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Uncomfortable in the New Flesh: Adapting to Body Horror in the Cinema of David Cronenberg

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Introducing the Body

Body horror as a genre exploits our own embodiment as viewers for maximum anxiety. This anxiety is exacerbated by the continual proliferation of new media and technology and their effects on how we view our own humanity as something not-machine, and vice versa. As the distinction dulls, it's important to visually evaluate what embodied anxiety about bodies looks like, from the bloody and gutsy to the metallic and plastic. The collapse of man and machine is the nexus at which body horror best disturbs humans as media users in proliferating contact with technology. In this article, I argue that what so viscerally shocks audiences about filmic representations of body horror is a meta-discomfort with the narrowing relationship between mediated and media. Citing director David Cronenberg's "body" of work, I connect his many films[1] to our current considerations of posthumanism and augmentation as theories that should redefine our relationship to ourselves, not threaten them. In fact, the notion that body horror should not disturb us is what his works play out so disturbingly. Cronenberg instead invites viewers to imagine marks, mutilations, and mutations as not simply uninvited intruders on a perfectly functioning body, but more compellingly rather as augmentations. Cronenberg's thematic fascination with augmentation can even be traced within his own filmmaking procedure, as his oeuvre is marked by adaptations, in directions from both page to screen and the less critically considered vice versa. Likened to the body horror of Cronenberg's films, adaptation can be a violent process in either direction, but the critical ideas that emerge from these extended bodies ask us to see mediated

[1] This trajectory may seem based on trivia, but I begin with *Scanners* and conclude with *A History of Violence*, the last Hollywood film released on VHS as well as Cronenberg's last "body horror" adaptation proper. Coming from the director of *Videodrome*, the schematic for my argument is irresistible.

embodiment as positive mutation. For Cronenberg, the unsettling trespasses of the body are not just ideas, but practices channeled through his textual processes embodied in the technologies of film and print. I analyze Cronenberg's adaptation processes as versions of body horror to literalize the uneasiness of how we write about our own bodies as sites of uncomfortable extension, from messily mediated to messy media, to resolve embodied anxiety amid encroaching technology.

The visual impact of body horror communicated filmically is crucial to its effect on the viewer as a potential site of anxiety through identification. There's power in the written word, absolutely, but it infects the viewer more subtly where filmic force bluntly intrudes. Though greater graphic detail can flourish on the page in ways it cannot on the screen, film literalizes action through embodied performance and viewers must contend with what they are optically presented. To see is to better recognize what can be obfuscated by print—what can be made safe. Tim Lucas reports that Cronenberg's film eventually looked nothing like its original screenplay, for, in the director's own words, his "'early drafts tend to get extreme in all kinds of ways: sexually, violently, and just in terms of weirdness.'" Cronenberg in fact admits that, "'I [wrote *Videodrome*] in a more extreme fashion than I would want to see it on the screen *myself*'" (qtd. in Lucas). That extreme fashion was realized on the page in Jack Martin's[2] novelization of *Videodrome*, based on an early draft of the screenplay full of scenes too gory and too complicated practically to make it to film. If the original product was too extreme even for the "Baron of Blood" (as Ernest Mathijs dubs him in *The Cinema of David Cronenberg*) to see, then reading elides more where viewing leaves exposed.

This tendency can be explored through a potent visual motif from Cronenberg's adaptation of William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*. Never was a twisted marriage of author and director better subversively matched, for, "A radical interrogation of language permeates [Burroughs's] books" just like a rabid investigation of the linguistic/tonal/gestural body persists throughout Cronenberg's films (Indiana). In his attempt to order the organizational chaos of the source material, Cronenberg cinematizes distrust of writing by anthropomorphizing protagonist William Lee's (Peter Weller) typewriters as giant cockroaches with grotesque anal cavities for mouths. That's right, his writing machines "talk out of their asses" and fittingly so, because they continually lie and betray Lee into compromising situations. This image against writing contributes to my claim that reading may include self-imaging, -embellishing, -editing in ways that "lie." Within the manic logic of the film, that argument's bolstered by Lee the reading-writer/writing-reader having no recognition of most of the pages he'd written that would become his new novel, *Naked Lunch* (an actual detail Cronenberg cited from Burroughs's own experience publishing the real thing). His mind elects to forget what he has written and read. Any reader wields a similar (less drug-addled) choice to render smooth what reads rough. It's an option to distance oneself from print that must be acted upon to be experienced—an opportunity less available to interaction with more direct sensory media. Filmic representations of body horror arrest viewers by recycling what they think they know about the body and the internal/external conflicts that work against it into a new tension that pits the medium against the mediated. In this

[2] Jack Martin is the penname for well-known fantasy and science fiction writer Dennis Etchison.

posthuman struggle, Cronenberg's films affect viewers symbolically the way his characters are affected physically. Viewing body horror becomes participating in body horror.

