

ABSTRACT

SULLIVAN, GORDON MATTHEW. "Fascinated Victims:" Aspects of Abjection in the Films of David Cronenberg. (Under the direction of Devin Orgeron.)

"'Fascinated Victims:' Aspects of Abjection in the Films of David Cronenberg" traces the intersections between Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject and the films of David Cronenberg. While this pairing has been the center of critical attention for some time, remarkably little attention has been paid to the specifically *cinematic* production and presentation of abjection in Cronenberg's work. "Fascinated Victims" hopes to mine this territory and, in so doing, it aims to foreground more generally the cinematic medium's proclivity for the abject. The primary means of analysis will be close readings of a number of key Cronenberg films, with particular attention paid to the various means through which abjection is produced. Occasional reference will be made to Cronenberg's responses to his films, and to their critical and theoretical surroundings. Although critical consensus seems to be that Cronenberg's use of the abject serves to make women monstrous, the present work will shift that focus from the figure of abjection to those forces, – cinematic and diegetic – responsible for the process of abject-ing.

Chapter 1 provides a survey of the critical literature regarding abjection in Cronenberg's films. Critics treat Cronenberg's films with little reference to his specifically cinematic tools, and find abjection in specific abject 'objects,' like the parasites of *Shivers* (1975). The critical failure to discuss Cronenberg in cinematic terms, to analyze the particular effects the cinematic apparatus might have on our understanding of the abject will be connected to the cinematic representation of the abject, demonstrating the need to explicate abjection in specifically cinematic terms.

Chapter 2 examines closely what we might call Cronenberg's *abjectifying* narrative strategies. Through the use of the subjective point of view and the representation of hallucinations, Cronenberg reinforces the abject images on the screen. Furthermore, by connecting the viewer to a protagonist through the subjective point of view, the boundary between character and viewer is collapsed, producing another form of abjection.

Chapter 3 will examine the process of adaptation in light of the abject. Because Cronenberg often adapts material from other media, creating hybrids in a manner that recalls the abject, both *Naked Lunch* and *Crash* will be analyzed to understand how their status as adaptations reinforces the abject produced by other cinematic means. The adaptation, by fusing media, elides the boundary between cinematic author/text and literary author/text, which recalls the lack of boundary in the abject. As with narrative techniques, adaptive techniques both reinforce the abject on the screen, while producing their own brand of abjection.

The conclusion will discuss the use of the abject in the context of Cronenberg's – and his critics' – attitude toward gender. Because Cronenberg's early films often feature monstrous women, while his later films see a transition to almost exclusively masculine monsters, the issue of gender is central to the use of abjection in Cronenberg's films, and to the wider question of his possible misogyny. With an understanding of the specifically cinematic means through which Cronenberg represents the abject, the charges of misogyny that critics have leveled at the director will be evaluated.

“Fascinated Victims:” Aspects of Abjection in the Films of David Cronenberg

by

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BIOGRAPHY

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Chapter 1: Breaking Critical Boundaries

From “The Body” to a *Body of Work*

The body, especially the female body, serves as the focus for much of the work of David Cronenberg, as well as the work of his critics. Critical charges of misogyny rest almost exclusively on the treatment of female bodies in the Cronenberg oeuvre. The body is often a site of horror, and even films which do not explicitly deal with “the body” – *M. Butterfly* (1993) or *Spider* (2002) – display an uneasiness towards the flesh. Much (though by no means all) of the horror stems from the treatment of the body, especially the female body, as *abject* in the sense described by Julia Kristeva in her essay “Approaching Abjection” (1-31). Because of its ubiquity in Cronenberg’s work as well as the critical discussion surrounding it, a greater understanding of the use of abjection in Cronenberg's films will deepen critical awareness of the complexity of his representation of the body, female and male, and contribute to an understanding that extends beyond the labeling of his work as simply “misogynist.”

Abjection, as a theory, has developed alongside Cronenberg’s films, intersecting with them through various critics. Robin Wood, in 1979, diagnoses a pre-Kristevan sexual disgust in Cronenberg's early films, especially *Shivers* (1975), while Barbara Creed, in 1993, applies Kristeva's theory of abjection to the film medium, claiming that the abject representation of Nola in *The Brood* (1979) is misogynist. Building on Creed's work with Cronenberg and Kristeva, William Beard's 1998 work *The Artist as Monster* returns to the territory mined by Robin Wood and recasts it in specifically Kristevan terms, as well as uses abjection to analyze later Cronenberg films. Taken together, these three critics present a clear picture of

the treatment of abjection in Cronenberg's oeuvre. In addition, they concurrently demonstrate a number of the shortfalls in the critical discussion of Cronenberg's work, especially the tendency to treat Cronenberg as a literary or theoretical figure by ignoring or downplaying concerns of mise-en-scène, as well as treating his films in isolation rather than as a body of work. A goal of the following chapters is to correct these oversights.

Before Barbara Creed initially explicated the connection between abjection and Cronenberg's films in 1993, critic Robin Wood offered a prototypical reading of the abject in Cronenberg's first feature *Shivers*. Wood's reading of the film revolves around the sense of “sexual disgust” that he claims the film is “premised on and motivated by” (194). His focus on disgust, specifically sexual disgust, forecasts the possibility of the kind of disgust considered abject in the Kristevan sense. Beyond a focus on the disgusting aspects of the film, Wood finds the “blood parasites” at the core of the film's plot worthy of analysis. The connections he makes – between the blood parasites and sexual disgust – are remarkably similar to the concerns Kristeva raises when discussing the abject. Wood claims the parasites have “strong excremental overtones (their color) and continual associations with blood” (194). With their connotations of waste and blood, as evidence of the inner body made emphatically outer, we could now say – in light of the development of Kristeva's theory – that the parasites are abject. Lacking that vocabulary, Wood still concerns himself with the meaning of the parasites in a manner reminiscent of abjection. Armed with his discussion of “sexual disgust,” Wood condemns the film – as well as its director – specifically for the use of sexual disgust towards women.

Despite the fact that Wood's work precedes Kristeva's initial conception of abjection, his analysis is useful for two reasons. First, as the most vociferous critical opponent of Cronenberg's work, his condemnation of Cronenberg hangs like a pall over much of the rest of the critical literature surrounding the director. Even authors such as Liana McLarty, who would contradict much of Wood's analysis often find themselves ambivalent, unable to answer the charges that Wood brings to bear, especially against Cronenberg's work pre-*Videodrome* (McLarty 236-8). However, the second useful aspect of Wood's work is to show the value of abjection as a tool for understanding Cronenberg's work. An understanding of abjection, coupled with analysis of the specifically cinematic aspects of its representation in Cronenberg's films, adds a layer of meaning to the texts. This added layer can serve to contradict the negative critical opinion that surrounds much of the director's work. Because – as we will see – presentation is key to the production of abjection, the cinematic means through which it is produced must be examined to fully explain abjection in Cronenberg's films.

Barbara Creed, like Wood, condemns Cronenberg's depiction of women. In *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, feminism, psychoanalysis*, Creed uses Kristeva's theory of abjection, specifically those aspects related to "the 'border' [the space where inside becomes outside]...the mother-child relationship and...the feminine body," to discuss the representation of women in cinema (8). Working across numerous films, Creed elaborates several archetypes of the "monstrous-feminine." In Cronenberg's *The Brood* (1980), Creed is most intrigued by representation of the "woman as monstrous womb" (43). Nola, according to Creed, gives birth to her "children," and she becomes a monster, and this monstrosity

can be analyzed fruitfully through Kristeva's theory. Creed argues that the first condition of monstrosity occurs because Nola's offspring do not have an autonomous identity, so she represents what happens when mothers have too much power.¹ The second condition occurs because Nola's maternity connects her to nature, and the cycle of death, which points out the inherent fragility of life, making her abject. Finally, the very existence of the brood points to a lack of border between inside and outside, to the abject. Nola, by becoming abject, becomes monstrous, and Creed finds this unfortunate. She condemns the film for its representation of the womb as monstrous, as it necessarily implies that possessors of a womb (i.e. women) are inherently monstrous. Creed's analysis is particularly interesting because her discussion of Cronenberg is situated within a larger discussion of the representation of the feminine. As such, her conclusions, at least where Cronenberg specifically is concerned, require further analysis.

The Artist as Monster, William Beard's book-length discussion of Cronenberg's oeuvre – published in 2001 and revised in 2006 – deals, as the title suggests, with the monstrous in Cronenberg's work, and more specifically the ways in which artistic creation is figured as monstrous in Cronenberg's films. Beard occasionally invokes Kristeva's conception of the abject to describe some of the horror found in specific films. His use of abjection is tentative, appearing only occasionally, and in a note to his discussion of abjection in *Shivers*, he discusses Creed's influence on his understanding: "My reading of some crucial aspects of Cronenberg's work is indebted to Creed" (507, n7). Although Beard is not explicit about what exactly he owes to Creed, the placement of the note during a discussion of abjection would indicate that he owes some of his understanding of the subject to his critical

¹ How this relates to Kristeva is not explicit in the text.

predecessor. Abjection has the most cachet for Beard when he discusses *Shivers*, and *The Brood* – territory covered by Wood and Creed. Beard also deploys the theory to explain some of the psychology of the Mantle twins in *Dead Ringers* (1988). The loss of the mother, and the concomitant fascination/repulsion relationship to the feminine other, does much to explain the Mantle twins, and Beard claims, much of Cronenberg's work since *Videodrome* (264-5).

Beard also uses abjection to explain the transition from horror situated in the feminine to one situated in the masculine, especially in *M. Butterfly* (1993). Because the line between masculine and feminine is a permeable one, the male who finds the feminine monstrous must, perforce, find the masculine, himself, monstrous as well. Finally, Beard notes the abjection inherent in the sex-death of automobile accidents in *Crash* (1996), where the inside becomes outside, and the boundaries between life, death, and sex are broken down. Beard's discussion of abjection in Cronenberg's work is primarily useful as a survey: Beard has shown what insights the idea of abjection offers across a range of Cronenberg's films. While not every film would benefit from explication using the tools of abjection (*Fast Company* [1979] comes to mind), Beard has laid the groundwork by showing that abjection applies to more than Cronenberg's early work, and may be seen as a guiding principle throughout his oeuvre.

While Wood, Creed, and Beard mark the major thrust of abjection in Cronenberg scholarship, Linda Kauffman presents a discussion of abjection – in a chapter of *Bad Girls and Sick Boys* entitled “David Cronenberg's Surreal Abjection” – which contradicts the previously negative opinion towards the abject in his films (115-145). While her analysis is

problematic – for instance she never explicitly says what makes Cronenberg’s abjection *surreal* – she lauds Cronenberg’s “antiaesthetic” which “trace[s] the intersection of...psychoanalysis and cinema” (115). In Kauffman’s view, the use of abjection shows the body as revolting “in both sense of the word – disgusting and rebellious” (115). In the broader context of her book, this approach is positive because it offers new ways to talk about the body, and the control that medicine/technology may exert over it. More significant for this project is her focus on the cause of the monstrous – “the man-made technological universe” – rather than what – or whom – is made monstrous. As we later examine the cinematic construction of the abject, it will become more obvious that Cronenberg’s focus is often more on the cause of the monstrous rather than the monstrous itself.

Beyond concerns with the monstrous, it is worth noting that abjection beyond that which is theorized by Kristeva has been applied to Cronenberg’s work as well. Beard discusses a more general abjection in connection with Cronenberg’s *The Dead Zone* (1983), based on what he calls the “dictionary sense,” namely “helplessness, victimization, prostrate suffering” (191). While these analyses are useful, it is important to point out their more general conceptions to contrast with the work contained here. Throughout this text, Kristeva’s theory of abjection – derived from her *Powers of Horror* essay “Approaching Abjection” – will be used. Unless otherwise noted, abjection and its derivative terms are meant in the Kristevan sense. While other theories of abjection may be useful for understanding Cronenberg’s films, Kristeva’s theory has resonances on both textual and critical levels of Cronenberg’s work.

