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Attractive Ambiguities: Epistemological Uncertainty of the Films of David Cronenberg

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Speaking about the commercial success of Cronenberg's feature *eXistenZ*, the Cronenberg scholar William Beard points out that its initial business was a disappointment.¹ However, just like other films before (*Videodrome*, *Naked Lunch*, for instance), the film "began almost immediately to develop a cult following" (Beard 2003: 156). Since all three movies represent notable highlights in the Canadian filmmaker's canon while at the same time displaying a variety of typical Cronenberg stylistic features and thematic preoccupations, I would like to use them in an attempt to explain the reasons for the recurrent trend of disappointing business vs. cult appreciation. In addition, my discussion will also include *Spider*, Cronenberg's latest work, for it shares several important features with the above films. An important point of departure is the observation that his films have found many admirers and interpreters in the intellectual community. This essay is an attempt at suggesting a tentative answer as to why his films generate such a high degree of academic attention, including mine. In other words, why has Cronenberg become a cult figure for academics?

Cronenberg's career as a commercial filmmaker started with a series of provocative horror flicks, specifically tailored for drive-in audiences. His major focus was the treatment of the human body as a site of horrific spectacle. As though he were testing the limits of traditional taste, Cronenberg exploded the boundaries of the body and filled the screen with unsettling visceral imagery of diseased bodies mutating, opening up with bodily fluids soiling the scene. Clearly, the visual attraction of excrement-like sex parasites entering the female body via its vagina (*Shivers*), a detailed shot of a head exploding (*Scanners*), or a look at a gory woman giving birth to materializations of her rage (*Brood*) could not be everybody's cup of tea. Was it gruesome spectacles of this kind that aroused the scholars' scrutiny – uniting them – rather improbably – with the teenage drive-in crowd? No, one could certainly find other reasons for

studying them: underneath the obsessive display of blood lay constant – and valid – concerns. The films could be successfully read as progressive critiques of late capitalist society for they highlighted dangers represented by predatory corporations and various manipulations of the individual. On the other hand they could also be interpreted as conservative cautionary tales about the dangers of science, for most of them featured a visionary scientist whose experiments went awry: instead of solutions, the crazed individuals created problems and the envisaged human liberation turned into anarchy, chaos and orgies of violence. To be sure, such preoccupations represent thematic staples of the horror / sci-fi genre, but Cronenberg offered more: his variations on the theme of psychosis and transgression of a distinctly sexual nature, for instance, provided a wealth of material for the application of psychoanalytic and feminist theories that were becoming courante in cultural studies at that time.

Videodrome (1986) represents in a variety of ways a turning point in Cronenberg's career. It is with this film that he started to move away from the "shoddy-exploitation-movie stereotype" (Beard 2003: 147) toward a more controlled, detached, polished style with higher budgets and wider distribution. The later features display a high degree of authorial control and their themes overlap remarkably with dominant cultural theories of the end of the 20th century. Almost "to the point of parody" (Testa 1989: 59) Cronenberg visualizes and dramatizes popular notions of scholarly celebrities such as Marshall McLuhan (media as extensions of ourselves; medium as the message), Michel Foucault (focus on the body as constructed, reinscribed, and – most significantly – destroyed by culture, discourse or history) and Jean Baudrillard (presentation of reality as simulated, depending on uncertain, unstable regimes of representation). Such material has been irresistible for academics of the respective scholarly denominations and thus one has witnessed a virtual explosion of textual production on these subjects.

Of all these obvious thematic lures, I would like to highlight Cronenberg's preoccupation with the question of epistemological uncertainty for therein I believe lies the core attraction of Cronenberg's work for academics. It is the inability of knowing for sure, the possibility of interpreting things simultaneously from the inside & outside that makes this idiosyncratic oeuvre so alluring, so close to our intellectual mindset. Doubt is the bottom line of a true intellectual's thinking; it is his or her painful pleasure. Constantly, we are being seduced by uncertainty. And it is precisely heavy doses of uncertainty one encounters when trying to make definitive sense of Cronenberg's movies.

