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The Postmodern Turn in Cronenberg's Cinema: Possibility in Bodies

Writing primarily about David Cronenberg's early corpus, William Beard characterizes Cronenberg as a filmmaker at odds with the postmodern world: "His films are full of split or scattered subjects, but none of them can survive in what is inevitably revealed to be an emotionally and psychologically dysfunctional status. All of them yearn for a wholeness that can have no place in the (post)modern world; and the author, too, must be seen as yearning for a wholeness that he fully understands cannot exist."¹ Cronenberg's earliest works, such as *Shivers* (1975), *Rabid* (1976), and *The Brood* (1979) established his renown as the "King of Venereal Horror" by focusing on the effects of desire and disease (generally of a specifically sexual etiology, and treated with vivid displays of the inner workings of the human body) on human psychology. Later films like *Videodrome* (1982) and *The Fly* (1986) depict the (often dripping, gruesome) annihilation of the body through the interaction of sex and technology; Beard's categorization of Cronenberg's work as subsumed by modernist sensibility and anxiety seems entirely in line with the basic unfolding of these examples. This label also likely well-describes films from 1986 to 1996's *Crash*, such as *Dead Ringers* (1988) and *Naked Lunch* (1991), which are more focused on psychological fragmentation, as well as 1999's synthesis of technology-horror and body-horror, *eXistenZ*. However, in this article, I aim not to investigate Beard's claim of Cronenberg's modernism, but rather to track what seems to be a new trend in the director's later work, beginning with *Crash* (1996) and developing increasing complexity in the decidedly non-horror films *A History of Violence* (2005) and *Eastern Promises* (2007).

These three films exhibit some qualities endemic to Cronenberg's other projects, especially a focus on the physical body and an utter lack of squeamishness

in taking apart the bodies of his characters. Indeed, Cronenberg's assertion that "The body is the first fact of human existence" still holds, as does his understanding that "[m]y imagery tends to be very body-oriented, my narratives tend to be very body-oriented, and I think I am interested in transformation as well. But not in a sort of abstract spiritual sense [...] but in a very physical sense."² However, instead of the (modernist) drive towards establishing an impossible unity or teleological transformation out of this body fixation, here Cronenberg prizes moments of possibility and provides instances of choice that exist as a way out (necessarily momentary, or changeable) of determined subjectivity. This new focus matches what Frederic Jameson refers to as "postmodern consciousness," which "may then amount to not much more than theorizing its own condition of possibility, which consists primarily in the sheer enumeration of changes and modifications.... [T]he postmodern looks for breaks, for events rather than new worlds, for the telltale instant after which it is no longer the same; for the "When-it-all-changed"... or better still, for shifts and irrevocable changes in the representation of things and the way they change."³ These three late films from Cronenberg provide loci of such breaks within their composition in general, but also, specifically, in the bodies these films track.

Crash, *A History of Violence* and *Eastern Promises* comprise, therefore, a decidedly different project from those of Cronenberg's earlier career. Rather than being a "question of a fragmented, splintered body, of organs without the body,"⁴ Cronenberg investigates the radical power of dismantling, which he nevertheless approaches at the literal-body level. Indeed, though each of these films is undeniably rife with images of death and near-death, Cronenberg envisions moments of radical possibility, encountered through processes of violence, and creates a visual body of work that is akin to that of Deleuze and Guattari's conception of the Body without Organs (BwO). This investigation begs to ask:

What does it mean to disarticulate, to cease to be an organism? How can we convey how easy it is, and the extent to which we do it every day? ... You invent self-destructions that

have nothing to do with the death drive. Dismantling the organism has never meant killing yourself, but rather opening the body to connections that presuppose an entire assemblage, circuits, conjunctions, levels and thresholds, passages and distributions of intensity, and territories and deterritorializations measured with the craft of a surveyor.⁵

Cronenberg requires the viewer to perform this same sort of dismantling – requires the viewer to interact with the film as if it were a BwO. The key to these three films lies not in the creation of stable selves or consistent identities, but rather in terms of continuums of choice, a deterritorializing process (that is, one that denaturalizes the expected set of responses, in favor of new potential responses and connection-making) that necessitates approaching each film without choosing a moral viewpoint. The viewer, without establishing emotional relationships to the characters, must nevertheless retain the ability to react to abject displays of the body—that is, the viewing process also requires an eventual reterritorialization, or the creation of a new set of links and expectations, on the part of the viewer—at some point, bodies and characters do meld again).

