

DAVID CRONENBERG: PANIC HORROR AND THE POSTMODERN BODY

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There's a Latin quote that goes "Timor mortis conturbat me" which, roughly translated, means "The fear of death disturbs me." I think that death is the basis of all horror. For me, death is ... very physical. There's where I become Cartesian, you see. Descartes was obsessed with the schism between mind and body, and how one relates to the other.

—David Cronenberg.¹

Canadian filmmaker David Cronenberg, whose early films, *Shivers* and *Rabid*, provide frightening visions of deadly sexual epidemics and psychogenetic bodily mutations, is among the first cinematic explorers of (post)modern panic,² where bourgeois individuals are attacked by viral forces and undergo mutations of mind and body. In Cronenberg's films both mind and body, in mysterious interaction, disintegrate or mutate out of control and wreak havoc in a hyperfunctionalized and hygienic social order unable to deal with frenzied metamorphosis and proliferating disease.

What we can now see as Cronenberg's middle films (*The Brood*, *Scanners*, and *Videodrome*) present psychotropic and telematic powers invading both the mind and the body. Although Cronenberg presents himself as a Cartesian in interviews, his films deconstruct the Cartesian opposition between mind and body, presenting the mind as a *res extensa* subject to control by both psychic and material forces, while presenting the body as a site of psychic and ideological invasion where *res cogitans*, often mul-

tively reproduced, literally reifies the body to subjectified excess. *Scanners*, for instance, presents new drugs creating destructive psychic powers while *Videodrome* shows telematic invasion conquering mind and body at once in the creation of a new species which synthesizes the technological with the human. Going beyond McLuhan's vision of the media as the exteriorization of mind and body, Cronenberg explores ramifications of media interiorization in an era when media and radical semiurgy are said to produce a catastrophic implosion of meaning, masses, and society which obliterates boundaries of the real and referential security.³

His most recent films *The Dead Zone* and *The Fly* focus more obsessively on the specific roles of politics, science and technology in a new technocapitalist political economy. Most of his films, in different ways, present technology out of control, intersecting with the imperatives of capital accumulation to produce disaster. Consequently, Cronenberg naturally comes to make use of the disaster, conspiracy, and dystopic genres which have become key forms of contemporary cinema.⁴ While his style and use of genre is somewhat conventional, he can be read in retrospect as a pioneering cinematic auteur of a specific version of Canadian/North American (post)modern social theory.

Cronenberg, Horror, and the Viral Body: *Shivers* and *Rabid*

Cronenberg's early films used the horror film to explore contemporary anxieties about the viral body and its frightening invaders. This is not surprising, for horror films have traditionally encoded some of our deepest and most unspeakable fears. The classical horror film articulated anxieties concerning sexual thralldom and deprecation (*Dracula* and vampire films), worries about science and technology out of control (*Frankenstein*, *The Invisible Man*), fears of ancient evils (*The Mummy*), anxieties over psychological disintegration and metamorphosis (*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*), and fears of uncontrollable bodily metamorphosis (*The Wolfman* and werewolf films). Horror films allow the playing out of these multiple fears, and the classical horror film attempted to provide symbolic resolutions to primal and social anxieties, while offering reassurance that institutions, authorities, and society were capable of eliminating evil and restoring order.

Since the era of German Expressionism in the Weimar Republic, horror films have been the shared nightmares of an industrial-technological culture heading, in its political unconscious, toward catastrophe. In (post)modern theory, the catastrophe has already happened, and the contemporary horror film can be read as indication of a (post)modern society in permanent crisis with no resolution or salvation in sight. Recent horror films—and especially those of David Cronenberg—reveal a society in a process of mutation and crisis; uncertain of its institutions, values, and way of life; and undergoing the panic disintegration of subjectivities and the terrifying techno-viral invasion and re-making of the body.

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Cronenberg's 1975 film *Shivers*, (*They Came from Within* in its U.S. release) has been aptly described as a "venereal horror" film.⁵ A scientist who believes that the contemporary individual is "an over-rational animal that's lost touch with his body," has produced a parasite which is a combination aphrodisiac and venereal disease. This parasite will both stimulate sexual activity and infect its partner with similar intense desire, and the contagious virus will be passed on to further hosts.