Obviously, other authors have treated abjection in Cronenberg's films – Terry Harpold, for instance, offers an amplification of Beard's discussion of abjection in *Crash* – but these three authors encompass the major movement of abjection in the critical discussion of Kristeva's theory of abjection in the films of David Cronenberg: the pre-Kristeva discussion of "sexual disgust," the in-depth application of the theory to a specific film, and finally a broader survey that reveals the possibilities of the theory across several films.

Despite the breadth of Cronenberg scholarship, several patterns emerge. Generally, critics treat Cronenberg as if he were a literary figure – discussing themes, character, and setting – with little reference to the specifically cinematic aspects of his work, namely editing and mise-en-scène. In addition, and again generally, critics also treat Cronenberg films individually, or in pairs. While neither of these aspects of Cronenberg scholarship are necessarily negative, as a general trend they leave much of Cronenberg's work unexplored.

As an example of Cronenberg's treatment as a non-cinematic figure, we need only turn to Beard's initial discussion of the abject parasites from *Shivers*: "The parasites themselves are extremely transgressive in their appearance and activity. They are about eight inches long...Seemingly boneless, they muscularly writhe and creep" (29)². Beard's lack of specifically cinematic vocabulary is readily apparent; he could be discussing a short story, or summarizing a medical report. This absence is troubling because the reader may be left with the feeling that specific cinematic analysis might strengthen Beard's argument. Beard is not the only culprit. In Robin Wood's discussion of *Shivers*, cited above, he too discusses "excremental overtones" and "association with blood," without lingering on the mechanics

² Beard does reference the cinematic aspects of *Shivers*, specifically mise-en-scène, but only at the end of the chapter, in a subsection, where it appears as an afterthought with little connection to his previous points.

(194). He claims that the phallic nature of the parasites is cemented when “one enters the Barbara Steele character through her vagina” (194). Absent, again, is any discussion related to the cinematic construction of the scene. Wood’s description effectively stifles analysis of the scene, essentially creating a tautology: The parasite is phallic; it penetrates the Barbara Steele character; this is bad; Cronenberg utilizes “sexual disgust”; that use is reprehensible. Wood also claims that “*Shivers* systematically chronicles the breaking of every sexual-social taboo...but each step is presented as merely one more addition to the accumulation of horrors” (194). However, the lack of visual detail noted in individual scenes undermines the “merely” in Wood’s argument; he notes the importance of “presentation,” but refuses to give the reader details which would support (or refute) his argument, making it difficult, if not impossible to judge if the film is “merely” anything. In either case, whether cinematic analysis would strengthen or undermine an argument, we can see that its absence in the criticism is problematic.

Unsurprisingly, most articles that address Cronenberg deal with only one film, but this situation seems to infect longer works as well. Beard, in his book-length study of Cronenberg, also chooses to do little work to bring Cronenberg’s films into dialogue. He states “With an eye to utility, each chapter has been designed – at least to a limited degree – to stand alone, so that reader may be able to look at chapters on individual films in isolation without becoming completely disoriented” (xii). The goal – clarity – is laudable, but Beard fails to identify the sacrifice necessary for his approach: the “unity” in Cronenberg’s work. For instance, He refuses to deal with *Fast Company* (1979), “which is almost completely uncharacteristic [of Cronenberg’s work] and almost completely uninteresting” (xii). By

admitting that *Fast Company* is “uncharacteristic,” he assumes that there is a Cronenberg “character.” The explication of this character, the contribution it could make to an understanding of any particular film with reference to other films, is lost when films are treated in isolation. In other words, much has already been done to explicate specific films. The time has come to consider what the works have to say to one another: while a work of this length cannot hope to treat Cronenberg’s entire oeuvre, it will place several key films in a dialogue with each other, allowing the broader implications of this dialogue to manifest itself.

Ironically, Robin Wood – who deals superficially with only two films – uses *auteurism* as a club to bludgeon Cronenberg. When describing *The Brood*, he notes “It carries over all the major structural components of its two predecessors” (195). His attention to multiple films is laudable, but he finishes his sentence with the parenthetical note “as an auteur, [sic] Cronenberg is nothing if not consistent” (195). The derision is plain, but so is the benefit of multi-work analysis: Cronenberg *is* nothing if not consistent. As we will shortly see, treating more than one Cronenberg work at a time, while addressing specifically cinematic aspects of his work can significantly broaden the application of critical insights, especially where abjection is concerned.

Between Beard and Creed, the abject has been revealed in both *Shivers* and *The Brood*, but there is more to be found in both films, and in the abjection they contain. By analyzing both films with particular attention to their cinematic construction, with occasional reference to the film made between them – *Rabid* – we may elaborate more fully on the abject in both films, and see how Cronenberg’s concerns – as they relate to the abject –

developed. This analysis will do much to counter the claim of misogyny noted by Wood and Creed, primarily by complicating the view that “feminine” is essentially or exclusively “monstrous” in Cronenberg’s films.

Dissecting the Critical Body

With the twin tools of cinematic and multiple film analysis, we may significantly amplify (or contradict) much of the discussion surrounding abjection in Cronenberg's films. While it is difficult to reply to so broad and unsupported a challenge as Robin Wood's, his claim that *Shivers* is “single-mindedly about sexual liberation, a prospect it views with unmitigated horror” (194), deserves refutation, if only because it seems to have influenced other critics, such as Barbara Creed (49). When I say that the claim is “unsupported,” I mean that Wood points to nothing specifically cinematic in the film, no particular cinematic evidence to bolster his claim. Instead, the thematic elements of the film stand in for the whole, which disallows a nuanced reading because cinematic evidence – which is *how* the thematic elements are presented – is ignored. In contrast to Wood, my readings of Cronenberg’s films will bring thematic elements into dialogue with their cinematic presentation, so they may be read together.

Wood’s claim may be split into two halves: that the film is about sexual liberation, and that the film/Cronenberg view the project of liberation with dread. The claim that *Shivers* is about sexual *liberation* is difficult to support; the entire film is comprised of sexual *compulsion*, the opposite of liberation. The cinematic detail that drives this point home occurs when Dr. St Luc, at film's end, finds himself trying to escape from the pool room to the outside of the building. From atop the hill, the occupants of the building swarm to meet

the doctor. The occupants' shambling, and St. Luc's incredulous reaction are a clear echo of George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). If it wasn't clear earlier in the film, it is clear at this juncture: the parasite makes these people zombies. There is no liberation, or hint thereof, in the entirety of the movie. Thus, the claim that Cronenberg views sexual liberation with horror is difficult, if not impossible, to support. Figured another way, there is no sex in the film, only rape. What emerges is horror at the body divorced from the mind, from rational thought. And, considering it was rational thinking that led to the parasite outbreak in the first place, the film views unfettered rationality with the same horror it views the body without rationality. One could argue that the multiple sexual partners – the supposed sign of liberated sexuality – of the infected girl were the cause of the outbreak, but we never see enough of her behavior for her to be shown as condemnable, and the posthumous comments made by other characters are respectful as well. Were sexual “liberation” a crime, and sexual disgust so prevalent, she would have likely been dismissed and labeled with some derogatory word, like “whore” or “slut.” Thus, the “sexual disgust,” which becomes subsumed into the discussion of abjection, proves not to be so powerful an influence as Wood asserts.

Because he utilizes more evidence from the film, and because he uses abjection as a descriptive rather than condemnatory idea, Beard's discussion proves more promising. He cites the parasites as evidence of the “domain of the body interior and what comes out of it” (29), which he links to Kristeva and abjection. However, in his zeal to name the parasites, he misses one of the principle sites for abjection in the film: Tudor's stomach. Inherent in Kristeva's discussion of the interior becoming exterior is the anxiety about borders, about what constitutes a subject, mentally and physically. When we see Tudor in front of the

mirror, nervously manipulating his stomach, we are aware that something is not right with him precisely because his inside (stomach) is not conforming to what its outside should look like: his boundaries are breaking down. In addition, he is bathed in uniform light, which indicates his position in the world of rationality. Later, Tudor is the example of the incubation of the parasites. We see him lying on his bed, a table lamp providing light, as his navel writhes with what we eventually discover to be parasites. The image is powerful and plain: there are no borders between host and parasite, between inside and outside. Even the light, as it spills from left to right creates a gradient, with no clear demarcation between what is light and what is dark. This is the abject, that which Kristeva claims “does not respect borders, positions, rules” (4). The implication of the scene is more than simply that the parasites are abject, but that the body, given the chance by parasites or other phenomena, will not respect “borders” either. Beard's larger purpose in discussing abjection seems to be to note the development of Cronenberg's fascination with the body and its disintegration. Although Beard proves his point adequately with reference only to the parasites, discussing Tudor's presentation as incubator sets up nicely Max Renn's navel orifice in *Videodrome* and Beverly Mantle's dream sequence in *Dead Ringers*, both of which we will return to.

Barbara Creed's discussion of *The Brood* may also be nuanced by closer readings of various moments in the film. Creed claims that the revelation of Nola's 'sac' – and the simultaneous evocation of horror – are a product, and a representation – of the abject. Nola becomes, through abjection, the “monstrous-feminine” in Creed's terminology. Cronenberg is thus charged with misogyny for his representation of women, and the case is closed on *The Brood*. While I don't dispute Nola's representation as a monstrous figure, there is more to the

equation than Nola's monstrosity and her motherhood. The setting for the revelation is the Somafree Institute, home of psychoplasemics, the Cronenberg-created pseudo-science. The first detail of note, beyond the setting of the revelation, is that it is intercut with footage of Dr. Raglan attempting to rescue Candice and avoid the titular brood. Dr. Raglan's attempted rescue seems a final bid for sympathy for an otherwise despicable character, but his death comes after we learn what has happened to Nola. The editorial association between Nola and Raglan is no accident; it is he who places her in the position of monster. Nola's motherhood is far from "natural," and it is Raglan's psychoplasemics that causes the abject growth of the brood.

It is beneficial, then, to examine Dr. Raglan and his psychoplasemics. Indeed these are the first shots of the film, and their analysis significantly complicates the presentation of Nola as monster. The first shot of the movie, after the opening credits, is an over the shoulder view of Dr. Raglan, as he exhorts a patient, apparently in a clinical setting, engaging in some kind of borderline-abusive therapy. The scene continues in shot-reverse-shot fashion, covering doctor and patient, until Raglan suggests that his patient should have been born a girl. Suddenly, the viewer is removed from the shot structure and given a much wider two-shot of the doctor and his patient. In the foreground is a darkened audience, and the background features Dr. Raglan and his patient, on a stage in the spotlight. As the therapy continues, the camera reverses views, and tracks across Raglan and his patient, capturing the audience in the background and the therapy in the fore. The tenor of the therapy rises, culminating in the patient's violent removal of his shirt, revealing a number of small, inflamed sores on his chest and back, a symbol of his hatred for his father. The viewer

becomes aware that this is the culmination of Dr. Raglan's therapy: the manifestation, on the body, of the patient's inner feelings. Beyond that, the scene is filled with evidence of the abject. Most obvious are the sores that appear on the patient's body, evidence of his inner life turned outer, the breaking of the border between what is inside the body (or the mind) and what is outside. This confusion of inner and outer is evident in the rest of the scene as well. While initially, we might think that the therapy session is private, as most one-on-one counseling is, we see that the session is instead attended by the public. The confusion of inner feelings and outer body is mirrored in the confusion of private therapy with public spectacle. The implication is that Dr. Raglan's therapy causes this confusion, this abjection. This view is upheld later when Frank visits Dr. Raglan's former patient, now suffering from some kind of lymphatic cancer. Dr. Raglan's psychoplasms encourages the abject in his patients. Women alone are not monstrous in *The Brood*, but the monstrosity shared by the sexes is created by "science."

