstructed. Moreover, its literalizations — such as Max actually turning into a videorecorder — are so fantastic, that when they collapse the metaphoric into the actual, the latter does not absorb the former, it becomes it. The real is effectively turned into pure signification.)

Linked to the privileging of reference over signification in Cronenberg's work is the agency of a subject who exists outside or prior to signification. This is the paternal "Signifier" in a pre-linguistic, pre-semiotic sense: not someone caught up in the sign play of signifier-signified, but one who "signifies" or "creates meaning" by setting the play in motion. (The paternal Signifier can be an individual or a corporate subject.) Spectacular Optical is a case in point. Though Max Renn and even Brian O'Blivion get

caught in the videodrome signalscape, Spectacular Optical stands outside, initiating and — at least for a time — controlling it. Seth Brundle begins outside, activating the teleportation process. His tragedy lies in forfeiting distance, becoming part of the process, and getting rewritten by his computer. In *Scanners* Paul Ruth originates the action, in *Dead Ringers* the Mantle brothers. It is Brundle, Ruth, Elliot, and Bev whom we can hold accountable for the horror within their films.

Standing outside signification, the paternal Signifiers are free to be referents, and to ensure the status of reference within their films. In so doing, they incarnate the traditional giver of meaning in Judaeo-Christian tradition, the absolute origin and transcendental referent: God ("Our Father," as Revok calls Ruth). Within the romantic tradition, they incarnate the Artist/Auteur, who stands prior to and sets in play the signification of his (gender intentional) artwork. (Cronenberg has suggested a link between his scientific Signifiers and himself-as-artist: "I feel a lot of empathy for doctors and scientists. In fact I often feel that they are my persona [sic] in the film.")[19]

We have already noted the absence of the traditional subject — and suggested the emphasis on signification — in Wieland's *Rat Life and Diet in North America*. The latter goes hand in hand with the film's thoroughgoing subversion of reference. The title is "wrong," the identification of gerbils as "rats" is "wrong," in fact the entire allegorical structure is "wrong." There are no referents to which the words "truly" refer us. The erasure of reference works two ways. Not only do words lie as they try to direct us "beyond themselves," the images we watch (potential referents in the "realistic" medium of film) lose their grounding in any real world by their absurd placement within allegory. Moreover, allegory as Wieland uses it, instead of performing its classic function of directing us to some extratextual reality, simply points out the absurdity of its own signifying excesses.[20] This undermining of a stable extratextual reality (in particular the Vietnam conflict, to which the film might ostensibly refer) was precisely what annoyed the politically committed.

Ultimately, *Rat Life* exemplifies the way in which signification emerges from the play of signifiers, not from the transparent reality of referents (or from fixed signifieds). It does so ironically — to illustrate the imposition of one kind of discourse on another. And, in fact, it may do so somewhat nostalgically, for (returning to the terms we set up in my earlier analysis of the film), the discourse of the oppressed (the feminine), clearly lies closer to reference than does the discourse of the oppressor (masculine).

The problem of the assumed (extratextual) referent got Friedkin in trouble, much as it did Wieland. In the case of the former, the film was boycotted by gays who felt that it presented a distorted view of the gay community. However, even Edelson, with his penchant for misrecognition, makes clear that the heavy-leather scene is *not* mainstream gay — obviating any real need for Friedkin's disclaimer at the film's beginning. More

important, the breadth and complexity of the film's vision have impelled gay critics to address it as something more and other than gay bashing.[21]

What Snyder suggests and my reading supports is that *Cruising* is no more about "real" people than about signification itself: about people "identifying" themselves within a system of meanings which fails to hold because the play of signification is far more important than the meanings it generates. It is about figures who from the outset, with their uniforms and colored handkerchiefs, are signifiers of signification rather than referents. These figures, culminating with the mystery image we see from the back, are two-dimensional, all surface, all (as Snyder will later demonstrate) semiotic. And the principal figure (Steve Burns), merely shifts subject positions within cultural subsystems of signification and ends up proving the radical impossibility of being a "real man."

