David Cronenberg’s films focus insistently, obsessively on the body. They relentlessly articulate a politics, a technology, and an aesthetics of the flesh. They are unsparingly visceral; this is what makes them so disturbing.

Cronenberg’s explorations of the flesh go against the grain of our most deeply rooted social myths. The body remains the great unknown, the “dark continent” of postmodern thought and culture. We live in a world of ubiquitous, commodified images of sexuality; but one in which the shocks of tactile contact and (in an age of AIDS) of the mingling or transmission of bodily fluids are all the more denied. New electronic technologies, with their clean bits of binarized information, claim to volatilize the flesh. Material needs, Baudrillard tells us, have long since been displaced by simulacra. Desire is described by Lacanian theorists as a linguistic process and scrupulously detached from any taint of bodily excitation or of affect. Postmodern Western culture is more traditional, more Cartesian, than it is willing to admit; it is still frantically concerned to deny materiality, to keep thought separate from the exigencies of the flesh. As Foucault sug-
gests, we continue to elaborate the strange "idea that there exists something other than bodies, organs, somatic localizations, functions, anatomo-physiological systems, sensations, and pleasures; something else and something more, with intrinsic properties and laws of its own" (History of Sexuality I: 152). This "something else" is the postmodern residue of the Cartesian myth of an autonomous thinking substance. Postmodern ideology has not rejected the notion of absolute subjectivity so much as it has refigured the old fantasy of freedom from the constraints of the body in the new terms of cybernetic information, sexual representation, and social signification. The text is the postmodern equivalent of the soul.

Cronenberg's films display the body in its crude, primordial materiality. They thereby deny the postmodern myth of textual or signifying autonomy. They short-circuit the social logic of information and representation by collapsing this logic back into its physiological and affective conditions. And they suggest that the new technologies of late capitalism, far from erasing our experience of the body, in fact heighten this experience, by investing that body in novel and particularly intense ways. The machine invented by Seth Brundle (Jeff Goldblum) in The Fly is typical in this regard. Its ostensible purpose is teleportation: the quintessential postmodern fantasy of instantaneous transmission, of getting from one point to another without having to endure the inconveniences of bodily movement and the passage of time. "I hate vehicles," Brundle remarks; he perpetually suffers from "motion sickness." But his experiments go awry; the machine quickly reveals its deeper, unintended purpose as a gene splicer. Far from negating the constraints of distance and duration, it implants the difference and delay that they imply directly into Brundle's flesh. Brundle's entire transformation is a kind of "motion sickness": he traverses the enormous gap separating human from insect, not seamlessly and instantaneously but in the slow unfolding of bodily affliction. Similar processes take place in Scanners, where extra-sensory perception—traditionally a figure for the liberation of the mind from space and from the body—instead instances the violent physicality of thought; and in Videodrome, where video technology destroys traditional forms of physical presence only in order to incarnate a "new flesh."

Cronenberg's films, then, are violently, literally visceral. They depict the violation and disarticulation of living flesh, and we are spared none of the gruesome anatomical details of the protagonists' physical transformations into flies or living video machines. Seth Brundle's exhibition of an insect's digestive processes blown up to human scale is more troubling than any number of psychopathic murders in a
slasher film would be. It is very nearly unwatchable—for the other characters in the film as well as for us—precisely because it is a simple matter of biology, a physical process devoid of symbolic or archetypal resonance. Master narratives of social progress and myths of inherent evil or of spiritual redemption are no longer available to inure us to the excruciating passion of the subjugated body. There is no vision of transcendence in the claustrophobic world of these films. We are left only with affects of despair and rage—embodied in cancers and monstrous births in *The Brood*, or with bafflement and confusion over limits and identities—as in the self-destructive trajectory of the physically identical Mantle twins (Jeremy Irons) in *Dead Ringers*. Passion is anchored in and expressed by the brute facticity of bodily transmutations.

Cronenberg is a literalist of the body. Everything in his films is corporeal, grounded in the monstrous intersection of physiology and technology. Bodily affections are not psychoanalytic symptoms to be deciphered; they actually are, in their own right, movements of passion. The body is the site of the most violent alterations and of the most intense affects. It is continually subjugated and remade, and in this process it experiences extremities of pleasure, pain, and horror. The flesh is less rigidly determined, more fluid and open to metamorphosis, than we generally like to think. Cronenberg’s science-fiction extrapolations of biotechnology register this troubling plasticity and ambiguity. The polymorphousness of living tissue has the capacity to traverse all boundaries, to undo the rigidities of organic function and symbolic articulation. New arrangements of the flesh break down traditional binary oppositions between mind and matter, image and object, self and other, inside and outside, male and female, nature and culture, human and inhuman, organic and mechanical. Indeed, the systematic undoing of these distinctions, on every possible level, is the major structural principle of all of Cronenberg’s films. The Marilyn Chambers character acquires a strange and deadly phallic appendage in *Rabid*; a vaginal slit opens in Max Renn’s (James Woods) body in *Videodrome*. The blurring of distinctions between self and other is especially evident in the case of the identical twins in *Dead Ringers*. In *Scanners*, with its telepathic brothers, ESP disrupts the very notions of bodily integrity and of mental privacy, and hence upsets any concept of personal identity based on either. This film also refuses to distinguish between natural and artificial intelligence: one scene depicts a violent contest of wills, on nearly equal terms, between human and computer. In *The Fly*, Seth Brundle is first transformed into “Brundle-fly,” and ultimately finds himself fused with inorganic matter.
But the most important binary opposition that collapses in Cronenberg’s films is that between mind and body, or thought and matter. Psychological and physiological processes occur simultaneously, and neither can be said to be the cause or ground of the other. In effect, Cronenberg deconstructs Cartesian dualism by establishing an absolute Spinozan parallelism between minds and bodies. In *Scanners*, telepathy is “the direct linking of two nervous systems separated by space”; that is why the experience of being “scanned” can culminate in nosebleeds, headaches, and even the brain being violently blown apart. Mental processes—desires and fears, affects and fantasies—are directly registered as bodily alterations. This is the basis for Dr. Hal Raglan’s (Oliver Reed) system of “psychoplasmics” in *The Brood*. Through a series of manipulative psychodramas, he induces his patients to go all the way to the end of their feelings of dependency and rage. The result is a series of grotesque physical deformities. As a former patient, now ravaged with lymphatic cancer, bitterly complains, “Raglan encouraged my body to revolt against me, and it did.” Nola Carveth (Samantha Eggar) maternally watches over, and even licks into shape, a “brood” of dwarflike creatures that emerge from external sacs on her body. These beings embody her anger and need for revenge; they are the ultimate product of her own experience of having been abused as a child. They literally enact her rage, murdering her parents and the woman she wrongly suspects of being her estranged husband’s lover. The brood is inarticulate (they make gurgling sounds, but lack the organs necessary for comprehensible speech) and self-consuming (they do not eat, but are nourished by an internal food sac and die of starvation once it is depleted). In all these respects, the creatures to which Nola gives birth are the embodiment at once of her victimization and instability, and of the way in which she aggressively redirects her pain, perpetuating the cycle of abuse.

