

UNLEARNING

(through the eyes of david cronenberg)

THE

VISUAL REGIME

an honors thesis by hannah maier-katkin

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Unlearning the Visual Regime

Through the Eyes of David Cronenberg

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Introduction

“I would without another thought consider anyone a hysteric if a cause for sexual arousal evokes overwhelmingly or exclusively feelings of disgust.”¹
Sigmund Freud

“One of our touchstones for reality is our bodies. And yet they too are by definition ephemeral. So to whatever degree we centre our reality—and our understanding of reality—in our bodies, we are surrendering that sense of reality to our bodies’ ephemerality.”²
David Cronenberg

Canadian genre film director David Cronenberg, dubbed the king of venereal horror, has made films over the course of a prolific career that push his spectator to the limits of what can be known about what can be seen. This project will explore how Cronenberg’s films subvert the supposition that knowledge is constructed through the imposition of visual coherence upon the body. Cronenbergian horror does not scrutinize the prospect of an alien Other, of externalized evil from the outside that threatens either the individual or societal structures more broadly. Rather Cronenberg’s distinctive approach defamiliarizes the body in order to explore the ambivalent relationship that the subject has to their corporeal form—which can at once feel intimately familiar and yet utterly foreign.

The body can be understood as the most identifiable sign of an individual. We think that we know someone once we have objectified them by reducing them to the sum of their visual parts. This, after all, is the aim of

¹ Sigmund Freud, *A Case of Hysteria: (Dora)* (London: Oxford, 2013), 23.

² David Cronenberg, interview by Martyn Steenbeck, ed. Chris Rodley in *Cronenberg on Cronenberg* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1993), 145.

Jacques Lacan's overly famous (read: overdetermined) argument about the mirror phase. A small child comes to form some understanding of itself upon seeing its own form reflected through a mirror. The German term for this bounded form is *Gestalt*, which denotes an organized whole that appears other to the sum of its parts (of the fragmented experience the child has of its body). *Gestalt* can serve as a marker of identity because of how we associate vision with knowledge and identity with wholeness, with a clearly demarcated form.

While traditional horror films typically locate horror in the externalized unfamiliar—aliens from elsewhere, the undead who rise from the grave—Cronenberg's horror is associated with what is most familiar or commonplace, the corporeal home within which the subject dwells. His films render this once cozy container inside out. The inhuman human body becomes the horrible itself. For the subject, the body ceases to be a *Gestalt*, a beautiful, balanced form (which it never truly was to begin with). The internal protrudes outward, twitches uncontrollably. Refusing to respond to the character's will, the body instead obeys its own logic. Psychoanalysis has taught us to think of this other logic as that of sexuality, to think the body not simply as a visible or surface form but as the site of sexuality.

Each film under discussion in subsequent chapters has to do with an effort to render intangible or otherwise invisible parts of the body observable and thereby recognizable to the human eye. For example, patients engage in therapy that translates their mental disorders into visible disfigurements that mutate the body in *The Brood*, men experiment on the reproductive organs of women in *Dead Ringers*, sexual desire is produced—though its realization is perpetually deferred—through repeated collisions with machines in *Crash*, and the talking cure is first invented as a means of interrogating the psyche in *A Dangerous Method*. These efforts and thought experiments—as opposed to providing insight into broad philosophical interrogations of the human condition—only serve to further bewilder Cronenberg's male protagonists by generating inconclusive results that indicate how little we understand about the world around us.

The limits of vision and representation are mapped onto the body. This body, however, rejects the totalizing agenda of scientific meaning-making. Scrutiny that conflates what can be seen with what can be known—or at least believes that knowledge of the individual can be achieved by reducing them to a list of quantifiable parts—is hinged upon the notion of transparency. The films in question pore over whether rendering the inside of the body visible

can solve the mystery of the sexual relation. This effort is always already a failure, because to render the interior of the body visible is to assert an illusory coherence upon the natural world. Cronenberg's films provide images of the body's interior externalized, images that bewilder and ultimately destroy the subject.

The body remains, however fraught, the subject's primary mode of interacting with their surroundings. Bodies serve as both conduit for and obstacle to knowledge production. The interplay of what is seen and what remains unseen, allegedly demarcated by the contours of the body as bounded form, is a relationship of contingency. Jacqueline Rose writes, "Meaning in itself operates at the limit, the limits of its own failing."³ The visible and invisible mark each other through structures of alterity. Meaning is formed at the limits of what is known.

Similarly, interior and exterior form and inform each other, consequently constructing notions of what we believe can be counted as knowledge. To interrogate this framework, Cronenberg takes us to the limits of the body as a source of knowledge through a process of deconstruction. By rendering the previously familiar physical body unrecognizable, these films display the groundlessness of this construction of familiarity in the first place—calling attention to the illusion of coherence first experienced by the child in Lacan's mirror phase. In other words, Cronenbergian horror prompts the spectator to question the basis of our knowledge, the epistemological assumptions typically taken for granted. Cronenberg's films call into question the parameters of sexual difference. They undermine the presupposition that we can understand sexuality through the dissection of the body. The question of sexual difference that drives the conflict is irresolvable. Cronenberg illustrates such irreducible antagonisms by constructing images horrifying for their indecipherability. Cronenberg's protagonists are trapped on an unrealizable quest for bodily knowledge—for knowledge of the subject who remains unknowable both to themselves and to each other. The films under question in this project are centered upon what Ian Courich summarizes as "exploiting and manipulating weaknesses in the border separating the body external from the body internal."⁴

What Cronenberg's films thus depict, through the undoing of the body, is what Rose calls "the psychic cost of the civilizing process for all."⁵ Societal

³ Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (New York: Verso, 1986), 70.

⁴ Ian Courich, "An aesthetic sense: Cronenberg and neo-horror film culture," in *The Modern Fantastic: The films of David Cronenberg*, ed. Michael Grant (Westport: Praeger, 2000), 37.

⁵ Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, 91.

impositions that categorize bodies into fictitious unities cannot be precisely mapped onto the flesh of each individual. Something within—unknown but not unreal—resists. Though information is extracted and analyzed, *something* remains elusive. Psychoanalysis takes up this something through the lens of sexuality, a negativity that resists man-made coherence, a destabilizing factor, the “vanishing-point of meaning”⁶ through the mystification of its negative construction.

The body of the woman bears, in our culture, the mark of sexual difference. Her body stands in for difference as such. She is different because she is the exception to the neutralizing universality that man represents. Woman represents non-norm, non-man. This is why Rose says, “Woman, therefore is *not*, because she is defined purely *against* the man”⁷ in negative terms, as what she is not—this is the point at which meaning breaks down. As different, as the exception to the norm, the woman becomes a specimen or object of study, a mystery that must be unraveled, normalized, or destroyed. Throughout Cronenberg’s work, the woman is consistently taken as the object of study.

The asymmetrical relationship produced by this gendered power imbalance proves continually insufficient. Nola Carveth defies knowledge and undermines masculine authority in *The Brood*. Claire Niveau, at first just another patient, drives a wedge between the Mantle Twins in *Dead Ringers*. Throughout *Crash*, Catherine Ballard eludes visual knowledge and the film’s formulation of pleasure. Finally, *A Dangerous Method* represents Sabina Spielrein as simultaneously its most and least powerful figure. She is at once completely beholden to her male doctors while also capable of maintaining a key distance as the figure who is not compelled to claim a side in an ongoing intellectual debate. Thus the woman’s queering presence undoes and undermines familiar dichotomies (masculine/feminine, interior/exterior) by gesturing toward alternate possibilities, the presence of something else.

Cronenberg carries the effects of the negative construction of femininity through his filmic representations of corporeality. He reminds the spectator implicitly of the misrecognition of which Lacan speaks when he devises the mirror phase. The bounded image that the subject sees in the mirror does not encapsulate the experience of the child—who does not experience itself as whole, but rather as a chaos of unintegrated movements; a mass of irreducible antagonisms.

⁶ Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, 71.

⁷ Ibid., 74. Emphasis mine.

Readings in the tradition of psychoanalysis take into account the disjunction inherent to the split subject. Rose further explains, “The unconscious constantly reveals the ‘failure’ of identity. Because there is no continuity of psychic life, so there is no stability of sexual identity.”⁸ These forces, upon closer inspection, begin to fray, to chaotically disentangle from the legible image of the corporeal dimension that we have designed, as a protective mechanism, to make sense of the world.

To reiterate: conflating what is seen with what can be known is both a harmful and futile effort to reduce the individual to a series of quantifiable parts. There is an excess of the individual that remains, that evades visual knowledge. This is because what we see when we gaze is, in fact, our own desire projected back at us. In a comprehensive explanation of the gaze through the example of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*, Miran Božovič illustrates how the viewer sees the object upon which they are fixated (Jeffries with his binoculars fixed upon Thorwald’s window), and how this same object “is already gazing at him; it is gazing at him from the point from which he cannot see.”⁹ The object is not fully objectified by the gaze—something of itself persists and evades the attempted scopophilic domination.

Moreover, “For the voyeur to exist at all,” explains Božovič, “There must be some blot in the window”¹⁰ (the exemplary object of Jeff’s gaze). Thus it is the spectator who places the blot upon the image in the first place—and consequently this particular stain exists only for them. Desire stains the object. Just as Jeff desires to uncover the mystery of Thorwald’s missing wife, the various protagonists of Cronenberg’s universe seek to uncover the mystery of the meaning constructed through the body. In these cases, the body becomes a blot in their sightline that cannot be overcome. The subject who desires is constituted through their desire, through the constant deferral of this desire, and a continuous search of something that is both unnameable and unrealizable.

The search for meaning undertaken by Cronenberg’s protagonists eschews an ethical dimension. By disavowing, for example, figures of paternal law within the diegesis (doctors, ethics boards, traffic cops, etc.), these films generate a multiplicity of varied (potentially contradictory) responses, opening the possibility for a new moral code as opposed to the normalizing ethos common to the resolution of horror films wherein the evil

⁸ Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, 90-91.

⁹ Miran Božovič, “The Man Behind His Own Retina,” in *Everything You Wanted to Know about Lacan but Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 2010), 169.

¹⁰ Ibid., 175.

is discarded to preserve the dominant order. Cronenberg's films end not in a process of renormalization, but rather destruction—or at least a sustained desire thereof. Nothing is preserved. Nothing is celebrated, no righteousness is upheld. The response elicited from the audience “is violently ambivalent on every level.”¹¹ In spite of our readings, our projects, our interpretive efforts: something beyond a societally established moral framework persists. Cronenberg's postmodern horror indicates the possibility of something else, a lingering potentiality that haunts the way things are now by insisting that they can be otherwise. When the body joins the conversation (Freud's words in regards to hysteria), it does not speak our shared language.

What we can most easily interpret from the body is that which we can see. Questions of visibility are historically tied to psychoanalytic studies, a practice that came into being around the treatment of hysteric patients—an intensely visual disease of spectacle whereby physical symptoms have no corporeally rooted cause. Hysterical patients manifested their symptoms in spectacular bodily gyrations, seizures, and fits despite the fact that their malady had no distinguishable corporeal cause. By establishing hysteria as “the founding neurosis of psychoanalysis,”¹² Freud brought the problem of the spectacle to the forefront of his practice. Again, the body joins the conversation, but it cannot be understood in and by itself. Hysteria is defined by Freud “as the somatic representation of a repressed bisexual conflict, an unconscious refusal to accept a single and defined subject position in the oedipal structuration of desire and identity.”¹³ Thus hysteria offers one method of exploring a basic tension fundamental to the formation of the subject and of the sexual relation.