Burns's "Dis/Appearance" — as well that of the murderer(s), the tugboat, the tuggee, and most everything else in the film — makes *Cruising* both an act of and an escape from signification. However, *Cruising* manages to escape from signification through signification — which is far different from a Cronenbergian escape to some pre-existing, originary, real. Friedkin's "escape" is, in fact, the articulation of *différance*, the Derridean "nonoriginal origin"[22] of signification, identity, and individual differences:

> It is because of *différance* that the movement of signification is possible only if each so-called "present" element appearing on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element, this trace being related no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past, and constituting what is called the present by means of this very relation to what it is not: what it absolutely is not, not even a past or a future as a modified present.[23]

*Cruising*'s concluding image of the "disseminating," "differentiating" rope is, it might be argued, the "trace of *différance*" found within signification once the rigid identities and "subject-ions" of society have been dismembered.

Having pushed my discussion entirely beyond the realm of reference, let me conclude with a brief retreat. Or, more specifically, let me acknowledge the obvious fact that, for all one wishes to talk of (pure) signification, there is a strong and powerful "content" with which we "identify" in a film such as *Cruising*. Its imagery of violence, brutality, and domination do reflect aspects of our society and our lives. It has, in short, a referential dimension — and one which is extremely grim. I would not argue that we should ignore this dimension — or foreclose discussion, for instance, of the film's relation to the gay community. I would, however, argue that equal play be given to its discursive dimension — to the way it opens up spaces and possibilities that "exceed" its social and psycho-

logical content and thus qualify the grimness of its reference. I would, in fact, argue that the film should be read "excessively" in two directions: as reference exceeding the limits of signification and as signification exceeding the bounds of reference. This kind of reading raises the interesting possibility that in postmodernism movies, while emancipatory strategies are denied in the realm of the social, they reemerge on the level of signification itself. Equally important, "excessive" reading keeps a film like *Cruising* free from premature dismissal as Hollywood mainstream cinema, enabling us to match its narrative suggestiveness with our own critical methodology of Dis/Appearance.

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Notes

1. "Postmodernism and Cultural Practice," *Screen* 28, no. 2 (Spring 1987), 24.
2. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1986, p. 3.
3. *Deconstruction in Context*, pp. 32-33. Taylor covers much of the same ground in his study of modern philosophy and post-philosophy: *Altarity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
4. The predominance of the "Imaginary story" may seem inevitable given the specular nature of the film medium. As readers familiar with film theory will know, film and the Imaginary have been fruitfully linked for well over a decade. See, for instance, Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, trans. Alfred Guzzetti, et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981); Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981); Charles F. Altman, "Psychoanalysis and Film: The Imaginary Discourse," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, 2, no.3 (Summer 1977): 260-264 (rpt. in Bill Nichols, ed. *Movies and Methods: An Anthology*, Vol. II (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).
   The link has been especially useful to feminist theory, beginning with Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure in the Narrative Cinema," *Screen*, 16, no. 3 (1975): 6-18 (rpt. in Nichols).
5. See for example John Caughie, ed. *Theories of Authorship: A Reader* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).
6. For useful access to important structuralist and poststructuralist writings on film, see *Movies and Methods: An Anthology*, vols. I & II, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976 and 1985); *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986); Dudley Andrew, *Concepts in Film Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).
7. Nancy Hayles and Kathryn Rindskopf, "The Shadow of Violence," *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 8, no. 2: 2-8.
8. Testa focuses on Wood's contributions to *The American Nightmare*, ed. Andrew Britton and Richard Lippe (Toronto: The Festival of Festivals, 1979) and *The Shape of Rage*, ed. Piers Handling (Toronto: General Publishing, 1983). An updated and revised version of Wood's *American Nightmare* perceptions appears in his *Hollywood: From Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 70-94.
9. I am indebted to Doug Kellner for this point.

10. This reversal is confirmed by the fact that when Nikki shows Max how to become the video word made flesh — by presenting a tv image of him blowing his brains out — the tv spews forth all sorts of intestines, whereas when Max himself performs the "transformative" suicide, the screen just goes blank. In other words, it's the tv image of Max that undergoes an organic or "real" death, whereas the "real" Max merely undergoes a video death.