Cronenberg thus reverses the popular mythology that would see cancer and other diseases as consequences of repression. The “revolt” of the body is a direct expression of passion rather than a pathogenic symptom of its denial. Raglan’s patients suffer from the very success of his treatment: they become all too capable of venting their rage. Nola literally gives birth to her anger, embodying and reshaping actual social conditions and experiences within the family. Physiological transformations do not symbolize or represent hidden psychological conflicts; they are the arena in which, precisely, these conflicts are no longer hidden. Cronenberg’s films insist upon the Artaudian imperative that everything be made body, everything be materially, visibly enacted. There can be no recourse to the negative hypotheses of
repression and hysterical conversion. Even the miseries and sufferings of Cronenberg's protagonists cannot be defined in terms of lack. Nola Carveth, Max Renn, and Seth Brundle do not perish from ungratified desire, but from bodily fulfillment even to excess. Each in his or her own way is made pregnant with a monstrous birth.

Monstrosity is not the consequence of denial in Cronenberg's films. The reverse is more nearly the case: our ideologies of "health" and "normality" are grounded in the denial or expulsion of monstrosity. Our culture's profound ambivalence toward all forms of birthing and embodiment is the source of the "horror" in these horror films. We feel panic at Cronenberg's vision of the body, its stresses and transformations, the intensity of its physical sensations. This obviously does not exclude our also finding this vision deeply hilarious. But terror and humor alike are rooted in Cronenberg's refusal to idealize his presentation of the body in its primordial monstrosity and obscenity. In one of Seth Brundle's early, unsuccessful experiments with teleportation in *The Fly*, a baboon is turned inside out and reappears as a throbbing, bloody mass of bones, hair, and flesh. It has been hideously transformed, but not quite to the point of death. An organic mass continues to pulse and groan imploringly, expressing pain and begging for our assistance. Such a spectacle makes a peculiar claim upon us. It is obscene, and by that very fact it testifies to an extreme vulnerability, of which we can only be the uncomfortable witnesses. We cannot do anything about this bodily transformation, but we also cannot sit back and view it from a comfortable distance. We are denied the luxuries of objectification and control; fascination is mingled with disgust. Our response is violently ambivalent on every level.

This monstrous ambivalence has been a frequent source of critical misunderstanding. Cronenberg's films have been the target of the most violent polemics. The usually perceptive Robin Wood, for instance, regards them with unqualified loathing; he sees them as expressing a hatred of the body and a rabid fear of sexual difference and sexual liberation. Wood is correct in apprehending that there is no utopian moment, no vision of redemption, no escape from the ambivalent pressures of monstrosity in these films. But he is wrong in therefore categorizing them as reactionary and defensive. Wood simply fails to grasp the political implications of Cronenberg's extreme literalism. To foreground the monstrosity of the body is to refuse the pacifying lures of specular idealization. By insisting on the gross palpability of the flesh, and by heightening (instead of minimizing) our culture's pervasive discomfort with materiality, Cronenberg opposes the way in which dominant cinema captures, polices, and regulates
desire, precisely by providing sanitized models of its fulfillment. *They Came from Within*, in which a phallic/excremental parasite transforms the inhabitants of a chic condominium into a band of violent, frenzied erotomaniacs, is not (as Wood argues) a paranoid rejection of the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Its mood is one of dark comedy rather than unqualified repulsion. It is not Cronenberg, but Wood, who responds to the sexual monstrosity in which the film revels with phobic disgust, and who regards this monstrosity as an objection to the life of the body. *They Came from Within* does not adopt such a phobic position; its own investments are entirely on the side of shock and spectacle. Everything is at once hideous and hilarious, from the gory apparition of the parasitic creature in the bathtub to the zombielike orgy in the swimming pool at the end. The film neither idealizes nor condemns these transgressive movements of physical violation and orgiastic excess. Rather, it slyly suggests that the bourgeois sexual “revolution” in fact merely reproduces the aggressive, hysterical logic of a commodified and competitive society. Transgression is not transcendence.

Cronenberg is thus equally skeptical of “left-Freudian” visions of personal and social liberation through the lifting of repression, and of right-wing claims that desire must always be repressed because it is inherently evil and disruptive. These positions are, in fact, mirror images of one another. They both posit a soul, an originary human essence—whether good or evil—and ignore the shady complicity that always already contaminates desire with the regulation and repression of desire. Humanist visions of unlimited freedom and conservative visions of original sin (or of inevitable limits) both strive to reject monstrosity, to deny the violent ambivalence of bodily passion. Harmonious utopian projections and anxious defenses of the status quo alike betray a continuing need to idealize, a panic in face of the excesses of the flesh. Both ideologies are trying to transcend the anxiety and insecurity implicit in the state of being a body.