The plot suggests that the virus is transmitted through blood and sexual activity. Early scenes show blood dripping through windows, being smeared on bodies, intermingling with sweat, in sexual tableaux which mix Eros with Thanatos, passion with blood, in a polymorphic perverse transgression of sexual taboos profuse enough to arouse the most jaded Sadean. The virus takes the form of phallic excrement: the perfect symbol of the wastes and excesses of excremental culture. The parasite violently transforms the body and mind of its host, and relentlessly passes from one individual to another; like sex itself, it is impossible to avoid or resist. The *mise-en-scène* frames the Sadean orgies and sexual excess within the ultramodern architecture of a highly controlled apartmentscape, and against the cold, sterile urban cityscape the sign of an overly functionalized modernity. Moreover Cronenberg periodically withdraws his camera from jerky, disjointed images of hysterized sexual panic within, to classical, well-framed and centered images of the apartment complex against the calm Montreal night. Canadian tidiness and cleanliness is befouled by filthy parasites who excrete noxious fecal matter and tiny droppings of blood—as if the excremental waste of a techno-utopic living scene refused repression and occlusion, and vomited up its material underside to remind the ultramodern denizens what decay and horror they were at once fleeing and engendering in their sanitized techno-environment.

The body invaders in the film obviously anticipate AIDS, though the parasites do not seem to kill the hosts but rather transform them into hyperactive sex machines recalling the frenetic sexual experimentation of the era. The film ends on an ironic note as the infected viral bodies drive off gaily into the night, ready to invade Montreal and take on its citizens who seem destined to assume the role of the sexual avant-garde.

Critics attacked the film as a manifestation of "sexual disgust," and the film was savaged in the Canadian magazine *Saturday Night* for its scandalous use of state funds provided by the Canadian Film Development Corporation.⁶ Yet the final scene is highly ambiguous, and can be read either as an horrific vision of sexual apocalypse (the destruction of civilization through sexual excess), or as a missionary attempt to share new-found sexual liberation with others. Cronenberg's text privileges the first reading, though I shall later examine the possibility of the latter.

Cronenberg's next film *Rabid* (1977) goes even further in linking body invaders with sexual parasites. The story features Rose, played by porn queen Marilyn Chambers who embodied innocent purity in *Ivory Snow*

soap ads as a child: a modernist iconic inversion which becomes resonantly intertextual in Cronenberg's film. Rose is involved in a motorcycle wreck and requires plastic surgery. In the Keloid clinic, she is treated to an experimental skin graft with synthetic flesh, which is supposed to read the genetic code of its host and grow into whatever was there previously, producing a typically Cronenbergian synthesis of nature and technology which, in turn, gives birth to a new flesh.

The implant mutates, however, into a parasitic new organ. A vaginal cavity erupts under her armpit and gives birth to a penile syringe which both extracts blood from its host and transmits a form of rabies. While *Rabid* intimates that the production of mutated designer bodies is highly problematic and dangerous, it does not particularly villainize the scientists who inadvertently cause the viral mutations. Indeed, there are no real villains, nor any sharp distinction between good and evil, in Cronenberg's early films. Although there is a technophobic element in the depictions of technologies and experiments producing catastrophic consequences—as well as in the repeated images (literal and microscopic) of the menacing viruses in *Shivers* and *Rabid*—for Cronenberg the catastrophe is a product of the implosion of nature, technology, capital, and humanity, and it can thus not be blamed on any one factor.

In resisting an explicitly technophobic reading of his films, Cronenberg prefers to explore the possible consequences of technology out of control in specific socio-economic contexts. Thus he always depicts technology as the product of historically specific relations of production, deriving from institutions and individuals pursuing economic as well as technological imperatives. This materialist contextualization distinguishes Cronenberg's films from films which merely blame technology for social disaster.

Within this context, *Rabid* challenges the technological rationality of high-tech society and portrays the unintended consequences of new technologies, as well as, the limits of technicism as a project of dominating and controlling nature.

The Carcinogenic Body and Viral Images: The *Brood*, *Scanners*, and Videodrome

The battle for the mind will be fought in the video arena, the videodrome. The television screen is the retina of the mind's eye. Therefore, the television screen is part of the physical structure of the brain. Therefore, whatever appears on the television screen emerges as new experience for those that watch it. Therefore, television is reality, and reality is less than television.

—Professor Brian O'Blivion in *Videodrome*

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"Words begat image and image is virus."