Treatment of hysteric patients indicates how something unreal and unseeable can nonetheless have real, physical effects. Doctors and patients repeatedly confront the limits of meaning, the supposed impossible. Claire Kahane writes about hysteria for the “centrality of the body rather than verbal language as the site of representation.”¹⁴ By studying the impact of psychic life upon one's physical conditions, by insisting upon the materiality of something that is both intangible and unknowable, we confront the limits of meaning. The hysteric refuses the symbolic limits of the body

¹¹ Steven Shaviro, “Bodies of Fear: The Films of David Cronenberg,” in *The Politics of Everyday Fear*, ed. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1993), 117.

¹² Claire Kahane, *Passions of the Voice: Hysteria, Narrative, and the Figure of the Speaking Woman, 1850-1915* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1995), x.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

through “ambivalent desire and identifications.”¹⁵ Hysteria is a malady of representation,¹⁶ which has historically been studied through photography and film (mediums of spectacle and representation). In the realm of cinema, horror “is almost always grounded in the visual representation of bodily difference.”¹⁷ But Cronenberg’s hysterical, convulsing bodies are transformed into something unrecognizable before our eyes. They become untethered from categories assigned in and through language.

Binary distinctions collapse into each other when they refuse the colonizing force of scientific meaning-making. These culturally-determined distinctions collapse around the negative construction of femininity through which meaning has fragilely been created. Kahane thus offers productive tools for engaging with the construction of the sexual relation by considering the incorporation of rage into feminine identity.¹⁸ She identifies rage specifically because “psychoanalytic theory describes rage both as an infantile response to separation and loss, and as a primal aggressivity against the maternal body, the most ambivalently constructed other who bears the illusory traces of the self.”¹⁹ Themes of ambivalence pervade both Freudian concepts and Cronenbergian narratives. Kahane’s meditation on rage is moreover a useful turn because of its own ambivalent status. Rage connotes fury as well as passion—a feeling that is violent, intense, productive, enthusiastic—as an active, affectively-charged response to one’s circumstances. Rage is a negative state that evokes a positive, productive, response.

Formally, Cronenberg’s films are also built upon a certain ambivalence. These works refuse to lead the spectator down a linear path or a narrative with a clear through line. Rather, Cronenberg’s films are posed as the unfolding of a storyline, as a series of revelations. His films meander before arriving at an ending that leaves the central problematic (the search for knowledge of the sexual relation) unresolved. In the films under discussion: Nola dies but her disease persists through her daughter, the Mantle twins bring about their shared death after their once successful career descends into chaos, the Ballards are unable to achieve the pleasure of physical

¹⁵ Kahane, *Passions of the Voice*, x.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁷ Barry Keith Grant, introduction to *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, 1-13, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas, 2015), 6.

¹⁸ Kahane, *Passions of the Voice*, xii.

¹⁹ Claire Kahane, “The Aesthetic Politics of Rage,” in *States of Rage: Emotional Eruption, Violence, and Social Change* ed. Renée R. Curry and Terry L. Allison (New York: New York University, 1995), 127.

fulfillment that their cult locates in death by the jouissance of the car crash, and two doctors debate the usefulness and purpose of the field of psychoanalysis for their patients.

Ultimately, what we can glean from a close-reading of David Cronenberg's works is an understanding of how anatomy does not determine destiny. His sinister inspection of corporeality illuminates how "the Symbolic inscription of fixed gender identity reaches its limit and can be broken down."²⁰ This breakdown entails an awareness of gender and sexuality as symbolic processes, positions in language, not as essential qualities of the body. Consequently to "separate desire from the body, or the Symbolic from the Real, is to perpetuate (in inverted form) the myth that sees the body as an essence, outside of history."²¹ What this honors thesis thus explores is how "the visible is a twisted modality,"²² presented through levels of mediation that keep the subject from coinciding with themselves.

²⁰ Shaviro, "Bodies of Fear," 124.

²¹ Ibid., 125.

²² Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière*, trans. Alisa Hartz (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 8.

The Brood (1979)

“I disgust you. I sicken you. You hate me.”
Nola, *The Brood*

In his work with Jean-Martin Charcot on hysteric patients at the Salpêtrière Clinic in Paris, Sigmund Freud questions “the idea that you could know a hysteric by looking at her body, that is, by reading off the symptoms of nervous disability or susceptibility to trauma.”¹ The reading of the hysteric’s visual symptoms as revealing of her psychical disorder relies on a model that places (bodily) surface against (a hidden psychological) depth—that is, a “depth psychological” model jettisoned by Freud’s theory of the unconscious. The unconscious is not something hidden beneath consciousness, but rather a specific kind of negation of it. For this thesis to be credible the unconscious must, of course, show (to give evidence of) itself in the visible world.

What “shows,” however, is not a positivity. Instead, what shows is negation itself as distortion, a blurring, or a stain. The visible’s reputation as inviolable source of knowledge is, we can say, itself stained. In treating what became the “founding psychosis”² of his field, Freud poses what Jacqueline Rose identifies as a “challenge to the visible, to the empirically

¹ Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (New York: Verso, 1986), 97.

² Claire Kahane, *Passions of the Voice: Hysteria, Narrative, and the Figure of the Speaking Woman, 1850-1915* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1995), x.

self-evident, to the blindness of the seeing eye.”³ David Cronenberg’s 1979 breakout film, *The Brood*, poses a similar challenge to the order of the visible through its physical representation of the central mother and hysteric, Nola Carveth.

Though cause and effect relations are obscured, the illness demands to be seen. The illness that acts on the body is a creative, autonomous cancer that plays with and adapts to the contours of its host, seizing upon and working within it. The female body gives way—gives form—to the film’s horrific revelations. Cronenberg’s self-proclaimed, autobiographical take on *Kramer vs. Kramer* casts a custody battle similarly marked by the betrayal of the mother.⁴ *The Brood* is fueled by a compulsion to repeat, revisit, and fictionally reenact the director’s traumatic divorce. Accordingly, the film is sympathetic to its male protagonist despite a deep fascination with its more enigmatic leading woman.

From its first moments, Cronenberg’s *The Brood* fixates upon weakness and male impotence. Denying the spectator an establishing shot, the film’s first disorienting image is a close-up on Dr. Raglan. He is the first object of the extradiegetic gaze and the first character to possess the diegetic gaze when the camera cuts to adopt his point of view—indicating his elevated level of authority. Raglan and a patient, Mike Trellan, role play a scenario in which the doctor assumes the position of the emotionally abusive father. Their relationship to each other is not immediately clear. The two men are set against a black background, intertwined in a coupling of shot and reverse shot close-ups that abstracts them from all social coordinates. The placeless background establishes the exchange as a prologue. The spectator does not know where these men are situated, who they are, or how their dialogue came to be. This prelude occupies its own cinematic time and space.

Beginning with an exchange that cannot be neatly placed within a diegetic whole, the introduction is framed as a puzzle to be pieced together through the film’s unraveling. Weak traits that mark Trellan’s illness, Raglan-as-father argues, must have been inherited from his mother: “It probably would’ve been better for you, had you been born a girl.” These words are among the film’s first offerings. *The Brood*, via Raglan, proffers the argument that it is better to be a girl because it is more acceptable for girls to be weak. Male weakness, however, seems the result of female treachery in a film that

³ Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, 97.

⁴ David Cronenberg, interview by Martyn Steenbeck, *Cronenberg On Cronenberg*, ed. Chris Rodley (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 76.

represents girlhood—and femininity more broadly—by way of trauma brought about through cycles of mental and physical abuse.

The camera eventually pans out to reveal the two men on a stage, observed by an audience of patients and their families. This metacinematic turn draws attention to how their deeply intimate interaction is staged for a clinically curious audience. Raglan's take on the talking cure aspires to render mental illness visible through both the patient's words and his physical deformities—as if these measurable offerings will make the patient's intangible inner workings knowable and comprehensible to a foreign audience, including to the patient himself. These revelations are sought through spectacle. Fellow patients and visitors watch, seeking the ocular proof that Raglan's experimental approach succeeds, that mental illness can have physical effects and external signifiers. Raglan's treatment is one of translation, allowing the patient to convert “verbal symbol into corporeal symptom.”⁵

Cronenberg's *The Brood* is primarily about Raglan's treatment of Nola. Positioned as both mother and daughter, Nola believes herself to have been abused by her mother as a child—knowingly or unknowingly, she subjects her five-year-old daughter, Candice, to a similar form of abuse. Through Raglan's experimental psychoplasms treatment, Nola births a brood of gruesome child-like creatures (resembling her daughter), who enact her revenge. The brood children kill Nola's mother, her father, and the schoolteacher Nola suspects is having an affair with her estranged husband, Frank. The brood children subsequently kidnap Candice and keep her at Raglan's Somafree Institute of Psychoplasms. Frank, who has already failed to shield his daughter—the young Candice witnesses the murders of both her grandmother and teacher—from her mother's deceptions, finally rescues the young girl by killing Nola after she reveals the extent of the physical deformities that riddle her skin.

Nola's death is a recasting of the spectacularized performance of the doctor-patient encounter between Raglan and Trellan, repeated in the film's climax with the more sinister coupling of Frank and Nola. Just as Trellan reveals his bodily deformities—a collection of boils that taint his skin—to the paternal figure of Raglan, Nola reveals her own bodily mutations to her husband. Frank kills her once he takes in the horror of her full form: external uteruses bearing the fetuses of brood children populate her abdomen. Through these varied physical disfigurements, Cronenberg's visual scene

⁵ Kahane, *Passions of the Voice*, 15.

operates to give “a physical presence to the idea that things go on within us which are strange and disturbing.”⁶ The defamiliarization of the body is a basic feature of venereal horror. Cronenberg’s camera reveals “the unshowable,”⁷ in a visual scene that is horrifying for its unintelligibility, its gruesomely excessive portrayal of female reproductive organs.

Her body is rendered repulsive when it reveals itself as monstrous. Frank kills Nola because her body is too horrific to be seen, because it threatens the illusory coherence of the Imaginary Order. Once her treachery is visually represented, Nola’s existence becomes a threat to any tidy, safe notion of reality. Accordingly, that which cannot be assimilated must be destroyed. Horror films often generate normative ethics. Somehow the horror must be confronted then eliminated in order to preserve the status quo. But this horror cannot be fully excised because it comes from within the subject.

“That’s what you do to me inside,” Mike Trellan explains upon revealing his disease-ridden skin. Seemingly discrete categories of the mental and the corporeal blend into each other. Their contingencies are revealed. The inside (both physical and psychical) turns outward, revealing an unignorable, unfathomable hideousness. Bodily deformities make the individual newly interpretable to others by revealing something decisively Other and unknowable—the ultimate horror of the film. The body and the illness each boast an autonomy estranged from the conscious mind.

Raglan’s therapeutic advice, repeated throughout the film, is to “go all the way through it to the end,” to “come out the other end” without stopping “in the middle.” This counsel is a meditation on the properties of filmmaking and film spectatorship. Raglan, addressing his patients, instructs the audience on how to properly engage with the filmic text as a whole. Yet the course of the film is not simply linear, rather it has the circular logic of an unending chain of cause and effect, a vicious cycle of the eternal return of the same. *The Brood* formulates this return to the same in the repetition of horror represented through its maternal relationships. Nola relays instances of abuse to Raglan in their sessions. She laments the fact that the father (who she alleges to love “unconditionally”) never intervened—the regulatory presence of the paternal order is absent, unable to subdue the monstrous feminine.

Nola-as-victim of childhood trauma (whether real or imagined, the film does not say) becomes Nola-as-monster whose homicidal brood kill their own grandmother in front of Candice, and later Candice’s school teacher (a

⁶ Cronenberg, *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, 43.