Conversely, a refusal of these myths of transcendence is at the heart of Cronenberg’s politics of the body. His films remind us that everything is implanted directly in the flesh. There is no getting away from the monstrosity of the body, nor from the violence with which it is transformed. For there is no essential nature, no spontaneous being, of the body; social forces permeate it right from the beginning. The body is at once a target for new biological and communication technologies, a site of political conflict, and a limit point at which ideological oppositions collapse. Nobody has gone further than Cronenberg in detailing the ways in which the body is invested and colo-
nized by power mechanisms, how it is both a means and an end of social control. The bodies of Max Renn and Seth Brundle, and of the telepaths Cameron Vale (Stephen Lack) and Darryl Revok (Michael Ironside) (the latter two in *Scanners*), are zones of intense receptivity; they capture and render visible a wide range of sinister and usually impalpable social forces, from implicit codes of sexual behavior to the financial transactions of multinational corporations. The word of late capitalist power is literally made flesh. The ubiquitous but ungraspable hyperreality of surveillance and domination is materialized and localized in the form of excruciating pains and pleasures. In this subjugated flesh, fantasy and materiality, affect and technology, the circuits of the brain and the circuits of capital, finally coincide.

Corporate power is apparent everywhere in *Scanners*. It is visible in the sets and decors of the film: in the establishing shots of the ugly, anonymous, and yet aggressively self-assertive architecture of corporate buildings, and in the spare, functional interiors of laboratories, interrogation rooms, and corridors that seem to lead nowhere. It is present more subtly in the second-order imagery which runs like a motif throughout the film: the recurring close-ups of corporate logos, the replays of crucial scenes on film and video, the presentation of information on computer terminals, and finally the startling close-ups of the wiring and transistors that constitute the “nervous system” of the computer. The business of ConSec is the invisible activity of security and surveillance; Cronenberg’s camera dwells on the hardware, the material base, that makes such a process tangible.

In a film so concerned with the politics of “information,” it is appropriate that the main characters should suffer physically from a state of vertiginous epistemological overload. The paranoia and social maladaptation of the “scanners” is a direct consequence of their extraordinary gift of telepathy. They are victims of the extreme permeability of their brains to the ideas and affects of others. Cameron Vale cannot establish his own identity because he cannot shut out the inner “voices” of the people surrounding him; he writhes on a bed in torment under the shock to his nervous system of so many contradictory messages. Vale’s role is not so much acted by Stephen Lack as it is walked through; such a character is disturbingly blank and affectless for the ostensible action hero of the narrative. But as one of Vale’s fellow scanners pityingly tells him, he is so crippled by his psychic sensitivity as to be “barely human.” The other main scanner character, Vale’s brother and antitype Darryl Revok, is even more distorted and chillingly inhuman; he drills a hole in his skull in the hope that this will “let the voices out.” His ruthlessness and lust for power are merely projec-
tions outward of this initial ecstasy of self-laceration. In learning to direct his powers, he becomes “no longer self-destructive, but merely destructive.” For all these characters, as for Artaud, thought is physical agony. *Scanners* is filled with close-ups of faces distorted by a violent tension or effort of concentration: the visible manifestation of the stress felt alike by the scanner and the one being scanned. These shots are usually accompanied by body sounds: breathing and heartbeats. Far from “expressing” or providing insight into the hidden depths of the soul, such distorted physiognomies confront us with a situation in which there no longer is any inner being or soul. Traumatic shock and emotional ambivalence are entirely materialized, played out on the surfaces of the flesh. Nothing can be held back. Confronted with these contorted faces, the spectators are themselves drawn into the agonizing circuit of telepathic exchanges. Observing the scene, watching the gathering of information—as an audience of businesspeople watches a mental duel between Revok and a ConSec scanner in one early sequence—itself becomes a kind of visceral contact. Of course, we cannot actually know the thoughts that lie behind another person’s facial expression. But when the flesh is pushed to such an extremity, we are affected by a physical shock, touched by the image at a distance, violated in the space of our own mental privacy: and so we no longer need to “know.” The violence of communication has priority over the calm registering of information. This is why watching Cronenberg’s films can be such an unsettling, unnerving experience.

There is a direct link between such extreme affective dislocation and the political implications of *Scanners*. Telepathy is first experienced as a state of radical passivity, a subjection of the body, before it is transformed into a power. The film suggests, therefore, that information gathering and management is by no means a calm, neutral process. A violence like that of “scanning” subtends the technologies of computer data gathering and biofeedback. The vulnerability of the organism is a basic, necessary condition for the mastery of cybernetics. The late capitalist utopia of information flow and control is in fact predicated on the violent extraction of information from, and the inscription of it back upon, the suffering flesh. And this technology of cruelty and domination is the common ground for all the plots and counterplots, the struggles for power, that constitute the convoluted narrative of *Scanners*. At the end, Cameron Vale can see no difference between the megalomaniacal ambitions of his brother, Darryl Revok, who wants to set up a dictatorship of scanners, and those of their father/creator, Dr. Paul Ruth (Patrick McGoohan), who projects marvelous new scientific frontiers. Both of these visions of autonomy in
fact pass through the corporate power and computer circuitry of Con-Sec. Both also establish their dreams of transparent mastery only by directing violence against—and for that very reason remaining implicated with—the density and opacity of the body in torment.

All of these ambiguous processes are pushed to even further extremes in *Videodrome*. Cronenberg relentlessly materializes not just information systems, but also the entire range of referentless media images that are so often said to constitute the postmodern world. Simulation is forced to display its body. The brutally hilarious strategy of *Videodrome* is to take media theorists like Marshall McLuhan and Jean Baudrillard completely at their word, to overliteralize their claims for the ubiquitous mediatization of the real. Baudrillard states that television implies not a "society of the spectacle" but rather "the very abolition of the spectacular,... The medium itself is no longer identifiable as such, and the merging of the medium and the message (McLuhan?) is the first great formula of this new age. There is no longer any medium in the literal sense: it is now intangible, diffuse and diffracted in the real, and it can no longer be said that the latter is distorted by it" (54). Media images no longer refer to a real that would be (in principle) prior to and independent of them; for they penetrate, volatilize, and thereby (re)constitute that real.