Thus the scenes where Cronenberg takes apart or marks the body or intentionally blurs the boundaries between bodies, or between bodies and technology (here it might be possible to argue that *The Fly* serves as a protoexample of the postmodern turn to come in later Cronenberg films), can be read as attempts to create bodies without organs; his style of filming, which favors surface over depth (for another important concept for the BwO is the *surface*) and an often-elaborate framing/re-framing of body-images, further serves to visually represent the process of creating the BwO. The freedom of this process of creation therefore lends itself to many different interpretations of the images and themes within these three films. For the purposes of my own investigation, I have chosen to follow specific moments of choice and possibility as shown with/on the bodies of the films' central characters, though analyses from anti-capitalist, feminist and queer theory standpoints (at the least) could be equally as fruitful. The BwO is the site of slippage and connection as well as disconnection, and therefore the postmodern allegorical tendency of these films provides an entrée to many forms of investigation.

OF THE FILMS THEMSELVES

Unlike J.G. Ballard's 1973 novel of the same name that provided the source material for Cronenberg's script, *Crash* is set in Toronto instead of London, but the city backdrop could essentially be any post-industrial glass-and-concrete construction. The film traces the marital relationship of James (portrayed by James Spader) and Catherine (Debra Kara Unger) Ballard, altered after James's sudden car crash. This crash also kills, instantly, the husband of Helen Remington (Holly Hunter), and it is through a mutual fascination with the site of the accident that Helen draws James into a small group enthralled with the "fertilizing possibilities" of car crashes. Each of the main characters in this film, save the physically perfect (almost sculptural) Catherine, has been marked by one or more crashes, and all share a sexual fascination with the crash. It is Vaughan (Elias Koteas), however, and to a certain extent his apostle Colin Seagrave (Peter MacNeill), who have perfected the theory of the crash, and Gabrielle (Rosanna Arquette) who most essentially embodies the potential of the crash. Though a substantial amount of the film merely follows this small band through various sexual couplings (nearly always involving rear entry and/or automobiles), singular importance is placed on orchestrating a crash for the pure Catherine. Most scenes occur in seemingly haphazard order; that is, so little plot connects them that days or months could have passed between subsequent scenes (indeed, in many cases action is so atomized such that it could have occurred at any point in the film to equal effect). Thus, "instead of exhibiting an onward narrative drive, it seems to fold back on itself, constructing a pattern of complex temporal displacement, in which elements are less subordinated to one another than merely conjoined,"⁶ though two important exceptions (dealt with below) occur in direct sequence, and represent exactly the site and aftermaths of breakage endemic to postmodern film.

Adapted by Josh Olsen from the graphic novel by John Wagner and Vince Locke, *A History of Violence* represents one of few films where Cronenberg did not substantially author the script. The film introduces Tom and Edie Stall (played by Viggo Mortensen and Maria Bello, respectively), parents of teenage Jack (Ashton

Holmes) and pre-schooler Sarah, living in small-town America; indeed the first third of the film works to establish a typical family-drama scenario. Through a fluke act of heroism, soft-spoken diner-owner Tom becomes a nationwide news item and garners the attention of a small posse led by Carl Fogarty (Ed Harris) from Philadelphia. Through his physical interactions with these men it is revealed that Tom is also Joey Cusack, brother to mob-affiliated Ritchie (William Hurt), and that Tom had “buried Joey Cusack in the desert and spent three years creating Tom Stall” after fleeing from Philadelphia some 18 years prior. Instead of focusing on the psychological effects this revelation creates for Tom and his family, however, Cronenberg follows bodily transformations and interactions, and though there is a certain sense of cause and effect here (decidedly lacking in *Crash*), the film is nevertheless more intent on exploring specific moments of transformation than on establishing a base for moral judgment.

