

PANIC PORNOGRAPHY: VIDEODROME FROM PRODUCTION TO SEDUCTION

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Introduction: Structure and Seriality

Infamous for their gruesome and spectacular imagery, David Cronenberg's horror/science fiction films impose themselves as underdeveloped yet suggestive excursions through the utterly blasted aesthetic of contemporary narrative film. Since the late 1960s, and the radically diminished confidence in the modernist "art film", the narrative film aesthetic has fragmented badly but has done so in complicated ways. Some ambitious manifestations of the involuted decrescendo of cinema's narrativity are to be found among so-called genre movies, particularly in the minor genres.¹

But just what do Cronenberg's films manifest, apart from a notorious iconographic excess so sensationally instanced by the extruded "birth sacs" of *The Brood* (1979), the "exploding heads" of *Scanners* (1980), or the metamorphosis of man into insect in *The Fly* (1986)? This is a question that covertly preoccupies the film critics assembled by Piers Handling in *The Shape of Rage: The Films of David Cronenberg*, an anthology of essays unified mainly by the seriousness with which the writers approach the filmmaker.² However, this collection of essays is problematic because these critics do not acknowledge the extremity of the director's work nor his shattering of film's narrative aesthetic. Instead, they examine Cronenberg as an imaginative innovator within the horror genre and, for the most part, they seek to decipher the director's variations within the structural tensions and formal usages assumed to characterize the horror genre as a whole.³ This type of analysis tends to ignore the difficulties of the twin

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methodological assumptions subtending film-genre study in general. First, there is the assumption that horror films share a solidity, often described as a quasi-mythic structure; and second, there is the presupposition that a director works comfortably inside and through that stable structure. The broad problems with these assumptions are twofold not only because modern film genres are unstable but also because Cronenberg, like most strong contemporary genre directors, is a baroque parodist (the most famous figure is Brian De Palma with his *Dressed to Kill*) who foregrounds instability in many ways. For example, Cronenberg blends horror and science-fiction, he deploys excessive imagery calculated to overwhelm narrative linearity, and, more radically, he actively refuses to become a "competent" narrative filmmaker. Instead he has devised a serial style of construction that is, at best, a parody of conventional narrative style.

Because of their assumptions, the *Shape of Rage* critics are able to concern themselves with investigating the director's "innovations" and his usages within horror. They interpret the genre as a set of stereotyped symbols around which Cronenberg is seen to weave his own "personal" improvisations. The mode of interpretation that results, which might be termed symbolic-structural, yields a familiar range of psychoanalytic ideas (in this case, softened by the critics themselves into a Neo-Freudian and/or humanist thematics).

This approach toward Cronenberg's films may be exemplified in its most sophisticated form by examining Robin Wood's critical account of horror films and his attack on Cronenberg.⁴ Proceeding in cine-structuralist manner, Wood establishes a set of binary oppositions shaping the horror film: the genre's root antinomy are the Normal/Culture and the Monstrous/Nature dyads where the Monstrous is the Natural taking the distorted form of the "return of the repressed", and the Normal/Cultural is repressive ideology extruded by "bourgeois patriarchal capitalism."⁵ The Monstrous, then, is a revenge against repression. However, it is to be interpreted — beneath its grotesque distortion under the regime of repression — as natural desire which, at a deeper level of the film-text, is accepted, even embraced (or rejected and repressed again) as the hidden self which suffers sacrificial renunciation at the overt level of the drama. Evaluating directors in the horror genre, Wood divides them into two groups, progressives and reactionaries, not according to whether their films achieve textual depth — for depth is provided autonomously by the symbols at play in the genre itself — but according to how filmmakers mediate his Monstrous/Normal opposition in order to articulate an acceptance or rejection of the monster as denied desire and as a mirror of the repressed aspects of the self.⁶ On these grounds, Wood argues that Cronenberg exemplifies reaction in the genre because his monsters cannot be recuperated at any level. His films actively affirm and repeat the repressive work of Culture against Nature even while depicting the normal world as enervated and deadening. Cronenberg's films, then, are the "achievement of total negation" and Wood

traces the basic meaning of his films to the director's "neuroticism" about "aggressive female sexuality".⁷ When discussing *Videodrome* (1982) in his contribution to *The Shape of Rage*, Wood adds heterosexual male anxiety about natural bi-sexuality to the filmmaker's neuroses.

Wood's influential account of the horror film, and his attack on Cronenberg, share the two methodological assumptions mentioned above. Wood assumes that horror films possess a stable system of stereotyped metaphors (his Normal and Monstrous categories) whose root signifieds are to be situated within the Nature/Culture opposition. He also assumes that a stable system of narrativization, usually called "the classical Hollywood style", operates through a stereotyped narrativity (how the monster emerges as a figure of the "return of the repressed") that can always be shown to mediate the Normal/Monstrous opposition toward a "reconciliation" (Wood's ideologically progressive conclusion) or "demonization" (the reactionary conclusion). These binarized alternate narrative conclusions arise, in Wood's treatment, from the style of an individual director — or "auteur" — and are to be read out of the films by the critic's discernment of his personal vision, or by an overdetermination operating within the studio system.