This participation invites us to visualize a reality populated by what we do not want realized physically. Kim Toffoletti claims in *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls* that, "despite considerable focus on the changing state of the subject in an era of posthumanism, there is little corresponding emphasis on the shifting status of reality" (31). While body horror is clearly concerned with effects on bodies, Toffoletti's call to shift our focus reminds us that the realities within which these horrors are possible matter. It's those realities' uncanny similarities to our own that should discomfit us as viewers/participators. In fact, Cronenberg states he has "'to balance… weirdness against what an audience will accept as reality'" (qtd. in Lucas) to keep them invested and/or unsettled. Body horror on film places the viewer directly at an intersection between Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's immediacy and hypermediacy. They explain in *Remediation*:

> In addressing our culture's contradictory imperatives for immediacy and hypermediacy, this… demonstrates what we call a double logic of remediation. Our culture wants both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: ideally, it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them. (5)

Therefore, we take for granted the reality of the film's world as we are equally confronted with its fiction through the viscera of body horror. Yet caught in that in-between is the resulting double-take of uncertainty as immediacy and hypermediacy both assert themselves, and we find ourselves asking a variation of the final question of *eXistenZ*: "are we still in the game?" Equally variant on that particular film is our shared point of immersion: the body. In our reality vs. filmic reality, our bodies are the site through which we enter the voyeuristic experience of seeing and feel the discomfort of identification with horrors we do not wish to experience. Of course, according to Cronenberg, "'to whatever degree we center our reality—and our understanding of reality—in our bodies, we are surrendering that sense of reality to our bodies' ephemerality,'" (*Cronenberg on Cronenberg* 145) which only adds to our feelings of too-close-for-comfort with much of what his films portray. Even so, the ironic force toward body horror is the invitation to see the "cerebral" made "visceral…and vice versa," according to Carrie Rickey. Cronenberg crafts grotesque catharses for anxieties about the body and its relationship to technology in an arena of imagery that challenges our relationship to our own reality. If I may toy with the words of *Videodrome*'s Professor Brian O'Blivion: "[film] is reality, and reality is less than [film]" in this case, so as we approach body horror film through our bodies, we will learn what shocks us is that we want to approach.

Marked for Augmentation

The body is mutilated, marked, and mutated in Cronenberg's body horror films. Cronenberg's ascension to commercial prominence came with a splatter in *Scanners*, a complex film about telepathy and materiality that was quickly reduced to "'the one with the exploding head'" (Newman). Kim Newman historicizes that scene in relation to an increasingly bloody cinematic trend:

> It was obvious to even the most casual cinemagoer that genre movies of the late 1970s and early 1980s were becoming more fantastically grisly… Not only could the movies now technically show anything, but filmmakers in the horror and science fiction genres were ruthless and seemingly demented enough to want to show the sorts of things that had been only implied earlier.

The infamous scene is an excellent example of the new freedom to freak out fans, but it's not fair to reduce the moment to shock factor. This image of extreme violence is important to the film and to the mutilated body in general. The scene only occurs about fifteen minutes in, leaving the audience tensely wondering if it will top it for the rest of its run. Its finale exercises some graphic violence too, but the "exploding head" scene tells viewers pretty quickly what's at stake for the film and the body. Cronenberg actually wanted to begin the movie with that scene, but it evidently tested poorly (Newman); this trivia did not stop Leon Whiteson from beginning his novelization of *Scanners* the way Cronenberg intended his film to. But even a few minutes into the film's runtime, the message is made early and clearly: in *Scanners*, the mind is far more powerful than the body, and that reversal should worry people. Less gory but still just as startling is the arm wrestling match in *The Fly*, for it marks the beginning of Seth Brundle's (Jeff Goldblum) loss of humanity. When his opponent's bone snaps out of his wrist, a sharp break in Brundle's personality occurs too as he walks away barely registering the traumatic situation. More violent here than that protruding bone is Brundle's emotional loss of empathizing self. He warns Ronnie (Geena Davis) later, "the insect is awake," and this scene indicates its first emotionless stirring. More realistically brutal, Cronenberg's most subtle entry into the canon of body horror is *A History of Violence*[3], a film that truly tests the Western diet for violent action. Telling the story of Tom Stall (Viggo Mortensen), a small-town man whose life changes when his violent heroics invite his dark past to revisit him, it does so by portraying its violent acts as realistically as possible. Cronenberg's dedication to anatomical brutality is quite unlike John Wagner and Vince Locke's graphic novel source material, drawn crudely in frantic black and white and teeming with over-the-top gruesome violence hinging on farcical. What the adaptation of *A History of Violence* does so well, according to Manohla Dargis, is refuse "to let us indulge in movie violence without paying a price." As body horror brings film and viewer, media and mediated, into uncomfortable proximity, the realization that violence accurately filmed is violent to the viewer completes maybe the most subtle, psychological example of body horror anxiety.