⁷ Ibid.

substitute maternal figure). Nola's brood continue to terrorize Candice, ultimately kidnapping her to live as one of the them in the attic of Raglan's Institute. Nola's rage, staged through her offspring, is primal. The creatures her illness produces are accordingly "nearly foetal, nearly formless."⁸ Heavy-handedly describing their juvenile myopia, a mortician reveals that the brood children can only see in black and white. While their insistence on killing the people who Nola believes have wronged her is unquestioning and unwavering, the film's own stance is less confident.

The film's conclusion offers little resolution, only further horror. Nola and Frank's daughter, Candice, has been abused and tormented at the proxy hand of her mother by the collection of Candice-looking brood children (a queer, asymmetrical doubling). The film concludes with the ambiguous revelation of spots on Candice's back similar to the spots Nola claims to have suffered at the hand of her mother. Nola's mother denies the visual signifier of the abuse as a method of denying the validity of the abuse altogether. The argument goes: her flesh was not marked therefore she was unharmed, yet Nola is clearly working through sustained mental trauma.

What can be seen and what knowledge can therefore be presumed are set in opposition as an irreducible antagonism. Accordingly, the film ends ambiguously. The triumph of the final visual scene is undermined by a somber soundtrack. Insidious psychological abuse, which has evidently shaped this lineage of women, is lodged in Candice's skin. The implications, however, are unclear. Physical symptoms signal a morbid continuation of the same violence passed from mother to daughter, unaltered by either father's futile attempts at intervention. Uncertainty lingers over whether Candice has been saved from her mother's sinfulness, or whether she is doomed to repeat it.

Nola is framed as the primary villain, the film's chaos factor. In psychoanalytic terms, she is a hysteric—although the film never makes this diagnosis. Sigmund Freud defines hysteria "as the somatic representation of a repressed bisexual conflict, an unconscious refusal to accept a single and defined subject position."⁹ Hysteria is a disorder of representation, of representational dysfunction between psychical and physical. Nola's words are translated into bodily symptoms. She conforms not only to Freud's clinical definition of a standard hysteric patient, but also to what Claire Kahane describes as the "dis-ease of women in patriarchal culture."¹⁰ Nola resents her

⁸ Cronenberg, *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, 84.

⁹ Kahane, *Passions of the Voice*, x.

¹⁰ Claire Kahane, introduction to *In Dora's Case*, ed. Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane (New York: Columbia, 1985), 31.

familial obligations and, while her sexual desire is never explicitly discussed, a freshly formed ability to self-replicate her brood without a sexual partner indicates a newfound potential to inhabit both male and female identity positions. Her body occupies a state of rage and revolt.

Film critic John Harkness situates Cronenberg's cult classic at the intersection of science fiction and melodrama because *The Brood* concerns itself "with the violation of privileged [white] middle class space by unbearable emotions."¹¹ Cronenberg's great innovation is his flouting of the body horror mechanics he devised in an intimate family setting. A nod to psychoanalysis, which is more than passing, the illness appears inextricably linked to the oedipal triangle of the middle-class family (in this case, as a result of parental abuse). According to the clichés of the sci-fi genre, the monster, or the return of the repressed, is male. Correspondingly the victim is female or otherwise feminized. In Cronenberg, however, these distinctions are not neatly contained. Cronenberg's is a postmodern mutation of sci-fi and horror that calls supposedly fixed categories and previously held knowledge into question.

Cronenberg's *The Brood* presents a matriarch who is both monster and victim, a doctor who is simultaneously hero and villain, and a male protagonist coded as the benevolent enforcer of paternal order who is an impotently helpless and (un)heroic presence. These identities are self-undermining. They gesture toward a lack of control. Even in her dying moment, the woman (though physically helpless) retains the gaze. As Frank strangles Nola, the camera jumps from his perspective back to hers. He ends her life only in response to her imperative: "Kill me! Kill me! Kill me!" Nola does not occupy an entirely active subject position. She does not personally murder, but rather acts through her sinister offspring. Still, she refuses the traditionally feminine place of a passive object.

Featuring a conventionally bland male protagonist, *The Brood* is a film about matrilineage, the relationships between mothers and their daughters, and the trauma passed down from one generation to the next. Cronenberg is often criticized for his misogynistic fixation on the horror of femininity and the female body. But this criticism is too reductive. While no woman in Cronenberg's oeuvre is unblemished by some trait of horror, women in his films have the authority both to drive the film's narrative and to dominate the visual scene. Nola, for example, becomes spectacle when she reveals the

¹¹ John Harkness, "The word, the flesh and the films of David Cronenberg," *Cinema Canada*, June 1983, 24.

consequences of Raglan's psychoplasms on her skin. Yet it is her desire that precipitates the violence that drives the plot.

The film does not offer a clear point of identification. The camera does not align itself with one position. This is a common trait of Cronenberg's films. The director once insisted that his 1979 film *Shivers* could be seen positively if one willingly inhabits the perspective of the disease.¹² Of *The Brood*, Cronenberg explains, "I'm *all* the characters."¹³ The plurality of the director's own varied identifications tugs at a thread present through the figure of Dora in Sigmund Freud's *Fragment of An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*. The female hysteric patient in treatment holds her father, Herr K, and Frau K—the three adults who seem to conspire against her—as objects of identification and desire simultaneously.

There is something inherently contradictory about desire, which acts autonomously like Nola's creative cancer—moving and receding of its own volition beyond one's conscious grasp. Nola's fragmented subject position relates to what Lianne McLarty categorizes as the ultimate figure of Postmodern horror, "the Other," which "is the feminine itself."¹⁴ The bind of the feminine reveals "paranoia toward both the social world and its horrific effects on us."¹⁵ There is something illegible about the negatively constructed feminine position, fueled by a resentment that refuses to cohere to the rigid over-simplicity of binary distinctions and categorical demands.

Examining the formation of the subject necessitates an unraveling of the child's relationship to the mother—a relation especially fraught in Cronenberg's *The Brood*, and largely ignored in Freud's case history of Dora. An analyst who interviewed Ida Bauer, Freud's Dora, comments that she "and her mother saw the dirt not only in their surroundings, but also on and within themselves."¹⁶ In a Shakespearian turn, the damned spot of femininity (the blood on Lady Macbeth's hands) is an eternal stain. While her mother cleans the house obsessively, Ida/Dora cleans her genitals so thoroughly that she requires multiple gynecological operations.¹⁷ Both women are suspended in the endless repetition of immanent labor that can never access the true, disembodied filth.

¹² Cronenberg, *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, 47.

¹³ David Chute, "He Came From Within," *Film Comment* Mar/April 1980 16 2, 38.

¹⁴ Lianne McLarty, "Beyond the Veil of the Flesh," in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas, 2015,) 263.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Felix Deutsch, M.D., "A Footnote to Freud's 'Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria,'" in *In Dora's Case*, ed. Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane (New York: Columbia, 1985), 41.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

Whereas Dora and her mother are driven toward excessive washing and cleaning, Nola gnaws her own filth. In her full expression, Nola bites with her teeth the external uterine lining to birth her brood. The dirt that Deutsch identifies is given physical presence through Raglan's psychoplasms. Dirt is an external imposition, attributed not only to femininity but to Dora's father's contraction of Syphilis—a sexually transmitted infection that affects the mind as well as the internal organs. What cannot be seen cannot be confronted, cannot be cleaned. Deutsch describes Dora as "resentful," afflicted by a deep-set unhappiness with her lived conditions. Fully claiming these feelings of resentment, Nola embodies the daughter's rage.¹⁸ Her lethal madness is a fictional representation of the difficulties that beset women, including: an inability to comfortably inhabit the normative positions of either daughter or wife. Claire Kahane names this pressure "the straitjacket of femininity."¹⁹

Dora's psychological obstacle, according to Jacques Lacan, "Is fundamentally that of accepting herself as an object of desire for the man."²⁰ In Dora's case, her inability to accept a passive position motivates her adulation of Frau K. Through these entangled relationships, Dora desires both to be and to have the wife of Herr K. She desires a refuge in sameness that displaces patriarchal demands. Where Dora fails to adapt to societal circumstances, Nola aggressively refuses this position, refuses identification altogether. Nola's transgression is therefore to assume an active role that destabilizes established patriarchal conventions. Nola precipitates a disordering of desire while living in isolation from her husband and in antagonistic relation to her immediate family. The woman's desire paradoxically threatens and drives the film's narrative.

The horror of *The Brood* manifests itself in a variety of ways: the exaggerated, excessive possibilities of the female body; impotence of male authority; the dissolution of previously 'fixed' categories. The film depicts a mutually constitutive relationship of mind and body as hostile, tenuous, and driven by a continuous tension that pits the two against each other. Guarantees of meaning are challenged at their very core. There is something completely Other about the feminine, which threatens patriarchal institutions. The Other threatens because it cannot be objectified. The subject cannot

¹⁸ Kahane, *Passions of the Voice*, xii.

¹⁹ Claire Kahane, "The Aesthetic Politics of Rage," in *States of Rage: Emotional Eruption, Violence, and Social Change*, ed. Renée R. Curry and Terry L. Allison (New York: New York University, 1995), 141.

²⁰ Jacques Lacan, "Intervention on Transference," in *In Dora's Case*, ed. Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane (New York: Columbia, 1985), 99.

distance themselves from the Other, consequently (because they cannot externalize it to see it) they cannot have knowledge of it.

Frank brings the film to its conclusion by destroying Nola, the otherness that haunts the family. But something of her leaks into the final scene. The film's final images are a close-up on the small boils on Candice's arms (inherited from her mother) and then a close-up on Candice's piercing green eyes. From a child who lost her voice early in the film, this look appears initially dejected and helpless. But the camera lingers, and the refusal to look away renders her gaze almost defiant. Interestingly, there is no room for the male figure of the father in the final frame. The girl alone remains as image, as reluctant spectacle.

The invention of hysteria by Charcot at the Salpêtrière in Paris is inextricably tied to photography as a growing method of documentation. The disease whose source could not be seen nevertheless demanded, called forth, obsessive visual scrutiny. At the turn of the 19th century, "Photography became the paradigm of the scientist's 'true retina,'" ²¹ supposedly offering a claim to objectivity that eludes verbal descriptors or illustrations (that are first mediated by the one who documents). Hysteria as a disease of spectacle tied itself to visibility, to the means of photography. An image cannot speak for itself. Though photography alleges itself to be a mechanism of mechanical objectivity by freezing a moment in time, it does so by obscuring its own self-referentiality. Used by doctors to record patients, to capture their sickness in the still frame of a lasting image, photography is thought to "authenticate the existence of its referent," to "grant us *some* knowledge" ²² that the spectator must continually reinterpret, diagnose.

Knowledge comes up against the limits of its own meaning, the terms of its construction. The photograph exists as a practice of theatricality, a simulation of reality. Photographs (and films) require makeup, costumes, and the staging of the subject in a pose that is meant to represent an essence that continually eludes the image. The photographed hysteric subject performs her disease for the photographer. This disease is constituted through a paradoxical status. The patient simultaneously suffers "from the most serious symptoms" and yet remains "intact, unharmed by concomitant lesions." ²³ The physician's camera believes it can capture that which cannot be seen. The

²¹ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière*, trans. Alisa Hartz (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 32.

²² *Ibid.*, 61.