Eastern Promises, written by Steven Knight, is Cronenberg’s most recent and in some ways most anomalous film. The temporal relationship between scenes is intact, and the narrative structure is more like mainstream film than either of the other movies in question.⁷ However, this tale about midwife Anna (played by Naomi Watts) and Russian mob lackey Nikolai (Viggo Mortensen) is nevertheless certainly a Cronenberg film, and in some ways goes furthest in its postmodern turn. Half-Russian Anna, drawn into the world of the London-based Russian-rooted underworld *vory v zakone* when she finds the diary of a young prostitute who died after giving birth, meets the charming Semyon (Armin Mueller-Stahl) at his upscale restaurant. At the same time, the film follows Nikolai, the driver and sometimes “undertaker” for Kirill (Vincent Cassel), Semyon’s only son, viewed as an embarrassment because he is a drunk and a “queer”, but nevertheless given a place of privilege among the *vory*.

Each of these films decidedly favors a sense of space over temporality, thus (though this current becomes less strong) “past, present and future are so interwoven that they make of the present time something to be dwelt in and dwelt on, something lived.”⁸ Specifically of interest is the lived body, which Cronenberg

manipulates and displays with an increased focus on space over time. The effect of this spatialization is described by Jameson, who observes that “the postmodern vision of the ideal or heroic schizophrenic (as in Deleuze) marks the impossible effort to imagine something like a pure experience of a spatial present beyond past history and future destiny or project.”⁹ Thus, for Jameson and Cronenberg alike, “the ideal schizophrenic’s experience is still one of time, albeit of the eternal Nietzschean present. What one means by evoking its spatialization is rather the will to use and to subject time to the service of space.” This spatialization occurs in the actual cinematography, but even more importantly, in Cronenberg’s treatment of bodies being altered.

THE BODY IN TRANSFORMATION

Each of these films focuses markedly on moments of transformation built into the body. Unifying or lasting identity-elements—some sort of psychological transformation, a new outlook on life—are of no importance to Cronenberg; his focus is rather on potential in action, which represents precisely these postmodern sites of breaking as literal breaks in the body. More precisely, the moment following a break is essential: crashes happen in real time (no surreal slowing down focuses on a vehicle’s rotation or crash impact, and no unnatural auditory manipulation amplifies the crunch of cartilage under fist), and Cronenberg puts primacy on faces and bodies that have been violated—not at the moment of splatter, but rather in the aftermath. Additionally, any personal information about characters is provided in relation to their bodies. History is an integral part of the body, but does not tie the body to an actual cultural process—these machinations are individual, unique, even though they are structured by underlying processes. Cronenberg’s characters are therefore seemingly socially untethered, and normal social or familial relationships are not easily available, except in the small moments of connection which must be chosen and must involve risk of some sort.

Cronenberg depicts bodily transformation in a variety of ways. Here, three methods of body-rending are particularly important. The first two are directly

related to violations of the body, namely death-creating violence and wound-focused violence. Death-creating violence is final and represents moments of breach that are too effective in creating transition—by their extreme status, they remove the risk involved in choice because the outcome is pre-determined. Wound-creating violence, conversely, provides (either through actual wounds or symbolic wounds such as tattoos) moments of choice where outcomes are not known and therefore the risk involved is creative. It is this violence that is, as described by Parveen Adams, “an experience of inhabited tissue, of an experience which life suffers in its attempt to maintain itself.”¹⁰ Cronenberg also employs facial and postural difference to signal changes within bodies that have not necessarily undergone violence, but have nevertheless processed a break.