The Films

Videodrome follows the attempts of Max Renn, owner of a TV channel specializing in soft-core sex and violence, to find a program that would be more explicit, provocative or, as he puts it, "more tough". In his search he intercepts an underground emission of a channel called Videodrome, which transmits genuine snuff material, mostly torture and murder. Strangely obsessed, the pornographer tries to locate the source of the show. In the course of the narrative we find out that Videodrome, in a subliminal way, radically affects its viewers and that Max's brain supposedly has grown a new internal organ. This organ changes fundamentally Max's perception of reality – including of his own body. Max's videotapes start breathing; gigantic lips voluptuously swell out of TV screens; Max grows a "fleshgun" – an organic weapon extending from his hand. Manipulated by two rival groups who use the power of the new medium, Max becomes a deadly pawn in their designs. Unable to discern reality from his hallucination anymore, Max ends up in the hull of an abandoned ship and commits suicide. If Max is baffled about the nature of his reality, so are the viewers.

Based on Burroughs' taboo breaking homoerotic novel, Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch* also centers on the difficulty of separating one's drug-induced hallucinations and paranoid delusions from what is "really" happening. The narrative follows the life of Bill Lee – Burroughs' alter ego – and endeavors to cinematically recreate the circumstances of his writing his book, combined with "imagery and small pieces" from it (Rodley 1992: 163). The movie starts with Lee's "straight" career as a bug-exterminator in 1953 New York City and depicts his infamous "William Tell routine" when Lee in a bug-powder high kills his wife and finally moves to the exotic and rather surreal place called "Interzone" where he finds refuge. There Lee starts writing while being plagued by paranoid fantasies about gigantic conspiracies; phantasmagoric visions of extraterrestrial creatures called mugwups; or unsettling delusions of typewriters mutating into giant bugs, giving him instructions through repulsively erotic anus-like orifices.

The epistemological status of the reality portrayed lies also at the heart of Cronenberg's 1999 feature *eXistenZ*. The central question here is not whether the two young attractive protagonists are going to survive, get married and live happily ever after, but whether the world they inhabit is "the real one". This time round it is virtual reality and the games people play within it. The story starts with a test session of a collective simulation game called *eXistenZ*. Among the players we find its designer, the much-celebrated Allegra Geller. While the round is submerging into the world of the game, assassins from the so-called "realist" camp, a group opposed to virtual reality experience, attack Allegra. She manages to escape with her bodyguard Ted Pikul, a timid, inexperienced apprentice in the virtual reality business. Having found refuge in a secluded motel, Ted and Allegra start playing her adventure game. They move through various levels of simulation until it becomes impossible to distinguish reality and simulation. To make matters more puzzling, the narrative framework from the opening sequence with the demonstration session, which we initially took for granted, becomes part of another game, *transCendenZ*. But even this ontological certainty is further subverted in the final shots of the film.

Adapted from Patrick McGrath's 1990 novel, Cronenberg's *Spider* may appear as an aberration in his work. The obsessive focus on the body, its transformation and destruction, is absent here. Save for one extraordinary exception – drops of semen splashed directly on the camera's lens – Cronenberg even refrains from the traditional display of bodily fluids. His sole focus is the main protagonist's schizophrenic mind. After his release from a mental institution, the middle-aged Dennis Clegg finds a place in a dreary boarding house, incidentally located in the working class part of London where he grew up. Together with him, we are trying to make sense of the web of submerged memories of his family: his father, who was a plumber, and the loving mother, who coined the nickname Spider. As Dennis relives his childhood traumas, from the delusive fragments of his memories it is possible to piece together a tragic story of a childhood crime. In the final sequences – unlike in the above films – uncertainty disappears (certainly a letdown for an intellectual fond of indeterminacy). Yet there are other possible rewards: the remarkable evocation of the elusiveness of one's memories; meditation on the tragic dimension of a most banal, low-down life; an existential awareness of the human condition and its excruciating sadness.

A Cinema of Subjectivity

"By the time of *Scanners*, *Videodrome* and *The Fly*, the point of view is totally centered on the monster-protagonist and the normal world fades to a neutral background" (Testa 1995: 45). The same holds true for the unhappy heroes of *Naked Lunch* and *Spider*. All these protagonists represent remarkably unreliable sources of information. Whether it is caused by

the harmful transmission of a new medium, drugs, or schizophrenia, their interpretations of the world are invariably uncertain. Likewise, the players of *eXistenZ* – no less monstrous, in fact – have absolutely no clue about the nature of their reality as they move through different levels of the game.