11. If there are any inaccuracies, omissions, or misplaced emphases in my discussion of *Dead Ringers*, I must blame the fact that I was only able to see the film once, as it screened briefly in Kingston, in the middle of term. I hope its release on videotape will not shame me into instant retractions.

12. In a review of *Dead Ringers* which is otherwise quite disturbing, Andrew Dowler makes some accurate observations that underscore the claustrophobic subject-centeredness of the film: "There are virtually no exteriors .... There are virtually no characters but the Mantles.... The absence of other characters leads to a lack of definition in the film's social setting — the world of medicine.... Without something ... to locate the Mantles with, or against, other doctors, the gynecological background loses much of its potential to enrich the drama. We see the casual drug use, the dehumanization of the patient, the monstrous ego, the authoritarian attitude and the hypocritical cant surrounding it all. But we see it all as Mantle brothers' behaviour, and they're weird from the go ..." (*Cinema Canada*, 157 (November 1988): 23.

13. Like the twins, Claire herself is caught in a system of replication, which just reinstitutes sameness and eliminates difference. She is a "trifurcate," possessing three cervical openings rather than one. When told she can adopt a baby she says: "It wouldn't be the same. It wouldn't be part of my body." She admits to being a nymphomaniac (i.e., to sexual repetition with a minimum of difference). And, of course, most important, she can't tell the twins apart until a friend informs her that Beverly has an identical brother.

14. Unlike many feminist reviewers who have seen Claire as "blamed" within the film for the decline and fall of the brothers, I see her as their victim from her opening moment — with legs spread in a gynecological posture of extreme vulnerability. (If the film blames any female, it is the adolescent who refuses to indulge the Mantles' sexual curiosity.) I would have found it infinitely preferable if some grown woman *could* have been blamed, could have been viewed as possessing enough power to originate something, anything — *especially* the downfall of the twins and their sick male world.

15. There is a temptation, given our hero-centered movie conditioning to read expression such as "bewilderment"or "loss" into Burns's face. But close examination reveals that his face is thoroughly expressionless.

16. The screen goes to black the moment the tugboat exits, leaving only rope. It is conceivable that on a full 35mm print, a tiny portion of the boat might remain, but even without the "purity" of the videotape version, the effect would be the same.

17. The recent frequency of both angels and identical twins in films reflects, I would suggest, a tendency to replace realistic individuals or subjects with signifying positions. Angels, after all, can hardly be taken as referential, and twins confound simple referentiality and signification by making identical signifiers point in at least two different directions. However, this tendency ends up frustrated. In Wim Wenders *Sky Over Berlin/Wings of Desire*, Peter Greenaway's *A Zed and Two Noughts*, and Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers* angels or twins begin as potentially free-floating signifiers, only to get grounded increasingly in a world of reference and sameness.

18. Even here, Cronenberg can be found guilty of "conservatism," as William C. Wees pointed out in "Through the Rearview Mirror Into Twenty Minutes Into the Future: McLuhan,

*Videodrome*, and *Max Headroom*," a paper delivered at the 1988 annual meeting of the Film Studies Association of Canada.

19. "David Cronenberg," Article and Interview by Paul M. Sammon, *Cinéfantastique*, 10, no. 4 (Spring 1981): 22.

20. The "classic" understanding of allegory has been strongly contested of late, particularly by postmodern theorists. Briefly, allegory is no longer seen as "vertical" — i.e., pointing outside the text. It is seen, instead, as exploiting and drawing attention to the polysemy of words, the multiple possibilities for signification *within* a given text. Words do not refer to something else; rather they mean exactly what they say because they say so much. (It might be interesting to work Wieland's film through on these very terms — though as my interpretation of *Rat Life* suggests, I feel something other is at stake.) For recent discussion of the allegorical, see Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," *October* 12 (Spring 1980) 67-86; and "The Allegorical Impulse (Part 2)," *October* 13 (Summer 1980): 59-80. Rpt. in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York, Boston: The New Museum of Contemporary Art/David R. Godine, 1984), pp. 203-235. See also Maureen Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979).

21. Robin Wood approaches the film seriously, relatively sympathetically, and with insight in his *Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan*.

22. Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. A. Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 7.

23. Ibid., p. 13.