Cronenberg’s employment of death-creating violence still makes the viewer deal with the visual effects and after-effects of the violent act, but the characters to which this violence happens are never central. Rather, Cronenberg uses their bodies to show wound creation that is too effective, so extreme as to be annihilating. These deaths generally happen to men who commit themselves too much to a particular idea, who are driven not to a radical potential for change but are rather either following orders or perversions, and therefore not capable of being BwO—having already established their theory for the value of action (glory through car-crash death for Vaughan and Seagrave in *Crash*, retribution in *History of Violence* and *Eastern Promises*), they are still too caught up in some sort of territorialization, disallowing any possibility for deterritorialization or reterritorialization with a new set of bodily priorities. Regarding *Crash*, William Beard describes this inevitable process: “As these people go further and more compulsively down the road of this philosophy, they approach the logical end of killing themselves and one another in car crashes as an expression of mutual love and desire.”¹¹ Beard applies this to all of the characters in *Crash*, but it is actually more in line with the radical projects of Vaughan and Seagrave, who do indeed perish in the glorifying car crashes they envisioned, than in Catherine and James’s desire to crash. The final scene of *Crash* finds Catherine (who, though she has had brushes with violence up to this point, remains free of

permanent wounds), in her sports car, followed by James in Vaughan's black, beat-up, and hearselike 1963 Lincoln, in an effort to create a crash. James succeeds in pushing Catherine's car off an overpass, reminiscent of Vaughan's fatal crash, but Catherine is revealed, thrown from her car but otherwise unharmed. Rushing to discover her status and finding her unscathed, James consoles Catherine: "Maybe next time... maybe next time." Beard reads this scene via the same philosophy he applied to Vaughan, such that "its logic is that Catherine's current state is *not bad enough* and that *things would be better if she were dead.*"¹² However, this seems to overstate the project upon which James and Catherine have embarked. The latter half of the film focuses on providing a crash for Catherine, one that would mark her body in ways that James and Vaughan had been marked—that is, by the creation of a wound. If indeed her situation is "not bad enough," it seems more correct to assume that Catherine wants to deal with her body's breaking, not to get out of the experience entirely (instead of wanting to die and thus remove herself entirely from the possibility for reterritorialization, she wants to be the generator of her own deterritorialization), and James's regret is at not having effectively helped her in her project of wound-creation.

Wound-focused violence provides the potential for creating discontinuity and difference. Several important examples occur in these films (only a few of which, for sake of brevity, are dealt with here), for this violence in particular seems to interest Cronenberg. Interestingly, explicit wound-focused violence exists only in *Crash*, while the other two films focus more on subtle yet nevertheless bodily transformation: a sort of sub-type of wound-focus exists that is non-violent and more controlled, namely tattooing, and the aforementioned changes in facial and postural expression— but the employment and significance of these body markings ensures their importance as alternative methods of wound-creation.

In James Ballard's initial crash with Helen Remington, her husband had not been wearing his seatbelt, and he shoots through the cabin of the Remington car into James's passenger seat. Both James and Helen appear shocked but physically unharmed, and a medium-shot focuses on James's face for a considerable length

of time, insinuating that James was unscathed. However, in a rare moment of temporal continuity, the next scene is of James coming-to in the hospital: the shot starts at knee-level and focuses on the extensive metal contraption holding James's leg together, then flows down the leg and up over his chest to a tender-looking gash (presumably from his seat belt) that has been stitched together, and then to James's once-perfect face, now heavily bruised and swollen. Beard describes the significance of this scene in this way:

The sudden brutality of the crash, smashing and deforming ... his reified, too anaesthetized body [...] has in a stroke broken through his frozen numbness with a massive exciting stimulus. And what this breakthrough reveals to him is that there is a world of physical and emotional reality still present in him. It is a world of pain and terror, of a vivid awareness of mortality, and at the most basic level a consciousness of the body in all its sentience. In this realm sexual arousal and torn, bruised, screaming flesh are essentially the same thing.... This is the realm of bodily abjection, together with the intense apprehension of desire and mortality that accompanies it.¹³

While I disagree with Beard's characterization of this as a moment of emotional relevance (Cronenberg seems utterly uninterested, throughout these films, in particulars of the psychological states of his characters), the moment does indeed represent James's initiation into understanding the creative potential of the wound. Through this experience he encounters Helen, Vaughan and Gabrielle, all of whom create new wounds with him. Though James's face heals and the metal brace comes off, he carries these wounds with him for the rest of the film and they never really heal—only when James is having sex does he move without visible problem, but otherwise he moves painfully, slowly.