The present paper takes a different starting point. It does not offer reasons why these assumptions are false but tries to suggest how one might proceed without them.⁸ It is my position that contemporary genre films are neither successful narrative mediations of oppositions in the sense that structuralist film criticism proposes nor do they deploy a successfully stereotyped symbolism. These critical constructs are of limited and dubious applicability, methodologically because largely confined to a broadly literary style of interpretation resembling "archetypal criticism", and historically because they are of particularly limited relevance when considering contemporary Hollywood horror films. In any case, Cronenberg, a Canadian director, has worked at quite a distance from Hollywood's horror genre aside from his adaptation of the American horror-novelist Stephen King's *The Dead Zone* (1983).

This paper does not propose a different construct of the genre but, by drawing on the post-structuralist film-semiotic work of Raymond Bellour⁹ and Stephen Heath,¹⁰ which takes "narrativization" itself as a problem, I will attempt a circumscribed account of a single "scene" from Cronenberg's *Videodrome*. At the same time, the paper seeks to discern something of the internal stereotypicality that Cronenberg works into the film. When placed under scrutiny, Cronenberg's films, and *Videodrome* especially, deploy a quite monotonous repetition of scenes which tend to be isomorphic (or at least homologous) with each other in terms of their syntagmatic relations (the ordering of shots), and their centering of the internal narrator (here the hero, Max Renn) within a tightly controlled and repetitious "suturing" (point-of-view system). The reason to select this single scene is that it marks a dramatic reversal in the signification of eroticized power positions within the film.

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I take as a starting point the notion that *Videodrome* is a parody, something the film itself at times insists upon by lapses into broad comedy and satire. The loose idea of parody helps illuminate some features of *Videodrome*. For example, even a casual viewing of the film raises the question: why is it that *Videodrome* is so unsuccessful in achieving narrative resolution, but instead concludes in a terminal TV/film loop, the ideal image of irresolution? It is not the director's incompetence, nor a failure of the film's structure. Rather, it is because Cronenberg acknowledges the blasted aesthetic of narrative cinema *en passant* and then passes it by. The iconographic excess is so extreme that the drama of the film is reduced to a phantasmagoric seriality of obsessed returns to pornographic spectacle and, later, to spectacular murders, so that it can never restore itself to the familiar linearity, cause-and-effect chains and homogeneity that are indispensable to narrative work in its conventional configuration. More importantly, *Videodrome* is a serious, even earnest parody of Jean Baudrillard's theoretical nightmare, using precisely one of the blunt figures of post-modern simulated erotics Baudrillard proposes: programmatic literalization of the human body.¹¹

This paper's critical activity will be a reading back of the film's excessive iconography, its placement and treatment within a serial film construction, into theory. This activity proceeds on three hypotheses: first, that theoretical ideas, quite aside from the intentions or knowledge of the director, engender a stereotypicality — here a programmatic — literalization that is thematized here as “writing the body”; second, that this engendering of the film's “programme” is set in motion and carried through the seriality of repetitions that determines the film's construction as a gross exaggeration of narrativization at the level of the shot sequence; and, third, that the drama of interpretation the film performs on itself works across the play of familiar but less conscious fascinations, with scopic pleasure and pornographic images especially, and that the film interprets them, through tropes and reversals, as the film interprets itself.

At first, *Videodrome* shares with the viewer pornographic imagery and a pornographic “look” that it later dissolves in a parodically violent reversal. Dependent on serialized scenes, on isomorphic camera set-ups and arrangements of shots, this reversal is encoded as transformation under the the signs of a literalized iconography of the body, and particularly, the body of Max, the hero. This encoding of reversal as transformation swings on two iconographic tropes: the hero's power becomes a wound that makes Max the site of a “writing the body” and, further, this reversal literalizes the shift from what Michel Foucault terms panopticism¹² with its bifurcated spaces of the look and the spectacle, to its spatially collapsed successor, Baudrillard's “contactual obscenity”.¹³ Indeed, *Videodrome* is a serious parody of that theoretical space which is Baudrillard's nightmare space of the videated body.

The Story So Far

Max Renn (played by James Woods), the hero of *Videodrome*, is the pornographer. He runs CIVIC-TV, a television station that, as another character puts it, "offers viewers everything from soft-core pornography to hard-core violence." It is a token of the film's sophistication that it denies the pornographer is some sort of artist who makes things. Owning the means to gather and purvey, Max is more purely the pornographer than someone who takes pictures of people caressing (or abusing) each other or who loops the moans of actresses for a living. Fitted out as the exacting consumer, the capitalized collector, and especially as the discerning eye of videoporn, Max at first seems to hold pride of place, the place of pure "production": his potent gaze enjoys a conjuring mastery over erotic spectacle. At his command, porn images appear, they are gathered, distributed, according to what Max sees and wants.