²³ *Ibid.*, 72.

photograph seeks to render itself more real than what it captures, to hold in posterity a spectacularized image, a representation that has been mediated by those who consciously or unconsciously construct what appears in the frame. Thus Georges Didi-Huberman identifies “the problem of the link—the phantasmic link—between seeing and knowing, seeing and suffering.”²⁴ The viscosity of hysteria is the point of its invention.

As inheritor of photographic conventions, film thus takes up the fraught, fascinating relationship between viscosity and knowledge. Cronenberg takes his films to the limit of the body, the limits of human knowledge. *The Brood* ultimately problematizes what Maria Ramas considers “a particular fantasy of heterosexuality as service due men, and one explicitly based on submission and degradation.”²⁵ Through the metamorphosis enabled by her treatment, Nola no longer requires the man to reproduce. The horror she poses is one of male extinction and obsolescence. What is terrifying about Nola is not the typical Freudian castration anxiety, that she figures the phallic lack feared by man. Rather, Nola is horrifying because she is “not mutilated like a man might be if he were castrated; woman is physically whole, intact, and in possession of all of her sexual powers.”²⁶

Nola’s sexual and reproductive excess undermines traditional family structures and, accordingly, a larger bourgeois cultural ethos. Vivian Sobchack describes both horror and melodrama as “dramatization of the processes that test and represent the coherence, meaning, and limits of the family as it has been constructed in patriarchal culture.”²⁷ The father’s inability to save his child from her own mother, however, points to a contemporary weakening in patriarchal authority and traditional social practices. Nola rejects maternal traits while retaining, even multiplying, her maternal functions. The middle-class family has collapsed before the film begins. The family unit has always already failed. Ideals mapped onto bodies warp and fray because they do not fit.

²⁴ Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria*, 8.

²⁵ Maria Ramas, “Freud’s Dora, Dora’s Hysteria,” in *In Dora’s Case*, ed. Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane (New York: Columbia University, 1985), 175.

²⁶ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 6.

²⁷ Vivian Sobchack, “Bringing It All Back Home: Family Economy and Generic Exchange,” in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas, 2015), 175.

Dead Ringers (1988)

“It’s not really connected with gynecology or
twinness. It has to do with that element
of being human. It has to do with this ineffable
sadness that is an element of being human.”¹

David Cronenberg

*“It takes three to be two.”*²

Mladen Dolar

Everything there is to know about David Cronenberg’s *Dead Ringers* is distilled in its first two minutes. Following the opening credits—words layered on a deep red background adorned with etchings of female internal organs, twins, and medical apparatuses—the film begins with the young brothers engaged in a discussion on the nature of sex. Beverly and Elliot Mantle concern themselves with boundaries that mark the separation between visible exterior and invisible interior. One of them (both at this point unnamed and indistinguishable from each other) explains: “I’ve discovered why sex is. It’s because humans don’t live underwater.” His rationale founds itself upon the observation that humans cannot lay eggs underwater as fish do, rather “they have to internalize the water.” And “therefore we have sex” as a means of access to the water contained within the human body, of transmitting fluids between discrete bodies. The twin continues, if humans lived underwater they could have “the kind [of sex] where you wouldn’t have to touch each other”

¹ David Cronenberg, interview by Martyn Steenbeck, ed. Chris Rodley in *Cronenberg on Cronenberg* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1993), 149.

² Mladen Dolar, “Touching Ground,” *Filozofski Vestnik* 29 no. 2 (2008): 84.

because the gap between inside and outside is filled in by water.

The properties of water, a feeling of being underwater, is reflected in the mise-en-scène of Elliot and Beverly's shared apartment. According to Cronenberg himself, the dark Mantle lair "is like an aquarium, as though these are strange exotic fish creatures" in an environment constructed as "purply and blue and sub-marine."³ The cool sterility reemerges in Cronenberg's later work, *Crash*. In this case, the marble texture of the pillars throughout the apartment carries the design that light creates when it meets water—amorphous light-colored spots with unclear, fading borders cut through a darker surface on these cold marble columns that run from floor to ceiling. Fixtures installed on the wall cast their light downward to create a deep blue shade that makes the room look as if it is submerged in water, inhabiting a darkness only locatable deep in the ocean beyond the reach of the sun's light. The twins—their life a pursuit of the means to merge themselves into one unit as a reversion to the prenatal state of the womb (wherein they were submerged in water)—devote themselves to the attempt to share their every physical sensation ("you haven't had any experience until I've had it too"), from their work to their living conditions, and the women with whom they sleep.

The opening sequence ends after the twins ask a neighborhood girl to have sex with the two of them in a bathtub as part of an experiment. She, in turn, insists: "I know for a fact, you don't even know what 'fuck' is." Consequently they devote their lives to uncovering what fuck, in fact, is. Their pursuit revolves around the uncertainty of what constitutes the border between the inside and the outside of a body, what can be seen and therefore known if visibility is meant to confirm knowledge. Gynecology becomes a convenient narrative tool in the scientific endeavor to confront directly the question of sexual difference because it offers a "strategy of covering or substituting for perilous desire with the controlling rationalities of science—gynecology becoming the most essential, the most perfect, of Cronenbergian scientific projects."⁴

The Mantle twins' investigation of the conditions of their physical separation and the attempts at their physical reincorporation are centered around the question of touch. Their initial rumination brings us back the work of Aristotle's *On the Soul* in which the Greek philosopher maintains that a

³ Cronenberg, *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, 144.

⁴ William Beard, *The Artist as Monster: The Cinema of David Cronenberg* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2001), 235.

distance, or gap, exists between sensory organs and the objects they sense. However, touch seems to act as an exception to this clearly observable rule: there appears to be no perceivable gap between the organ of touch and the object it touches—what is *felt* is hinged upon the impression of immediacy.

In fact, a commonsense notion of touch is based upon the assumption of a lack of distance. This is unlike the case of seeing or hearing, wherein there is a more discernible distance between eye/hear and what is seen/heard. Touch entails direct contact. Still, Aristotle insists that even in the case of touch that there must be a gap, however imperceptible. This gap is designated as flesh. The place of flesh is not outside of the body, nor is it between the sense organ and the external object. Flesh is within the body itself.

Mladen Dolar explains, “The flesh is the distance of the body to itself,”⁵ a distance the Mantle twins are unable to bridge. The touch constitutes the limit. Because touch is a visible limiting point between two that requires a “split to render touching possible,”⁶ meaning the touch between two is facilitated only by the presence of a *third*. Aristotle (and Dolar) would thus question the fantasy posed by the twins, that two can become one in water, because the wetness of the surfaces indicates the tangible presence of water—the real though imperceptible gap—that keeps the two from direct contact with each other.⁷ The problem of touch, the necessity of the third for the two to make one, becomes more clear, and more problematic, once the love interest, Claire Niveau, drives a wedge between the brothers.

Before we get further ahead of ourselves, a basic summary of the film is overdue. Cronenberg’s *Dead Ringers* is narratively split into two parts. The first half of the film is figured around the success of the Mantle twins in their field and the budding relationship between the more studious sibling, Beverly, and Claire, the actress with a trifurcated womb whose “life is empty” (explains Elliot before meeting her in their office) because she cannot bear children. Beverly pulls away from Elliot as his relationship with Claire intensifies until he abandons her under the suspicion that she is having an affair. In a state of paranoia and despair, Beverly spirals into prescription drug abuse. The film then turns its focus to the ensuing collapse of Elliot and Beverley’s medical practice, signified through the creation of continually more sinister and medieval-looking gynecological tools. Elliot attempts to cure Beverly of his

⁵ Dolar, “Touching Ground,” 85.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

drug addiction. Instead, feeling an intangible pull to live exactly as his brother does—as if the two share one nervous system—Elliot willfully becomes addicted to the same pills. The two sequester themselves in their apartment until they end their shared life in a murder-suicide. Beverly crawls into the disemboweled stomach of Elliot in a visual recreation of the Pietà that finally allows for the physical incorporation of one brother into the other. They merge as corpses no longer separated by their flesh.

Cronenberg's films exploit a tension between internal and external, rendering the interior external to the body in the scientific/artist pursuit of knowledge, a futile desire to make sense of one's surroundings. The body is the site of horror (the threat to meaning) precisely because it is the site of the flesh (an *excess* of meaning). The twins confront the body of abjection, writes Barbara Creed, as "a body without stable boundaries—[challenging] phallogentric myths of the body which seek to confirm the body as a classical, discrete, harmonious form."⁸

Mutations and explorations of the body are intended to render the interior visible. But, to use the language of the body, the flesh is a point that cannot be metabolized and then easily packaged as meaning. The horrible is the indigestible. Still the task of processing the bodily insides externally enacted by Cronenberg's protagonists as an attempt to provide insight into life's greatest mysteries (to locate the coveted solution to a fundamental tension upon which the subject is constituted) cannot overcome the gap that is figured as an excess over and against the neat confines of the body. The subject only becomes increasingly mystified through a pursuit of knowledge as visuality that inevitably leads to their undoing.

The desire to see this gap—this excess that is the flesh—is self-defeating. In *The Brood*, for example, female sexual organs are multiplied and displaced outside of the body. Nola becomes less recognizably human. While bodily mutations in *Dead Ringers* eschew Nola Carveth's supernatural qualities, the woman's reproductive organs (invisible to the spectator's eyes, but constantly scrutinized via medial apparatuses by the doctors) remain a constant preoccupation. Claire's uterus is all the more troubling because it cannot be seen by ordinary means, hence the need for technological enhancements of vision. The unseeable (and therefore unlimited) marker of sexual difference stains even by way of its invisibility in contrast to the singularity and presence of the phallus. Her dysmorphic uterus is a marker of

⁸ Barbara Creed, "The Naked Crunch: Cronenberg's Homoerotic Bodies," in *Magic Fantastic: The Films of David Cronenberg*, ed. Michael Grant (Westport: Praeger, 2000), 85.

sexual excess that reminds the titular twins of the strangeness of their own doubled state.

The question of the relationship between interior and exterior spheres carries from the question of sexual difference to the relationship between living organisms more generally. Beverly and Elliot, identical twins both played by Jeremy Irons, appear as two sides of the same coin. They (are played as if to) comprise one person distributed through two bodies. They seek, through shared sexual partners and shared work, to experience their lives concomitantly, to physically merge through the presence of a third conductive object, (in vain) to overcome the gap posed by the corporeal senses. The bridge is figured in the third compartment of Claire's uterus. Like water as a conduit between two bodies underwater, or air between two bodies on land. Claire is, in this misguided case, not the third in the sense which Dolar uses the term in the epigraph (not the illusive distance or the flesh) but that which fills in the gap, bridges the distance between the Mantle brothers. She is an external link, not the distance that separates each of the twins from themselves. Comparable again to *The Brood*, the woman's reproductive organs—in excess—frame the horror because they mark the subject's birth, call into question the physical alienation of the subject. Sexual difference is marked in the flesh.

William Beard describes this fundamental antagonism—the condition of physical separation of individuals into discrete units unknowable both to themselves and to each other—as the “subject's desire for mutually exclusive things, its pathology, and ultimately its impossibility” explored through the “metaphor of twinness”⁹ embodied by the Mantles. The alienating condition of their corporeal separation, which the brothers devote themselves to overcoming, matches “the sense of the subject's alienation from his own body, the sense that it is the site of strange and compelling and uncontrollable things.” In Cronenberg's expression of “identical twins who are fascinated, attracted to and repelled by each other,”¹⁰ the two (played by one) confront an impossibility at the limits of their condition of embodiment. While Elliot remains devoted to their fraternal bond, Beverly desires intermittently to be his brother and to be rid of him.