But *Videodrome* suggests that—contrary to McLuhan and Baudrillard—the resultant "hyperreality" is hot, not cool. Far from being "intangible," it is gruesomely physical: the realm of what Dr. Brian O'Blivion (Jack Creley), the McLuhanesque TV theorist in *Videodrome*, calls "the video word made flesh." The body is not erased or evacuated; it is rather so suffused with video technology that it mutates into new forms and is pushed to new thresholds of intense, masochistic sensation. As it progresses, *Videodrome* moves further and further into the seductive, hallucinatory pleasures of the video-activated body. The key, as Nikki Brand (Deborah Harry) points out early on, is continual, violent overstimulation of the senses. The purpose of the masochistic games into which Nikki initiates Max Renn (cutting herself and sticking burning cigarettes into her naked flesh) is to make bodily sensation more vivid, and therefore more "real." Video technology only further heightens this pleasure. Videocassettes and TV monitors begin to throb like living, breathing flesh; Max embraces Nikki's enormous smile extended in luscious close-up across, and bulging out from, the TV screen. Identities merge and shift; bodies die and come alive again, appear and disappear; it becomes impossible to distinguish between what is spontaneous and what is prerecorded. Max doesn't merely lose any point of reference outside of what is
imprinted on the video screen; he comes to embody this process directly, as he is transformed into a human video machine.

Brian O'Blivion's categorical, video-recorded pronouncements are repeated like mantras throughout the film: "the television screen is the retina of the mind's eye; therefore the television screen is part of the physical structure of the brain." When experience is absorbed by video technology, then this technology is itself quite palpably "real." To abolish reference is not, as Baudrillard imagines, to reduce desire to a series of weightless and indifferent equivalences. The more images are flattened out and distanced from their representational sources, the more they are inscribed in our nerves and flash across our synapses. The real is not "lost" so much as it is redescribed in consequence of a radical epistemological break or shift: it is no longer that which is referred to, but that which suffers and is transformed. This shift is perfectly expressed by the activities of Spectacular Optical, the multinational corporation that turns out to be behind the sinister technologies of Videodrome. The company's public activity is the manufacture of designer eyeglasses, while behind the scenes it is working to dominate the video market—and therefore the entire social organization—of North America. The trade show (for selling "spectacles," or eyeglasses) over which Barry Convex (Les Carlson) presides is itself an old-fashioned spectacle, a stage show self-consciously organized around the themes of Renaissance perspectivism: "love comes in at the eyes" and "the eyes are the windows of the soul." But the videodrome experiments target the body, not the soul. Vision is imploded, turned back upon the flesh. Convex gives Max, instead of eyeglasses, a grotesque metal box that entirely encases his head, and which is supposed to record his hallucinations. We have entered a new regime of the image: one in which vision is visceral and intensive instead of representational and extensive.

In this new regime, the body is the common locus of subjectivity and subjection, of inner perception and outer manifestation. O'Blivion claims at one point that his hallucinatory visions are the cause of his brain tumor, and not the reverse. But these visions are themselves physiologically induced by a video signal that directly stimulates the brain. O'Blivion is the first
victim, as well as the inventor, of the videodrome project. If cancer in *The Brood* was an articulation of affect, in *Videodrome* it materializes the very act of perception. For his part, Max Renn is first exposed to the videodrome signal in the form of a snuff video, containing harshly realistic scenes of torture—hooded figures beating a naked woman—that fascinate and frighten him. He becomes pornographically addicted to this repetitious vision of violation and death; he wants to show it on his cable TV channel. Yet the program escapes his sensationalistic intentions: for what he has encountered is neither the shock of a public spectacle nor the transgressive thrill of a novel by de Sade, but the secret, anonymous world of state and corporate power, where the most extreme abuses of the body are matters of bureaucratic routine. Vision is rendered to the body in the form of pain; shock is now a chronic condition. Max cannot just be a cynically detached spectator of torture; he must suffer it in his own flesh. This new regime of the image abolishes the distance required either for disinterested aesthetic contemplation or for stupefied absorption in spectacle.

But there is still another twist to this scenario. The videodrome signal, it turns out, is a kind of McLuhanesque joke: it is a function of the medium, not of the message. It is a subliminal stimulus that does not require the extremities of a snuff video, but can function under any kind of program, even in a test pattern. The videodrome project thus marks the end of the primacy traditionally accorded to representation. As vision is technologically rationalized and turned back upon the body, its physiological effects take priority alike over the ideological forms of representation and over the contents being represented. The function of vision is no longer to show, but directly to excite, the nerves. Sight is not a neutral source of information, but a gaping wound, a violation of the integrity of the body. In this implosive embodiment of vision, spectacle is indeed abolished, but so is the digital coding that Baudrillard sees as taking its place, for there are no more simple images, no more simulation models, no more surfaces. What starts out as a play of impalpable reflections quickly blossoms into a physical metamorphosis: “the visions became flesh, uncontrol- lable flesh.”