The marks of harm bore by particular characters in *Videodrome* and *Crash* speak to the capacity for pleasure in the body. These scars indicate a detachment from the typical channels of interaction and pleasure, demonstrating the body can be numbed from engaging the world in simpler, socially expected ways. In *Videodrome*, when Max Renn (James Woods) appears on the Rena King show he meets Nicki Brand (Deborah Harry), a radio show therapist. She first complains, "I think we live in overstimulated times. We crave stimulation for its own sake. We gorge ourselves on it. We always want more, whether it's tactile, emotional or sexual. And I think that's bad." Soon after however, she admits that, "I live in a highly excited state of

[3] I should clarify here that Josh Olson is credited as the sole screenwriter for *A History of Violence*, but that Cronenberg subjected Olson's script to his own rewrites, according to actor Viggo Mortensen. Mortensen claims, "[Cronenberg] should have actually taken a screenplay credit, because [Olson's] 120-something pages ended up being about 72 pages, and that was him."

overstimulation." Her state of "overstimulation" seems understimulated by regular sexual intercourse, so she pursues sexuality through sadomasochism, rendering her body a canvas of tiny nicks (Nicki) and brands (Brand). These scars map out her desire for more and foreshadow her drive to "audition" for *Videodrome*. Scars as indicators of proclivity drive my point nicely into Cronenberg's adaptation of J.G. Ballard's *Crash*. The main character James Ballard (James Spader) is involved in a car accident that soon introduces him to Vaughan and his group of car crash disciples, who all get off on paraphilia, or sexual pleasure from car accidents. The inevitable side effect of this fetish is of course scars, and the film documents them all in more bluntly graphic ways than its technically bloodier source material, without Ballard's dreamlike prose to bandage it. Vaughan (Elias Koteas) is covered in scars; it's what attracts Ballard's wife Catherine (Deborah Kara Unger) so strongly to him. Probably the most notable scar in the film is Gabrielle's (Rosanna Arquette) vulva shaped scar on the back of her leg, which Ballard has sex with. These scars then function not only as badges of desirability, but also different ways to express oneself sexually. However, they are not just the effects of their turn-on; they are visually indicative of the need for their extreme fetish. According to Parveen Adams, the visual purpose of the scars—none new or red; instead old and bloodless—is "not traumatizing" but implies "a condition of our psychical and social life" (111-112). In other words, the scars aren't full of life, just like their characters aren't—there's something missing from them that drives them to this extreme need to connect sexually through car crashes. Eugene Thacker, in *Biomedia*, writes, "We may cite [many] areas of culture as examples of the body both as a medium (a means of ccommunication) and as mediated (the object of communication)" (9). Mapping Thacker's claim onto scarred bodies, I argue that the scars on both Nicki and the disciples of Vaughan are ways for them to communicate a need they have beyond normative sexual practice, while simultaneously confirming their sexual outlets will lead to danger and death. Carrie Rickey suggests that, "In a Cronenberg film, pathology is never comfortably external… pure pathology is often indistinguishable from pure pleasure—and their common source is the body." Pathology and pleasure mingled here manifest in destructive ways, but body horror horrifies by suggesting that isn't necessarily a bad thing.

The gross mutations depicted in Cronenberg's body horror films bear powerful suggestions influencing the way we see the issues they mutate around. *Videodrome* eventually finds Max Renn with his hand/gun spreading the gospel of the "Video Word made Flesh." His mission, reprogrammed into him by Bianca O'Blivion, is to kill Barry Convex, CEO of Spectacular Optical and mastermind behind the plan to broadcast Videodrome and wipe out everyone in North America who watches Max's late night softcore channel. Instead, Max stops them, mutating his traitorous friend Harlan's hand into a "potato grenade" that detonates him and then disposing of Convex by shooting him with bullet-sized cancerous tumors. This powerfully disturbing scene depicts Convex basically ripped open by tumors that burst out of his body, as a subversion of the similar fate Spectacular Optical intended for the viewers of Civic TV. But not merely that, this gruesome fate is the last point in a theme that equates flesh with cancer: excess cells. The New Flesh, the flesh of video, promises by contrast to be pure. Thacker writes of this attitude toward embodiment, "it would seem that cultural attitudes toward the body are the same as those toward media: our culture wants to render the body immediate, while also multiplying our capacity to technically control the body" (9). The New Flesh would promise some kind of immediate-hypermediacy, no body to be embodied in. Cronenberg explores the no-body more plausibly in *Dead Ringers*, between twin gynecologists

Eliot and Beverly Mantle (Jeremy Irons). When Beverly commissions freakish surgical tools for operating on "mutant women," he's imagining a body that does not exist. Eventually, those tools only work "to separate the Siamese twins" and kill his brother Eliot, mutating himself into a twinless twin. The immediate-hypermediacy of this flesh ends up an upgrade unto death.