-William Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*

The Brood (1979) continues Cronenberg's obsession with mutating bodies. Dr. Hal Raglan is the inaugurator of a psychic technique which enables patients to externalize their rage in carcinogenic growths. The result is catastrophic for Toronto's Carveth clan. Their daughter Nola is Raglan's most sensitive and prolific patient, who is able to externalize her "psychoplastic" rage into mutant children, the brood, who carry out her unconscious and perhaps conscious anger. Accordingly, they beat her daughter when she misbehaves, they kill her deeply-hated mother, and they destroy her daughter's school-teacher with whom she imagines her estranged husband is having an affair.

Cronenberg's psychoplastic provides a gruesome deconstruction of Cartesian mind/body dualism and is the ultimate manifestation of psychophysical disease or power. One of Raglan's patients, who has developed a lymphosarcoma which hangs from his neck like a shrivelled breast, complains: "I've got a small revolution on my hands, and I'm not putting it down very successfully." The images also provide frightening manifestations of the cancer epidemic which is currently causing around 35% of deaths in North America, and whose carcinogenic cells are probably up to something in all of our viral bodies: radical metastasis as the fate of the West. Yet Cronenberg's disaster films are resolutely dialectical: the sexual epidemic in his first two films provides both miseries and pleasures, and the carcinogenic revolutions in *The Brood* are seen as embodying a new ecological environment whereby mind and body can co-exist in harmony as well as disharmony, and can exhibit new powers as well as dangers.

I read Cronenberg's next two films, *Scanners* (1981) and *Videodrome* (1983), from this perspective. While in *Shivers* and *Rabid* sexual viruses produced "abnormal" mental behavior, in *Scanners* a new drug, Ephemerol, which was intended to tranquillize mothers during pregnancy, produces paranormal psychics called "scanners," who can scan (i.e. read) other minds, much as one scans a computer system for information. The scanners are also able to externalize their psychic powers: exploding heads, causing fires, and producing a host of spectacular cinematic effects.

Scanners thus leaves the hermetic sphere of sexuality and the family which framed Cronenberg's early films, while moving out into the corporate-political world of techno-capitalism. A corporation Con Sec produces international security systems, weapons, and high-tech opticals, while experimenting with computerization and the exteriorization of the mind (which prove to be one and the same).

Scanners suggests that the new mental powers generated by corporate/economic excess can be used for power and domination or for empathy and community. While Darryl Revok wants to organize the scanners into a corporate-political force to take over the world, a small scanner underground wants to use its unique powers for human empathy,

solidarity, and creativity. Cronenberg thus tries to represent the new technoscape both as a catastrophe and as a potentially higher and better stage of evolution. In good Hegelian fashion, his dialectics of disaster reach a higher stage and new synthesis in *Videodrome* (1983)—his most complex and disturbing film. To the viral body (*Shivers* and *Rabid*) and the carcinogenic body and mind (*The Brood* and *Scanners*), Cronenberg adds viral images and the telematic body. *Scanners* concludes with a very McLuhanesque figure of one of the scanners using his central nervous system to scan and explode the central nervous system of a mainframe computer, and *Videodrome* carries through Cronenberg's exploration of his fellow-Torontonian's media probes.

In *Videodrome*, a video-machine produces viral images which create brain tumors and hallucinations, and a "new flesh" which is able to assimilate and generate technologies. The film thus thematizes the implosion of mind, body, and technology in the media society. Cronenberg pictures video at the center of social life, emblematic of (post)modern society as site of a radical semiurgy—a proliferation of viral images which produce a new techno-reality. In the film, Cathode Ray Missions gives derelicts free exposure to video to help socialize them. The shelter is run by Bianca O'Blivion, whose father (an obvious McLuhan figure) had evidently been the first victim of *Videodrome*. His daughter preserves thousands of tapes of O'Blivion and pretends that he is still alive by releasing his tapes to TV stations. For O'Blivion, "public life on television was more real than private life in the flesh," thus his death has no sting—as long as his videotapes and video image circulate.

The body invasion pictured in *Videodrome* produces psychic mutations which give rise to a new mode of perception where there is no distinction between video hallucinations and reality. We are in Baudrillard's world of simulations where representation and the real implode in an undifferentiated play of signifiers. While, like the carcinogenic body in *The Brood*, the telematic mind/body in *Videodrome* is presented as a sinister development, the film also suggests that the viral images of *Videodrome* might produce a new stage of perception and reality and a "new flesh" which are potentially positive for human experience.