By the end of *Videodrome*, the distinction between fantasy and actuality, or between inner bodily excitation and outer objective representation, has entirely collapsed. The point at which subjective reality becomes entirely hallucinatory is also the point at which technology becomes ubiquitous and is totally melded with and objectified in the human body. When Max is programmed by cassette to be a killer
for Spectacular Optical, his gun is incorporated directly into his flesh, first by a series of plugs and cords and then by an odd fusing together of plastic, metal, and skin. Video technology is no longer concerned merely with disembodied images. It reaches directly into the unseen depths, stimulating the ganglia and the viscera, caressing and remolding the interior volume of the body. An enormous slit opens in Max’s belly: this is at once an actual slot for inserting prerecorded video-cassettes, a link between surface (skin, membrane, retina, image screen) and volume (the thickness and multiple convolutions of the entrails), and a vaginal orifice, indicating the sexualization and “feminization” of Max’s body. This is the point of maximum opacity, at which Max’s conditioning cannot be separated from his desire. He cannot render himself autonomous from technology; the best he can do is painfully to exchange one programming for another, to replace the “videodrome” tape with the ambiguous lure of “the new flesh.” Cronenberg offers no alternative to a ubiquitous, simulated video reality. He suggests that any promise of utopian transcendence is yet another avatar of manipulative power. In the final scene of Videodrome, the television set explodes and burns; but this is only part of a repetitive video loop in which Max is trapped. He shoots himself after seeing himself shoot himself on television. The quasi-religious doctrine of “the new flesh” pushes Max to a limit, but holds out no promises as to what he will encounter on the other side. The film ends with the sound of his gunshot—perhaps a finality, or perhaps a rewind to one more playback.

All this is not to say that Cronenberg leaves us with a Baudrillardian vision of absolute, totalitarian entrapment. The emphasis, rather, again falls on ambivalence and monstrosity. Max’s transformation absurdly, hyperbolically literalizes the ideology that equates femininity with passivity, receptivity, and castration. Videodrome makes us obsessively aware that it is cultural and political technology—and not natural necessity—that imposes the restricted economies of organicism, functionalism, and sexual representation. Anatomy is not destiny, precisely in the sense that the corporeal is the realm in which the Symbolic inscription of fixed gender identity reaches its limit and can be broken down. When a fascistic operative reaches into Max’s belly to insert a new program and instead has his entire arm eaten away, this is most obviously a joke based on the notion of castration anxiety. But the scene undoes psychoanalytic doctrine in a subtler manner as well. Lacan removes gender and sexuality from the body, interpreting them instead as Symbolic processes. His followers argue that this conceptual distinction—which shows that gender differences are not naturally
given—is a necessary first step in criticizing and reversing patriarchy. Cronenberg's supercharged images suggest, to the contrary, that it is only sexist ideology that establishes the distinction (between social constructions and the body) in the first place. Max's transformations, like the obsessive gynecological displacements of the Mantle twins in *Dead Ringers*, demonstrate that gender is not a social construction *rather than* a state of the body; it is precisely a social construction of the body. To separate desire from the body, or the Symbolic from the Real, is to perpetuate (in inverted form) the myth that sees the body as an essence, outside of history. Power does not work merely on the level of images and ideologies; it directly invests the flesh. Symbolic ascription is not a seamless or conclusive process; it involves continual operations upon the body. The visceral density of the flesh gets in the way of any untrammeled, instantaneous exercise of total power. In *Videodrome*, Spectacular Optical controls all the software, but it still has to depend upon the unreliable materiality of (human or mechanical) hardware. The body is a potential site of resistance, not in spite of, but because of, its being a necessary relay, target, and support of power. The flesh is perpetually monstrous, unstable, out of control.

Cronenberg's films thus exceed the limits of social control to the extent that they locate power and desire directly in an immanent experience of the body. Initially linear plot lines explode in multiple, incompatible directions, following the delirious, paranoid logic of proliferating cancer cells, or of interfaces between biology and technology run amok. Mutations whose original function was to serve corporate or bureaucratic power take on a sinister life of their own once they have been implanted in the bodies of their hosts/victims. Power and authority are swallowed up within the very mechanisms of fear that they themselves have created. Ambiguity, chance, and intense pleasure are unavoidable consequences of embodiment. In *Videodrome*, masochism and "feminization" are instances of this process. Max Renn starts out (thanks to James Woods's consummate performance) as stereotypically "masculine": sleazy, competitive, aggressive, and tough in a self-congratulatory way. But his transformation destroys these pretensions, even as it is a movement not subject to his own control. His body gets penetrated by technology to the very extent that his will is dissolved in passive fascination. He is absorbed by the medium when he no longer possesses the cynicism and detachment necessary to manipulate it. And he is seduced, stimulated, "turned on" by the affective overload of new sensations in new organs. Such a subject position is also that of the viewers of *Videodrome*. 
Cronenberg's strategy is the perverse opposite of Brecht's; it shatters identification and "alienates" the spectator by virtue of too great a proximity to bliss and horror, and not because of any rational distancing from them. The self-possession of the "male gaze" gives way to the intensely ambivalent—and ambiguously gendered—pleasures of an all too vulnerable flesh.

The relations between power and pleasure in Cronenberg's films are subtle and complex. Max Renn and Seth Brundle experience new forms of affect exactly to the extent that they lose control over what's happening to their own bodies. But it would be too simple to say that their pleasure is therefore a compensation (or a pernicious alibi) for their loss of power. For both of these developments must be seen in conjunction with a mutation in the very form of subjectivity. Passion is imprinted directly in the flesh, prior to any movement of self-conscious reflection. Psychophysiological changes are continually occurring, at a rate that exceeds our ability to assimilate or understand them. In *The Fly*, Seth Brundle's rationalizations of his state always lag far behind the actual, visible changes in his body. He posits a series of ideological explanations—a leap into the plasma pool, a bizarre new form of cancer—each of which is discredited as his physical transformations continue. He is finally compelled to admit that he suffers from "a disease with a purpose" of its own, one to which he cannot himself be privy. He is in effect excluded from the scene of his own metamorphosis. Human subjectivity cannot absorb or "recognize" the being of a fly. And so the movements that turn Brundle into Brundlefly are necessarily passive and unwilled. They involve affects and passions of which their ostensible subject is not the master. Sensation and desire are so far from being reducible to self-consciousness that for the most part they are incompatible with it.