By encoding Max's look as a mastery, *Videodrome* exaggerates conventions of many films that position the protagonist in and by the "narrativization of space".¹⁴ The exaggeration is that here this potency (Max as owner) and its production of eroticism (Max as discerning eye) are brought together not as one point in a network of looks but as the exclusive center of the gaze that makes fantasy into spectacle. As the fiction of *Videodrome* develops, Max's position is flipped over, reversed and, in that reversal, Max's mastery is transformed in a viciously imaged victimhood. Max panics at the same place, the center of the gaze, once the center of his mastery, where the pornographer's position might always be reversed and where he might always panic.

Max embodies the pornographic imaginary and he acts out that imaginary often early in the film when he quite literally conjures images by his command, inspecting them and dismissing them from view. And Max always, it seems, dismisses the imagery he calls up because he is the master pornographer, the man who is secretly certain that he has the ur-text of the pornographic in his mind as he rummages about for its manifestation in photographic spectacle in a film or video image. Of course, he firmly believes his spectacle will never be found. This belief is the *felix culpa* that grounds his power: it ensures the distance that opens between every spectacle and his disappointed gaze, and that divided space depends on his never finding the realization of his ur-text, which is always inside him. Marked by that distance, pornographic production — the mastery of erotic spectacle under his gaze — bores the pornographer. His boredom in turn — the token of his power in ownership — protects his production, as discernment, collection and banishment. These three moments — power-in-mastery/ pleasure-of-his-gaze/and boredom-in-ownership — always proceed on to the production of the next erotic tableau which, again, will not be that spectacle.

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These three moments are repeatedly played out in the early passages of *Videodrome*. In the third scene, for example, Max conjures up a porn tape with the words, "Let me see the last one"; an excerpt from a soft-core Japanese porn tape appears on the screen (the fourth sequence) and, in the fifth sequence, Max dismisses it as "soft, too soft" and presciently calls for "something that will break through, something tough." The reversal and Max's panic begin when the pornographer finds his spectacle, the S&M Videodrome show, or worse, it finds him. In Videodrome it "breaks through" all right — Videodrome closes the distance, reverses the system of the gaze, and rewrites Max as if that "something tough" were the original of every pornographer's imaginary and rightfully part of his flesh; in fact, Videodrome cuts itself into some important parts of Max's flesh: the eye and the hand, making them sites of polluting inscription. In *Videodrome*, what fleetingly seems like blissful conjunction of the pornographer's ur-text and the Videodrome TV show's savage S&M spectacle flips over to reverse the erotics of *Videodrome*, bringing them under the signs of pollution, contamination, incision, inscription — and Max's production turns over into his seduction.

The Space of the Theoretical Nightmare

In *Videodrome* this reversal programmatically follows Jean Baudrillard's dyad of media "obscenities" corresponding to the second — and third-order simulations. In what could be correctly read as a treatment for the film, Baudrillard writes,

The hot, sexual obscenity of former times is succeeded by the cold and communicational, contactual and motivational obscenity of today. The former clearly implied a type of promiscuity ... objects piled up and accumulated in a private universe.... Unlike this organic, visceral, carnal promiscuity, the promiscuity that reigns over the communication networks is one of superficial saturation, of an incessant solicitation, of an extermination of interstitial and protective spaces.¹⁵

Videodrome is a film that literalizes the concepts it brings into play, and there is a particular configuration of shots that marks off the space in the film where the pornographer's "production" flips over to become his "seduction", where Baudrillard's "extermination of protective spaces" is articulated in a literalism: Max's body opens up with a large pulsating slit. An incision is inscribed on Max's flesh, a flesh he believed he held at a distance, that was a protected space in which he stood in mastery over spectacle. This is the distance the pornographer ensures himself he enjoys as the owner of the erotic spectacle delineated in cinema from the place of panoptic power and scopic pleasure. That distance closes in, a "contactual" obscenity filling the gap, and Max literally opens up.

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That event is configured in a 19-shot sequence to be found in the middle of the film; here *Videodrome*, a television signal that Max has been "monitoring" and seeking to purchase, rewrites Max, rewrites the text of his body. Simply put, the pornographer panics when it is revealed that his own eroticism (his pornographic ur-text) is and always was a simulation he never owned. It was never inside him, never a "depth", never the pornographer's imaginary. Rather it has made him and has inscribed him as its text cutting directly on the surface of his flesh. Ownership and production were only Max's fantasy, as they are always the pornographer's fantasy. There is and never was any such pornographic ur-text, but only a nostalgia for the owned imaginary original of a private universe that never was. Instead, Max has been "contacted" and has fallen under the contaminations and inscriptions that have rewritten him, remade him as technology's body, the issue of the obscene paternity, the simulation model. Precisely as pornographer, now under the seduction earlier misrecognized as his production, Max opens himself to the signal while seeking the pornographic spectacle he believes to be his own production. Instead of opening out before him under his gaze as it seemed to do, Max himself opens up and is cut a new eye, the slit in his belly.