Creed claims "the final scenes help us to understand the possible origins of Nola's rage – her husband's disgust at her maternal, mothering functions" (45). This analysis breaks down, however, when we see that the "mothering" she does in the film is only the product of the abject therapy she undergoes, a therapy produced by the masculine figure of Dr. Raglan. Without other clues to her behavior prior to therapy, we can not make claims about Nola's rage as a response to Frank's feelings. Can Frank be blamed for being horrified at the sight of the monstrous birth, especially since the viewer knows that the "birth" is in response to Raglan's therapy, as the editing suggests? Creed's contention that Nola is monstrous holds up, but the charge of misogyny seems less stable, as the movie does little to suggest that Nola's

monstrous body springs from her “essential” nature as a woman. Instead, there is ample evidence to suggest that her appearance is due to the “scientific” – and male gendered – interference of Raglan's psychoplasms.

Again, we arrive at a critical opinion about Cronenberg, specifically his misogyny. Both Wood and Creed object to the depiction of women as monstrous in Cronenberg's films, especially in his first three features (*Shivers*, *Rabid*, and *The Brood*). The arguments of the preceding pages have shown that the representation of the abject is more nuanced than previous critics have cited, and this evidence is revealed through attention to cinematic detail, through analysis of the specifically cinematic elements which produce and reinforce abjection. The corollary to this argument is that not all representations of the monstrous, of the abject, are centered on women. This counters Wood's claim that Cronenberg reserves a “very special animus” for “female sexuality” (194): as we have seen, Cronenberg's male characters receive their share of “animus” as well. Specifically, that animus is reserved for the scientist figure. Utilizing multiple Cronenberg films, we can see a development across his first three films away from horror outside the flesh, to a horror that *is* the flesh.

What does not change across the films, however is the scientist figure. It is easy to trace the growth, from *Shivers* to *The Brood*. Initially, the scientist figure must create a parasite, ostensibly a being which exists without a host. By *Rabid*, the abject has moved to the vampiric phallus, which has no life outside the being to which it is attached. The scientist has moved from creating autonomous parasites, to creating parasitic organs. Finally, in *The Brood*, the title creatures emerge from within the body (along with the sores mentioned on the patient of the opening scene). The scientist figure manipulates the interior, changing

outside from the inside, attempting to co opt the maternal function. As the films progress, the scientist figure becomes more threatening as his ability to alter interiors increases. This development lays the blame for monstrosity, both that of women and of men, squarely on the shoulders of misguided science. Beard refers, in a discussion of *Crash* to the “scientist's role” as one who “experiments and innovates...and whose actions produce abjection and monsters” (401). If we must thrust Cronenberg into having a “moral” it is that science, unchecked, is more the site of horror than any single body. I am, of course, not the first to notice this trend. In her article, Linda McLarty draws on this evolution to counter Wood's charges (231-2), but she is left feeling more deeply ambivalent about the early films than this analysis does, because she still sees the monstrous women of the early films as a reflection of Cronenberg's hatred of women. Beard, too, occasionally points out the possibility of evolution, though he does little to develop it, but generally restricts himself to the evolution of male characters instead of the representation of the “monstrous” woman (134).

The Kristevan Approach to Abjection

The preceding arguments have attempted to demonstrate a critical deficiency, in which several important aspects of Cronenberg's cinema are overlooked, and others misinterpreted. The tools necessary to correct these oversights are the specifics of cinematic analysis, and the treatment of multiple films. These techniques in hand, we may explore Cronenberg's use of abjection more fruitfully. However, before such a project can begin in the following chapters, some explication of Kristeva's theory, and the particular aspects that will be used, is necessary. As most other critics note, the entirety of Kristeva's theory cannot be explored in any one project that hopes to deal with other primary texts (Creed 8), so a

narrowing to the most useful aspects is required. Of the various aspects of abjection Kristeva examines, the most important to this project are fragility, intention, fascination and representation.

Fragility is not an aspect of abjection per se, but instead it is what the abject reveals about the world around it. The abject is that which makes us aware of the fragility of our world, especially “law” according to Kristeva (4). The abject is that which “does not respect borders, positions, rules” and inhabits the “in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.” This disrespect, this ambiguity, is precisely what reveals the fragility of the world. All that we use (“borders, positions, rules” and the law) to form a subjectivity, collective or individual, are revealed as, if not arbitrary, then vulnerable. It is not the abject then, that horrifies. What horrify are the realizations the abject forces us to consider, about how and what constitutes a subject. The abject, then, is that which must be “thrust aside in order to live,” because it reveals how fragile life itself is. It is worth noting that the site of abjection, beyond elementary loathing of food and corpse, may occur in an individual. Abjection may be produced by the “cunning murder[er],” one who does not deny that murder is wrong, but who continues to do it anyway, “sinister, scheming, shady” (4). Individuals aware of the “rules,” but who still break them intentionally, also highlight the fragility of the “rules,” and as such are abject.

We ignore at our peril the seductive quality of the abject, for the abject is also fascinating. The abject “beckons” to us because it is what we are unable to part from (Kristeva 4). As Kristeva reveals, it is only through abjection that we come to be constituted as individuals, specifically desiring individuals, and it is subjectivity and desire which make

the abject so formidable. Jouissance too, plays its part; this is what Barthes calls “pleasure without separation” (164), for abjection “does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it” (Kristeva 9). Thus, horror mingles with pleasure because the subject is constituted, despite the violence from which it came.

Finally, we may see the roots of abjection in presentation and representation. The abject is that which “shows” the fragility of life (3). The abject is only abject in how it is presented. Consequently, nothing is inherently abject in film. Film is entirely about presentation and representation, and that which does not “show,” is therefore, in the realm of film, not abject. Take, for instance, the parasites of *Shivers*: in the film they are predatory, phallic, excretory creatures who evoke abjection by their disrespect for borders and their association with bodily fluids. In another context, a documentary about the making of *Shivers* for instance, the same pieces of rubber would no longer be abject, as they are divorced from the context that created their initial presentation; they would no longer *show*. This insight may be the linchpin of this entire project, as cinema is always already representation, but the abject is only abject insofar as it *is presented*. The production of the abject in Cronenberg’s films rests entirely, then, on *how* it is shown, not necessarily just what is shown.

With the previous point in mind, Chapter 2 will focus on the narrative presentation of the abject, examining the ways in which abjection may be reinforced by the use of various cinematic narrative strategies. By looking at Cronenberg’s use of the subjective point of view, we can see how association between character and viewer reinforces the abject, while breaking down the boundary between character and viewer, further contributing to the

production of the abject. Also, the use of hallucinations will be explored, again for the their ability to breakdown the boundary between characters, and their relationship to the audience.

Chapter 3 will focus on the relationship between adaptation and the abject, and how the manner in which adaptation occurs can also reinforce the abjection otherwise present in Cronenberg's films. The process of adaptation elides the boundary between novel and film, creating a third category which echoes the abject. Furthermore, much of the discourse surrounding Cronenberg's adaptations contains language that evokes the abject in words such as "fusion" and "hybrid," which recall the abject through the loss of boundary. The adaptive nature of the films *Naked Lunch* and *Crash* contributes to the already-present abjection created and sustained through narrative means.

Chapter 4, the conclusion, will advocate a reevaluation of Cronenberg's relationship to gender and sexuality while continuing to challenge the director's status as misogynist.

Chapter 2: The Narrative Boundary Hemorrhage

As we have seen, the critical literature is littered with discussion of the abject in Cronenberg's films. However, this discussion is limited to those figures – on the screen – which are abject.³ This implies that some of the horror of Cronenberg's films occurs because of the abject nature of the images presented to the viewer. While this contention is accurate, it is not the complete picture. The presentation of the abject – the parasite, the vampiric phallus, the rage-made womb – certainly evokes horror; however, the key word – little emphasized – is *presentation*. As the previous chapter demonstrates, the cinematic presentation of otherwise abject figures affects viewer perception. However, presentation extends beyond concerns of mise-en-scène, and even editing, to the strategies of narration employed in a particular film.

According to Kristeva, abject fluids, such as “blood and pus” do not “*signify* [sic] death” (3). Instead, these fluids “*show*” what must “be thrust aside in order to live,” thus making them abject (3). Those figures which signify death, such as a “flat encephalograph,” allow for a degree of intellectualizing which does not bring on the feeling of abjection, as they allow for one to “understand, react, accept” (3). These reactions would deny the primal nature of the abject by allowing a layer of intellectual distance between the subject and death. The abject in cinema must, therefore, ensure that it “shows” rather than “signifies” that which is “thrust aside in order to live,” that which demonstrates the “fragility” of “order.” Therefore, to extend the discussion of abjection in the films of David Cronenberg, this

³ Language becomes difficult here, as Kristeva notes that the abject has no object, per se. Precisely because the abject breaks down the barrier between subject/object, to speak of abject *objects* is impossible. Thus, the awkward phrasing.

chapter will focus on the presentation of the abject, through the use of narrative strategies which reinforce the abject images presented, ensure it *shows* rather signifies.

Before addressing the narrative techniques, we may pause for a moment to consider the abject more broadly in Cronenberg's films. While Kristeva finds the corpse the summit of abjection, as we have seen in Chapter 1, the abject in Cronenberg focuses less on the corpse than on that "which does not respect borders" (4). Cronenberg literalizes the abject with figures such as the parasites of *Shivers*, or the titular brood. The use of these boundary hemorrhages continues through the rest of his work. As we will see, the use of narrative strategies reinforces these abject boundary hemorrhages, while producing their own hemorrhage between character and viewer.

Beginning with *Videodrome* (1983), a shift in narrative complexity occurs in Cronenberg's films. While his first five films present relatively straightforward narratives, often conforming to generic forms, *Videodrome* marks the beginning of Cronenberg's use of deliberately complex narrative techniques. While a number of his films post-*Videodrome* would return to the more familiar narrative strategies of varying genres, *Videodrome* also signaled the director's willingness to incorporate more consciously difficult storytelling techniques into his films. These techniques often intersect with, and reinforce, the abject in Cronenberg's films.

Before we can examine Cronenberg's narrative strategies, and their relationship to the abject, some discussion of narration is necessary. David Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction Film* provides a useful framework for discussing narrative structure. Two of Bordwell's ideas are especially useful to the present discussion. First, Bordwell describes narration, the

process of narrative, as “the activity of selecting, arranging, and rendering story material in order to achieve specific time-bound effects on a perceiver” (xi). The consequences of this approach are myriad. Critically, however, this conceptualization of narration treats narrative as a dynamic entity, and this ability to change connects to the “perceiver,” or the viewer. Thus, narration is not a story that unfolds along a linear path, but is instead a shifting set of strategies (or processes) that the director brings to bear on the viewer in order to create a larger effect.

Also useful to the discussion of abjection in Cronenberg’s film is Bordwell’s discussion of “norms” in narration. While his discussion is primarily intended as a descriptive analysis of various historical forms of narration, of primary use is his distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic norms, which vary from film to film, as well as historically. Extrinsic norms are those norms with which the viewer approaches a film, derived from various expectations, including, but not limited to, genre, period, and relationship to other media. Intrinsic norms are those norms that are generated by the film, in concert with the viewer. With extrinsic norms, “the viewer applies these schemata to the film, matching the expectations appropriate to the norms with their fulfillment within the film” (153). However, Bordwell also notes that “the viewer is alert for any norms set up by the film itself,” and these norms may or may not contradict the extrinsic norms of which the viewer is aware (153).