Interestingly, while the mutations of Cronenberg's earlier films were primarily products of well-meaning scientists, the inventors of *Videodrome* are more diabolical. The Spectacular Optical Corporation intends to use *Videodrome* to produce a populace "tough" enough for the "savage times" envisaged in the techno-future. "North America's getting soft... and the rest of the world is getting tough, very, very, tough." To survive, North America must become "pure, and direct, and strong." To reverse the trend toward "rotting away from the inside," the inventors of *Videodrome* want to produce technologies that will generate a species which merges technology and mind, video and body, in order to preserve white male hegemony in North America in the world of the future.

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Videodrome thus projects a future of techno-fascism some moments into the future, anticipating the 1987 TVcult series *Max Headroom*.⁷ In the final images, the TV programmer enters the video screen to make love to the video image of a woman with whom he is sexually obsessed. After watching his own simulated image blow itself away on the screen he shoots himself to enter the new video-sphere and become a new video-flesh. These virtually unreadable polysemic and surreal images recall the hallucinatory efforts of Nietzsche's Zarathustra to use parables, puzzling images, and cries of distress to awaken the 19th century to the mutations which it was undergoing. Cronenberg's films pose the enigma of the fate of a society of proliferating images and mutating bodies where the dwarfs and moles on Zarathustra's back become body invaders which enter our minds and bodies in a hyperreal new world that we are only beginning to understand.

Panic Films: *The Dead Zone*, *The Fly*, and The Resurrection of The Flesh

The truth, when it emerges, is more terrible than you could possibly imagine ...

—David Cronenberg⁸

The catastrophe has already happened ...

—Jean Baudrillard⁹

The viral, carcinogenic, and telematic bodies in Cronenberg's films present images of a *new* organic-conscious being which replaces the "natural" body of evolution and the designer bodies of recent consumer society where the bourgeois body descended "into the empty site of a dissociated ego, [becoming] a 'volume in disintegration,' traced by language, lacerated by ideology, and invaded by the relational circuitry of the field of (post)modern body."¹⁰

For Cronenberg as well as for Baudrillard, the catastrophe has already happened—many times. The (post)modern body is invaded and remade, or unmade, not only by parasites of dead power, but by viral, carcinogenic, and telematic parasites which are posing new challenges to bodily survival and human evolution. The bodies of the (post)modern have good reason to panic, as well as to meet the new challenges—first posed by Marx and Nietzsche—to remake the body corporeal and the body politic.

Within this context, David Cronenberg emerges as an auteur of panic films who uses and merges the horror, disaster, science fiction, and conspiracy genres to provide original meditations on the fate of the mind and body in the (post)modern scene. His films exhibit thematic inventiveness, philosophical complexity, clever irony, subtle humor, and nauseating gruesomeness in the context of Hollywood narrative codes, where such gestures are not often found. Yet the most astute aficionado of the contemporary

horror film, Robin Wood, claims that Cronenberg's works are paradigmatic examples of the reactionary horror film.¹¹ For Wood, Cronenberg's films are anti-sex, anti-women, anti-life. *Shivers*, in his opinion, views sexual liberation with "unmitigated horror" and the "entire film is premised on and motivated by sexual disgust."¹² In a later text, Wood complains how, in a symposium on the horror film in Toronto, Cronenberg was univocally metaphysical and refused to consider the social and political elements of his films.¹³ In his most recent critique, Wood refuses to revise his negative readings of the films, and steadfastly continues his polemic.¹⁴ In the context of the previous readings—and in the light of those that will follow—I would argue that Wood's critique is vitiated by his failure to see how the metaphysical and the social, the artistic and the political, are interconnected in Cronenberg's films, and that his films are full of social and political commentary that should be congenial to a critic with Wood's radical political commitments.

To begin, the major villains in Cronenberg's films are corporate executives, and throughout his films there is sly and sometimes strong critical commentary on corporate capitalism and hegemonic class formations. The corporate apartment manager, technocratic doctor, and bourgeois apartment dwellers in *Shivers* are obviously the butt of Cronenberg's satire, as are the executives in the skin graft clinic in *Rabid*, who discuss setting up a chain of plastic surgery clinics around the country. (A dissenter states that he does not want to become the "Colonel Sanders of plastic surgery.") Throughout his films, Cronenberg links capital accumulation and corporate hubris with the production of destructive technologies and sterile technourban environments. Thus his films can be read as critical visions of the production of designer bodies self-destructing in technocapitalism. Even more explicitly, the villains in *Scanners* are the corporate executives and functionaries who wish to take control of the world: an obvious allegory for the dangers of capitalism producing a techno-fascist world order. Finally, the villains in *Videodrome* are Convex and his minion Harlan (the corporate executive and his flunky), while *The Dead Zone* attacks a power-mad politician.