In *Videodrome*, the iconography of Max's body descends into the gruesome nightmare of the destiny of the body described by Michel Foucault's essay on Nietzsche and amplified in his *The History of Sexuality*:

The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated Self (adopting the illusion of substantial unity), and a volume in disintegration. Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history and the process of history's destruction of the body.¹⁶

The Place of the Reversal

To begin, however, one speaks of a place, Max's first place in the erotics of *Videodrome*. At the level of the sequence, in what is, in terms of the standard cine-semiotic account of syntagmatic arrangements, a classically made film, *Videodrome* sets up that place as, first of all, a reverse angle point-of-view shot. The 19-shot sequence to be studied comes after an extended series of almost identical sequences, starting with the very first of the film. These sequences form the principal syntagmatic series of the film, a point-of-view/object-of-the-gaze dyad construction in which Max communes in his apartment with his TV set. Minor variations include a visit to his television station's video lab (sequence six) and a session with his partners in the station's board room (sequence four). Quite monotonously, this series of almost isomorphic sequences has positioned Max as the internal watcher, the center of the filmic space. In the only other series, those involving Max's encounters with other characters, and the brief tran-

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sitional passages where Max moves from scene to scene, the hero also assumes a like centering position. But it is this primary series, which includes the pornographic spectacles of the first half of the film, where the emphasis on Max's gaze is obsessively emphatic and controlling.

In this 19-shot sequence, like most of its predecessors, the first shot begins with a backward zoom and proceeds to a series of alternating shot-reverse shots, seven of which are evenly distributed reverse-angle shots of Max looking. The segment closes with a rightward pan following Max as he moves to answer a phone call. Over the course of this passage, starting at shot 8, Max "becomes the monster" of the film.

In a naive sense, Max is alone in his apartment and is watching a videotape of the murdered media prophet Professor Brian O'Blivion — loaned to him by the professor's daughter, Bianca. During the backward zoom from the TV image, O'Blivion starts to explain what Videodrome, supposed by Max to be only a sinister and fascinating S&M TV show, really is. This zoom figure has been used so often before that it already announces Max will occupy the space of the implied reverse angle — and that this first shot is already from his point-of-view. The shot-reverse-shot series which ensues shows Max in medium shots and close-ups silently watching O'Blivion on the TV. The banality of this shot construction, which represents the most ordinary solution to the question of how to convey the scripted scene of a conversation, is listlessly articulated to render quite exactly the bored fascination of watching a videotape on TV. This banality also underscores the contrasting aggression of the soundtrack, which consists of O'Blivion's deliberately overwritten speech. Then, at shot 8, the segment spirals out into gruesome spectacle of the opened slit and this ordinary sequence becomes an extraordinary parody of the conventional horror film scene in which the main character "becomes the monster".

O'Blivion is explaining that he was Videodrome's inventor and first victim. Massive doses of Videodrome have given him a brain tumour he believes is really a new organ of perception, a new eye. The professor is addressing Max as his "son", a man made by the father's invention — a ray of light, a code, a signal — since Max has been absorbing massive doses of Videodrome "under" the S&M TV show. He will become what O'Blivion became; Max, too, will develop a new eye. A character thinly disguising Marshall McLuhan, O'Blivion is transparently a parodic personality. Nonetheless, throughout *Videodrome*, McLuhan's texts are always paraphrased cogently and even earnestly, although with dark irony. Max has been videated by the ray which has no direct connection to the S&M imagery — "the signal can come in under a test pattern, anything." So, Videodrome is, first of all, a medium that is its own message indifferent to content, including pornographic spectacle. This paraphrase of the famous media prophet's slogan, "the medium is the message", is collated in O'Blivion's speech with McLuhan's theory of the extended and transformed sensorium as the result of electronic media. However, whereas

many interpreters of this theory, and sometimes McLuhan himself, have been inclined to see this transformed sensorium as a beneficent "exteriorization of the senses" and the media as "extensions of man", in *Videodrome*, McLuhan's theory is articulated under the signs of contamination, incision and violation of flesh. Max is not just videated, he is totally worked over, contaminated, incised and inscribed by the Videodrome signal. He is, in Foucault's formulation, "traced by language and dissolved by ideas" and Foucault's "destruction of the body" is literalized as a wound in Max's flesh. In fact, in Cronenberg's blunt, parodic unfolding of the image of the slit during the second half of the film divided by this segment, Max becomes a videotape machine that acts out Baudrillard's "contactual and motivational obscenity". Max is to be not just saturated and contaminated but injected with a simulation model that is to remake him according to a political scenario.