There is no stable subject position in Cronenberg's films, just as there is no figure of hypostasized, absolute Otherness. In typical horror films, as Robin Wood has argued, a socially constructed "normality" is threatened by a monster that in some sense figures "the return of the repressed." The monster is the Other, the portion of the self that is "projected outward in order to be hated and disowned" (199); and "the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses" (201). But the parasites in Cronenberg's films do not conform to any such dialectical logic. We can say neither that monstrosity is purely extrinsic and has nothing to do with us, nor that it is actually internal, really a repressed and projected portion of ourselves. There is no hope of escape, no possibility of separation and expulsion; but there is also no possibility of recog-
Cronenberg’s “monsters” are forms of alterity that cannot be reduced to the economy of the Same, but that also cannot be identified as purely and simply Other. Autonomy is out of the question. A parasite is neither part of me nor apart from me; it is something from which I cannot separate myself but that at the same time I cannot integrate into my personality. I do not become cognizant of alterity; rather it insinuates itself within me, as a new and uncontrollable potentiality of the body. I am passively invested by forces I cannot recuperate as my own. Boundaries between self and other break down; the festering wound of alterity is incurable. I am affected by, and compelled to “experience,” something that remains irreducibly not me: other minds (Scanners), media images (Videodrome), and even the altogether nonhuman (The Fly).

In Cronenberg’s films, then, there is a disturbing intimacy at the heart of terror. We are not transported to some fantastic realm; everything takes place in the bourgeois privacy of living rooms and bedrooms. Anonymous corporate and professional spaces alternate with the most banal and claustrophobic upper-middle-class decors. There is no escape from this rigidly circumscribed world; a point of explosive, utopian liberation is never reached. Instead, a principle of entropy seems to be at work: the apartments and work spaces of Max Renn, Seth Brundle, and the Mantle twins become increasingly cluttered and strewn with debris. As Brundle turns into Brundlefly, he leaves behind the now useless traces of his former existence: teeth and other body parts, and bits of regurgitated, half-digested food. At one point, he even proposes (with dark humor) to preserve these relics, to turn his loft into a “Brundle museum.” The image of increasing disorder, composed of leftover bits and pieces of himself, is entirely apt. Brundle’s past existence is not entirely effaced; it remains in the form of discontinuous fragments. He has not been translated from one state of being into another so much as he has been uprooted from the fixity of human identity and submitted instead to a process of continual flux. It is at the point of greatest intimacy, in his own home and in his own body, that he has become a stranger.

It is this unmooring of subjectivity, its passive immersion in bodily turbulence, that marks the limit of power. The violent metamorphosis of the flesh is fatal alike to the assertion of personal initiative and to the manipulative technologies of social control. Brundlefly is born in the excruciating rigors of an estrangement without hope of return. Such a voyage into the flesh cannot be actively willed, for it approaches precisely that condition in which the will no longer commands. Insofar as Seth can will anything, his need to rehumanize himself is
irreducible. But his moving, desperate attempt to preserve his identity from monstrous transformation is also a ludicrously literal endeavor to conform to social norms. Seth cannot distinguish his self-preservation from his subjection to socially imposed definitions of what it means to be “human,” to be “male,” and so on. And so he prevents Veronica (Geena Davis) from aborting her genetically altered fetus and tries to force her instead to fuse with him, thus creating the ultimate “nuclear family.” All this suggests that will and personal identity are inextricably intertwined with forces of domination and social control. And conversely, those movements that exceed Seth’s will, that violate the integrity of his body, and that compromise his sense of personal identity also absent themselves from the meshes of normalizing power.

There is nothing utopian or redemptive about this process. Brundlefly is not a new species or a new identity, but literally a monster, a point of absolute singularity. Seth is free from social control only in the sense that he cannot be part of any society. Yet another of his failed dreams is to balance the two sides of his nature, to become “the first insect politician.” But his becoming fly is an open-ended process, always pulling him further and further away from any community, any identity, any repose. Seth starts out not being able to teleport organic matter, because he doesn’t understand the flesh. In the course of the film, he is increasingly compelled to endure the burden of the materiality that he is unable to comprehend or master. His body is traversed by physical forces, and submitted to stresses, that are more and more intolerable. By the end, he is all too acquainted with the flesh: he is even merged with the machinery that alters him, with the telepod itself. This new body, this mass of mingled tissue and metal, is a burden too great to bear. Its sheer weight epitomizes sensory and corporeal overload: an overinvestment of the muscles and the nerves, a sensitivity and vulnerability too great to be endured, and yet that must be endured. Seth crawls forth and gestures imploringly to Veronica; death is the only release from this relentless process, this hell of embodiment. This excruciating materiality cannot be redeemed, this contaminating alterity cannot be assumed or possessed. Yet it is precisely the untenability of this position that is most important, and most affirmative. To the extent that the flesh is unbearable, it is irrecoverable. The extremities of agony cannot finally be distinguished from those of pleasure. Bodily intensity is in this sense an other to power, an excess that disturbs it, a surplus that it cannot ever control or appropriate.
Autonomy and disalienation are empty lures in the postmodern world, in which even the innermost recesses of subjectivity have been commodified by the forces of economic exchange and pigeonholed by normalizing power. Every utopia is already its own reification. But let us not mourn the disappearance of those promises of redemption and transcendence, which were never anything more than pacifying myths, or devices of social control, in the first place. The time for idealization and fantasy is fortunately over. Cronenberg's films desublimate and decondition the affects of fear, anxiety, and mourning; that is to say, they present these feelings positively and literally, as affections and transformations of the flesh, and not as secondary consequences of some originary loss or lack. We are given the experience (an intense physical excitation) without the meaning. Anxiety is not an existential condition but a churning of the stomach, a throbbing of the arteries, a tension distending the skull, a series of stresses and shocks running the entire length of the body. Fear is not susceptible to phenomenological analysis; for it marks the emptying out of subjectivity and of time. It abolishes all other concerns and feeds only upon itself; it has no external points of reference, no antecedents, and no possibility of cathartic resolution. Cronenberg's films heighten, and indeed celebrate, those extreme situations in which even the intimacy of my own body is an exposure, a vulnerability, and not a refuge.