The concept of “norms,” expectations with which the “perceiver” approaches a film, offers the raw material for the creation of abjection in Cronenberg’s cinema. Recall that the abject is that which “disturbs identity, systems, order.” Norms, as such, may be treated as a

“system,” or an “order,” which the director may disturb, creating a sense of the abject in the viewer. Furthermore, the abject is that which reveals the “fragility of the law,” that which demonstrates that standard concepts of order (or identity, or system) are arbitrary. Thus, the “cunning” director who demonstrates the fragility of concepts of order in the “law” of narrative, especially concepts of linearity, as well as cause and effect, may also produce the what we may call the narratively abject. Cronenberg is such a director. However, beyond simply breaking “norms” to produce abjection, Cronenberg’s narrative manipulations also act, as his *mise-en-scène* does, to reinforce otherwise abject images.

Norms, according to Bordwell are “circumscribed by the possibilities and probabilities of particular traditions” (149). While it would be outside the scope of this project to delineate all of the extrinsic norms that govern Cronenberg’s films (the science-fiction, the horror, the international art-cinema), because this chapter will deal primarily with *Videodrome* and post-*Videodrome* films, some description of the extrinsic norms that constitute a “Cronenberg film” until that point will be useful. These particular extrinsic norms grow out of the intrinsic norms of his prior films. Perhaps the dominant narrative mode of the pre-*Videodrome* films are their linear, objective quality. There is a disruption, and the protagonist investigates, and the problem is resolved. The resolution, in *Shivers*, and *Rabid* was perhaps more detrimental to society, whereas *The Brood* and *Scanners* demonstrate a bit more hope for society. *In media res* beginnings are also typical. *Shivers*, for instance, begins with the parasites already loose, and *The Brood* too begins after the clinical entrapment of Nola. The objective camera reigns, with little in the way of POV shots. The viewer is continually asked to view the proceedings from a clinical distance. Generally, the

viewer is also more aware of what is going on than any of the characters. For instance, in *Shivers*, we are often more aware of the presence of the parasites than any of the characters, and although there are moments of subjectivity (we only realize that the buildings manager has turned when he lures a couple into an orgy), these moments are non-essential in narrative terms, and the extent to which the viewer succumbs to such moments of subjectivity is debatable.

In *Videodrome*, many of these expectations are upset. While the film begins *in media res*, at least insofar as the Videodrome project is up and running before the narrative begins, the viewer's knowledge of the world is restricted almost exclusively to what the protagonist, Max Renn, knows. Furthermore, what he knows is colored by the various bizarre occurrences that accrue after the discovery of the Videodrome signal. Just as the Videodrome signal is manipulating Renn diegetically, the viewer too is manipulated by extension because awareness of the diegetic world is restricted to Renn's vision. These departures from previous narrative structures are not without purpose. Instead, they allow Cronenberg several advantages. The main advantage is to disturb the viewer. While holding his narrative cards close to his vest, Cronenberg heightens the sense of paranoia directed towards technology present in his earlier films. Instead of merely presenting the viewer with a disintegrating science, after *Videodrome*, Cronenberg utilizes narrative tools, especially the subjective point of view and hallucinations, which allow the viewer to experience the disruption created by overweening rationality. This ability to involve the viewer spills over into the abject as well; no longer does Cronenberg simply present the viewer with an image of the abject, but post-

Videodrome he involves the viewer in creating abjection through narrative technique, forcing the viewer into a state of abjection.

While numerous narrative techniques might produce a sense of abjection in the viewer (and those listed here might not always produce abjection in the hands of other *auteurs*, or even in Cronenberg's), the techniques described herein are those which Cronenberg uses that reinforce the presentation of the abject on the screen. We may imagine a hypothetical film in which the narrative techniques consciously work against the presentation of images, but these techniques specifically reinforce images of the abject. The two most prevalent in Cronenberg's films are the use of subjectivity, and the use of the hallucination/fantasy. These techniques have the effect, in certain instances, of reinforcing the presentation of the abject.

Subjectivity, the narrative technique that restricts viewer access to the diegetic world to the experiences of a single character, is not, *a priori*, a fixture of abjection. However, the aligning of viewer experience with the experience of an abject character heightens the effect in a manner different from more objective modes of storytelling. When, as in the case of *Videodrome*, *eXstencil*, and *Naked Lunch*, the experiences of the characters the viewer aligns with are fragmentary, the effect is enhanced by the absence of the distance brought about by objective techniques; subjectivity *shows*, rather than *signifies*. For instance, as horrible as the revelation of Nola's "pregnancy" is in *The Brood*, the viewer is prepared for it by the previously objective narrative techniques. The more objective stance gives the audience more information than the film's protagonist: we know to expect something horrible, even if Frank is more surprised. Instead, in the more subjective films that follow *The Brood*, the viewer's

access to the world – in *Videodrome*, *eXistenZ*, and *Naked Lunch*, – is restricted, and the confusion, horror, *abjection* of the characters becomes the confusion, horror, and abjection of the viewer.

The abject center (and center of abjection) in *Videodrome* is the slit in protagonist Max Renn's navel. The slit, with its overwrought vaginal connotations, signals the lack of boundaries that signifies the abject: his inside has become outside, the boundary permeated by an invasive technology. The slit also signifies the place where ego breaks down, as Renn can be controlled (his ego denied) by tapes inserted into him. The tapes themselves, with their undulating exterior, also signify the lack of boundary, and the disruption of "order." The film contains abjection on a more abstract level as well. *Videodrome* implies that the entirety of Max Renn's (and by extension, the viewer's) awareness of the world is controlled by vast multinational entities who desire control over the masses. The "fragility" found in abjection occurs in abundance as Renn learns of the dark forces beneath the veneer of "order." The subjective nature of the narration reinforces all of these aspects of the abject, moving beyond signification to *showing*.

Chris Rodley claims that *Videodrome* is told from a "relentlessly first-person point of view" (94), while William Beard amplifies this observation by stating that the "first-personness [sic] of *Videodrome*...is absolute" (123). Indeed, Beard claims the "idea is the key to the film" (121). From the opening image of "Civic TV," we are introduced to the protagonist Max Renn, and given the indication that we will follow him. Although there are few "point of view" moments where audience and character are united in vision, the camera rarely strays from Renn and his environment, and when it does, we are given no information

that he doesn't know. The first confirmation that we will not be leaving him occurs when he watches the "Samurai Dreams" video. The camera pushes in on the television featuring the segment in a seedy hotel room, and while the video plays on, the camera pulls out, and we are in a boardroom where Renn attempts to define what he hopes to find for Civic TV. If it was not clear before, this camera move makes it obvious that the audience will be following Renn, despite the occasional narrative ellipses.

When the hallucinations occur, we are as bewildered as Renn, perhaps more so. The first appearance of the slit serves as an instructive example. Renn watches Brian O'Blivion's tape (with its underlying Videodrome signal) and the proceedings become more bizarre, and impossible given our knowledge of O'Blivion. He is strangled, and the murderer is revealed as Nicki Brand, a patent impossibility. This has the effect, also, of increasing our alignment with the subjectivity of Renn's view. She beckons him into the television, itself undulating like the tapes before it, in an abject fusion of man and machine, as her lips swallow his head. Upon waking the next day, Renn returns the tape to Bianca O'Blivion, and learns that Dr. O'Blivion has been dead, and she will give him more tapes to explain the Videodrome phenomena. As Renn watches a new tape, we are forcibly reminded of the previous night's hallucinatory experience. Again, we remain with Renn as he watches, and the camera cuts between O'Blivion's explanation, Renn's reaction, and Renn's increasing abdominal discomfort, all in medium closeup. A red welt appears to split his navel in closeup, as O'Blivion discusses the (abject?) reaction of the body/brain to the Videodrome signal: "I believe the growth in my head....is not really a tumor, not an uncontrolled undirected little bubbling pot of flesh, but...it is in fact a new organ." When the tape ends, Renn looks down

at his navel, clicks his tongue, and shakes his head as if to clear it. There is a cut, and the welt in Renn's navel has expanded to an organic slit. The vaginal – and abject – associations are obvious. More important, however, is Renn's attempt to deny the slit. The camera cuts back to Renn's face as he continues to try to clear his head, obviously disbelieving, as well as horrified, of the slit in his stomach. Renn's disbelief and horror continue as he puts his gun into the slit and it disappears. The abject nature of this opening orifice, and the placement of the gun in it, seems straightforward. However, its abject nature is heightened by the viewer's association with Renn. Having seen the previous hallucinations, and knowing that the slit is likely a hallucination as well, the viewer may try, as Renn does, to ignore it. Instead, the horror, the abjection, are ultimately inescapable, for the viewer as for Renn. This inescapability, reinforced via narrative subjectivity, increases the abjection caused by the appearance of the “wound” in Renn's abdomen. Had the scene been framed more objectively, the horror would still be present, the orifice abject. However, the association between the viewer and Renn adds his horror to that which would have already been present.

The heightening of abjection through subjective reinforcement via camera positioning and the restriction of viewer knowledge occurs elsewhere in the film as well. The continual reappearance of the slit as “programming” tool magnifies its abject qualities, as the audience experiences Renn's continual horror at the revolt of his body, in much the same way as the initial appearance described above. In addition, the abjection produced by the “flesh gun” that eventually molds to Renn's hand achieves its abjection through the disruption of the boundary of Renn's person, but also through our knowledge of its origins, how it came to be in Renn's abdomen. In addition, the flesh appears in much the same way as the slit, as

surprising to the audience as it is to Renn. Because of the continual association between the audience and Renn, the viewer's horror is compounded by the experience of Renn's horror.

eXistenZ, too, maintains a general subjective narrative association with its protagonist and features the reinforcement of the abject. While the use of editing techniques to associate viewer and character is not as pronounced as in *Videodrome*, *eXistenZ* still achieves association by restricting the viewer's diegetic access to the protagonist's knowledge. Ted Pikul acts as the protagonist, and his apparent disinterest in the gaming culture that makes up the bulk of the film's narrative allows him to act as an audience surrogate for much of the film. Although we watch several people "play" *eXistenZ*, we don't get to see what the game looks like until Ted enters it; we see it as Ted sees it. Abjection, too, rears its head early, with references to "meta-flesh" and the organic design of the gamepods, as well as the "bone-gun" of the assassin. Ted's dis-ease with gaming, and especially with "bio-ports" reinforces the audience's experience of abjection upon the revelation of their purpose and location. The bio-port is the primary site of abjection in *eXistenZ*, and in Ted's words it is "too freaky." His reluctance to undergo the "bio-porting" procedure sets up the audience to view the device with skepticism, if not outright horror. Although we see the "gun," and the procedure of the bio-porting (an odd homoerotic mixture of mechanics and penetration), the bio-port is not immediately apparent. Only after the procedure do we see any bio-ports, and then initially, only Ted's.