A far different upgrade of the body occurs in *The Fly* by nature of an accident, and from it is born "Brundlefly." In gruesome contrast to the scientist Andre Delambre of George Langelaan's 1957 short story "The Fly" and the 1958 first film adaptation of it, Seth Brundle does not maintain his humiliated humanity, just with a giant fly's head: he becomes more fly genetically and less human ethically. As he continues to transform and meet the fly in the molecular middle, he tries to rationalize the situation as calls it "the disease" at first: "I know what the disease wants… [to] turn me into something else. That's not too terrible, is it? Most people would give anything to be turned into something else." But as he continues to turn, his actions become disgustingly manic. As Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston write in *Posthuman Bodies*, "[he] revels in the disintegration of his human form, collects his human parts and creates a museum/mausoleum in his bathroom medicine cabinet. The human is emphasized here as a scientific showcase, a medical exhibit, a show of force but always a threatened constituency of body parts and reason" (13). It's that connection to the human that keeps Brundlefly just Brundle enough to tell Ronnie to leave or he'll hurt her. In political language, he speaks to the conflict between human reason and insect instinct that's brought him to the moral realization he's losing grip of morality: "Have you ever heard of insect politics? Neither have I. Insects... don't have politics. They're very... brutal. No compassion, no compromise. We can't trust the insect. I'd like to become the first... insect politician," but he basically admits he can't. In the concluding minutes as the fly part of Brundlefly subsumes nearly all of his personality, it's when what remains of his human flesh all rips away that he finally just becomes the monster of the movie; he may be called Brundlefly, but there's no Brundle in him left to speak of.

Cronenberg revisits the human/insect divide again in *Naked Lunch* and in appropriately gross fashion. The film contains disturbing images like large cockroach typewriters, a giant centipede rapist, and the iconic mugwump, a tall, green, wrinkled alien creature somewhere between man and insect. The mutations in *Naked Lunch* are typically those working on Lee's mind, as it's never certain if he's hallucinating or we are. Worth noting toward the film's ick factor is the human/insect interaction through fanciful bug drugs more revolting than "boring" cocaine or heroin: examples like bug powder, mugwump jism (taken via fellatio, a sexually explicit nod to the sexually explicit novel), and "the black meat of the giant, aquatic, Brazilian centipede." These drug options are original to the film, an idea so wicked that Burroughs admitted he wished he'd thought of it. In Interzone, humans and insects ingest each other in various ways that make viewers uncomfortable with the erotic gross-out of the interaction. As an adaptation of one of the most sexually graphic novels ever, the film plays a bit more subtly, but its mutations of mind and body suggest a constant motif of penetration: drugs or sex, human or insect—someone or something is always violating someone or something. Donna Haraway declares in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* that, "By the late twentieth century in US scientific culture, the boundary between human and animal is thoroughly breached" (151). These mutations unflinchingly depict that breach, and with insects, certainly not the

most "human" animals for humans to feel comfortable about. Insects are colder, more mechanical creatures, so becoming bug through gene splicing or penetration of drugs and disturbing sex threatens what feels human about the body, remediating it into something abnormal. Thacker reminds, "in considering the remediated body, something is done to the body in the first place; the body's techniques do not arise from within itself, but rather it gains its remediation externally" (9). As Seth Brundle becomes Brundlefly and William Lee loses grip on his reality via potent bug drugs, however, that external feels frighteningly more internal than we can handle.

As we squirm with the internal and the external, I suggest that Cronenberg's body horror works to reunite body and mind through the aesthetic of disgust. To be disgusted in this context is to be intimately threatened by ways in which the body should not work. The mind feels for the body, realizes its vulnerability within it. This forceful reunion may be exactly what Cronenberg has in mind, according to Ernest Mathijs:

> What distinguishes Cronenberg in his existentialism is his appreciation of the human body. In an effort to 'mend the Cartesian rift' between Mind and Body (as he himself has repeatedly put it…), Cronenberg's films equip the human body with a will of its own. Amoral in the most literal sense, there is no 'good' or 'bad' body. Cronenberg asks viewers to accept a tumour, a wound, a deficiency not as a fault or flaw but a companion to the rest of the body. (6)

Therefore, the scars and mutations and more are not simply uninvited intruders on a perfectly functioning body: they are augmentations. In *Videodrome*, Brian O'Blivion "tells" Max over videotape that his tumor—induced by visions, not the other way around—feels like, "not an uncontrolled, undirected little bubbling pot of flesh, but… is in fact a new organ... a new part of the brain." Mathijs elaborates on O'Blivion's acceptance with an explanation from the director himself:

> Cronenberg once used the metaphor of colonialism to describe the relationship between the 'normal' body and its outgrowths; the growths are first seen as a rebellion by the 'normal' body, then their desire for independent existence is resisted, and finally some arrangement is found in which the two are forced to live together. (6)

Considering the history of colonialism, we can be certain that the arrangement isn't always an agreeable mandatory arrangement: Max adapts to his flesh VCR and literal hand/gun, but Brundle doesn't win much ground with the fly spliced with him. Yet both examples force the body and mind, "ever fighting the Cartesian battle for integration" (Rickey), to take account of each other in a relationship more intrinsic than even the colonialism of growths: they have both always been with each other.