These films bear witness to the birth of a new form of subjectivity: one that is entirely embodied, that has no sense of privacy, and that can no longer be defined in terms of fantasy. Without fantasy, without the alibis of idealization and transcendence, there is no way to stabilize identity, but also no way to escape from the limits and pressures of corporeality. This is the fundamental double bind of Cronenberg's films. The subject is dispossessed of itself, radically decentered, and yet it remains all the more vulnerable and constrained. It is implicated in processes external to itself, contaminated or diseased beyond all hope of recovery. It cannot free itself from forces that it is unable to control and that continually threaten to destroy it. These forces are social technologies of power; but they are also passions, obsessions, sensations, and pleasures. And these forces do not exist merely in the imagination; they are visible and tangible, and must be physically endured. Fantasy is extinguished in the radical passivity of visceral anguish.

Nowhere is this movement more powerfully articulated than in *Dead Ringers*, all the more so in that the film has so little recourse to gory special effects or to the projections of science fiction. Here the monstrosity of the body is insinuated only in the “mutant” shape of Claire Niveau's (Genevieve Bujold) womb, on the one hand, and in
the visual identity of the Mantle twins (the film's one spectacular special effect), on the other. But these minute deviations of the flesh are sufficient to disrupt the workings of fantasy and to unhinge the articulations of self-consciousness. The process is gradual, however. At the start of the film, Elliott and Beverly Mantle maintain a conventional sense of their own identities by objectifying women's bodies. The very first scene shows them, at age twelve, intrigued with the idea that fish, who live in the water (as they once lived together in the womb), do not need to engage in physical contact in order to reproduce. As adults with a successful gynecological practice, they maintain the same distance from others, and the same primary attachment to one another. Beverly's voyeuristic probings of women's insides and Elliott's superciliously dry medical school lectures allow them to engage in activities that have a high sexual charge without sacrificing their physical and emotional detachment. They work on problems of female fertility, and steadfastly avoid any questioning of male physiology. ("We don't do husbands," Beverly exasperatedly tells one patient who begs him to treat her husband's sterility, and seems to be implicitly requesting that the doctor take over the role of spouse.) Yet at the same time, their deepest emotional satisfaction seems to come from mimicking one another, switching their identities in order to fool the outside world. They even share women as sexual partners in this way.

So far, this is a classic pattern of male fantasy. But the film is not content merely to critique the ideology of such an arrangement. Dead Ringers does not try to explain the structure of male desire in psychoanalytic terms; it explores the material and corporeal basis of fantasy. Women's bodies are both the target of an objectifying and normalizing technology and the physical support for the Mantle twins' efforts to stabilize their own disincarnate masculine identities. Cronenberg thus assimilates the possessive gaze of dominant cinema to what Foucault calls the "medical gaze" of the male gynecologist examining his patient. Masculine "identity" is not the result of a structuring process involving fears and fantasies of castration; it is the actual product of a concrete articulation of power and knowledge. Such an "identity" is ambivalent and unstable, constituted and traversed as it is by a whole series of forces and resistances. Male subjectivity is a strange affection of the body, articulated in the doubling of the Mantle twins. Their physical resemblance allows them to "pass" for one another; they can share and transfer experiences, and literally be in two places at once. Male fantasy thus separates self-consciousness from the constraints of materiality, purchasing omnipotence by denying embodiment. But
this denial is itself rooted in the body. Beverly and Elliott's overresemblance is also a confusing redundancy, an uncomfortable excess of embodiment, that disturbs the freedom of male fantasy. They are too much alike not to suffer from separation.

The uncanniness of this situation is perfectly captured in Jeremy Irons's double performance. The mannerisms of Elliott and Beverly are subtly different, so that we can nearly always tell which one of them is which. But these differences are not enough to negate our awareness that the same actor, the same body, is rendering both. (The film wouldn't work with two actors as the brothers, even if the actors were themselves twins.) Because of their excessive physical similarity, the characters of Beverly and Elliott are more like different performances than like different selves. Neither of them is able convincingly to dislodge his interiority from its reflection in the other; neither can ever be self-sufficient or self-contained. They are unable even to live apart from one another, although Beverly tries at times to escape. Nonetheless, such dependency does not guarantee communion. Because their bodies are two, and separated in space, it is also impossible for them ever fully to coincide. There is no unified identity at the base of their contrasting roles. They are paradoxically too close to one another to be able to resort to the mechanisms of identification. Just as Beverly struggles unsuccessfully to preserve for himself alone the feelings and memories of his relationship with Claire, so Elliott obsesses over his need to become "synchronized" with his brother. These seemingly opposed impulses are in fact mutually cohesive manifestations of the same situation of excessive proximity. The Mantle twins can achieve neither absolute union nor complete differentiation. Near the end of the film, there is a scene in which Beverly and Elliott trudge through their apartment in their underwear. The precise similarity of their appearance, and the perfect correspondence of their physical gestures as they walk, is like something out of silent film comedy; the motions are entirely singular, and yet they give the impression of being robotic or mechanized simply because they are doubled. The Bergsonian absurdity of this otherwise somber scene points up, yet again, the irreducible insistence of the flesh. Just as in Cronenberg's other films, alterity is found within the closest intimacy, at the very heart of the self's relation to itself.