Indeed, as the professor talks on over the shot-reverse-shot alternations, the silent Max is being solicited by his technological father; O'Blivion's discourse is a science-fiction patriarchal aetiology. The professor tells the tale of the birth of a race, the men of the "new flesh", of which the professor himself is father and Max his son. In the sixth shot, a stately zoom-in that makes O'Blivion's face fill the film screen, the professor concludes "the only reality is our perception — surely, Max, you can see that, can't you?" The video image of O'Blivion splatters out. In the next shot, Max, in close-up, looks down, and Max does see since the succeeding shot is clearly from his point-of-view; he sees a close-up of a large, pulsating slit that has opened up vertically in his chest. The pornographer's panic has assumed a spectacular visibility which, by the rules of the horror genre, makes Max the monster; and, by the rules of *Videodrome's* systematics of space and sound, flips over the erotic power positions of the film.

System and Excess

As a formal unit, the segment is calculatedly dull, but it is not just a container for this gruesome spectacle of the slit. Although it is obvious that the excess of the image is factored into the dullness of the sequence to ensure the shock of reversal, this is really a superficial effect, and so obvious that it tips the scene over into parody. More important is the way that dullness is calculated on the conventionality of the scene's construction. There are two inextricable aspects of this formal conventionality relevant to understanding how *Videodrome* renders Baudrillard's theoretical nightmare: the first is the system of spatial organization, called "system of the suture" and centered on the gaze; the second is the systematic imbalance of image and sound (and specifically, language, which assumes the mastery Max seemed to enjoy in the first half of the film).

The institutional codes of narrative cinema, especially at the level of the composition of successive shots, have as their basic purpose setting up

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a continuity system that unifies the fragmentary single shots. Stephen Heath describes this purpose as the "narrativization" of screen space, and he writes,

Classical continuity ... is an order of pregnancy of space in frame; one of the narrative acts of film is the creation of space but what gives the moving space its coherence in time...is here 'the narrative itself', and above all as it crystallizes round character and point of view.¹⁷

Film semiotics have excavated that "narrativized space" and examined its center — the point-of-view crystallization — as a critical site of textual production. Developing the critical heuristic called "the system of suture", semioticians have argued: 1) that screen space coheres through a network of feints and fusions that are anything but literal; 2) that they are instead complexly figural of anxieties and desires and, therefore, that this cohering function is not a neutral process but a determined activity; and (3) that the site of production of the "system of suture" is as well and concomitantly the site of the erotics of cinema involving pleasure, desire, difference and, at least potentially, excess.

Most narrative films mobilize the gaze through a network of looks and in varying degrees dissipate that erotics and smooth over the narrativizing activity. This is, in essence, what the cinematic decorum often associated with "classical narrative style" consists of. Exceptions, like the often discussed films of Josef von Sternberg and Alfred Hitchcock, concentrate and exacerbate the erotics of the "suture system" in the direction of difference and/or excess. *Videodrome* belongs among these exceptions, and in a highly exaggerated manner, for Cronenberg narrows the network of gazes to a very tightly closed circuit of power/pleasure. Max's point-of-view is not just crystallized as the centering position of screen space, his gaze is totalized as the solitary site of spatial production, and not just for one or two sequences, as occurs in Hitchcock's *Psycho*. Max seems literally to own all screen space, and to conjure up the pornographic spectacles out of that space because cuts from his point-of-view overwhelmingly determine what the camera's reverse angles show (early in the film these are persistently pornographic sub-sequences) and because the camera so insistently returns to Max's look from the reverse angle afterwards. Cinematically, this is what makes Max so purely the pornographer and how the film obsessively serializes the expository facts of Max's ownership, his discernment and his boredom into Max's empowered production of images. And, when this tightly coiled system of looks and gazes is reversed, the effect is extraordinarily powerful, an effect thrust into extraordinary and parodic excess of the image of Max's slit torso.

Videodrome is firmly rooted in the tradition of the *Kammerspielfilm*, the single-character drama in which the inner state of the protagonist controls the dynamics of composition and the mood of the piece as a whole.

The character's state becomes the whole enunciation of the work. From the very beginning, *Videodrome* extends to Max's point-of-view this sort of extreme enunciatory potency. Even when scenes do not begin with Max, the camera's trackings, zooms, dollies and pans obediently return to him; all the film's movements through space and time are obsessively centered on his screen presence. More particularly, his empowered gaze operates as the specifically pornographic gaze: the lengthening glimpses at the savage S&M TV show are for Max alone, at least until he meets Nicki Brand. Marking an extension but no change in the film's enunciatory system, Nicki watches and delights in *Videodrome* with Max, declares "I was made for this show" and then, becoming his lover, performs her sexual masochism with and for Max. This erotic encounter triggers his first hallucination: the theatricalized image of their lovemaking on the *Videodrome* set, the bliss of the ur-text fantasy and the production of spectacle made one.