When the homeostasis of their secluded life is upset—exploiting the differences in disposition between the otherwise identical twins, and their corresponding desire to pave over those differences through an enforced

⁹ Beard, *Artist as Monster*, 235.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

sameness—the film’s narrative demands that the brothers confront death as the only resolution to their conflict. Each central character, both brothers and Claire, addresses the “bedrock feeling of incompleteness and loss”¹¹ through conflict with their insurmountable physical obstacles. Despite the hopelessness of their prospects, they each continue to look toward science to dislodge any impediments, to answer an ontological uncertainty that underscores the physical conditions of being.

The disjunction that defines their relation to their own bodies—the lingering awareness that their insides (their most intimate, fleshy parts) are what is most foreign—is the basis of Cronenberg’s fleshy horror. The interior of the subject remains unknowable, even as the Mantle twins devise their purportedly cutting edge procedures, however violent and primitive their tools appear. They can reach the insides of their patients, inspect them with penetrative apparatuses, and x-ray their bodies to render the hidden interior visible and thereby an object of study. The doctors strive to reduce the individual to a series of nameless parts, each a potential source of knowledge.

An x-ray is a medical device that subscribes to the logic of visibility. It is designed to make visible, to reveal, what is hidden beneath the body’s surface. For something to be *real*, it must be visible. This logic implies that which cannot be seen either does not exist or has no material effects. To scrutinize these claims, Gérard Wajcman explores the condition of “the modern subject” who “is subjected to the incessant desire for visibility that animates every power and saturates our societies”¹² through modern technologies. Wajcman describes the neutralizing effects of hyper-visibility in our scientific modernity, which strives to expose every nook and cranny of the supposedly “transparent subject.”¹³ This ideological position assumes that x-ray images, the aggregation of data about the traces of the individual, can render otherwise unseeable (and thereby unknowable) parts of the body clear and readable—in short, that visibility offers closure.

Tenets of hyper-modernity promise that every part of the human can be knowable through visibility. Some things, however, cannot be linked to their physical effects through an illusory transparency. The tools that Beverly creates to inspect the female body face limitations when actually confronted with a corporeal reality. After a patient complains about the pain his tools cause, Beverley exclaims to his brother: “There’s nothing the matter

¹¹ Beard, *Artist as Monster*, 236.

¹² Gérard Wajcman, “Intimate Extorted, Intimate Exposed,” *Umbra* “Semblance” (2007): 38.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 49.

with the instrument. It's the body! The woman's body was all wrong!" In another defensive monologue, he later insists that the collection of female patients they have recently received "look all right on the outside, but their insides, they're deformed." The body is subordinated to the technological advancements it continues to defy. There remains a negativity that confounds and repulses those who deny it. While the Mantles' medical apparatuses subject the body to their form of knowledge collection, the flesh persists as a limiting point.

The premise of the Mantle twins' research is that the woman's body (they refuse to examine male patients) can become transparent, that everything can be exposed. An attempt to render the patient transparent runs through the film's practice of gynecology. Eliot explains to Claire during their first meeting in his examination room: "Surely you've heard of inner beauty. I've often thought their should be beauty contests for the insides of bodies. You know, best spleen, most perfectly developed kidneys. Why don't we have standards of beauty for the entire human body? Inside and out." His strange claim, a logical extreme of the values of hyper-modernity, makes the bodily organs a question of aesthetics rather than function.

Wajcman thus concludes in his critique of the order of the visible, "The search for bodily transparency is a fantasy because there is something that we will never be able to see, know, or master: the sexual relation,"¹⁴ which will never simply work to the will of the master. Elliot's appraisal of internal organs, his obsession with an interior that he must make visible, creates a new fetishization of the female internal organs through a displacement of anxiety about sexual difference. The doctors treat sexuality and desire as something positive that can be exposed. But sexuality is a negativity that incites the film's irresolvable conflict, bringing about the demise of the Mantle twins—who find themselves unable to solve the mystery of, to use the film's own terminology, *what fuck is*.

While gynecology appears a suitable method to confront directly the question of sexual difference, the Mantle twins use their profession to displace their neuroses on the female body. The woman bears the mark of difference through her sexual excess. Beverley declares Claire "a mutant" because of her trifurcated uterus, which refuses visual representation and is therefore an inexhaustible source of anxiety. Invisibility simultaneously empowers and disempowers the female subject, who lacks the power-through-presence of the phallus but retains a power that haunts the subject

¹⁴ Wajcman, "Intimate Extorted, Intimate Exposed," 55.

through a mystifying placelessness defined by masculine parameters, in the words of Luce Irigaray, as “a ‘hole’ in its scopophilic lens.”¹⁵ The male scientists of *Dead Ringers* frame “female sexuality and bodily otherness as a form of ‘monstrosity’ or ‘mutation’”¹⁶ onto which they can disavow their castration anxiety—a fear of losing not only the phallus, but of losing their tenuous connection to each other (already experienced through their separation at birth). The treacherous female body must repeatedly be inspected. The marker of sexual difference must be accounted for visually and thereby rationalized, objectified, stripped of the power it holds in its visible absence and invisible omnipresence. The search for mastery inevitably leads Cronenberg’s male protagonists, duplicated in this case by the singular Jeremy Irons, to his self-inflicted destruction.

Bodies constitute, in the words of Steven Shaviro, “the great unknown.”¹⁷ Claire’s uterus is a source of sustained fascination and anxiety—visually unrepresentable within the diegesis, “but nevertheless ever-present because of the constant verbal and symbolic references to woman’s reproductive system as a signifier of the grotesque.”¹⁸ Claire’s womb is founded in the myth of a physical impossibility. While there are recorded cases of bifurcated wombs, trifurcates are to this point unknown, unreal. Claire thus “offers the impossible—a womb for each of the twins and a third womb for the ‘other.’”¹⁹

Precipitating their gruesome finale, Beverley dreams that he and his brother are conjoined. His dream self asks Claire to tear the two apart at the abdomen with her mouth. The moment visually recalls *The Brood*, how Nola primally births her infernal brood children by tearing the lining of the external uterus with her teeth. Beverly, the toolmaker, substitutes the mouth and teeth for a technical device, favoring a primitive instrument. The mouth is a site of entry between internal and external, by which fragments of the exterior world are incorporated into the body. Maggie Kilgour considers the physical incorporation of one discrete unit into another, an internalization of the outside through the opening of the mouth and the “ambivalence of eating.”²⁰ The oral aggression, or cannibalism, Beverly associates with this action retains Kilgour’s ambivalence. For it acknowledges both his desire to be ingested,

¹⁵ Luce Irigaray, *The Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell, 1977), 26.

¹⁶ Beard, *Artist as Monster*, 236.

¹⁷ Shaviro, “Bodies of Fear: The Films of David Cronenberg,” in *The Politics of Everyday Fear*, ed. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1993), 113.

¹⁸ Barbara Creed, “Phallic Panic: male hysteria and *Dead Ringers*,” *Screen* 31, no. 2 (1990): 126.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 135.

²⁰ Maggie Kilgour, *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation*

or absorbed whole (along with his brother) into the maternal body while simultaneously acknowledging that there is something indigestible which can never be taken up into her.

The womb, like the mouth, has teeth that cut through, or surrender, that to which it gives birth. The violence of birth damages its product, creating a wound that will never be healed. Eating as an act of aggression (here paralleled to the act of giving birth) remains couched in a less malicious act of pleasure. Claire acts on an imperative to please Beverly. The ambivalence is an interplay of pleasure and aggression, the two not entirely dissimilar. These prescribed roles, as Kilgour explains, are “completely unreciprocal.”²¹ One must overtake the other. The overtaken must submit themselves to an existence fully within the bounds of the other. The logic of incorporation privileges the body. Though Cronenberg’s narrative refrains from cannibalism, the desire for incorporation, and for the dissolution of difference, prevails. The horror of unsuccessful incorporation is indigestion, a failure for one neatly to be absorbed into the other. Indigestion may culminate in vomit, which brings the eaten object back into the world as something both repulsive and unrecognizable.

Cronenberg’s *Dead Ringers* considers the possibility of a representation of “the impossible nature of the masculine quest for wholeness and totality”²² by exploring the physical limits of the body. The twins are unable to merge, to undo their split condition. Even if the twins can briefly link their bodies through the conduit of a third (female) body, and through symmetrical drug usage, they cannot overcome flesh as border to the soul. As Dolar argues with reference to touch, the individual must already be split, doubled, in order to touch itself “as the human body constantly does.”²³ What one touches (whether in oneself or in others) is never the *same*, but something other, something ungraspable—or unconsummable. This split, which keeps two from becoming one (e.g. keeps the twins from full integration with each other) founds the subject whose “unity resides only in their split”²⁴ as a permanent ontological condition. Creed phrases this idea in similar terms, that “separation and difference are the price one pays for subjectivity.”²⁵ And the price of the abolishment of that separation is the destruction of the self, the death of the Mantle twins.

(Princeton: Princeton, 1990), 7.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Creed, “Phallic Panic,” 134.

²³ Dolar, “Touching Ground,” 80.

²⁴ Ibid., 88.

²⁵ Creed, “Phallic Panic,” 137.

Separation is integral to the formation of the subject. Creed further explains:

“psychoanalytic theory thus provides us with a narrative about the way in which the subject is constituted through loss and separation: separation from the mother at birth, loss of the breast, the experience of division in the semiotic, misrecognition of the self in the mirror phase, the division of the subject in language.”²⁶

The casting of the woman as castrated accordingly is a mechanism of the displacement of the condition of castration, a disavowal of the loss that precedes it: the original estrangement from the mother’s body, the cutting of the umbilical cord, the loss of the breast, the separation of two twins from one womb. The Mantles’ fixation on the reproductive maternal body, the conditions of the uterus, has to do with the contradictory role the body of the mother occupies for the child. Her body “most clearly represents the body of separations, the body which reawakens in the male subject his unconscious anxieties about separation.”²⁷ However, “the mother’s body simultaneously represents a desire for reunification, a reassurance that total symbiosis and unity are possible,”²⁸ a unity that once existed before the child was forced into the world—the fantasy of prenatal containment and touch before the subject forms their own sense perceptions.

The twins articulate a fragile, singular self out of two parts. To constitute one self, the individual must “throw out, reject our nonselves,”²⁹ thus the end of the Mantle twins entails that they disintegrate into each other, to die in the fashion they could never properly live. However, the Freudian subject is not conceived as that which takes place via an ejection of what is foreign, but through the inclusion within ourselves of what we are not. The subject is born out of this tension, which has material effects although they cannot physically be located. Thus the subject is driven in search of a return to wholeness. He aspires to repair “the loss of imaginary wholeness,” a loss that is “only intelligible *retroactively* through representation”³⁰—a trauma repeatedly visited and reenacted. The fantasy of the Mantle twins is one of abstraction, full integration of the individual into a totalizing whole. Cronenberg’s work points toward the “fragility of reality”³¹ that the subject constructs for themselves and must repeatedly invent and represent.

²⁶ Creed, “Phallic Panic,” 138.

²⁷ Ibid., 140.

²⁸ Ibid., 140.

²⁹ Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire* (New York: Verso, 2010), 129.

³⁰ Creed, “Phallic Panic,” 145.

³¹ Cronenberg, *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, 144.



Crash (1996)

The first image in Cronenberg's *Crash* is of a privileged machine: not yet the cars that become the film's primary fixation, but rather shiny metal planes—in stasis, parked together in a warehouse. The moving camera approaches the fixed machines one by one, revealing the living organisms that linger amidst these hulking metal structures. Catherine Ballard, initially dwarfed by the looming presence of the planes in the cavernous setting, undresses. Her head rests on the metal sheath of the plane in a moment of ecstasy. From the opening alone we can register an overwhelming attraction between the technical and the organic, the two tending toward each other. Before any notion of the film's crash cult appears, a sexual fascination with the machine persists, as do questions of visibility and desire.