In a second scene of wound-focus, James and Gabrielle capitalize on the fact that she is already wounded. Gabrielle had her own accident some undisclosed time prior to the opening of the film, and created for herself a fantastic image out of her disability, utilizing leather-and-metal braces to complement her near-fetish

attire. In addition, during the scene (which takes place, as many, in a car), she displays under her fishnets an impressive scar at the back of her thigh, which James then penetrates to both parties' intense enjoyment. Here, they use the gash in the back of her leg for sexual enjoyment, not so much as an ersatz vagina, since she has one of those that presumably works (that's not the issue) but because re-opening the wound is preferable. It provides a better signifier of Gabrielle's self and allows for blurring, a connection, between these two bodies that is utterly unique, since her wound was formed through a chaotic event (not a normal evolutionary-biologic one).

Catherine's project throughout the film can be considered one of wound-seeking. She is attracted to Vaughan precisely because he seems to offer a way into the wound. This proves, however, to be superficial; Vaughan photographs her as the ersatz-victim of another car crash and then, in a heavily-framed and arguably allegorical car-wash scene, proceeds to bruise her heavily during sex. The viewer is shown the aftermath of this experience, in a second (rare) instance of temporal continuity, but Catherine is only bruised, not scarred, and has therefore still avoided a wounding event. As mentioned before, the movie ends without her moment of wound-creation, but the idea is left firmly in place that these moments of chaos will be sought again for their entrée to the world of the wound.

Though *A History of Violence* does not have any tattooing, both *Crash* and *Eastern Promises* provide two interesting scenes of the ritual. In *Crash*, Vaughan and Ballard are tattooed by a "medical tattooist" with iconic automobile imagery: Vaughan with his steering wheel, and Ballard with his hood ornament. More than just the experience of being tattooed together, these images in blood provide an insight into the differences in "project" between the men; Vaughan wants his abdominal tattoo to look "rough" because it needs to be realistic of him impaling himself on the steering wheel, while James is merely following Vaughan's suggestion, and the placement of the tattoo on his inner thigh does not as closely match what might happen in a car crash. These are, of course, also the first sites that the men explore on each other's bodies before they have sex (predictably in Vaughan's '63 Lincoln).

For Nikolai and the *vor* in *Eastern Promises*, tattoos represent a man's history, denoting experiences in prison and providing insight into an individual's character. In Nikolai's case, however, the reliability of the tattoos is called into question by the fact that he is both *vor* lackey and an undercover agent for the FSB, hence the history of the body provided is necessarily unreliable. The specific act of tattooing depicted in the film is similarly ambiguous, and the viewer, like Nikolai, watches the process of tattooing without knowing what the outcome will be. The captain's stars (placed on the chest and kneecaps) are significant to Nikolai and Semyon, but differently so. To Nikolai they ostensibly offer an entrée to power, a way to become more than a servant; but they also offer a way for him to better pass in the world of the *vor*; as the viewer does not learn of Nikolai's attachment to the FSB until later. Because many of his actions seem potentially irreconcilable with each other, it is unclear which of these potential meanings holds precedence. As cited by Christine Cornea, Paul Patton describes this sort of project of signification designed to promote self-identity as particularly endemic to living within the postmodern, post-industrial period, such that he "extends certain of Jameson's notions concerning a sense of loss of subjective inwardness and referential depth as indicative of the postmodern experience by arguing that, to facilitate a life spent in such close quarters with so many strangers, people are increasingly encouraged to indicate their 'role' within society." He continues: "In cities, people identify other people on the basis of their appearance, their social role or other singular characteristics. In turn, this mode of relating to others reacts back upon their sense of self and they experience themselves as actors."¹⁴ Thus the fact that the choice to be tattooed both signifies Nikolai's (supposed—for it is never revealed to the viewer what parts of his identity are fabricated) past as well as future identities and allows him access to the *vor* power structure at the same time that it represents the atomization of the subject himself—and his potential undoing. Semyon has offered stars to Nikolai not because he wants to bring him up, but rather because his son Kirill has gotten into trouble; the general's stars are a sign Semyon wants Nikolai to possess so he could be "recognized" as Kirill—they are, therefore, merely props given to a man

he still considers a servant, a dramatic tool designed to make Nikolai proudly and unwittingly provide an alternative body to substitute for Kirill's.