The camera follows Allegra as she gathers supplies, including her gamepod, and a lubricant modeled after WD-40. The camera cuts from her face, to Ted's, as she looks determined and he hesitant. Again, the viewer seems more likely to share Ted's point of view

as he acts as the surrogate. The revelation of the bio-port occurs as a downward shot, as Allegra sprays the lubricant on it. It appears as an anus, and abjection is reinforced through the association with bodily waste. Beard notes the homoerotic subtext, calling it “comically lurid” (453). The bio-port is obviously a breach in Ted's bodily boundary, making it abject, but it is interesting to note that it would not, *a priori*, be horrifying. Were the movie told from Allegra's point of view, the bio-port would be just another technological achievement which happened to open the body, not unlike the mouth, to the outside world. However, because Ted is our surrogate, we share his subjectivity, and his fear of the bio-port. Unlike the slit in *Videodrome*, however, the bio-port in *eXistenZ* does more to bring out the fascinating, instead of the horrifying, aspects of the abject. Because Ted, and the viewer, desire to be in the game, and the only path the game is the bio-port, it becomes a necessary evil and object of fetishistic fascination, as Allegra and Ted argue about its relative merits and Gas opines about the worlds it opens up. Thus, the narrative association between Ted and the audience creates a space for abjection in the film, whether it fascinates or horrifies.

In *Naked Lunch*, protagonist William Lee acts as audience surrogate, taking the viewer on a trip through Interzone. Association with Lee also provides a reinforcement for the abjection depicted in the film. We follow Lee through a round of exterminating, and discover that he is implicated in bizarre drug-related activity with the powder used to exterminate bugs. When he is taken in for questioning, the film's first use of abjection occurs. While Lee swears innocence because the powder is for killing bugs, the officers claim they have a way to test his theory, and offer him a bug to kill. Lee sits, stone faced in a medium closeup, while the camera cuts to the officers removing a nondescript cardboard box from a

cabinet in the room. The camera maintains a closeup, possibly from Lee's point of view, as the top is removed. A large "bug" emerges, wings fluttering, and as it crawls from the box, a large, anus-like growth is momentarily visible on its back. The bug flounders in the powder while the officers exit, the "anus" not yet fully revealed. The camera cuts to Lee watching the bug, as a voice emerges, apparently from the bug, addressing Lee by name. The camera cuts to the bug, which now has a voice emanating from the "anus" behind its wings. Lee's character is obviously not easily riled, but in the inter-cutting, we can see him growing increasingly less comfortable with the bug. To underscore this point, a closeup of Lee is replaced with a closeup of the "anus" as it explains the hierarchy of control. Bill gives the impression of someone playing along with a madman as he acquiesces to the request to rub "some powder" on the "lips" of the bug. As the bug tells Lee that his wife is an agent of "Interzone Incorporated," Lee reaches for his shoe. Shoe in hand, Lee jumps out of his chair and proceeds to smash the bug, his formerly laconic expression replaced by a closeup of gritted teeth and grunts of disgust. The smashed bug oozes a viscous liquid as Lee escapes.

The "bug" is obviously a figure of abjection. The associations with anal waste, and the grafting of an (apparently) human body part onto the frame of an insect calls into question the nature of the human body, highlighting the fragility of the bodily (and species) boundary. Again, however, we can note that the narrative link between audience and character magnifies the abjection produced by the bug. Lee's reaction to the bug provides an excellent template for audience response. Because we have associated with Lee, we tend to share his reaction. He initially seems nonplussed, as if the bug were strange, but also as if he was not aware of the full implications of its existence. He, like us, does not realize that the

bug will begin to speak, and it is at this point that he, and the viewer, become increasingly uncomfortable with the bug. Finally, Lee's reaction, and our own, rise to outright horror as Lee removes his shoe and smashes the bug. Although, by itself, the bug may have been abject, seeing a character with whom we identify react with horror can only increase our own horror at the anus-bug. Similar reactions occur with the Mugwump, but by then Lee, as well as the audience, have become more accustomed to the bizarre sights of *Naked Lunch*.

Cronenberg utilizes subjective association with an audience surrogate in several of his films. The technique allows the director to magnify the sense of abjection produced by his visuals. In a process of emotional arithmetic, the horror of the audience surrogate is added to the horror of the viewer produced by the images on screen. The use of subjectivity also breaks down the boundary between the viewer and the character whose subjectivity is shared. This disintegration – of the boundary between character and viewer – reinforces the abject in the film by producing abjection on a more abstract level than the images in the film. Subjectivity also allows Cronenberg to flout conventions of linear storytelling. As we will see, the subjective approach opens up his films to realms of the unreal, the hallucination, the virtual. The upsetting of the expectations of linearity and logic creates its own sense of abjection, which reinforces the visual representation of the abject as well.

Subjectivity, as we have seen, allows for a certain degree of deviation from consensual reality: *Videodrome*'s hallucinations, *eXistenZ*'s virtual space, and the drug-induced visions of *Naked Lunch*. While any subjective representation is necessarily idiosyncratic, these films, along with others, specifically code certain portions of the film as departing from the consensual reality shared by the other characters. These moments – in

Videodrome, *Naked Lunch*, and *Dead Ringers* – have two important effects. The first is to reinforce abjection, and the second is to disrupt the viewer's perception of the narration, which produces a fundamental questioning of the possibility of narrative logic and linear experience.

Videodrome presents the viewer with both a “reality,” and a set of hallucinations experienced by Max Renn. Interestingly, there is little in the way of cinematic trickery involved in the shift from consensual reality to the hallucinations. Changes in film stock, lighting, or editing techniques are minimized. Instead, the lack of verisimilitude with the rest of the narrative, the introduction of impossible elements, serves to inform the viewer that all is not as it seems. The sex scene between Max and Nicki illustrates how hallucination is used in the film, and how that hallucination can inform abjection. After watching a *Videodrome* tape, a temporal ellipsis occurs, and we see Max and Nicki laying on a sheet, lighted by the glow from the *Videodrome* tape on the television. Max pierces Nicki's ears, as she moans. The shots of Nicki's ear, and Max's face are all in closeup, and when the camera pulls back after both ears have been pierced, Max and Nicki are on the *Videodrome* set having sex.

Abjection abounds. The piercing of the ears stands as a sublimated sex act, where the body's boundary is violated. Max licks the blood from the needle, an act which, to him seems pleasurable, but is more likely to evoke horror in the audience, as the rules of the inside and outside are violated again. The revelation of the *Videodrome* set heightens this abjection by demonstrating the fragility of perception, both Renn's, and our own. The hallucination, in that moment, creates ambiguity about Renn's entire relationship with Nicki, which calls into question the ability of the audience to correctly perceive any of the action on screen. The

boundary between reality and perception is violated by the hallucinations in *Videodrome*, reinforcing the abject on the screen. Furthermore, the sex between Renn and Nicki – with its piercing – is coded as abject, revealing, perhaps, Renn's own attitude of horror and fascination towards sex and violence, which reinforces his search for something not “soft” for his cable channel. The entirety of his character seems to be both horrified and fascinated by most of the trappings of his job, namely sex and violence, and thus his abjection is given force in his hallucinations.

Naked Lunch, like *Videodrome* before it, features a pervasive set of hallucinations/fantasies centered on the quasi-fictional Interzone. The hallucinations in *Naked Lunch* serve to bolster the abjection presented on the screen. Cloquet's “sex” scene offers a fascinating example. After a scene in which Cloquet's amorous affections are rebutted by his target Kiki, Lee claims to go to the bathroom, but instead wanders off to ingest a drug. While returning via hallway, Lee hears moaning, and Cloquet intoning Kiki's name. The camera follows Lee as he approaches the “master bedroom” which has “cages,” according to Cloquet. Initially, we only see Lee's reaction to the scene in the bedroom, his look of horror predominant. The camera then only shows the contents of the cage in profile. Initially, it is difficult to ascertain what is in the cage, but as the camera slowly tracks around to show the front of the cage, we see Cloquet and Kiki, locked in an insect embrace. Cloquet has grown a carapace, and his forelegs are lodged in Kiki in what appears to be a (homo)sexual embrace.

The breakdown of the border between bodies produces much of the abjection in the scene. The breakdown occurs both in the figure of Cloquet, and the way in which he

“embraces” Kiki. The transformation of Cloquet demonstrates the fragility of the body’s integrity. Cloquet’s embrace of Kiki demonstrates the permeability of the boundary between individual and other, the permeability of self that is a concern of abjection. However, the coding of the scene—and indeed the film—as hallucinatory, magnifies this abjection. Lee’s ingestion of the white fluid indicates that the scene which follows is not meant to be taken literally, and the breakdown of perception in the wake of altered consciousness demonstrates the fragility of any “order” which might exist in the narrative. The hallucinatory quality of the scene also invites a more metaphorical reading. The coupling becomes an externalized representation of the disgust, produced by ambivalence, that Lee feels towards homosexuality. The scene invites us to read the homosexual as abject for Lee, with Coquet’s new body a sight of fascination and horror as it engages in the abject act of homosexual penetration. The hallucination thus allows a moment of abjection while providing a lens through which to read it.

Unlike *Videodrome* and *Naked Lunch*, the break with reality in *Dead Ringers* occurs during a dream. Beverly appears to wake up, with Claire on his arm in bed. The scene is bathed in blue light, maintaining the cool, clinical distance of the camera from the rest of the film. Upon waking, Beverly is shocked to see his brother Elliot, on his elbow, leaning over the couple. Beverly appears completely aghast at his brother’s appearance, while Elliot seems calmly bemused. We read their faces in closeup, without an establishing shot of the bed. Claire offers to “separate” them, and the camera pulls back to reveal an organic link between the brothers, a kind of umbilicus. The umbilicus obviously calls back to the slit in *Videodrome* (its placement is almost exact) and forward to the transformations of the flesh in

Naked Lunch, and especially *eXistenZ*. Echoing another famous Cronenberg scene, the camera shows Claire, in closeup, bite into the cord and rip a huge mass from it. Elliot still seems slightly bemused, while Beverly screams, and he wakes up, in the same room, with the same blue light, maintaining a sense of continuity between dream and waking which gives the former extra significance.

The umbilicus is the obvious site of abjection in the scene, with its ability to break the boundary separating one twin from another. However, the fact that the scene is a dream indicates that another level of abjection exists. The umbilicus points towards each brother's distaste for the body, for flesh, and thus the abject flesh links them. However, it also indicates that, for Beverly at least, the other twin is abject. As long as they are two, in Beverly's mind, he can not be a whole. Claire represents a force that could drive the two apart, and give Beverly space to be an individual, but this is obviously a process he views as abject, as evidenced by his discomfort with his brother, but his horror at their separation by Clair. The dream has opened a place where the abject can be manifested, revealing character while also producing horror.

The hallucination/fantasy dichotomy suggests the abject. A hallucination implies a force from outside – like the Videodrome signal – imposing a vision, while a fantasy implies a vision from within of something desired. In the examples above, it is not clear if the breaks from reality represent something that the character desired, or if it was a hallucination forced by another entity. This points to the breakdown of self and other that is the abject, because audience and character are not sure if the visions are self or other directed. The visions also point to horror/fascination inherent in the abject. Because the visions represent abject spaces,

they are horrifying in what they represent, but ultimately equally fascinating as they show the world as it might be.

Nick Redfern, while specifically addressing *Videodrome*, offers a reading that could apply to any of the Cronenberg films under discussion:

Cronenberg undermines the processes of applying schemata and testing hypotheses that underwrite the spectator's construction of the fabula in the classical cinema, and if we are to engage in the testing of the emergent world in Cronenberg's films these classical narrative schemata must be discarded. (22-3).

To put the quote into the context of the abject, Cronenberg upsets expectations produced by classical cinematic narrative techniques, demonstrating their fragility. Thus, while the techniques reinforce the abject boundary hemorrhages in individual films, they also contain a hint of the abject in and of themselves. While obviously not on the visceral level of an image like the slit in *Videodrome*, the use of narrative techniques which are themselves disruptive of boundaries provides another avenue for abjection. Again, the use of abject-ting narrative techniques – most obviously in the case of subjectivity – places the viewer in a position to experience the abjection of the character. By so doing, the techniques break down the boundary between viewing subject and the character who is viewed, opening a space for the abject outside the diegetic space.