The twin gynecologists of *Dead Ringers* function as a distributed metaphor of how non-Cartesian our bodies actually are. When Beverly "separate[s] the Siamese twins" by killing Eliot, he soon dies in response—not because as the tagline for the film misled that they had "Two Bodies. Two Minds. One Soul," but because, through his mutant surgery tools, Beverly figuratively makes himself a part of Eliot's body via violence. Their "battle for integration" as

twins destroys them both, and viewers begin to question in the murderous aftermath if the tagline would better read "One Body. One Mind. Two Souls." When we see the body mutilated, marked, or mutated, we feel anxiety for our own. This reaction is not graced upon the body from the mind up above but comes from within and alongside out of vulnerable identification with what physically expresses it. N. Katherine Hayles insists in *How We Became Posthuman* that, "for information to exist, it must *always* be instantiated in a medium" (13), and that medium here is the body. McLuhan, of course, famously states in *Understanding Media*, that "the medium is the message," (7) so what we communicate is bodily: our unease with body horror is bodily.

Subjects, Objects, and Cyborgs

That unease is very object-focused, coming from a place of absolute certainty as subject. Toffoletti discusses her notion of "the body as 'cultural plastic,'" (164) so I appropriate it to consider the literal/cultural interplay of Cronenberg's prosthetics. To achieve the disturbing effects his films depict, he and his design team go through a lot of rubber, gel, foam, and plastic. He renders the body as literal plastic, but the messages his grotesque images explore stretch the body in the cultural kind as well, probing our discomfort with pain, disease, penetration, etc. and behind all of them: technology. Mathijs mentions Cronenberg's affection for what he calls "money shots": the violent, gory reveal of shocking mutation and pain—shots which depend on practical effects, prosthetics, plastic. He claims, "Beyond immediate shock value these shots offer a way into understanding Cronenberg's fascination for the accidental composition and contingency of the human body and how it is 'supposed' to look" (6). Rendering the body changed or harmed through rubber and plastic likeness means filming an object and claiming it's a body. The subject becomes the object, an object utilized just to be distorted or damaged. Cultural plastic, therefore, is portrayed by literal plastic. The effect is alienating, emphasis on "alien" the more inhuman that body becomes. According to Neil Badmington, it's the more "object" that body becomes. In *Alien Chic*, Badmington suggests we distance ourselves from representations of aliens in film and popular culture by relegating them to objects, something we feel superior to practice as subjects. What he aims to accomplish is to reintroduce fear of the alien through identification with it, as we realize their subjectivity alongside our objectivity, reaching a mutual otherness. Badmington concludes his argument stating, "this otherness has always been part 'us,' parting 'us' from 'ourselves.' Posthumanism, as I see it, is the acknowledgement and activation of the trace of the inhuman within the human… In the end, humanism finds itself a little alien" (155). If we consider "alien" within the context of the human body, then body horror upsets our place as subjects by mutating us to objects. The human is threatened by the nonhuman rising up to attempt organic life with, in, and through us.

That nonhuman becoming more human all the time in our gadget-loving society is technology, an active participant in Cronenberg's dramas of body horror. Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" situates well our relationship to technology, first defining, "A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (149). Before fanciful androids come to mind, Haraway sobers the discussion by elaborating, "By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism. In short, we are

cyborgs." We, the users of technology, or Brian Rotman would suggest "the used," (*Becoming Beside Ourselves* 6) are these organisms/machines, and here in the twenty-first century, approaching the fiction that Haraway suggests even more. Hayles nevertheless insists, "human being is first of all embodied being, and the complexities of this embodiment mean that human awareness unfolds in ways very different from those of intelligence embodied in cybernetic machines" (283-284). This distinction I'm inclined to agree with, but Toffoletti's observation that, "there is still a pervasive tendency to secure human identity as something that can be differentiated from a machine" (28) speaks directly to what's so unsettling about body horror distributed across bodies: the human body and the machinic body. As Richard Doyle phrases it in *Wetwares*, "More than a becoming-machine of the organism, this retooling or 'refiguring' of life provokes double takes on the becoming-lively of the machine" (94). The human becomes machine and vice versa throughout Cronenberg's films in ways that both depict an escape from the body and entrapment within the body, as augmented by technology.