Furthermore, Cronenberg's films embody contemporary tensions and conflicts between good and evil, the rational and the irrational, the old and the new, repression and emancipation, which rarely privilege one side over another, and thus explore a wide network of contemporary oppositions in a proto-deconstructive vein. Although Cronenberg is clearly not a sexual emancipationist à la Reich, Marcuse, and Wood who see the undoing of sexual repression and unleashing of sexual energies as good per se, Cronenberg clearly is not a sexual conservative who comes down on the side of tradition, repression, and patriarchy. He is certainly critical of bourgeois normality and patriarchy (*The Brood* contains a compelling exploration of the conflicts hidden in the bourgeois family). And he reserves some of his strongest criticism for patriarchs (Raglan, Dr. Ruth, and the

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most despicable characters in *The Dead Zone* and *The Fly*).

Thus I suggest that Cronenberg's panic film express legitimate anxieties concerning the machinations of corporate capital, technology, and the state in the contemporary scene of techno-capital. His films exhibit anxieties about body invaders, fascination with the changes and mutations produced, and critical visions of the corporate-technological forces behind the body invasion. While Cronenberg's films are negative and pessimistic, they deal with real anxieties and phobias. His horror films combine projections of the universal fears of death, and the bodily mutations, invasions, and disintegration which nourish the classical horror film, with fears of contemporary viral, carcinogenic, and telematic body invaders. The horrors often mutate into phantasmagoric nightmares of catastrophe and apocalypse, reminding one of the disaster films which became one of the 1970s proto-typical genres. And the critical takes on corporate capitalism remind one of the corporate conspiracy films of the past fifteen years, while the political fears beneath *The Dead Zone*, which I shall examine shortly, resonate with the political conspiracy films.

The limitations of Cronenberg's films reside in the limitations of his genres and his use of Hollywood narrative conventions-though he often inventively expands these conventions and uses them for incisive social commentary. Yet his social critique is often of a conventional liberal/humanist mode, lacking both radical negation and social alternatives, preferring cool dissection of the contemporary scene and imaginative projections of possible futures. It was, indeed, Cronenberg's use of conventional genre and narrative cinema which enabled him in the mid-1980s to enter the mainstream cinema and make relatively well-bugeted genre films: *The Dead Zone* (1983), *The Fly* (1986), and *Dead Ringers* (1988).

The Dead Zone, based on a novel by Stephen King, utilizes the genre of the political conspiracy film, popular in the 1970s. Cronenberg's use of conventional genre and narrative cinema enabled him in the mid-1980s to enter the mainstream Hollywood cinema and make relatively well-budgeted Hollywood genre films: *The Dead Zone* (1983) utilizes the genre of the political conspiracy film, popular in the 1970s. In Fredric Jameson's reading, the conspiracy films represent an attempt of the political unconscious to map the networks of economic and political conspiracy and power in the (post)modern world of multinational capitalism.¹⁵ Conspiracy films can thus be read as an attempt at a cognitive mapping of the unmappable, or as a representation of the unrepresentable.

The Dead Zone is one of Cronenberg's most overtly political films. The film articulates fears of not only political conspiracy but nuclear holocaust. Johnny Smith, an all-American everyman, detects through psychic visions that an opportunistic politician will start a nuclear war. He then proceeds to assassinate the politician. The film depicts Smith's powers as mostly positive, though difficult to live with. Johnny pays the price of isolation and assumes the burden of perceiving the horrifying spiral of history from the

holocausts of World War II to post-nuclear destruction. Yet he copes and lives on and tries to use his powers to preserve and enhance human life.

Both *The Dead Zone* and *The Fly* continue Cronenberg's obsessive inquiries into mind/body mutation in the contemporary scene of technocapitalism. The films bring to the fore a tragic dimension less visible in the earlier films. Both Johnny Smith in *The Dead Zone* and Seth Brundle in *The Fly* are victims as much as agents as they cope (unsuccessfully in the end) with their new minds and bodies, and both expire as sacrificial victims of the new flesh. Each embodies, however, a utopian fantasy of transcendence, of evolution to higher forms of life. Both show the risks involved in evolution to the new flesh, and both show how the conventional world threatens and resists their mutations. Like Max Renn in *Videodrome*, both go all the way to the end of their experiments and both perish along the way.