Abjection in Cronenberg's cinema is a multifaceted subject. Beyond those figures of abjection presented on the screen, techniques of narrative produce and reinforce abjection through subjectivity and hallucination/fantasy. Understanding these techniques adds a layer

of complexity to the study of abjection in Cronenberg's films. However, abjection does not end there, as its trace may be found in the process of adaptation.

Chapter 3: Adaptation as Boundary Hemorrhage

Seven of Cronenberg's films, constituting almost fifty percent of his feature films as of *A History of Violence* (2005), are adaptations of literary works.⁴ For a director famous for such idiosyncratic visions as *Videodrome*, the adaptation seems an odd venue to express his creative impulse. However, adaptation, as we will see, occupies a fascinating, and often controversial, space in cinema studies, offering a place for the director to continue his thematic concerns through the work of others. Consequently, this chapter will examine the relationship between abjection and adaptation in Cronenberg's films, especially *Naked Lunch* and *Crash*. While no direct link between adaptation and abjection will be posited – for example I will not be arguing that “adaptation causes abjection” – I do hope to illustrate that in the process of adaptation, might be detected an echo of abjection, in the lack of boundary between literary author/text and cinematic author/text.

As Chapter 2 explains, boundary hemorrhages are the primary mode of abjection in Cronenberg's cinema, whether presented as the disintegrating borders of the body, or the collapsing narrative boundary between character and viewer. His films present an instance of boundary dissolution – Max Renn's slit, or Cloquet's insect form– which is reinforced by cinematic techniques which disrupt “order” not only for the characters, but for the audience outside the diegetic space as well. Adaptation can perform a similar function. Not surprisingly, a number of Cronenberg's adaptations contain scenes of abjection – often reinforced by the previously discussed narrative techniques; these are further heightened by Cronenberg's process of adaptation. In the same way narrative techniques can simultaneously

⁴ Five of those are novels, while *A History of Violence* derives from a graphic novel, and *Dead Ringers* from a non-fiction account. The number becomes eight if we count *The Fly* (1986) which is a remake of a film based on a short story.

present the abject while forcing the viewer to be abjected – breaking down the boundary between character and viewer – adaptation provides a source of the abject while also reinforcing it. Instead of forcing the viewer into abjection by imbricating character and viewer, the adaptation breaks down the distinction between literary and cinematic authors, between text and film. Furthermore, Cronenberg's particular method of adaptation—by breaking the distinction between authors and their creations— disrupts viewer expectation, disrupts the “order” of adaptation. It would be overstating to call this abjection by adaptation, but there is a link between the two which is worth exploring in the context of abjection in Cronenberg's films.

In his essay on “The Theory and Practice of Adaptation,” Robert Stam argues that adaptation studies have their origin in the concept of fidelity to a given text. Thus, an adaptation is judged on how well it “follows” its literary predecessor. Stam, while tracing the history of adaptation studies, acknowledges that much criticism has moved beyond concepts of fidelity, while also acknowledging the “violence” of the concept of fidelity, and the “intense sense of betrayal we feel when a film adaptation fails to capture what we see as the fundamental narrative, thematic, or aesthetic features of its literary source” (14). This betrayal, as Stam calls it, stems from a set of expectations about what an adaptation should do; expectations about the “order” of adaptation have been upset, presenting a moment of abjection. Thus, while critics must move beyond “fidelity discourse” to more nuanced discussions of filmic adaptations, the idea still has experiential implications for an understanding of the effect of a given film.

Stam, in particular, highlights the theories of Gerard Genette as necessary to an understanding of adaptation studies. Genette's concept "of transtextuality," the relationship that exists between texts, works well for adaptation studies, particularly the transtextual relationship of "hypertextuality" (31). Hypertextuality posits that any text (the "hypertext") has precursor texts, called "hypotexts," from which it derives. Therefore, adaptations are "hypertexts derived from pre-existing hypotexts which have been transformed by operations of selection, amplification, concretization, and actualization" (31). The consequences of such a view, according to Stam, are that adaptations become "caught up in the ongoing whirl of intertextual reference and transformation, of texts generating other texts in an endless process of recycling...with no clear point of origin" (31). The assumption that underlies this is that a particular filmic text is a static entity, with identifiable hypotexts. While it may be that we can treat individual films as fully constituted, the notion of hypertextuality necessarily breaks down our understanding of the clear borders of a filmic text. Such a breakdown calls into the question the nature of textual identity, what specifically constitutes a text, as well as concepts of authorship. If all texts are based on other texts, then the idea of a single author becomes impossible; the multiple authors of a text begin to blur and become indistinct, the border between them disintegrating in a manner isomorphic to the abject. This is the space in which Cronenberg's adaptations, especially *Naked Lunch* and *Crash*, operate.

As stated previously, no one to one correlation between adaptation and abjection is possible, but there are strong association contained in the idea, and Cronenberg's adaptations, especially of *Crash* and *Naked Lunch*, are especially significant in this context. Both source novels have been described as "unfilmable," and both stand as excellent representatives of

Cronenberg's concerns while maintaining an experiential fidelity to the vision of their hypotextual authors. Cronenberg describes the process of adaptation in terms reminiscent of the discourse of abjection. He calls the process the "experience of mixing my blood with somebody else's," and claims "[t]he two of you mix together and make something that didn't exist before...it's like sex" (para. 6). The reference to "blood," and "mixing" echo the abject in their lack of boundaries – of the inside becoming outside – and Cronenberg's personalization of the process by continual reference to "you" instead of reference to the work, demonstrates the connection to identity.

Stam argues that "fidelity in adaptation is literally impossible. A filmic adaptation is automatically different...due to the change of medium" (17). Furthermore, "there can be no real equivalence between source novel and adaptation" (18). While Stam's intention is to point out the problems inherent in fidelity discourse (and point the way towards an understanding of media-specific adaptation), he also provides an entrance point for discussion of the relationship between adaptation and abjection. Compare Stam's claim to Kristeva's that abjection is a "failure to recognize its kin" (5). Thus, the lack of equivalence between novel and adaptation can be read, somewhat metaphorically, as a relationship of abjection, as the failure of the adaptation to recognize its novelistic kin. Nothing, as Kristeva says, "is familiar," insofar as an adaptation which changes media cannot help but alter its source in an attempt to create a cinematic experience (5). The extent to which an adaptation is successful in creating a *cinematic* – as opposed to literary – experience determines the extent to which it may be categorized as replicating the experience of the abject.

This is, of course, a form of abjection extrapolated from the roots of Kristeva's theory, and extended to the realm of the adaptation. An echo of abjection isomorphic to adaptation. Again, we are faced with a technique (adaptation) which acts to reinforce the otherwise abject proceedings of a film. Due to both the repeated references to “fusion” in the critical response to *Naked Lunch* and *Crash*, as well as their status as adaptations of “unfilmable” novels – which is sure to create and upset expectations – these films reinforce their abject images because they echo abjection in their status as adaptations. Thus, discourse surrounding the film, as well as the relationship between film and textual source act to reinforce a sense of abjection already present in the films themselves.

Between *Naked Lunch* in 1991, and *Crash*, in 1996 at least three high-profile literary adaptations came to the screen: *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994), and *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (1996).⁵ Significant, of course, is the use of the names of the literary progenitors as a promotional tool. The use of the names of literary figures creates an effect of authenticity, the imprimatur of the author sanctioning the adaptation. This bid for authenticity – present not only in the use of authorial stamps, but in clothes and other period trappings – betrays an anxiety about the cultural value of cinema, as directors such as Francis Ford Coppola attempt to cement a cinematic legacy by demonstrating the power of film to illuminate literature. As a promotional tool, this technique assumes that the audience also desires authenticity. This authenticity goes beyond the “fidelity discourse” discussed by Stam, as “fidelity” resides in the film itself. The desire for literary authenticity does not just ask that the film be “faithful” to the novel, but brings

5 The chronology is not perfect, of course, as *Crash* was shown at Cannes before *Romeo + Juliet* was released, but it did not open in America until 1997.

significance to the fact that the film's narrative was once a novel in the first place. These facts demonstrate an expectation in the mind of the audience for literary authenticity in their adaptation: viewer's appear to want their adaptations to be firmly entrenched in literature, even as they are obviously cinematic experiences. This expectation creates a "system" which Cronenberg is able to "disrupt," allowing a space for abjection.

Like the study of adaptation, auteurism has enjoyed a fascinating and controversial position in cinema studies. Troubled by such charges as "the elitism emanating from French cinè-clubs," the term still retains an experiential cachet (Andrew 21). According to Timothy Corrigan, the use of auteurism as a heuristic feeds "the desire and demand of an industry to generate an artistic (and specifically Romantic) aura during a period when the industry as such needed to distinguish itself from other, less-elevated, forms of mass-media" (102). Thus, the number of adaptations that attempt to trade in on the cultural significance of their literary authors are revealed as an attempt to borrow legitimacy from literature to bolster film. In this context, the insistence on *Cronenberg's Naked Lunch* upsets expectation about the role of the auteur as a legitimating force, again opening the space for abjection. Corrigan also offers a more positive reading of auteurism that encompasses Cronenberg's use of abjection and adaptation. He reveals that increasingly, auteurism has been seen as "an agency that establishes different modes of identification with its audience" (136). As we have seen, identification is central to the production of abjection in Cronenberg's films. Similarly, it is central to the production of abjection through the use of adaptation.

Both *Naked Lunch*, and *Crash* appear without the name of the literary authors in the full title. In fact, both contain the legend "A film by David Cronenberg" in their posters.

From the outset, Cronenberg indicates to the viewer that neither of these films is an adaptation in the manner expected from such films as *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. Instead, Cronenberg has assumed authorship of both films, without reference to their literary sources. In fact, both authors disavow ownership of the films, claiming they belong to Cronenberg. Sinclair claims that Ballard refers to "Cronenberg's *Crash*" as "a masterpiece" (11), while Rodley reveals a similar sentiment from Burroughs, who "gave his blessing to what emerged" (163). This disturbance of expectation is the first indication of dis-ease in adaptation, and points towards the space for abjection in the repeated references to the "fusion" of author and director.

The discussion of fusion comes from Cronenberg himself, who claims that he "had to fuse with Burroughs" to make *Naked Lunch*, and Beard especially uses the merger of Burroughs and Cronenberg as a starting point for his analysis. While Sinclair is less willing to label the combination of Cronenberg and Ballard a "fusion" – he prefers "co-conspirators" – the title of Cronenberg's film belies this analysis, as Cronenberg's *Crash* indicates the fusion of Ballard and Cronenberg (18). Again, Cronenberg's claim that adaptation in general is "like sex," and the two authors "mix together" to create adaptation is significant because it too indicates a fusion (para. 6). Again, the echo of abjection is produced by a lack of boundary perceived between authors in the discourse about the film. The inability to distinguish between the work of each author creates a discomforting experience when compared to the more literary-minded contemporary adaptations.

While this effect is present in the discourse about the adaptations, it is present, too, in the adaptations themselves. The fusion – on the level of text – noted by Rodley and Sinclair,

is more fully described by Beard. He claims that “crucial aspects” of *Naked Lunch* come from Burroughs, like the “insects, Mugwumps, [and] drug addiction,” while “their realization is entirely Cronenbergian” in terms of the “creatures” and the “philosophy” (280). Beard's larger point is that the film is not an adaptation of *Naked Lunch* in the strictest sense, but instead a “narrative of the writing of *Naked Lunch*” (280). While “a handful of passages, transcribed directly” remain, the narrative of *Naked Lunch* comes more from Burroughs’ other writings, as well as his biography (278). Fusion thus occurs between the work of Cronenberg and Burroughs, but also between the various source texts. By examining a moment of “fusion” in Cronenberg’s film – specifically by examining a “transcribed” piece – we can see that abjection in the film is reinforced by the adaptive fusing of author and director.