Cyborgs we may be, caught between human and machine, but we embodied beings still haven't figured out the machinic ability to transfer mediums. Our bodies are what we have, which is comforting *and* startling in this context. The best way to understand an escape from the body is through Doyle's notion of uploading. He explains, "Uploading, the future porting of human identity and corporeality to a noncarbon substrate, is a contemporary utopian narrative of becoming-silicon, a set of rhetorical operations that render the future as 'more life'" (124-125). In the body horror films of Cronenberg, it is that "noncarbon substrate" that gets complicated, for the leveling of body and machine also confuses the two in surprising ways. In *Scanners*, Dr. Paul Ruth (Patrick McGoohan) explains to protagonist Cameron Vale that there are many skills he can master within his telepathic abilities. When the unfolding conspiracy of the film is primed to be exposed, however, Dr. Ruth makes a request of Cameron that estimates consciousness and computer in very similar terms. Asking Cameron to use his powers to access ConSec's Ripe program, he hints, "you do have a nervous system. And so does a computer. And you can scan a computer, as you would another human being." This interplay between man and machine suggests an idea that renders data as thought and mind as information; to liken a computer to a human being equally enacts the opposite. In *Becoming Beside Ourselves*, Rotman declares a like-influenced sentiment: "as technological systems penetrate every aspect of contemporary culture, bringing about an escalating and radical series of cognitive and social upheavals, it has become clear that no… separation of mind and machine is possible" (1). That exchange and the following battle Cameron wages against the computer's self-destruct measure unleashed to fry his mind imagines that mind and data are equally vulnerable to tamper with each other. This fantasy of "cognitive upheaval" powerfully hints toward the way machines continue to increase in similarity to humans. Once again, the vice versa applies poignantly. That computer/consciousness connection thematically foreshadows the film's conclusion. When Cameron and his brother Revok (Michael Ironside) square off in a psychic showdown, the battle eerily ends with Cameron overtaking Revok and "uploading" into his body. According to Doyle, "'uploading' exists as an anticipatory technology of the self" (132), but the twist of this technology's utilization in *Scanners* is that uploading occurs not in a machine, but a new bodily self. Cameron overtakes Revok and the film ends with Cameron's voice coming from Revok's mouth, the new hardware for Cameron's software.

In *Videodrome*, Cronenberg ups the stakes of uploading by transcending a mental overtaking of body and promising an evacuation of the flesh entirely. Doyle expertly analyzes the film's perplexing finale:

> At the end of the film, when [Woods]… raises a… gun to his head as a sacrifice of his old body in favor of the 'new flesh' of video… Woods is, of course, on video as he makes the transition to the new flesh of *video*. But the anticipatory gaze leads to a blank screen, an interstice that paradoxically comes at the end. Rather than a simple refusal to display the 'world' of the new flesh, Cronenberg's production of a blank yields the mechanism of the 'new flesh' an invisible mechanism whose visibility is continually anticipated but which is imaged only through a fracture or a break. (142)

This "'uploading' to video" (142) concludes, I suggest in contrast to Doyle's reading, with not simple anticipation, but transcendence of our ability to see the world of the new flesh, still trapped within our "old flesh" bodies like an old computer trying to run a new program. Should we ever attain the "new flesh," then that world will reveal its visibility. A less ecstatically transcendent uploading occurs in *eXistenZ*, in which the escape from the body ends with a return to it, like playing any console now. Of course, the creepy outcome of this film is that the game world is too real, and all subsequent reality feels less so. Another update on Professor O'Blivion's mantra: "[the game] is reality, and reality is less than [the game]." When Allegra Geller (Jennifer Jason Leigh) asks Ted Pikul (Jude Law) how it feels to be back after he asks to pause the game, he reports, "It feels completely unreal." She concludes, "because there's nothing happening here. We're safe. It's boring." The reality of the video game is contingent upon action, therefore this uploading necessitates doing over just being. But Pikul continues, "It's worse than that. I'm not sure...here, where we are, is real at all. This feels like a game to me. And you, you're beginning to feel a bit like a game character." This exchange ends up ironic by film's end when it's revealed that they were playing *eXistenZ* inside a game actually called *TranscendenZ*. But Pikul's in-game worry becomes reality when he and Allegra are asked if everyone's still in the game and the film closes on their uncertain faces. The sense of unreality followed them, and the uploading took something with it that didn't come back. Or are they still in the game? The possibility for a recursive loop taunts the viewer's reality when the film ends on such an uncertain note. Doyle discusses the uncertainty of still being oneself once uploaded, and *eXistenZ* portrays it maddeningly.

What tethers the sense of reality to the real is the entrapment of the body. Yet this leaves open more disturbing possibilities as technology no longer guarantees escape but threatens integration. Hayles safely assumes that, "Using tools may shape the body… but the tool nevertheless is envisioned as an object that is apart from the body, an object that can be picked up and put down at will" (34). Doyle tweaks this slightly as he explains, "machines are fundamentally made of connection, a little bit of this and a little bit of that. A gun connects flesh and metal at a distance," for example (4). Tools, i.e. machines connect us to them to complete a task. Yet when he begins to discuss William Burroughs's *The Place of Dead Roads*, Doyle cryptically claims, "the condition of being a shootist is to become-gun" (6). What sounds creepy here achieves full body horror when Doyle's idea is taken literally in *Videodrome*: Max has, as I mentioned before, not a handgun, but a hand/gun. Bruno Latour defines this "both" as the "actant" in *Pandora's Hope* (180). Using the incredibly relevant example of a citizen