For *A History of Violence* the exploration is not so much in the actual wound itself (though Cronenberg still certainly makes the *viewer* deal with the effects of the death-creating violence that Tom/Joey enacts on others) but the choice to engage in violent behavior; that is, taking responsibility for the choice to create wounds on others, and also for the change it creates in future relationships. Unlike the bodies in *Crash* and *Eastern Promises*, history has not been written onto Tom Stall's body; there are no significant signs of his existence as Joey Cusack until the specific material conditions are presented that require this incarnation to emerge, and transformation is accomplished largely through small but perceptible facial, postural and vocal changes. In a truly outstanding scene between Tom, Carl Fogarty and Fogarty's two men, the viewer witnesses Tom's transformation into Joey.

Provoked by the fact that Fogarty is threatening to hurt his son Jack, Tom drops the shotgun with which he had armed himself and agrees to Fogarty's request that he accompany the men back to Philadelphia, while still refusing to admit that he is indeed Joey. During the scene, Tom's posture becomes more rigid and his facial muscles tighten ever so slightly (accompanied by a close-up and slight darkening of the frame). He warns, "It'd be better if you'd just leave now," in a voice that resembles more that of Joey than the one Tom had adopted. Tom/Joey manages to disarm one of the henchmen by (realistically, and graphically) breaking his nose, and shooting the other one man, but Fogarty manages to shoot Tom, which lays him on his back. As Fogarty stands over him, Tom/Joey remarks, "I should have killed you back in Philly." Importantly, this is the first explicit admission on the part of Tom that he is also Joey; directly afterward, Jack shoots Fogarty with the discarded shotgun, splattering bloody pulp and spray (but, characteristic to Cronenberg in all three films, not *too much* of either) on Tom/Joey. Then, standing up and advancing almost like an animal towards his terrified son, Joey slowly transforms back into Tom—his face relaxes and his expression of aggression turns to concern. Here, the viewer glimpses a parallel between Tom/Joey's behavior and his son's (in the scene

prior, Jack had broken a bully's nose in similar, though less calculated, fashion), but more importantly, the explicit shift between the two men who inhabit one body.

MOMENTS OF CHOICE

To reduce these three films to mere explorations of death or dismemberment would be to belittle the director's new project; Cronenberg takes apart the bodies of his subjects, in true BwO fashion, to show that "death is felt rising from within and desire itself becomes the death instinct, latency, but it also passes over into these flows that carry the seeds of a new life."¹⁵ It is these new seeds of life that are evident in the bodily choices made by his characters. The choices that Cronenberg provides in each of these examples are not moral choices; there is no possibility of being a hero or even a "good guy" in the end of any of these. Rather, the moment of altering the body provides a way to fundamentally understand the possibility within the abject, described famously by Julia Kristeva, where "it is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior..."¹⁶ Cronenberg provides a place for each of these (it would not be a stretch to say that each of these characters is present in these three films); more importantly, though, there is also a reforming of the idea of the abject, such that loss is not necessarily othermaking, that there is a way to find subjectivity in the chaos of the violent experience that does not require trying to integrate it, but rather harness it as a locus of choice.

Cronenberg's explicit and naturalistic focus on the undoing of the body, indeed often quite cringe-inducing, requires the viewer to react to bodily display in an effort to pull the viewer into thinking about the body's capabilities since abjection here is key: "the revolting and disgusting is attractive in its own right... because it reminds us of something essential about ourselves... [This reminds] us of our own most basic vulnerabilities."¹⁷ This vulnerability comes precisely from the body's ability to be taken apart—perhaps to even go too far and be annihilated—but

Cronenberg's new cinema also seems to promise a decidedly more interesting possibility than the mere recognition of the body's fragile nature, namely that of a creation of BwO through visual representation. The repetition of thematic images also serves this project of deterritorialization, since "is not repetition capable of breaking out of its own cycle and 'leaping' beyond good and evil? It is repetition which ruins and degrades us, but it is repetition which can save us and allow us to escape from the other repetition."¹⁸ It is precisely the way that Cronenberg utilizes the repetition of specific theme-images in these three films that points to a postmodern project, because these images serve to take apart more standard ideas of subjectivity and possibility. There is nothing predetermined about the repetition that Cronenberg provides the viewer; rather, it is repetition with difference that allows for gaps and breaks.