Max's pornographic look, not unlike Freud's Baby Max, operates in what seems to be his playpen of power and desire. It is his apartment, his TV station, his videoplayer, his screen and finally his fantasy which Nicki embodies that constitute the enclosed, virtually solipsistic spaces of the film's first half. The images that interest Max he picks up and drops, unwinds and rewinds like so many erotic yo-yos. The whole scopic system of the film converges as a monotonous seriality to constitute this exaggeration of Max's position in *Videodrome*. Then, after the sequence in which Max "becomes the monster", the elastic alternation in the later part of *Videodrome* is re-configured and Max's position is reversed: he is now the toy at the end of the elastic wire.

Max is pulled into *Videodrome*, that other playpen, the hyper-simulation of Max's "new flesh" — and what the film soon amplifies in the clanking comic book phrase — "the video word made flesh". But, of course, there never was any other playpen but always only the game of Max's seduction in which Max's body is always rewritten (as "new flesh") to a scenario (the "video word") produced elsewhere in the no-place of the *Videodrome* simulation model. It always and already produces technology's body, which was always the pornographer's real — or rather his hyper-real — body. At the juncture when Max has a glimmer, when his new eye — the slit in his chest — opens to his point-of-view, as his father O'Blivion promised seconds before, *Videodrome's* eroticism — which as Max says himself "ain't exactly sex" — flips over. The slit opens as a new eye — and it is again the slit eye that so provoked Jacques Lacan to see it as the site of inscription when it was opened in the notorious first sequence of the Dali — Bunuel *Un chien andalou* — that marks the effacement of Max's own body. The incision signals that it is Max who is now the site of a writing of another "ur-text".

In terms of sequence, narrative space and system of point-of-view, then, Max has not simply become the monster, his slit means he has become the obscene spectacle he, as the holder of the pornographic gaze, had stood

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outside of. Indeed, Cronenberg makes him a humiliating spectacle at that, for in shot 9 he sticks a pistol into the new cavity and his hand is drawn in after it. A grisly slapstick attempt to remove the pistol ends up with him able only to withdraw his hand.

From Production to Seduction

Baudrillard's opposition between production and seduction is critical here in understanding that in *Videodrome* the reversal that occurs is not just between owners of the look or gaze. It is not just that Max's position in the film is flipped over and that someone else is on top and he has become the film's eroticized bottom. Rewriting Foucault's theory of the production of the sexual through multiple discourses and "panopticism", (precisely the mastering look from within the protected spaces of a private universe), Baudrillard describes production's imperative: "let everything be said, gathered, indexed and registered: this is how sex appears in pornography...with its immediate production of sexual acts in a frenzied activation of pleasure."¹⁸ Posing seduction as a stage beyond panopticism's productive activity, Baudrillard adds: "seduction withdraws something from the visible order" and calls it back to an origin it never had, while it flows without depths through the technological manufacture of simulation models, scenarios, simulacra without originals.¹⁹ Max's pornographic gaze is, then, a fantasy of production that centers, conjures, activates. Now become the spectacle, Max opens up and is drawn inward (his hand and gun) toward seduction, and everything is reversed. Not just the installation of a second panoptic system (that would make *Videodrome* merely a paranoid film), the reversal extinguishes the very system of Baudrillard's "protected spaces".

But, having spoken of inscription, of Max being re-written, we must now shift over to the second aspect of this 19-shot sequence, to the systematic imbalance of image and sound/language. This aspect Cronenberg not only exaggerates but complicates in *Videodrome*, although this is an aspect of the film that is perhaps less successfully realized than others. In most narrative films, the soundtrack supports the image. Moreover, sound and language simultaneously defer to the image-track by constantly insisting that they have as their point of origin someone or something inside the image, even if it is not immediately visible. It could be "off-screen", but always potentially brought "on-screen" to confirm that sound and/or language's origin lies within the image-track. One of the key film-sound conventions of narrative cinema, then, is a systematic balance of sounds across shots to maintain the "coherence of vision", in Heath's phrase,²⁰ which is what this system of sound-image relations protects.

Max is silent in this 19-shot sequence, which on one side is bordered by O'Blivion's speech and on the other by the phone call, which will turn out to be corporate executive Barry Convex's first command to Max —

to have a talk. The next scene is that talk, in which Convex, too, tells Max what Videodrome really is and what it has made of Max. The scene concludes with Max's last hallucination: Nicki and Max "performing" on Videodrome, this time followed by the flagellation murder of a secondary character. It is the first murder, indeed a site where pornographic spectacle crosses over to spectacular killing, in a series of murders that will mirror the pornographic spectacles of the first half of the film.