with a gun, he explains, "You are different with a gun in your hand; the gun is different with you holding it. You are another subject because you hold the gun; the gun is another object because it has entered into a relationship with you" (179). The "citizen-gun, gun-citizen" is a "hybrid actor" made of connection (à la Doyle) between man and machine (Latour 179, 180). Cronenberg's actant integrates man and machine literally into one grisly entity that horrifies the body. Less traumatizing than just gross, he revisits the organic gun in *eXistenZ* with the bone gun that shoots teeth. It may not be grafted into anyone, but we assume a gun should be machine, and a lifeform should be organic—without overlap. Which is exactly why the body horror of human become technology and vice versa unnerves. Yet these characters do not just "become-gun." Max similarly becomes-VCR in yonic visual terms with his chest cavity Betamax. He can literally remediate or be remediated with his body as the tapes at first control him before he learns how to take control of others through his new organ/machine. Issues of control over/through the body similarly emerge in *eXistenZ* in the form of the bio-port. The film imagines that the body is now the controller, linked through a hole at the base of the spine to the organic, fleshy console/creature. So the characters become-game. When Allegra and Pikul fuss over his newly installed bio-port, the tension of flesh and technology asserting control continues:

> It hurts. I think it's infected.
> No, it's not infected. It's just excited. It wants action.
> But I really don't think I want action! Me, I mean. The bearer of the excited bio-port.

Dialogue like this indicates why when Christopher Priest[4] novelized *eXistenZ*, the story struck him as "a well-made adventure…with a lot of witty dialogue and entertaining scenes" (qtd. in Van Parys). Admitting, "There was some fairly gruesome stuff," Priest insists, "even that seemed to us to be played not as horror but as black humour" (qtd. in Van Parys). Cronenberg may not disagree, saying, "Untenable situations can only be dealt with through humor, if not despair and resignation. So, I prefer the humor" (qtd. in Gordon). In blackly humorous horror fashion here, the bearer and the bio-port at odds contribute to the nervous gray area of human and machine sharing space.

Flesh and technology struggle against each other in more gruesome ways in *The Fly*. As Brundle attempts to eventually teleport organic life through his telepods, he does so with serious bumps along the way—like a baboon turned inside out. He diagnoses the trouble over a steak tasting test:

> The computer is giving us its interpretation... of a steak. It's, uh translating it for us; it's rethinking it, rather than *reproducing* it, and something is getting lost in the translation… The flesh. It should make the computer, uh, crazy. Like those old ladies pinching babies. But it doesn't; not yet, because I haven't taught the computer to be made crazy by the... flesh. The poetry of the steak. So, I'm gonna start teaching it now.

[4] Priest wrote his novelization under the penname John Luther Novak to avoid confusion with his own novel out around the same time, *The Extremes*.

"Teaching the flesh" works and the computer does learn to "go crazy," but indiscriminately. Beyond the splicing of Brundle and fly into Brundlefly, the computer, without human hesitation, furthermore fuses Brundlefly and the open telepod, resulting in a tragic hybrid mess. This mess of course goes unnoticed by the technology responsible for it, which reports, "Fusion of Brundlefly and Telepod successful." Halberstam and Livingston observe, "When he merges fly/human with the genetic structure of the computer and its attendant hardware, the triple other of animal/human/machine cannot slouch anywhere to be born but only abjectly crawl and beg to be killed" (13). This fate seems to be the unfortunate endgame of body horror films—death. After all, it's not just body anxiety; the horror had to come from somewhere.

Body Horror Scared to Death

With death in mind, I consider what it looks like when body horror is played straight. There's a body horror of the "real world" depicted through film just like there is its flashier equivalent of mutant growths. *A History of Violence* is Cronenberg's subtlest example, but it's just as dictated by technology in smaller ways. Two things set Tom's path into motion toward confronting Joey Cusack, the man he was before he fled Philadelphia and his Irish mafia ties to settle down in Indiana. Guns and television. Machines and media. These particular technological forces rule much of our interactions with our real world outside of film too, usually inextricably tied as the media gravitates toward the drama of shootings, exactly like *A History of Violence*'s plot unveils. When Tom's confronted with violence, he immediately recalls the Joey Cusack he was and makes quick work of the men holding up his diner. After media outlets get wind of his hero story, Tom is broadcast across the nation's news, bringing Carl Fogarty and his henchmen to town. Here too, technology connects: Tom to his past, Fogarty to his location—and those connections set the rest of the violence into bloody motion. The body horror here is violence depicted realistically, which the majority of films neglect to fully reveal. Cronenberg strips the media representation of its filters and makes the camera tell the truth as far as fiction is able to.