As Julia Emberley has argued, Cronenberg's films incorporate a radical discontinuity, incarnating a rupture with "life as we know it."¹⁶ Metamorphosis is thus the theme and syntax of Cronenberg's films which portray mutating minds and bodies in fragmented narratives and discontinuous cinematic space ruptured with dead zones, shivers, quickly scanning camera movements, a videodrome of strange images, and broods of frightening horror. Perhaps only the horror film could capture the terror of radical metamorphosis, of fateful mutation of our minds and bodies in a society characterized by radical semiurgy and radical toxification. Yet *The Fly* also contains the desire for a higher mode of being, for transcendence, for a new energy and flesh, that is a recurrent theme in Cronenberg's cinema. Indeed, the very notion of metamorphosis so crucial to *The Fly* is utopian, though in the contemporary horror film, following Kafka, it more generally takes dystopic forms. A comparison with the earlier version of *The Fly* might help clarify the dual vision of metamorphosis in Cronenberg—and his (post)modern break with an earlier world.

While the original *Fly* (1958) safely anchored the scientist's experiments within the bosom of the family—and centered on his devoted wife—Cronenberg's *Fly* takes place in the post-familial singles scene. And while the original took place in a Montreal suburban home and garden that looked like a Disneyesque small-town U.S.A., Cronenberg's film takes place in an urban loft filled with junk-food, computers, and other detritus of ultramodernity. While the metamorphosis machine in the earlier *Fly* looked clumsily mechanical, Cronenberg's teleportation apparatus is controlled by computers and operates according to the principles of genetic engineering. Embodying Baudrillard's (post)modern molecular model of life as a code, of genetic miniaturisation (DNA) being the ultimate constituent and aleatory determination of human life,¹⁷ Cronenberg's teleportation machine breaks down the mind and body into its primary molecules and encodes the molecular structure into one telepod while decoding it in another.

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While the earlier *Fly* presented the teleportation experiment as a means to bring food to the starving, Cronenberg's *Fly* presents the invention as an exigency of (post)modern life to overcome space and time: moving the body instantly from one place to another and thus overcoming inertia, entropy and bodily limitation. It also depicts mutation of the body as the evolutionary/devolutionary fate of the human species as it enters a new age and new world. Although Brundel/Fly is destroyed in a paroxysm of special effects, his earlier metamorphosis is presented as a synthesis of wonderful new powers. Brundel/Fly is in touch with his body to an unparalleled degree, he discovers new physical and sexual energies, and he is aware that he is the bearer of a new species being. Yet he is unable to synthesize the new and the old, and eventually destroys himself. At one point, Brundel/Fly complains: "I'm saying I'm an insect who dreamt he was a man and loved it. But now the dream is over and the insect is awake."

This inability to incorporate new mental and bodily phenomena runs through Cronenberg's films. In *Shivers*, one of the male characters tries to live and harmonize with the parasite virus living in his stomach, saying: "You and me are going to make friends...atta boy." And the characters in *The Brood* attempt to control their cancerous growths. Indeed, the feared concepts of carcinogenics and metastasis signify growth and development. Cronenberg's characters try to accept their viral and carcinogenic body invaders in the hope that the new flesh will be able to evolve to a new mode of existence. These would-be-*Übermenschen* generally fail, but their efforts display fascination with and a utopian desire for rebirth and resurrection.

Dead Ringers (1988), by contrast, deals primarily with fears of mental disintegration and the loss of identity in contemporary techno-culture. Two identical twin brothers (both played by Jeremy Irons) become successful gynecologists and scientists and habitually share experiences. Consequently, both sleep with a movie actress with whom the more introverted brother becomes romantically involved. She is extremely angry when she learns they are trading her off, and her absence precipitates a disintegration of first one and then the other brother.

The film raises complex philosophical questions concerning identity and articulates panic over loss of identity in contemporary society. The sets are all ultra-modern and the high tech hospital/science scenes are framed with cool classical and ultramodern architectural design, picturing a rationalized and cyberneticized world without passion or intensity. Blue is the dominant color which permeates objects and lighting, connoting a cool technoscape where individuals are expected to act "normally" and predictably. The two ultra-intellectual scientists lose their cool and their identities in frightening scenes of psychological disintegration. Although Cronenberg depicts once again his obsession with mind/body interaction and personal identity, this time there is no suggestion of utopian rebirth or resurrection.