Crash begins with a three-scene sequence introduction of the main couple, Catherine and James Ballard. The sex in the first two seemingly non-related opening scenes are both rear-entry—as is almost all of the sex throughout Cronenberg's highly eroticized adaptation of J.G. Ballard's provocative 1973 novel of the same name (in which the protagonist shares his name with the author). The fictionalized James Ballard is introduced through his appearance out from behind the bare ass of a nameless woman. The continued motif of staging two characters as physically intertwined

while facing away from each other in the same direction is used, the director explains, to create a “disconnected” feeling that allows the characters to have sex without “quite having sex with each other.”¹ Social alienation cuts through even the most intimate settings.

Just as bodies collide, cars rear-end one another as their only possible mode of connection. The feelings of disconnectedness that the film cultivates from its first moments culminate in the third opening sex scene. The spectator first encounters the film’s central couple through the lens of their infidelity. This sinister subversion of otherwise commonplace human relations (paired with an absence of children or parents) constructs a perverse diegetic space replete with violent sexual encounters that deeply unsettled many of its viewers. Perhaps spectators were not able to recognize their own desire written in the film—or, rather, the reflected desire they could locate is one they would rather not.

This installment of Cronenberg’s work depicts the way the Ballards become involved with Vaughn, the coarse leader of a cult whose members boast intricate bodily scars as trophies of automobile accidents. Vaughn devotes himself to recreating famous car crashes: we first see him narrating and reenacting James Dean’s iconic, fatal automobile accident. When James Ballard absentmindedly crashes his car, he simultaneously kills the man behind the wheel of the opposing car and creates an intense bond with that man’s wife, Helen, who sits in the passenger seat. Helen in turn introduces James to Vaughn and his cohort. Both Catherine and James, even prior to his crash, have been absorbed by talk of their cars and the flow of traffic visible from their balcony. Vaughn injects a reinvigorated sexual tension into their relationship, arousing a passion they both feel more acutely for him than for each other. Cronenberg’s adaptation is a meandering, non-narrative exploration of a pathological fascination with, as Vaughn articulates, “the reshaping of the human body by modern technology.” The ensuing collection of scenes that comprise the film—intense moments of bodies and pleasures intertwined with machines—cannot easily be placed in relation to each other in space or time.

Art cannot exist in isolation from censorship—whatever legal or cultural form these restrictions take in acting upon the object. Cronenberg’s *Crash* was heavily resisted by government censors in England, and the film’s release was delayed until almost a year after winning the Special Jury

¹ William Beard, *The Artist as Monster: The Cinema of David Cronenberg* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2001), 408.

Prize at Cannes.² In what Annette Kuhn describes as “largely unprecedented circumstances,” the controversies surrounding the film escalated to cause “a government minister to become embroiled...to the extent of publicly calling for a ban”³ of the film. The conservative resistance responded to something ambivalently disturbing about the film, a slow-moving noir-style project that is largely bereft of dialogue and other cinematic codes devised to ensure the safety and comfort of the spectator. Something inarticulable unsettles the work: a desire (perverse, polymorphous, insatiable) that drives the film’s characters to the brink of death and, hopefully, beyond.

Political questions of censorship and cinema are often woven into debates about whether a given visual representation endorses or encourages what it places on screen. Posturing the absence of a moral frame, “Cronenberg positively [elicited] audience uncertainty and self-scrutiny.”⁴ It is a difficult—if not wholly uninteresting—project to impose a moral agenda upon the philosophical questions the film poses, questions about the sexuality of crash culture and of the desire that fuses the organic and the mechanical. Rather than moralizing, however, the film offers the ruthless study of a “pathology.”⁵ The desire that drives these characters to crash their automobiles, and to view crash reports as a form of pornography, is a pervasive cultural “disease” in which the crash cult members allow themselves to indulge (or, following the logic of the illness, to be *infected*).

After his crash, James confesses that it is “almost a relief [to find himself] in an actual accident [after] being bombarded endlessly by road safety propaganda.” The jolt of the crash, previously an abstract possibility, facilitates a rebirth. His experience has no relation to the visual representations that proliferate in public safety campaigns. The sensation feels immediate. Those ubiquitous images are meaningless to him; meaning comes only from the crash itself. The experience of the crash is the point at which *Crash* both constructs and deconstructs meaning. The pathological condition of Vaughn’s cult stems from a obsession with cars that permeates the American imaginary, amplified by the aesthetically arousing advancements

² Annette Kuhn, “Crash and film censorship in the UK,” *Screen* 39, no. 2 (1998): 166.

³ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁴ Martin Barker, Jane Arthurs, and Ramaswami Harindranath, *The Crash Controversy: censorship campaigns and film reception* (New York: Wallflower, 2001), 5.

⁵ Beard, *Artist as Monster*, 392. Psychoanalysis, importantly, takes a non-moralizing approach to the treatment of patients. The focus on analysis, through the familiar example of the talking cure, implies an examination that refrains from judgment, that does not pathologize. This is similar to the ambivalent and non-moralizing manner in which Cronenberg represents his cast of social deviants.

of modern technology, and (perversely) with how machines are marred and transformed by impact.

“Maybe the next time,” sighs Catherine after a failed sexual interaction in the film’s third opening scene. Lacking the pleasure of the perceived immediacy of the crash, the relationship between the Ballards—much like their facial expressions—is empty, passionless. Mladen Dolar reminds us however—through a rephrasing of Aristotle’s theorization in the previous chapter on *Dead Ringers*—that there is always a gap or distance between the sensory faculty and what it senses. The excess of a “two plus”⁶ renders any claim to immediacy illusory, because the sense is accompanied by a gap. Thus the coveted physical experience of immediacy continually eludes the film’s protagonists. In the final scene, James echoes Catherine’s lines, whispering “maybe the next time” to his wife after she survives her first crash.

Through these instances, which bookend the film, female sexual pleasure remains unrealized. Catherine’s desire hangs like a question mark over the film. Whether her desire ultimately lies in the sublime violence of the crash, or any individual encounter, is unknowable, if unlikely. Catherine speaks more often in hushed questions than affirmative statements, as if searching to name and thereby fulfill her inarticulable wishes. But she appears pained, uncomfortable, or bored in sexual encounters (even the ones she instigates with James, with Vaughn). Catherine consistently appears to have the realization mid-action that this is not what she wants after all.

No reading of Catherine’s motives or reactions seems wholly satisfactory. Her face is inscrutable. In, for example, the aftermath of her violent sexual encounter with Vaughn, Catherine’s look is not quite pained but, rather, blank. The first image post-violence is a close-up of James laying his hands directly over the hand-shaped bruise on Catherine’s thigh. His wedding ring is prominently displayed, inscribing the institution of marriage as one that simultaneously endorses violence and protects women from it—her safety is provisional. His hands are tepid, tender, but the new shades of black and blue that ornament her skin transfix both James and the camera.

Though stationary, the camera slowly zooms—intermittently bobbing up and down slightly as if uncertain of where to focus—from a wide shot that displays the woman’s body in the room to a close-up that encompasses her face framed by her husband’s. The steady movement of the camera into the room pulls the spectator further into the space. But the primary object of the gaze remains impenetrable. Catherine barely moves, except to turn her

⁶ Mladen Dolar, “Touching Ground,” *Filozofski Vestnik* 29 no. 2 (2008): 84.

face away and then to close her eyes. She closes herself off from a coherent reading. Unlike the female hysteric patients photographed by Charcot at the Salpêtrière in Paris who perform a visual manifestation of their psychical disorder for their doctor, Catherine denies satisfaction to a domineering gaze that seeks to objectify her.

The presumed pain on Catherine's face does not translate to any legible emotional response. After Vaughn's death, for example, Catherine describes her abuser as "a close friend," indicating a continued affection. This statement could be read as internalized-misogyny, masochism, a frigid female disposition. But there remains an excess in Catherine's reaction that cannot neatly be reduced to any of these categories. The spectator is continually compelled to find a certain sadness in Catherine's look. However, these futile attempts to render Catherine an object of knowledge are consequences of a Kuleshov-like Effect. Catherine's blank expression placed in any context only lends itself to the assumptions and value judgments the spectator chooses to project on the visual scene. Catherine's blank stare positions her as a mirror that projects the spectator's unknown and uncomfortable desires back at themselves. The inscrutability of the image calls attention to the falsity of the assumption that vision is the portal of knowledge. Catherine's image does not surrender any secrets. Her image functions, rather, as a mask that disguises her true desires.

But the secret is that there is no secret. Catherine has no special knowledge of her own desires. Such knowledge does not exist. She remains opaque not only to the audience but, above all, to herself. Even her failure to die in the film's conclusion is the final sinister indication that her desire cannot be realized.

Catherine's apparent blankness demonstrates a greater ambivalence throughout a film that neither condemns nor praises its characters and their pursuits. A crew member suggested to Cronenberg that he include a voice over in the film to act as the sympathetic presence that guides the spectator through diegetic space. The person who made this suggestion was fired.⁷ The image offers itself to the spectator who in turn constructs knowledge out of it. Cronenberg's *Crash* denies the spectator any illusion of coherence or the comfort of a guide through the cold dark blues and grays that, similarly to the mise-en-scène of *Dead Ringers*, shade the diegetic space. The passage of time throughout the film is unmarked. Spatial correlates are largely absent. The relations among the various locales remain obscure. The city

⁷ Barker, Arthurs, and Harindranath, *Crash Controversy*, 5.

is amorphous, without distinction boundaries. Driving is not about moving from one point to another. Rather, this self-indulgent action is about being in motion and encased in the machine. The act, merely a gesture, is not completed.

Even in a film so passionate about cars, the logistics of how the characters travel from one locale to another is unknown. The camera does not follow purposeful movement from one setting to the next. Rarely do we witness anyone park a car, for example, or arrive at a specific destination. The cars that receive attention are either those that drive aimlessly or those that have become heaping piles of deformed metal and consequently can no longer move at all. Like these cars, words fail—and perhaps that is why Cronenberg's characters use so few of them. The controversy thus lies not in the dialogue, of the brief and hedonistic diatribes of cult leader Vaughan, but in the rigidly austere and disturbing visual scene—an austerity that seeks, and fails, to confine the persistent violence of the aimless desire that defines crash culture.

Lacking the inhibitions of the ego working under the reality principle, the primary characters of *Crash* are possessed by a desire for self-annihilation that hinges on the collapse of distinctions between pleasure and pain. Their compulsions shun the notion of a moral code beyond physical fulfillment. Good becomes a matter of feeling (anything). Vaughn and his followers never consider the question of right or wrong, they seek only to indulge their fantasies—with no consideration of the human cost. James wonders for a moment, why the police are “taking this so seriously?” He is unable to conceive of a moral dimension, is not disturbed by the restrictions of the paternal authority that would repress or otherwise regulate his desire.

Vaughn extends a renewed celebration and reinvention of critical terms such as ‘sex’ and ‘death’ untethered to cultural norms. He identifies currents that run through ideologies of modern progress and an ultimately suicidal valorization of the machine for its own sake and its capacity for destruction. Wounds, similarly, are rewritten as captivating evidence of past penetrations lodged in the flesh—not a physical debilitation but an opened opportunity, a newfound object of desire. The abject body (of both human and machine), which has “lost its form and integrity”⁸ becomes sacred, idealized. Castration and loss are celebrated. Each body carries its own scars, which mark out an eroticized personal history.