The truth depicted in *Dead Ringers*, more outlandish but no less plausible, is the death and mutilation that technology can inflict upon the human body. Regarding truth, Cronenberg adapted *Dead Ringers* from the bizarre true story of Stewart and Cyril Marcus, twin gynecologists like the Mantles in his film, found dead in Cyril's apartment from apparent suicides. The film is simultaneously based on Bari Wood and Jack Geasland's novelization of the true crime story, *Twins*. However where the true story is straightforward and the novel schlocky, Cronenberg's film philosophically investigates the technology of the human body. Beverly Mantle's surgical tools for "mutant women" first of all treat women like a different bodily technology altogether. More poignantly, they make us reconsider through violent alienation effect the very act of surgery as a mechanical retooling of the body. That mechanical retooling by film's end reveals how very fragile our sophisticated wetwares truly are: Beverly does not "separate the Siamese twins"; he kills them through a Latourian actancy more chillingly possible than Max's hand/gun.

The technology of course at stake in *Crash* is the car, a machine as known for its ease of transportation as for its destructive power. Harmonizing both, Paul Virilio reasons in *The Original Accident*, "To invent the… automobile is to produce the *pile-up* on the highway" (10).

When the characters of *Crash* want to feel the effect of automobile technology upon their bodies—or at all really—they welcome Virilio's invention of the accident. Before Ballard's accident initiates him to this underground network of car crash disciples, it first introduces him to the person whose car he hits, Helen Remington. Her husband killed in the accident, Ballard and Helen quickly begin their own affair, in a location key to this discussion—in cars. When Helen admits she was unfaithful to her husband in a series of similar car featured dalliances, Ballard asks, "You had sex with all those men in cars? Only in cars?" Helen retorts, "Yes. I didn't plan it that way." But they all happened that way, much like a majority of the sex scenes in *Crash* occur in cars as well. In fact, the way the camera films certain positions, the sex scenes are obstructed by parts of the car—if we only look to the people for sexual onus. I suggest here that every sex scene in a car is actually a filmed threesome with the car, for as Halberstam and Livingston argue, "Turn-ons are not sexual; sexuality is a dispersed relation between bodies and things" (8). The car may not be inherently sexual but gets sexually fetishized by the human act upon the technology. The technology also acts upon the human in deadlier ways. Vaughan, the madman prophet of paraphilia to the car crash faithful, first tells Ballard his project is "a reshaping of the human body by modern technology." That reshaping is, again, one of scars and mutilation. Even more to the point, it's a reshaping unto death, which Vaughan does not regard negatively. Later, he revises what his "project" is by waxing poetic about how "the car crash is a fertilizing rather than a destructive event, a liberation of sexual energy, mediating the sexuality of those who have died with an intensity that's impossible for any other form." Vaughan in fact remediates infamous car crashes of famous movie stars: James Dean, Jayne Mansfield, Grace Kelly, etc., "to experience that, to relive that." But to relive a car crash is likely to live death: to die much like Seagrave and Vaughan do. As *Crash* ends, Ballard and his wife have reconnected as a couple through the deviancy of sex mediated by traffic accident; they lie in the grassy median next to Catherine's crashed car and begin to make love as he whispers, "Maybe the next one." The inevitable purpose, therefore, of their technologically augmented pleasure is hinted to be Vaughan's own "project" of sorts, to thrust and penetrate with the car where the body cannot unto eventual death. And that's almost a happy ending. Body horror enacted realistically against technological augmentation will inevitably confront the viewer with the fact that a body can only mutate/mutilate so far before death claims it.

As body horror alters the bodies filmed within it, it more subtly alters the viewers at which it's screened. David Cronenberg's films I have discussed particularly demonstrate how the meta-discomfort of viewing body horror alerts us, the mediated, to being enacted upon by media figuratively as these fictions have carried out more literally. Writing, though powerful, surrenders representational control to the mind of the reader; it's the filmic representation of body horror that leaves us more vulnerable to the full force of seeing bodies like ours mutate into the represented unrepresentable. David Cronenberg's career of film adaptation then functions as a practical application of his thematic fascination with augmentation, mutating one narrative body into another. "Adapting" to the aesthetic of disgust throughout Cronenberg's tour of mutilations, marks, and mutations, the Cartesian dualist must take nervous account of the vulnerable body they inhabit. There they will find that body horror terrifies the object in the subject, an increasing anxiety as technology approaches subjectivity and attempts to act on the human body as a mutable object. Body horror played fantastically or realistically is a play toward a death of sorts, so whether flashy

and fleshy or subtle and subversive, it should face the viewer with the strange ephemerality of their own body. As a medium of disease, change, violence, addiction, pleasure, terror, the body is an arena for frightening possibilities: to see that filmed is to confront those possibilities within oneself. David Cronenberg invites us to view these possibilities as opportunities for augmentation. His body of work tells us that living inside bodies means we must face our body horror by proclaiming, "Long Live the New Flesh!"

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