In *Crash*, sex becomes significant not for emotional or biological connection to others, but rather as a site of potential wound creation, of choice-making that allows a subject to blur the boundaries of his own body and also creates a sense of responsibility to others to help them create their own wounds. The goal (or anxiety) here is not unity, or wholeness, but continued difference, wounds that do not form scars, but rather stay open and significant. *A History of Violence* speaks to the specific use of violent force as a decidedly anti-heroic act; radical physical options are shown to be too complicated to be heroic, and there is the potential with such action, regardless of the motive, to propel the body into unknown permutations of relationships. It is important to note that Cronenberg does not provide even a potential answer, since the film ends without divulging the repercussions of Tom's transformation—that is, the future state of his body or the bodies of his family members. At the same time, the film investigates the body's attachment to its own history, not in instinctual terms, but rather as tied to a process of will and consciousness that is nevertheless somehow different than human. Nikolai's decision to take on the captain's tattoos in *Eastern Promises* shows the chaotic nature of choice, which closes off certain possibilities while leaving room for new other potentialities. This film refrains from providing an easily-ascertained answer

as Nikolai has ostensibly taken Semyon's place and is using that power to return the rule of law, and nevertheless his posture and placement in the final scene, reminiscent of Semyon's own physical presence, perhaps allude to a necessary ambiguity in attempts to obtain such power. Nikolai's one truly unnecessary risk (that of helping Anna save the infant child) cannot be reconciled with the rest of his physical actions, but the importance of that moment of freedom is nevertheless key to the dismantling of the idea of stable or reconcilable identity.

DETERRITORIALIZATION AND THE VIEWER

In these three films, there are no settled selves, no subjects that have a truly understandable point of view, no choice made with possibilities guaranteed or necessarily positive; there are plenty of organs (in the Deleuzian sense) in these three films, but each organism is diminished. This is accomplished at the level of the screen shot, which tends toward flatness, by following the body at a relatively stable distance, and is akin to organs running over the body. This stylistic element is coupled with specific moments of disarticulation, of choices that take bodies apart or otherwise transform them. These choices are firmly outside the normal accepted structure of choices: they are not law-abiding, they are unconcerned with consequences beyond actual disarticulation—that is, they are not necessarily designed to represent some sort of actual relationship to the future, but rather are more concerned with the body's relationship to itself before and after the choice. Displays of the body also occur in serial format, the most salient examples being the repetition of rear entry in the sex scenes in *Crash* as well as repeated juxtapositions of human flesh with car parts; the twin scenes of nose-breaking in *A History of Violence*; the doubled throat splitting and focus on the general star tattoos on different bodies in *Eastern Promises*. These function as repetitions with difference, where parallelism feels like an investigation of the same instead of a more typical attempt to create foreshadowing or even a sense of familiarity. The films also deterritorialize the viewer's experience, since the viewer is not expected to engage emotionally with any of the characters—even the movie that approaches

some sort of psychological resonance, *A History of Violence*, fails to fully engage in this manner because the characters are so defamiliarized. The realistic quality of the violence accomplishes this as well, since the typical viewer will expect either not to have to see it in any but the most caricatured manner (arealistic violence) or to see an overdone version of it (hyperrealistic violence) but instead, the crunch of cartilage or the aftermath of a gunshot wound are displayed with excruciatingly *natural* quality.