At the segmental level, Cronenberg replicates in *Videodrome* the favored narrative design of his later films (excepting *The Dead Zone*): set piece spectacular scenes alternating with sequences in which secondary characters (here O'Blivion and Convex, and usually, like them, paternal figures) tell the hero-monster the origins of his monstrosity, which is always the secret history of his body as a technological product. In *Videodrome*, and in its successor, *The Fly*, this design gains an unusual density and obsessiveness that are linked directly to the "writing of the body". In the 19-shot sequence discussed here Cronenberg literalizes that linkage: O'Blivion speaks and what he says does actually transform the body. This empowered speaking — which is a writing — redoubles the seduction Max undergoes in the second half of the film. But the place of that speaking does not have an actual source, an origin, because the empowered speaking comes from the TV — in *Videodrome* a no-place, the simulation model from which the literally dead, like O'Blivion, address the living, namely Max, in their place. In the reversal, Max's power over the video-porn spectacle becomes the video-speech's power over Max, and the conjuring work of his gaze is returned to its proper no-place, the TV image. Moreover, the inscriptive work of sound/language is empowered, as speech, from that same no-place over the course of the second half of the film.

The aural aspect of the reversal is crucial to interpreting the film and, particularly the Videodrome's gruesome iconography of the body. O'Blivion, for example, tells Max that Videodrome's signal engenders a new organ of perception, a new eye, and Max's belly promptly opens to be that new eye. At first, this might suggest only the flipping over of erotic positions from Max on top to the "father" whose instrument unmans the son. This suggests that *Videodrome* can be mapped on to an Oedipal structure: when Max's gun and hand slip into his slit and he struggles to pull them out, he succeeds only in removing his hand, and so experiences a sort of emasculation by the father. The imagery and the humiliation suggests that the reversed erotics of *Videodrome* have made Max a monstrous castrato-hermaphrodite. His monstrosity, his humiliation and especially his panic are reactive signs that his bi-sexuality and its trauma have been unconcealed. For Robin Wood, this is everyone's repressed true nature, and its escape into view — indeed, into grotesque spectacle — signifies Cronenberg's neurotic fears of bi-sexuality.

This is initially a persuasive symbolic reading of the imagery. However, *Videodrome* is a film that uses not only imagery, but a tremendous, even

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redundant, supplement of language. It is critical that this 19-shot sequence is bordered on both sides with explanatory speeches. In the second half of the film, these speeches are multiplied. In every instance, the speeches effect the production of the horror spectacle, which is always now Max's own body. The image of the slit is not a hidden depth, the repressed bisexual self, that has emerged into view. It is a stereotype worked up internally by the film itself, and it has heaved itself into view as a body written and re-made as "the new flesh". This internal stereotyping is the point of Cronenberg's insistent scripting and of the massive supplement of explanatory-empowered language to the point of self-parody.

Moreover, the phone call from Barry Convex is not just a transitional closing shot but resolves the question that two earlier shots (16 and 18), taken from Max's left side, had raised: just whose position are they taken from? In a film so insistent on the gaze and on such positionings, this question has weight. When the phone rings, the pan in shot 19 reveals the angle to have been "the phone's". Or rather, it is Convex, who has "seen" through this medium of speech.

But who exactly holds that point-of-view at the end of that sequence is no more interesting and no more critical in Cronenberg's register of sound, language and image than mystic McLuhanism or corporate science fiction fascism. What matters is that both O'Blivion and Convex are "fathers of the eye": O'Blivion inscribes Max under his image with his aetiological speech; Convex encodes Max under the S&M TV show. Convex also encodes Max with a "flesh-cassette" and "flesh-gun": instruments of "writing." In a scene following his phone call, Convex thrusts a flesh-like videocassette into Max's slit and says "Open up to me, Max. I've got something I want to play for you." Max's slit is torn open, turning Max literally into a videotape player: the instrument for writing the science fiction of a corporate dystopian revolution. Crawling into a stairwell, Max then removes the gun from the slit, and it extends metal styli that penetrate Max's hand and arm, growing Max his "flesh gun".

Both O'Blivion and Convex incise Max's body as a slit eye with the paternal phallus of language itself: their speech, which serves as a tremendous supplement to the image — so much so that it is out of balance with the images and creates an excess of language that collides with the iconographic excess. When coupled with Max's silence, the fathers' speeches act as signs — no less than the reversal of the film's suture system — of his opening to them. The paternal speech-that-makes-spectacle is the video word that makes (rewrites) Max's flesh. The eye and the hand as sites of polluting inscription, are further signs along the chain of internal stereotypes that wind through *Videodrome*: like the slit that cuts a new eye in his torso, the gun whose styli penetrate Max's body is a displacement of the pen that inscribes the hand, that rewrites it exactly as the "flesh-gun". In the reversal of *Videodrome's* erotics, Max's body becomes a scene of writing for a scenario written elsewhere. He becomes the spectacle of incised flesh,

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the effacement of the text of his own body, which is rewritten from that elsewhere of the fathers. And, by being rewritten, Max is withdrawn from the "visibility" that had been the fantasy arena of his power, pleasure and ownership and has become literally the written image of "contactual obscenity".