One of the more memorable “routines” from Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch* involves the “man who taught his asshole how to talk” (132). The vignette emerges in a dialogue between Schafer and Benway, and tells the story of an individual whose anus, after learning to speak, desires full rights, wants to “be kissed [the] same as any other mouth” (132). It emerges that the man’s mouth eventually grows over as the anus takes full control of the body, except for the eyes. The scene operates – on a thematic level – to demonstrate the ways in which expression may become disconnected. The description of the incident is firmly in the realm of the abject, with its lack of boundary between insides and outside – represented by the anus – as well as the excremental overtones of the scene. The “voice” of the asshole is described as a “thick, stagnant sound,” which makes the listener “gotta go” (132). The talking asshole is presented as a figure of abjection. Interestingly, the discussion begins as a critique of the

body by Schafer as “scandalously inefficient,” after which he proposes an “all-purpose hole to eat *and* [sic] eliminate” (131). This routine presents the basic materials for the production of abjection in *Naked Lunch*: lack of boundary between inside and outside, as well as extreme excremental overtones. However, instead of presenting this dialogue in a context similar to the novel, Cronenberg “transcribes” it to heighten the abject effects of his film.

In Cronenberg’s film, the routine is transformed. Spoken by the protagonist William Lee instead of Benway, the story emerges from a flirtatious discussion between Cloquet and Lee. Cloquet intimates that Lee was “coming on” to him when they first met. When Cloquet admits this, Lee begins to recite the routine deadpan. Instead of treating it like a story and telling it, Lee appears to be reciting it like a routine, attempting to ward off the affections of Cloquet with a disturbing vignette. Lee’s recitation of the skit is in marked contrast to Burroughs own animated reading⁶, reinforcing the incantatory intent of launching the story after the flirting of Cloquet. While the story is still amusing – before the asshole has begun to take over – the camera stays primarily on Lee, but occasionally shows reaction shots of Kiki and Cloquet. As the man’s situation becomes more dire, and the asshole more prominent, the shots alternate between close-ups of Lee, and reverse shots of the road, populated with men and camels, lit almost exclusively by the headlights of the car. The final shot of the scene looks out at the road, dense with fog, as the reference to crabs’ eyes on stalks hangs in the air. The scene which follows is the previously mentioned scene between Kiki and Cloquet. The scene retains its thematic focus, with Cloquet’s misunderstanding of Lee’s intentions, as well as Lee’s use of the monologue to disguise his discomfort reinforcing the disconnection in expression developed in the novel.

⁶ Found on the Criterion DVD

The “talking asshole” scene reinforces abjection by indicating Lee’s disgust with homosexuality, which will be further developed in the abject coupling of Kiki and Cloquet. The scene also reinforces audience subjectivity with Lee, as the camera relentlessly offers us views of Lee himself, as well as reverse shots of what he is seeing.. Although one imagines that the film would offer the opportunity for a flashback, or some other visual interpretation of the story, *Naked Lunch* instead retains the dialogic nature of the piece. Thus, the routine loses none of its abject power for its inclusion as a deadpan monologue.

The scene, robbed of its context from the novel, upsets the expectations of the novel – that the scene be a dialogue between Benway and Schafer—as well as the expectations of the cinematic form – that the story be literalized. Instead, Cronenberg merges the words of Burroughs with his own narrative devices. This fusion unsettles, as the various elements of each author may be identified, but the product is a third thing: the boundary between the two effaced in the act of adaptation. The words obviously come from Burroughs – “transcribed” – despite being divorced from their context within the novel. The cinematic tools are Cronenberg: the subdued lighting, the shot-reverse-shot structure, even the choice to have Lee as the vehicle for the monologue. However, all these elements have created a third thing, something from neither Cronenberg, nor Burroughs.

That two such strong personalities as Burroughs and Cronenberg may be submerged into a cinematic moment calls to mind the lack of boundary found in the abject, as the abject effaces the ego even as it defines it, just as the *Naked Lunch* defines both Burroughs and Cronenberg. The film subsumes both its authors, the moment of abjection on the screen reinforced by the imbricated authorship. The novel is transformed into a cinematic moment,

unable to recognize its “kin,” and abject because it has been so successfully transformed from novel to screen. The order of fidelity, of authorship, has been disrupted by Cronenberg's adaptation technique.

Another of the “transcribed” moments from the novel is Burroughs description of the “Meet Café” (108). The moment from the novel is more a series of images than a literal description; the denizens are described, either literally or figuratively, as marginal, beyond normative society. Consistent throughout the description are prohibitions, drugs, and decay. The prohibitions emerge in such phrases as “unthinkable trades,” “infractions denounced by bland paranoid chess players,” and “unspeakable mutilations of the spirit.” Drugs –real or imagined – are referred to frequently: “drugs not yet synthesized,” or the “sensitized cells of junk sickness.” The references to both the prohibitions and drugs lead to a pervasive sense of decay, embodied in the “black dust of ruined cities” (108). Although it would be a stretch to argue that this is a scene of abjection, the continual references to materials placed in the body – breaking down the inside/outside split – coupled with extensive description of various psychological practitioners, offer the raw material to reinforce abjection in Cronenberg's film.

In the film adaptation, these description take the form of a slightly edited piece, probably a poem, read by Martin, the Allen Ginsberg surrogate. As he recites the piece, in a voice only slightly less deadpan than Lee's during the “talking asshole” monologue, the camera cuts from his face, to the page from which he reads a handwritten scrawl. The camera pans to Hank, the Jack Kerouac surrogate, engaged in apparently passionless sexual contact with Lee's wife Joan. The scene shifts to a wider shot, encompassing both Martin, and the

Hank/Joan pairing, as Lee enters the door from the right of the frame. Martin occupies an odd position, as both voyeur and provocateur. Lee appears to find nothing odd as the camera follows him about his entrance rituals. The quotations from the novel cease when Martin notices Lee. After greeting him, Martin suggests “why don't you and I join them?” Lee looks at Martin, but says nothing. The camera shows Hank losing interest in Joan as Lee walks off with a bundle of centipedes and closes the bedroom door on the living room proceedings.

On the surface, abjection appears to be absent from the scene. However, the scene does hint at what the audience will come to find out is abject for Lee: homosexuality. The disorientation produced by the “fusion” of Burroughs words with Cronenberg's directorial technique creates a sense in the scene that something is not as it should be, a fact reinforced by the furtive sex of Joan and Hank, as well as the discomfort in Martin's body language. The association of writing with sex, by the camera's move from page to couple, reinforces the abject nature of writing in the narrative, as Lee must submerge himself in Interzone to complete his book.

The other Cronenberg adaptation that receives major critical attention is *Crash*. Adapted from a novel by J.G. Ballard, both book and film follow a disaffected protagonist (named Ballard), who, after a car crash, falls under the spell of a techno-prophet, Vaughan. As he becomes more involved with Vaughan, Ballard increasingly fetishizes the car crash, the merging of human and machine. The ultimate goal of Vaughan, witnessed by Ballard, is the combination of sex and death through the union of man and machine represented in the titular crash. Abjection, in novel and film, has its roots in the elided boundary between human and machine.

In contrast to the treatment of *Naked Lunch*, a number of critics note how “faithful” Cronenberg’s *Crash* is – narratively speaking – to Ballard’s (Beard 379). Sinclair claims that Cronenberg copied large chunks of the novel into his script: “The same text, copied afresh, acquire[d] a new author” (19). The “fusion” present with Burroughs is less obvious, but no less potent. Both Cronenberg and Ballard emerged from the 1970’s, offering dystopian dissections of technology, with *Shivers* and *Crash*, respectively. The cross-pollination is difficult to ignore: Vaughan provides the blueprint from the scientist figures of later Cronenberg, where prophet and victim are merged in such figures as Max Renn. That the work of the two authors would come together with Cronenberg’s film seems inevitable. As Beard notes, Vaughan is “himself the monster he produces” (401). While the final product – the film *Crash* – might not bear the more obvious marks of “fusion” as *Naked Lunch* does, the film still contains enough of the boundarylessness which echoes abjection, reinforcing the abjection present in the narrative.

Abjection in the novel *Crash* is most often produced by discussion of the various eroticized wounds produced by the titular activity. The very act of crashing produces a breakdown of the boundary between inside and outside, and the novel features continual references to the abject fluid, blood. Vaughan’s death serves as an excellent scene to discuss with reference to both novel and film. Ballard’s novel opens with the information that “Vaughan died yesterday in his last car-crash” (7). The scene goes on to describe both the manner of Vaughan’s death, as well as his corpse, the “delicate lacework of blood” which conceals his body. Vaughan’s car jumps an embankment, goes over a ramp, and lands on the top of a bus. References to “piercing,” “wounds,” and “broken” reinforce the sense of

abjection in the scene, as the body's boundaries are continually decimated by the "geometry" of the car crash. The fact of Vaughan's corpse, despite its residual "engorge[d]" state, further signals the abject. The scene's presence at the start of the novel gives it a mythic status, as the rest of the narrative attempts to give context to this shocking description of death.

Cronenberg's *Crash* takes a more linear approach to the narrative. Vaughan's death occurs towards the end of the movie, with no flash-forwards or other indications that he will die. This deprives the scene of the inevitability found in the novel. The camera follows James, as Vaughan continually rams the back of James's car. Suddenly, Vaughan's car veers off, out of the right of the frame, over a ramp. James pulls over, and he and Catherine examine the wreckage of Vaughan's crash. Like Ballard's novel, in the film Vaughan's car lands atop a bus. Unlike the novel, no details of Vaughan's death are given to the viewer. The scene is shown in wide shot, taking in the wreckage, but there are no closeups of Vaughan, no "delicate latticework of blood." The effect is to increase what Ballard calls "the death of affect" (qtd in Sinclair 10). Vaughan's death becomes another member of the parade of horrors, given no special, gruesome significance despite his centrality to the narrative. To downplay this moment gives greater significance to the abject horror of the rest of the film. Cronenberg's disruption of the novel's description of Vaughan's death disrupts viewer expectation, generated by both the novel's details, and the film's previous refusal to shrink from the visual presentation of the effects of the crashes in the film. The disruption of this expectation leaves the audience frustrated, helpless, if not in a state of abjection then more susceptible to the abjection in the rest of the film.

Both *Crash* and *Naked Lunch* contain moments of abjection, and the techniques of adaptation employed by Cronenberg reinforce this abjection. Adaptation, in Cronenberg's hands, offers a boundary hemorrhage similar to those presented on the screen and produced by narrative subjectivity. This hemorrhage allows a space for abjection in the viewer in addition to the abjection produced by the images on the screen.

Chapter 4: Abjection and the Reassessment of Gender

According to Kristeva, the artistic experience “is rooted in the abject it utters and by the same token purifies” (17). Essential to the notion of the abject is an associated catharsis. The abject purifies through disavowal, through repudiation, through purging. Thus, when *Shivers* presents an audience with the abject figure of parasites, or the undulating navel of Tudor, it also presents an opportunity to acknowledge, however unconsciously, the fear of disease, infection, corporeal violence. This acknowledgment allows for repudiation in the form of horror at the film's images. Art takes the place of religion, in this instance giving the audience something which they can all be horrified at, something they can all be purified of, creating unity. An understanding of the purgative aspects of the abject in Cronenberg's films counters readings of his films that focus on his “monstrous” representation of women.