⁸ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 11.

If, as Joan Copjec explains of psychoanalysis, “it is the repression of this desire that founds society,”⁹ then the project undertaken by Ballard (the author) and Cronenberg is to contemplate society’s undoing of itself. This assertion refers more specifically to the repression of a desire for incest (the first taboo). Society is contingent upon this repression, upon an impossibility without which society would collapse. There is no incest in a film without parents. However, we can take the crash cult members as a collection of siblings for whom any possible permutation of sexual couplings is not only possible but encouraged. *Crash* displays a scenario of desire attempting to dislodge itself from the mechanisms of repression. The film’s founding taboo then is a nihilistic desire to crash violently into one another. The participants in Vaughn’s cult celebrate the machine not in the sophistication of its intricate parts but rather as an assemblage of mechanical limbs.

The law—the paternal order expressed through traffic authorities, doctors, etc.—constructs a subject who “rejects its desire, wants not to desire it.”¹⁰ The members of the crash cult, however, actively desire that which will maim and kill them, that which runs contrary to the laws they blatantly disregard. Vaughn’s obsession traces a larger societal fixation with car accidents, mechanical failures, and body-deforming traumas that have become public spectacles and objects of obsessive mass consumption—James Dean, Princess Diana, John F. Kennedy. Their deaths, more than their lives, elevated these celebrities to the rank of legend.

The characters of *Crash* come to inhabit “the place where meaning collapses,”¹¹ the place of the flesh. They give themselves up to the negativity of desire and sexuality—which is similarly described by Jacqueline Rose as the “vanishing-point of meaning.”¹² It is imperative, argues Barbara Creed, that the abject “be tolerated” because “that which threatens to destroy life also helps to define life”¹³ by insisting upon what it is not. Creed continues, “The subject, constructed in/through language, through a desire for meaning, is also spoken by the abject, the place of meaninglessness.”¹⁴ This place of abjection and meaningless is what the protagonist James Ballard is confronted with through his first car crash—the film’s only genuine accident.

The violent jolt, the traumatic moment, cannot be experienced

⁹ Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire* (New York: Verso, 2015), 24.

¹⁰ Ibid., 25.

¹¹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University, 1982), 2.

¹² Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (New York: Verso, 1986), 71.

¹³ Creed, *Monstrous Feminine*, 9.

¹⁴ Ibid., 10.

because of how quickly it acts upon the individual. The central characters are therefore driven to repeat their loss, to reenact these moments obsessively. The crash is continually reenacted precisely because it is unrepresentable. Vaughn can endlessly discuss the circumstances of a particular accident. Still, the crash cannot be experienced—it exists only as a hole in reality. Although these holes cannot be seen, they haunt the subject nonetheless. The subject subsequently attempts to fill the holes, to account for apparent inconsistencies. One method is, through technology, to construct sameness through modern technological advancements.

As Creed explains in a description that seems to be about Vaughn himself: “The human psyche and body have been profoundly shaped by technology.”¹⁵ Her claim is a platitude Cronenberg takes up repeatedly in his work. In the formal composition of the film, “Cronenberg’s camera tracks over and cuts among these injuries with utter serenity.”¹⁶ He traces aspects of the car obsessively, even tenderly, through the gaze of the camera. During conversations, for example, the camera often disrupts the typical shot-reverse shot composition with close-ups of various characters stroking parts of their cars.

Automobiles thus play an active role in each encounter as a participant in an ongoing orgy of social interaction. Helen Remington feels the fender of James’ totaled car when they meet in the parking garage during their formal introduction. When James subsequently gives Helen a ride and they become better acquainted with each other, the camera cuts mid-conversation to focus upon the way James uses his finger to fondle the seatbelt that rests upon his shoulder before removing it. Moreover, the violent encounter between Vaughn and Catherine begins as they enter the car wash. Their intimacy is broken up within the frame, interrupted by the movement of the top of the convertible covering the car. The even sounds of the automobile’s moving parts become the soundtrack of their sexual interaction, of the couple—mechanical and sexual rhythms blur.

These fragmented experiences, supplemented by the presence of the machine, are symptomatic of “the postmodern desiring subject,” writes Creed, who “yearns for an experience marked by crash culture—division, simulation, brutality, obscenity, perversity, death.”¹⁷ These subjects seek self-annihilation above all else: a sex that is transgressive and unproductive, practices

¹⁵ Barbara Creed, “The Crash debate: Anal wounds, metallic kisses.” *Screen* 39, no. 2 (1998): 176.

¹⁶ Beard, *Artist as Monster*, 398.

¹⁷ Creed, “The Crash debate,” 175.

between all possible pairings of organic and technic interfaces. Consequently, “only death, violence, transgressive sex, can make a dent in the emptiness”¹⁸ of an otherwise passionless, alienating, disorienting, fragmented world. No longer satisfied by the little deaths, they flirt with the final corporeal death, with annihilation of both self and machine, annihilation of self through the machine.

Catherine—the only primary character who has not been in a car crash—becomes fascinated with Vaughn, his preoccupation with car crash culture, and the prospect of the visceral experience. However, as she continues to search beyond the opacity of her desire, to locate it in order to satiate it, she finds nothing. An insurmountable obstacle, this lack of clarity is “the very *cause* of the subject’s being.”¹⁹ Desire cannot be satisfactorily articulated. This claim is paramount to the formation of the identity of the individual, to the conditions of the alienation of the split subject.

A theme that runs through these close readings of Cronenberg’s work is how no individual subject can be reduced to a series knowable parts, of objectified details distilled in words and fastened to a sheet of paper. Rather, “The subject is the effect of the impossibility of seeing what is lacking in the representation, what the subject, therefore, wants to see.”²⁰ Their desire—as Miran Božovič explains in his reading of *Rear Window* (discussed briefly in the introduction)—stains the image because the subject is constituted through their desire.

These insatiable wishes are what propel the individual in search of *something*. Because the subject is a “desiring being,”²¹ desiring that which it can never realize. Cronenberg’s subjects exist as transgressions to the law not because they have a pointed political agenda but rather because they subordinate themselves to desires that do not abide by the repressive structure of societal frameworks. Cronenberg’s particular strategy for interrogating horror in the body is to alienate “the spectator by virtue of too great a proximity to bliss and horror, not because of any rational distancing from them,”²² and thereby fully to adopt and to explore the extremes of a hedonistic agenda that indulges in the search of physical fulfillment.

The postmodern condition entails the disposal of meta-narratives. Old meanings are dislodged, signs proliferate without referents. As Cronenberg

¹⁸ Beard, *Artist as Monster*, 393.

¹⁹ Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 35.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 36.

²² Steven Shaviro, “Bodies of Fear: The Films of David Cronenberg,” in *The Politics of Everyday Fear*, ed. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota), 126.

explains in the DVD commentary to *Crash*: “These people have come loose from old meanings.”²³ Accordingly, they devise new meanings for themselves. They become their own gods, Vaughn a messiah. The cast of misfits chooses to “rewrite those things we think of as being immutable,”²⁴ because they are not fastened to a pure or fixed truth. Rather, these concepts “are reinvented for every time in every culture.”²⁵ Supposed absolutes are now understood as relative, changeable concepts with their own histories. In the absence of an absolute guarantee of meaning, the subject has to invent and represent reality continuously because reality is ontologically incomplete.

Crash is a more physically restrained film than its predecessors, *The Brood* and *Dead Ringers*—though not as visually austere as Cronenberg’s later work, the period piece *A Dangerous Method*. Physical mutations exist in the form of sustained injuries, but much of the anxiety about how our bodies fail, how they undermine or fail to produce certain kinds of knowledge, are displaced onto man-made machines. This deviant group embraces a cyborg culture that unites man with machine to maximize pleasure if not efficiency. Nevertheless *Crash* continues to explore what Georges Didi-Huberman terms “the phantasmic link...between seeing and knowing.”²⁶ Knowledge through optic cues is not confirmed but rather challenged. This tension is most evident through an analysis of Catherine Ballard, an enigmatic figure of emotional ambivalence who continually attempts to satiate her sexual desire in spite of its constant deferral (and an ostensible lack of pleasure that accompanies each physical encounter, or collision). Similarly, car crashes destroy rather than create meaning because they are themselves unknowable—functionally they cut across the mechanical function of the automobile while, phenomenologically, they cannot be experienced by the subject who survives them. This elusive quality of a trauma engenders the need for reenactment, for the repetition of what is missing. These characters’ anxieties converge around the negativities of sex and death. Cronenberg presents a series of characters who produce new meanings and new forms of sex, death, (in)human bodies, pleasure—meanings that have been destabilized.

²³ Beard, *The Artist as Monster*, 411.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière*, trans. Alisa Hartz (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 8.



Coda:

A Dangerous Method (2011)

“With the words, anything goes;
with the senses, nothing goes.”¹
Mladen Dolar

“Our job is to make our patients capable of feeling.”
Otto Gross, *A Dangerous Method*

A Dangerous Method, David Cronenberg’s 2011 adaptation of Christopher Hampton’s 2002 stage play, *The Talking Cure*, is far more contained than his earlier works. The horror recedes further inward—though the horror of the body continually bleeds through the prim bourgeois ethos of the film’s early nineteenth century western European sensibility. Still the film retains the director’s signature touch, including: Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung within the lineage of mad scientists, bodily contortions distilled in the spectacle of Sabina Spielrein’s hysteria.

In fact, the focus on the father of psychoanalysis and his potential inheritor takes Cronenberg back to the origin of the horror of the body, the initial acknowledgment and confrontation of the problem of sexual difference. Cronenbergian cinema is a continuous attack on the bourgeois lifestyle, its notions of morality and its regulation of sexuality. Accordingly this later work, though less tonally unsettling, continues to address questions we have traced through a sampling of the director’s lengthy career about the relation of knowledge to vision and how it operates through body and flesh at the limits (or rather, excess) of meaning.

¹ Mladen Dolar, “Touching Ground,” *Filozofski Vestnik* 29 no. 2 (2008): 98.

Psychoanalysis is a field of study founded upon the body of the female hysteric, upon a disease that confounds optical knowledge. These doctors, however, are more aware of the limits of visual knowledge than Cronenberg's typical protagonists. Thus Freud and Jung are engaged in the analytical project of treating their patients, of interpreting their dreams—an effort well suited to cinema as a medium preoccupied with sex and fantasy. The controversial nature of psychoanalysis is depicted not only between this strange new discourse and the majority who rejected it, but even as a struggle internal to the discourse itself. Freud, psychoanalysis' indisputable founder, and Jung, the colleague once privileged by Freud as his potential successor, become embroiled in conflict as the film progresses. By offering each doctor an opportunity to challenge the other, the film retains a certain ambivalence, a refusal to moralize to its audience.

The film begins with Spielrein—a hysteric deeply troubled by fits of madness linked to a perverse pleasure in beatings and humiliation—being forcibly transported to Jung's medical facility in Switzerland. First employing the talking cure, Jung's treatment of Spielrein becomes most successful when he provisionally takes her on as an assistant. Jung also uses this case as an opportunity to travel to Austria and meet his idol, Freud, with whom he begins a fruitful intellectual relationship. Chaos ensues when Freud sends one of his more controversial students, Otto Gross, to Jung for supervision. Before Gross runs away, his advice to Jung to liberate repressed sexual desires encourages the once upstanding protestant doctor to take up the now healthy Spielrein on her proposition of an affair. Their sexual relationship continues until rumors threaten Jung's profession, word having traveled to Freud himself. Jung first lies to Freud about the affair until Spielrein, concerned about her own prospects as an analyst, violently presents her former lover with an ultimatum. After a series of disputes and disagreements, the relationship between Freud and Jung disintegrates into hostility while Spielrein begins a promising career sympathetic to both of their practices. *A Dangerous Method*, marked by an extensive series of suggestions about what psychoanalysis is and how it ought to be practiced, concludes without offering a decisive answer to its earnest academic investigation.