However, even this is not yet exactly all Max's seduction — to become a sort of reversal-production, to become Max the product rather than master of production. The fathers' punishing gift to Max is to ritualize panic as murder, excess of power and further spectacle — and so the shootings in the second half of the film that answer the pornographic passages of the first half. But that is not all, for it is not just the fathers' words that transform; Nicki calls to him as a mother as well. And it is Nicki's role to articulate the no-place from which empowered speech emanates.

When she first appears on Videodrome (having disappeared temporarily from the drama to "audition for that show", as she says), she strangles O'Blivion in mid-speech and calls out "come to me, come to Nicki, Max". Her lips protrude from the sexually aroused TV like a tumescent breast and Max plunges his face into the screen-breast-face. Later, in concert with Nicki, Bianca "changes the programme" by removing Convex's flesh-tape and renames Max "the video word made flesh"; and finally, Nicki offers him extermination/resurrection, soliciting him to the no-place of origin, Videodrome itself, where the difference between TV signal and the flesh collapses into the "communicational". This is the seductive call that is, for Baudrillard, always the call to return to origins that never were — here back to the source(the TV itself) that made Max what he has become.

Videodrome concludes with a last trope, a last literalized turning, a TV/cinema loop in which Max hails himself as "the new flesh" and shoots himself in the head with the flesh gun. The loop arcs out over the figure of the hysteron proteron to diagram a no-beginning no-end. Max's suicide and its video-simulation loop over and under each other and neither can be the original. Nicki seduces Max to this final end of extermination and resurrection in what is also *Videodrome's* last parodic gesture, a black parody of McLuhan's theory of angelistic circulation of the body in the electronic media: the disincorporation of the nervous system through electronic media that curves back to engender "cosmic man", the simulation become the noogenesis of the body itself. The pseudo-incarnational rhetoric, the use of openly magico-religious speech to seduce Max this one last time, suggests nothing so much as an impossible collision of Baudrillard and Teilhard de Chardin. This TV/cinema loop is the absurdist lighting flash of a dead divinization.

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Notes

1. Two critics who attempt to develop this widely assumed but rarely investigated notion are Robert Phillip Kolker in his study of modern American directors, *A Cinema of Loneliness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980) and Robert B. Ray, in his study of the ideological shifts in American films, *A Certain Tendency in the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), especially pp. 247 ff.
2. Piers Handling, ed. *The Shape of Rage: The Films of David Cronenberg* (Toronto: General Publishing, 1983).
3. See especially William Beard, "The Visceral Mind," in Handling, pp. 2 — 10.
4. Wood has written often on horror films over the last decade. His most important texts are gathered in Andrew Britton, Richard Lippe, et al, *The American Nightmare* (Toronto: The Festival of Festivals, 1979), especially pp. 7-32; and in his own *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 70-162 and 189-201. His first criticism of Cronenberg appears in *Nightmare*, 23-26; his second, expanded attack is "David Cronenberg: A Dissenting View", in Handling, pp. 115-135.
5. *Nightmare*, pp. 14-16.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 7 and "Dissenting", p. 130.
8. For a sustained criticism of current methods in film genre criticism, see Stephen Neale, *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980). Also see Thomas Schatz, "The Structural Influence: New Directions in Film Genre Study", in Barry Grant, ed., *Film Genre Reader* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), pp. 91-101.
9. See Raymond Bellour, *L'analyse du film* (Paris: Editions de l'Albatros, 1979); *Camera Obscura*, Nos. 3-4 (1979) affords a very good introduction to Bellour's analytical procedures and critical themes.
10. Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981).
11. Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication* (New York: Semiotext[e], 1988), pp. 30-32.
12. Michel Foucault, "Panopticism", in his *Discipline and Punish: Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1979). Also see, Jean Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault* (New York: Semiotext[e], 1987), especially 20-23.
13. Baudrillard sets up this spatial typology in "The Ecstasy of Communication", in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983), 126-133.
14. Heath, "Narrative Space," *Questions of Cinema*, 45-46.
15. Baudrillard, "Ecstasy of Communication", 131.
16. Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald Blouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 148
17. Heath, "Narrative Space", 44.
18. Baudrillard, "Ecstasy of Communication", 132. Also see *Forget Foucault*, 21-23.
19. Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*, 21. See also "Seduction, or, the Superficial Abyss, in *Ecstasy of Communication*, 57-75.

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20. See Heath, "Film Performance", *Questions of Cinema*, 119-121: "To disturb the achieved relations of sound and image in the apparatus is to disturb the performance, to break the whole coherence of vision."