The displays of James, Catherine, Tom/Joey and Nikolai are, then, not provided to represent issues of conscience or even of identity, but rather the possibility for choice. These possibilities are inscribed by (the body's relationship to) history but not necessarily constrained by it. Thus in a postmodern turn, in these three films, Cronenberg transforms the body to investigate potential for discontinuity and breaks, reminiscent of what Jameson describes as a reinvention of allegory, which "can be characterized by a generalized sensitivity, in our own time, to breaks and discontinuities, to the heterogeneous.... to Difference rather than Identity, to gaps and holes rather than seamless webs and triumphant narrative progressions."¹⁹ For Cronenberg's cinema, there are no universals and certainly no concrete beings, but rather moments and scenes that fold back on each other, that repeat with subtle and important differences and largely ignore the establishment (or, importantly, the requirement) of any sort of coherent identity for the characters. The director underlines this process with the structure of the films, where repetition of images, instead of psychological development, is privileged over the course of each piece. The viewing process is therefore akin to the process of allegorical interpretation as described by Jameson:

the newer allegory is horizontal rather than vertical: if it must still attach its one-on-one conceptual labels to its objects... it does so on the conviction that those objects (along with their labels) are now profoundly relational, indeed are themselves constructed by their relations to each other. When we add to this the inevitable mobility of such relations, we begin to glimpse the process of allegorical interpretations as a kind of scanning that, moving back and forth across the text, readjusts its terms in constant modification.¹⁰

The “horizontal” process of movie-watching is exactly what Cronenberg requires of the viewer.

Indeed, the resonance in these three late films does not come from an exploration of human psychology, but rather by defining moments in each of possibility and choice that are rooted in, and carved into, the body itself. Each piece ends mid-story, without providing conclusion: *Crash* with Catherine’s first car crash, intentionally caused by James and disappointingly not resulting in lasting wounds to her body; *A History of Violence* with a wordless, tense return home during his family’s dinner for Tom; and a Nikolai who has succeeded Semyon as *vory v zakone* boss but who resembles Semyon in posture and placement, thus making it unclear what his actions actually mean. These non-finales do not provide an easy synthesis of each film’s material and therefore require the viewer to do work, to experiment with interpretations; precisely with these non-ending conclusions does Cronenberg bring the viewer into the process of deterritorialization (and, with whatever eventual judgments the viewer might come to, a process of reterritorialization as well). *Crash*, *A History of Violence* and *Eastern Promises* represent a decidedly postmodern take on the allegory, providing not cautionary tales or moral guidance, but requirements for the viewer to deal with graphic, realistic displays of the body at moments of choice. In the process, Cronenberg dismantles bodies in a process akin to the creation of the BwO, and his cinema exhorts the viewer: “We should say instead, ‘Let’s go further still, we haven’t found our BwO yet, we haven’t sufficiently dismantled the self. Substitute forgetting for anamnesis, experimentation for interpretation. Find your body without organs. Find out how to make it.’”²¹ Cronenberg does not tell the viewer how to do this, but rather uses these three films to provide visual representations of what the process might look like.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 William Beard, *The Artist as Monster*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), ix.
- 2 See *Directors: David Cronenberg*, Dir. AFI Film With David Cronenberg, 2000, DVD.
- 3 Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), ix.
- 4 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, (Minneapolis: Univ of Minnesota Press, 1987), 164.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 160.
- 6 Michael Grant, "Introduction", *The Modern Fantastic: The Films of David Cronenberg*. Ed. Michael Grant (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2000), 14.
- 7 Indeed, Cronenberg remarked shortly before its release that this was his "sellout" film; however, he also said this about *Crash* and *eXistenZ*, so this should perhaps be taken tongue firmly in cheek.
- 8 Grant, 28.
- 9 Jameson, 154.
- 10 Parveen Adams, "Death Drive," *The Modern Fantastic: The Films of David Cronenberg*. Ed. Michael Grant. (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2000), 120.
- 11 Beard, 380.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 408, emphasis in original.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 390.
- 14 Christine Cornea, "David Cronenberg's *Crash* and Performing Cyborgs," *The Velvet Light Trap* (52.3, 2003), 6.
- 15 Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 223.
- 16 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.
- 17 Robert C. Solomon, "The Philosophy of Horror," *Philosophy and Literature* (16, 1992), 174.

- 18 Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 131.
19 Jameson, 167-8.
20 Jameson, 168.
21 Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 151.

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