Linda McLarty argues that Cronenberg's films, from *Shivers* to *Dead Ringers*, attempt to reveal “threatening social practices,” but fall into misogyny when “the body, particularly to female body, is constructed as the site of the monstrous” (232). Her examples of the “monstrous” are also examples of the abject, including the “phallic protrusion” of *Rabid*, and the parasites of *Shivers*. She, like Creed, reserves *The Brood* for special attention, claiming that “it is specifically the maternal body which produces the horror” (236). As we have seen, Nola is constructed as abject in the film, an abjection produced by the psychoplasms of Dr. Raglan. The blame for her monstrosity rests on the scientist-figure. McLarty approaches this reading claiming “the most monstrous implication of Raglan's therapy is graphically articulated through Nola's aggressive maternal body” (236). However, she chooses to find fault in the fact that there is a maternal body, rather than reading the scene as a condemnation

of a science which would pervert maternity. An understanding of the abject, and specifically the ways in which the film structures abjection via mise-en-scène, ensures that the blame is laid squarely on the shoulders of the scientist-figure. Cronenberg's films do not endorse the monstrous woman, instead they present a possible consequence of excessive science. The horror that such monstrosity produces might make cautionary tales of the films.

Later in her analysis of Cronenberg, McLarty claims that the horrors of *Videodrome* derive from the invasion of the male mind by “invasive social forces” (239). This stance is somewhat more progressive of Cronenberg, as it does not see the body as a site of horror. Instead, “when the body does erupt, it is because the mind has been invaded” (241). I do not dispute her reading; however, the lens of abjection would strengthen this critical position. Indeed, as we have seen, Cronenberg’s narrative reinforcement of abjection, especially in *Videodrome*, does not offer just the figure of the invaded by “social forces,” but replicates it through subjectivity and hallucinations, and the implication of the audience in these processes. As abjection is presented in the invaded mind, it is produced in the audience, as the boundary between character and viewer is ruptured. The progressive aspects that McLarty highlights are also apparent in narrative techniques, as the female body is not implicated in the horror produced by the “social forces.” Thus, an understanding of the abject in Cronenberg bolsters McLarty’s analysis of the monstrous in *Videodrome*.

McLarty finds the most progressive aspects of Cronenberg’s cinema in *The Fly* and *Dead Ringers*, because “they collapse the distinction between scientist and the monster” (241). Because of this, “the monstrous is not so much located in the female body as in the male mind, which is alienated from and which attempts to transcend/control that body”

(247). The nascent criticism of science present in Cronenberg's early abject (female) figures is traced to its source in *The Fly* and *Dead Ringers*, where the scientists are now abject themselves. The criticism of science portrayed in its abject offspring (the parasite, phallus, and womb) has been returned from creation to creator. McLarty finds this progressive because of the uncoupling of the monstrous and feminine, but her point that science is being critiqued, as we have seen, applies to the early films in which she finds fault. The ambivalence towards the early films may be countered by an understanding of the monstrosity of the early films as a manifestation of the abject – an abjection produced by science – and therefore as critical of science as the films in which monster and scientist have collapsed.

I have chosen to first examine McLarty's claims about monstrosity because of her balanced approach to Cronenberg's misogyny. She claims that although the early films are examples of misogyny, Cronenberg becomes more progressive as his work continues. Understanding his work, especially the early films, in terms of abjection removes some of the taint of misogyny: the figure of the monstrous woman is not a fantasy of Cronenberg's, but the result of technological invasion. McLarty's analysis ignores Barbara Creed's inauguration of the discussion of abjection in Cronenberg's work, so her failure to recognize the influence of the abject on Cronenberg's early work is understandable in this light. However, as we have seen, abjection does not, for Creed, alleviate the misogyny of Cronenberg's early films.

Creed restricts herself largely to *The Brood* in her discussion of the abject in Cronenberg's films. The appearance of Nola, for Creed, implies that "without man, woman

can only give birth to a race of mutant, murderous offspring” (45). Nola, as Creed acknowledges, is abject by the film's end. If the function of the abject is to purify, what, then, is Nola's presence intended to purify? The answer lies not in Nola's motherhood, but in the tampering with its normal functioning by the pseudo-science of Dr. Raglan's therapy. The audience is justified in feeling horror at Nola's pregnancy precisely because it is *not* a pregnancy; her “mothering function” has been perverted. The film takes great pains to point out that Nola is ill, but not “evil,” or in any way unredeemable. Instead, the villain of the piece is Dr. Raglan. The treatment of Nola is not, to take the opposing critical position, feminist in the strictest sense, but her treatment in the film is not sufficiently inappropriate to forever label Cronenberg's work—either *The Brood*, or his oeuvre more generally—misogynist.

Creed attempts to link the representation of Nola to the male fear of female reproduction, to the charge that “mothers create monstrosities through the power of their imagination” (45). Indeed, she claims that in *The Brood*, “maternal desire [is] held as the origin of monstrosity” (46). Instead, as the abject womb, Nola is the product of the desire of Dr. Raglan, focused through Nola's rage: the origin of the monstrosity is psychoplasms, not Nola. She is the victim of monstrosity, not its embodiment. Her role is to produce horror, not at the womb in general, but at the science which her “womb” is a product of. Creed notes that Nola's particular response to the therapy – that she produces the brood rather than a lesion or boils – demonstrates that women are singled out for particular hatred by the film. Instead, I would argue that through abjection Nola is singled out by Dr. Raglan, a reading the film supports by his (over)attentiveness to her as a patient, and this attention is what produces her

unique response. It is not the filmmaker who reserves his hatred for Nola, but the scientist who manipulates her.

Extending the analysis of misogyny beyond *The Brood*, we see that most of the abject, objectionable images occur during subjective moments in films such as *Videodrome*, *Dead Ringers*, *Naked Lunch*, and *Crash*. While aligned with those characters, we may feel their disgust at the abject, whether it be women, technology, or homosexuality. However, nothing ends well for any of these characters, leading to a re(e)valuation of the association between character and audience. The moments themselves occupy a cathartic position, purifying those feelings from the audience even as the characters are unable to escape. For example, the audience experiences the appearance of the slit in Max Renn from his point of view, sharing his subjectivity. If the slit is misogynist, an example of the vaginal made monstrous, it is a manifestation of Renn's hallucinatory subjectivity, which the audience shares. Abjection is produced by the rupture between character and audience, and with the death of Max, the audience is called to question both its association with him, and those images shared during subjectivity. Thus, if the slit is objectionable, it was not given to us uncritically, but through the lens of Renn. The audience is given the responsibility of evaluating Renn and his hallucinations, which calls into question Cronenberg's misogyny. Furthermore, if the abject has a purifying effect, then the abject in *Videodrome* – as well as the other films mentioned – can purge the viewer of misogynist associations.

The ritual purifying aspects of the abject also impact Cronenberg's status as *auteur*. Kristeva notes that “one does not get rid of the impure; one can, however, bring it into being a second time, and differently from the original impurity” (28). Thus the abject may purify,

but it does not permanently banish what it represents. The consistency in Cronenberg's body of work takes on significance with respect to the abject. The consistency in theme across Cronenberg's work can be read as the abject reconfiguring the impurity as it attempts to purge it. Thus, Cronenberg's consistency can be explained by abjection, as he continually reconfigures, rather than banishes, the abject in his films. In *Shivers* we see the concern with integrity of the body in the face of invasive medical and scientific technologies; the body is made abject by tampering. Purged, this concern reemerges in almost every other Cronenberg film, however differently reconfigured. In *Videodrome*, it is the science of television and video which threatens to make the body abject, while in *Naked Lunch*, drugs and the creative process place the body under duress. *Scanners*, *The Fly*, *Crash*, *eXistenZ* all bear the marks of that primal moment of abjection in *Shivers*; all are about the ways in which science can make the body strange. Cronenberg's oeuvre, then, can be understood as a response to increasingly invasive technologies, as various configurations of this impurity are represented, and purged, by the abject.

Here the role of adaptation becomes more significant, as even in the material that Cronenberg borrows from others is stamped with his particular brand of abjection, both on the screen and through the process of adaptation. Beyond the purification of the abject figures in the adaptation – the homosexual in *Naked Lunch*, and the car crashes of *Crash* – the adaptations break down the boundary that separates film and text, which has the effect of purifying the audience of the fear of the dissolution of boundary between literary text and cinematic texts. This begins the process of revaluing the discourses of fidelity, as

Cronenberg's abject adaptations provide a space for new forms of adaptation removed from the struggle for legitimacy.

Underexplored, here as much as in other critical literature, is the relationship between the monstrous and sexuality. Authors such as Wood and Beard hint at the significance of sexuality in Cronenberg's cinema, but a reevaluation of abjection – with its attendant reevaluation of Cronenberg's attitude towards gender – demands a concomitant reevaluation of Cronenberg's attitude towards sexuality. *Naked Lunch*, in which the homosexual appears abject for protagonist William Lee, is ripe for such a reading. Although a pervasive social order is responsible for much of the abjection in the film, Lee's reaction to homosexuality, and its manifestation as the abject calls for an explanation with respect to Cronenberg's attitude towards society, how "progressive" he is.

With regards to "progressive" tendencies, Wood divides the American horror film into two binary categories, the reactionary and the progressive, placing Cronenberg in the former category. Although Wood attempts to soften his categorization by claiming it can never be "rigid or clear-cut," his vitriolic attack on *Shivers* and *Rabid* belies his intention. He contends that reactionary horror merely reproduces the status quo by disallowing, amongst other things, identification with the monster (192-3). McLarty borrows the progressive terminology in her evaluation of Cronenberg as well, strengthening the political overtones of Woods vocabulary, while adding nuance to her analysis. While the political implications of art, especially cinema, can not be ignored, the terminology would benefit from overhaul. The binary nature of the distinction leaves little room for nuance, something which the interpretation of the abject demands. The refinement from Wood to McLarty needs to be

extended further with respect to the evaluation of Cronenberg's work. Before such a project begins, a greater understanding of the techniques of Cronenberg's cinema, abjection included, must be in place. Knee-jerk evaluations such as Wood's offer less than the more nuanced analysis of McLarty, and this trend should be broadened to provide greater understanding of Cronenberg's films.

Analysis of the films themselves must be extended, and placed into dialogue. This thesis has begun that work, generally with an eye towards the evolution of technique and thematic concerns. However, more novel groupings of films can only increase the value of their analysis. In addition, this work has spent less time on films which could be fruitfully explored with the critical tools presented in Chapter 2. *The Fly*, and to lesser extent *The Dead Zone* (1983) and *M. Butterfly* (1993) would benefit from an analysis of the narrative techniques that reinforce abjection. While I have singled out *Naked Lunch* and *Crash* as examples of abject adaptations, Cronenberg's other adaptations, especially *Dead Ringers* with its non-fiction source, could benefit from analysis with respect to relationship between abjection and adaptation.

Because so much of Cronenberg's status as a misogynist rests on his representation of women who are made monstrous by abjection, a more detailed analysis of the monstrous is necessary. Wood and Creed, amongst others, find the representation of a women as a monster to be metonymic for all women, and Cronenberg is thus a misogynist for representing all women as monstrous. I have argued, in contrast to these critics, that the women in Cronenberg's films are made monstrous by science, and the audience is horrified more by the effects of science than by women. At the center of this debate is the figure of the monstrous

women. The next step for criticism is to abstract away from Cronenberg's representation of monstrous women to the question of the representation of women more generally: is it ever acceptable, no matter the motivation, to represent woman as monster? Does the potential harm from misreading (the misogyny that Wood and Creed see) outweigh the possible cathartic benefits of the abject figure? This question applies not only to Cronenberg, but to the genre of horror more generally, and perhaps to the representation of women across media. A greater understanding of Cronenberg, and his representation of women through abjection, can only illuminate the representation of women in our culture.

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