And so Elliott and Beverly's notion that they are not just identical, but Siamese, twins is something more than a metaphor. What starts out as a fantasy (when Beverly has a nightmare that Claire is tearing apart—with her teeth—the flesh that unites him to Elliott) has to be literalized and enacted by the end of the film. The figure who triggers
this movement from fantasy to actuality, from the Mantles’ appropriating investment of women’s bodies to their ambiguous captivation with their own flesh, is of course Claire herself. Claire doesn’t remain safely ensconced in her position as objectified Other; she doesn’t play her appointed role in “the Mantle saga,” not just because she insists on distinguishing between the brothers, but also because the “mutant” singularity of her sterile, trifurcate womb reminds the twins all too strongly of themselves. Beverly is immediately fascinated by this strangeness in her reproductive system, and Elliott tries to flatter her with his idea of “beauty contests for the insides of bodies.” Claire is also an actress, somebody whose profession consists in the simulation of identities; the twins associate the glamour and illusionism of acting with their impersonations of one another. Further, although Claire is quite a capable and powerful figure, her sexual tastes tend toward the masochistic, and she repeatedly makes clear her “need for humiliation.” This in turn feeds back into her perception of her own body; she feels “vulnerable, sliced open,” and in a position of abject dependency as a result of her inability to have children.

This vulnerability and physical singularity is what attracts the Mantle twins to Claire, but also what allows her to escape them. She frustrates their gynecological gaze because she so aggressively embodies, and claims for herself, those very features that are supposed to demarcate the privileged zone of male fantasy. Beverly and Elliott see Claire—in different ways—as the living realization of their deepest desires and anxieties; but she refuses to be a support for their projections. Beverly’s involvement with Claire is the extreme expression, but also the limit, of his and his brother’s obsessions. The turning point comes when Beverly calls Claire’s hotel suite and, incorrectly assuming that the male secretary who answers the phone is her new lover, launches into an obscene tirade about her anatomical peculiarities. After this, everything collapses. The moment of the most violent male paranoia (jealousy, possessiveness, and dependency compensated for by a need to deny and to control) is also the moment when projection fails, and the reality of the flesh comes most insistently into play. Beverly becomes more and more hysterically misogynous, complaining that his patients do not have the right sort of bodies, crudely insulting them and finally even injuring one of them on the operating table. But this only marks his desperation, as the structure of male fantasy implodes. Beverly is no longer able to maintain the distancing equation of femininity, objectified otherness, and the body. He is brought back, not to “himself,” but to his primordial complicity with Elliott, to the agonizing resemblance of their own shared flesh.
Dead Ringers thus emerges as Cronenberg’s strangest and subtlest study in embodiment. The structure of male fantasy is progressively undone; attention is returned from the objectified female body to the subjectified male one. The Mantle twins end up experiencing in their own flesh the processes they had previously tried to project onto others. Their subjectivity is initially stabilized by its obsessive objectifications of, and hysterical projections upon, women’s bodies. But the very excess of these processes ultimately undermines their power. The twins are relentlessly drawn into a spiral of self-disintegration. The hieratic red robes that Beverly dons when performing operations give way to the Caravaggiesque nudity of the two brothers in the final shots of the film. Beverly’s bizarre gynecological instruments for treating mutant women find their more intimate use as tools for separating Siamese twins. The rituals of medical power and prestige are turned back against the selves that they had previously confirmed and inflated. Elliott reminds us that Chang and Eng, the original Siamese twins, could not stand the shock of separation; when one of them died of natural causes, the other died in turn of sheer fright. The incisions that are supposed to separate Elliott from Beverly once and for all similarly succeed only in uniting them in the most extreme resemblance there is, that of death. Beverly cannot leave Elliott’s body behind and return to Claire, because in killing his brother he has in fact performed a self-canceling ritual of automutilation. Male subjectivity is finally rendered to the flesh, and quietly consumed—and consummated—in abjection.

The imploding trajectory of Dead Ringers is that of all of Cronenberg’s films. They reject fantasy and embrace abjection, just as they undermine symbolic and ideological processes in order to affirm the impropriety of the real body. Of course, cinematic experience in general has traditionally been defined in terms of fantasy, idealization, and a dialectic between the pacifying stabilization of identity and the imaginative freeplay of indeterminacy. Cronenberg’s films are powerfully disruptive of these norms, even though they depend on the “illusionism” of special effects and observe the formal rules of seamless continuity editing and narrative closure. When the possibilities of fantasy and appropriative identification are destroyed for the male protagonists of these films, they are equally destroyed for the spectator. The audience cannot be exempted from the processes of contagion. Walter Benjamin writes that “the shock effect of the film . . . like all shocks, should be cushioned by heightened presence of mind” (238). Cronenberg’s strategy is continually to up the ante of shock, in order to anticipate and outstrip any such protective counterheightening. We
are pushed to the limits of vision and of representation, compelled to witness what we cannot bear to see. Exploding and multiplied flesh, the violent or insidious violation of bodily integrity, is crucial to Cronenberg’s project formally as well as thematically. He doesn’t offer a critique of the operations of “suture” or the norms of cinematic representation, for it is from within these very operations and norms that the most perverse and threatening flowers bloom. The imposing plenitude of the image instills in the spectator a heightened sensitivity to the affections of his or her own body. The continuity of character and action binds us to a logic of nonidentity and disintegration. The convincing explicitness of the gore and other special effects makes us feel all the more fragile and insecure, in that our awareness of the fictionality of what we see offers us no comfort, alleviation, or escape. Identification (of the spectator with the protagonist, or with the gaze of the camera) leads to a loss of control, a shattering of the ego. It is the excess of male fantasy, and not a critical reduction of it, that leads to its destruction; just as it is from deep within postmodern technologies of domination, and not at a utopian remove from them, that an irrecoverable other to power can be affirmed. Cronenberg disrupts the power mechanisms normally attributed to classic narrative cinema not by distancing himself from them, but by pushing them as far as they can go. He discovers or produces, at the very heart of these mechanisms, a subject that can no longer be defined in the conventional terms of lack, denial, and fantasy, and whose intense passion cannot be described as a desire for mastery, closure, and self-possession. The viewing subject’s most intense pleasures lie rather in the unresolved tensions of vulnerability, ambivalence, and fear. The cinematic gaze is violently embedded in the flesh. I discover, in Cronenberg’s films, not the flattering illusion of my omnipotence, but the ecstasy and terror of abjection.

Note

1. This essay forms part of a larger study on film and the body entitled _The Cinematic Body_ (University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

Works Cited