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Yet, I wish to fantasize that someday Cronenberg will make a film which will follow the adventures of his sexually emancipated viral bodies who, at the end of *Shivers*, happily drive into Montreal. I imagine that they would produce new forms of sexuality, society, and technology. I imagine that they confront new challenges and disasters with good humor and good will, and maintain their social solidarity and individual integrity. Such a film would present the resurrection of the body, the new flesh, both positively and negatively, as the site of loss and new possibilities. It would embody the most progressive insights into a non-repressive (post)bourgeois civilization set out by Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown in the 1950s, and would move beyond to a new modernity for which we do not yet have a Concept.¹⁸

Such a utopian vision seems, of course, impossible in the present situation of panic sex and techno-capitalism—and survival is no doubt the imperative of the moment. But radical philosophy—and progressive filmmaking—should contain a “dreaming forward” (Ernst Bloch) as well as an illusionless diagnosis and critique of the present grounded in historical comprehension of the past. As Herbert Marcuse put it, “Thought in contradiction, must become more negative and more utopian in opposition to the status quo.”¹⁹ Otherwise, it’s unlikely that we’ll have either a nice day, or a better one to look forward to tomorrow.

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Notes

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1. “David Cronenberg. Article and Interview by Paul M. Sammon,” *Cinefantastique* 10.4 (Spring, 1981): 22.
2. On (post)modern society, see Arthur Kroker and David Cook, *The Postmodern Scene: Excremental Culture and Hyper-Aesthetics* (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 1986). For my reservations about current postmodern theorizations, see Douglas Kellner, “Post-modernism as Social Theory: Some Challenges and Problems,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 5.2-3 (June 1988), 239270.
3. See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983) and *In the Shadows of the Silent Majorities* (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983), discussed in Douglas Kellner, *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).
4. Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideologies of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).
5. David Chute, “He Came from Within,” *Film Comment*, March-April 1980: 36. The original title was *Orgy of the Blood Parasites*, followed by the title *The Parasite Murders* for English Canadian release and *Frissons* for French release. When the French version was more successful, the film title was changed to *Shivers*, though it was released in the U.S. as *They Came From Within*.

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6. Sammon, p. 25.
7. Is it an accident that Max Headroom takes on Max Renn's first name, and that Renn's Channel 83 becomes Headroom's Channel 83 in the TV-series? Someone who plays with words and names as creatively and intertextually as Cronenberg would certainly appreciate such a gesture....
8. Cronenberg, in Chute, p. 39.
9. Jean Baudrillard, *Les strategies fatales* (Paris: Grasset, 1983).
10. Arthur and Marilouise Kroger, "Body Digest," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 11.1-2 (Winter/Spring 1987): i.
11. Robin Wood, *American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film* (Toronto: Festival of Festivals, 1979), pp. 24ff. I would further argue that Cronenberg's films, cited by Wood as paradigmatic of the reactionary horror film, do not generally exhibit the features he ascribes himself to the reactionary horror film. 1) Cronenberg's films do *not* designate the monster as "simply evil" and "totally non-human." Cronenberg's monsters always contain some humanity and are worthy of at least some sympathy more so as the films progress. 2) There is never any "presence of Christianity" or even religious transcendence in Cronenberg's films. 3) Although some of Cronenberg's films can be read as equating "repressed sexuality with sexuality itself," as I try to show here, other readings are plausible. Further, Cronenberg's monsters are products of existing bourgeois-capitalist society--and not invaders from outside--and point to the "monstrosity" at the heart of "bourgeois normality," thus meeting Wood's criteria for a progressive monster figure.
12. Ibid.
13. Robin Wood, *Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 129-130.
14. Robin Wood, "Cronenberg: A Dissenting View," in *Shape of Rage: The Films of David Cronenberg*, ed. Piers Handling (Toronto: General Publishing Company, 1983), pp. 115-135.
15. Fredric Jameson, unpublished paper on conspiracy films.
16. "Metamorphosis: *The Fly*," *Impulse* 13.3 (1987): 19-22.
17. Baudrillard, *Simulations*, pp. 103ff
18. See Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955) and Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death* (New York: Vintage, 1955).
19. Herbert Marcuse, *Negations* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968).