A Dangerous Method does, however, seem slightly to favor the discipline's founder. Jung is repeatedly enfeebled—at one point penetrated (symbolically castrated) by Spielrein, who draws blood from his cheek with a letter opener when she demands that Jung tell the truth about their relationship. Feminized through weakness, Jung ultimately sinks into his own

hysteria, depicted through the motionless lethargy of both spirit and body as opposed to the vigorous bodily contortions that characterize Spielrein's visual symptoms. Freud, however, remains the all-powerful authority who refuses to be psychoanalyzed by his friends and colleagues, sparking an irreparable rift in his friendship with Jung. Freud is often figured seated in the frame while Jung paces around the office. This spatial strategy creates a sense of stability through motionless that connotes Freud's authority.

But Jung is not completely illegitimated. The film ends with his description to Spielrein of a dream that predicts the inconceivable destruction of Europe in the First World War, evidencing Jung's theories of an attachment between premonitions and the unconscious. This ambivalence, the film's own aspiration to analyze rather than pathologize, is signature to the works of Cronenberg evidenced in previous chapters. His projects remain sympathetic to each of their troubled characters. Rather than confirming meaning, these films undermine previously held beliefs. They stage conflicts that open (rather than foreclose) new potentials.

Also typical of Cronenberg's work is how each film's conflict is centered around the problem posed by the body. *A Dangerous Method* moves through the flesh to explore an intangible interior: the unconscious. Still, the film is anxious about the body and the perverse nature of pleasure un-repressed. As in the case of the doctors of *Dead Ringers*, uneasiness about corporal boundaries and limitations entails an investigation of the body of the woman who bears the stain of sexual difference, "So as to make part of [her] essence visible."² Both Freud and Jung's clinical practice endeavors to extract further evidence of the invisible psychic workings of the subject through the talking cure. Although Freud famously insisted that both men and women could be hysterics, in the diegesis these doctors only treat female patients. The conflict that fractures their embattled field is due to the inconclusive nature of their research, the endlessly debatable possibility of what constitutes ethical treatment or valuable analysis.

Through a sustained debate over meaning, the film is also haunted by the ideology of transparency that psychoanalysis seeks to dispel. Traveling by ship to the United States, Jung shares with Freud a dream that seems to foresee the ensuing rift with his mentor (another instance of the psychic capabilities granted Jung by the narrative). Freud faces away from Jung, allowing the camera to frame the two men as if they are seated in a

² Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière*, trans. Alisa Hartz (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 8.

psychoanalytic session with Jung as analyst. Interestingly—and perversely so—this queer coupling is also reminiscent of the intimacy staged throughout *Crash* whereby couples are intertwined while both facing the same direction, as if not to be present with one another. This spatial relation allows the doctors to both participate in an exchange without seemingly sharing it with one another.

Refusing the role of patient, however, Freud insists that he does not share himself with others out of concern that he would “risk [his] authority.” To share one’s dreams, to have the alleged manifestation of the unconscious interpreted, is to cede authority to the interlocutor and to make oneself visible to the other. The power lies in the one who sits, unseen, and listens. Through verbal descriptors in the absence of an image, one divulges what they can of the figure of their interior. Here we encounter familiar ideological conflicts from this continued close-reading of Cronenberg’s work, not only Wajcman’s indictment of the illusory promises of hyper-visibility (in the chapter on *Dead Ringers*) but also Georges Didi-Huberman’s exploration of the hysteric subject whose visual symptoms cannot be anchored to a corresponding visual/physical source (primarily discussed in relation to *The Brood*). This tension refers back to the desiring subjects of *Crash* whose pleasure is continually deferred because it is necessarily unrealizable.

An emphasis on speaking over seeing acknowledges the limits of representation, the limits of visual cues to constitute knowledge. But the imperative to continue their inquiry into the nature of the subject and the sexual relation incites this cast to speak. While previous Cronenberg films under discussion make attempts visually to represent the body’s interior, visually to account for the sexual relation, the more subdued nature of this historical period piece displaces scopophilic anxieties onto the audio scene. These academics speak more insistently and articulately than any of the Cronenberg personalities who precede them.

A Dangerous Method does not attempt to represent the holes that decomplete reality and that, although they cannot be seen, have material effects recognizable in the world. Still this refusal of representation is productive, it produces endlessly enthusiastic discourse. That this study, moreover, revolves around the words of hysterical women is essential to the field, to its radical ambitions. The talking cure first took into account the words of women to whom no one listened. These women were largely considered insufferable on account of their obsessive concerns with seemingly trivial matters—incessant complaints and odd, unsettling visible symptoms that

could not be traced back to any physical cause. To take these institutionalized women seriously remains a progressive project, a turn toward the possibility of something else. Recognition of the contingent relation of talking and listening creates an understanding of the body as more than a physical mass, as other to the sum of its parts. Thus the film's representation of Jung (making claims to the historical figure) cites the incitement of his disputes with Freud as the moment that his supposed friend and mentor refuses to divulge his own dreams. This is the moment that language fails, that silence retains a mysterious power.

By acknowledging the limits of meaning, the point through his own study of psychoanalysis at which meaning is simultaneously made and unmade, Freud also recognizes the risks of overdetermination. Steven Marcus explains, "The world of meanings is a world of multiple and compacted causations; it is a world in which everything has a meaning, which means that everything has more than one meaning."³ Reality is riddled with holes and inconsistencies, points of intervention that unlock the possibility of something else—referred to continually, and perhaps somewhat frustratingly as "something else" because of the elusive negativities that affect the subject, such as sexuality and desire.

The juncture at which language fails compels these characters to return to their bodies as a potential site of meaning production. Spielrein's disease in the first half of the film entails that she, at a loss for words, violently contorts her body. She stutters uncontrollably, arching at the back, struggling to articulate words harshly embedded in her throat. She communicates more efficiently in piercing screams and unhinged laughs. Jung, conversely, becomes catatonic by the film's end. Practically unable to speak, he almost loses the ability to move his limbs. Similarly, an aged Freud still fighting to maintain control of his struggling discipline, stutters before collapsing to the floor while embroiled in a debate with Jung. Thus bodies also fail. And in so doing they communicate something of the unconscious. Despite these moments of bodily articulation, the film focuses more intensely upon extended conversations between its primary characters.

By displacing the primacy of body with the spoken word, *A Dangerous Method*, offers a new kind of touch. In speaking of touch we can think back to the Mantle twins of *Dead Ringers* who sought, through the necessary conduit of a third (women, drugs), to touch one another and thereby to become

³ Steven Marcus, "Freud and Dora: Story, History, Case History" in *In Dora's Case*, ed. Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane (New York: Columbia, 1985), 79.

unified. Psychoanalysis, according to Mladen Dolar, practices “the art of touching the body with the word.”⁴ Each sense, (focusing upon tactile and auditory for the sake of this inquiry), entails a gap between sense and sense organ thus necessitating the subsequent presence of an interface that acts as cursory bridge. In order to touch the unconscious, to employ Dolar’s effective metaphor, one must travel a road that is “roundabout, encircling [the unconscious] not as a piece of positive being, an information, a missing piece of the puzzle which would complete the picture, but precisely as a cut,”⁵ a negativity. What the talking cure uncovers, by running counter to the colonizing logic of transparency, is precisely nothing: the absence that is simultaneously an excess, a surplus of nothing—just as the flesh is in excess to the body (in *Dead Ringers*) and Catherine’s insatiable desire indicates the nothingness that underlies it (*Crash*).

Over the course of his career, Cronenberg narrows in on the fixations of bourgeoisie purity, on the notion that our bodies are obscene or horrifying. He literalizes the symbolic filth imposed upon the body, which compels the infamous Dora to wash herself incessantly to the point of causing physical harm. Cronenberg’s films appear obsessed with the body as a site of knowledge (un)production. Accordingly his projects are visceral in their horror, “grounded in the monstrous intersection of physiology and technology.”⁶ Technology through the medical practice depicted in the case of Freud and Jung—exaggerated in the scientific pursuits of *The Brood* and *Dead Ringers* and the technophilic hedonism of *Crash*—becomes a means of manipulating the body. But the body does not simply submit to the will of the master.

These efforts to control and thereby to understand the body precipitate the protagonist’s downfall. The body becomes simultaneously a site of resistance and control, “not in spite of,” writes Steven Shaviro, “but because of, its being a necessary relay, target, and support of power. The flesh is perpetually monstrous, unstable, out of control.”⁷ Distortions of the body and the flesh breakdown binary oppositions as opposed to re-inscribing them.

Bodies shield the mysteries of negativities. Because the body as physical and visual boundary is a limiting point at which meaning is both made and unmade. In other words, Shaviro continues, “The body is at once a target for new biological and communication technologies, a site of political

⁴ Dolar, “Touching Ground,” 95.

⁵ Ibid., 98.

⁶ Steven Shaviro, “Bodies of Fear: The Films of David Cronenberg,” in *The Politics of Everyday Fear*, ed. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota), 115.

⁷ Ibid., 125.

conflict, and a limit point at which ideological oppositions collapse”⁸—a potential site of social control that itself cannot entirely be controlled. The body continually presents the possibility of something else, something that undermines the knowledge created about it. Thus the body’s incoherence becomes an “other to power, an excess that disturbs it, a surplus that it cannot ever control or appropriate.”⁹ Such unsettling horror cannot properly be dealt with, or excised. It continues to nag at the subject’s fragile construction of a coherent reality.

Through the Cronenberg films we have investigated, the spectator is led to question how knowledge is derived from visual signifiers. These themes suggest the exploration of larger inquiries into racial and gender stereotyping. Spectacles of the body have been manipulated to construct types of knowledge that objectify and oppress whole groups of people. The body is at once the site from which meaning is derived and a threat to the very establishment of this meaning.

Horror as a prolific film genre has become a preferred arena for exploring the question—the threat—of sexual difference. Horror films repeatedly pose the question as to whether the horror lies within the social world or the organic body. Horror and science fiction, two genres that Cronenberg straddles through his career, are both preoccupied with the ontological properties of difference. Cronenberg’s postmodern brand of horror thus focuses primarily on the horror of the body that exceeds its organicity. This body elicits anxiety and disgust not because it is part of nature, but because it is de-natured, propelled by drives and pleasures that imperil the subjects who presumably *own* them. These uncanny bodies are fitted to technologies designed both to probe and prod them and to discipline, probe (again), and prop it up by merging this body with technological prostheses and express help to realize their aberrant desires.

Cronenberg rigorously pursues cinematic investigations into how concepts can be displaced from previously (seemingly) fixed notions. The bodily protrusions of his earlier work are translated to intellectual fixations that culminate in Cronenberg’s period piece on Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud—who flesh out the contours, and debate the merits, of the talking cure in what is Cronenberg’s most verbose work. The concerns of psychoanalysis, of how the subject is sexuated, are confronted more and more directly as the director’s portfolio expands. They all point toward a negativity, an absence of

⁸ Shavero, “Bodies of Fear,” 118.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 128.

meaning (coalesced around that body) upon which the subject cannot help but fixate. A horror lodged in the indecipherable flesh unsettles the subject's fragile sense of self, thus casting all meaning under the shadow of a doubt.

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