To make matters worse, Cronenberg typically avoids signaling by any conventional cinematic means whether what we see is just a character's delusion. When Max's body opens up with a gaping vaginal slit in his abdomen, this ghastly spectacle is not perceived from Max's vantage point (for instance while looking into the mirror), nor does the soundtrack suggest anything out of the ordinary; afterwards Max does not "wake up" into a reality that would be more reliable, predictable or stable. (When he actually does wake up later in the film, he appears in a situation just as mind-boggling as the one he had left behind.) The typewriter-bug in *Naked Lunch* is clearly a product of Lee's junkie fantasy, but so might be the whole Interzone experience even in its less hallucinatory moments.

If Beard proclaims *Videodrome* and *Naked Lunch* "sibling films in the Cronenberg canon" for the "systematic representation of hallucinations within the realist apparatus of mainstream cinema" (Beard 2001: 281), so are *eXistenZ* and *Spider*. The young Spider believes to have witnessed his father murdering his mother for she had discovered his extramarital affair with a pub tart. The crime is presented from a disturbed narrator's point of view, but his unreliability is revealed only in retrospect, in the final moments of the film. The furthest Cronenberg has ventured in the realm of uncertainty is, of course, in *eXistenZ*. The complex narrative lacking any unambiguously established grounding point pushes ontological unreliability to the extreme. In this film even the characters' identities remain a mystery as they assume various roles in different stages of the game.

The Blank Screen, Narrative Closure and the Erotetic Model of Narrative

Out of the four films in question two – *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* – end with a blank screen. The darkness of the screen in *eXistenZ* is accompanied by a desperate character's question: "Are we still in the game?" Such are the final words of the film: the answer to this crucial problem lies elsewhere. The term "closure" or "narrative closure" is traditionally defined "as the moment [in the movies] when all saliently posed and sustained questions that the movie has raised have been answered" (Carroll 1996: 90). Out of the four films in question only *Spider* – the odd film out (!) – could fall within this definition. To be able to assess how unsatisfactory the various Cronenberg closures are, let us contrast them with *eXistenZ*'s mainstream equivalent of the same year, the Wachovski brothers' cult feature *Matrix*. In the case of *Matrix* no such deficiency could be discerned for the script leaves no salient question unanswered. For example: Is Neo – the film's hero played by Keanu Reeves – the chosen one, capable of liberating humans from the dominance of the machines? Yes. Can he beat the virtual guardians of the matrix, agent Smith & his colleagues? Yes. Is it possible to tell where the matrix stops and reality begins? Yes, undoubtedly. (One cannot fail noticing the very smart latex & leather outfits that signify existence within the world of virtual reality.)²

The narrative closure of *Videodrome* may be interpreted more plausibly as Max Renn's suicide, but ultimately what happens is not quite certain, either. He might have become "the New Flesh", after all, a kind of fantastic, superhuman, "videated" living entity. Or perhaps he just fired a shot in the corner of the boat. Maybe the blast freed him from his obsessive visions, he returned home, made himself a hot bath and quietly read a book in the evening. Indeed, without seeing Max's brain sprinkled all over the rusty ship's hull there can be no satisfactory resolution. As Piers Handling put it: "Endings without resolution – the open

text – suggests that the world cannot be reduced to simple schematic equations. This is particularly relevant to Cronenberg (Handling 1984: 89).

In his *erotetic* model of narrative Noel Carroll describes the structure of a traditional “Hollywood International” film as a system of “internally generated questions that the movie goes on to answer” (Carroll 1996: 89). A satisfaction of the viewers’ curiosity in regard to the salient questions put before them explains, according to Carroll’s hypothesis, the power of the movies, the viewers’ intense engagement with them. Again and again, the major Cronenberg films fail to meet these elementary criteria. On the contrary, the narrative development presents the viewers with enigmas that are left unanswered, or provide contradictory answers – or are downright unanswerable: Is the Interzone a place in Northern Africa or is it just a figment of Bill Lee’s imagination? Has he left New York City at all? Does Videodrome exist? What exactly are the rules of the game of *eXistenZ*? Nobody can tell.

Conclusion

It would be possible continue and analyze other narrative features complicating the easy understanding and hence widespread reception of Cronenberg’s movies. One could, for instance, highlight the merging of different time-levels in *Spider* where the old protagonist occupies the same space with his younger self – again without appropriate cinematic clues – signifying that what one deals with is ultimately a delusional memory. But I no longer deem it necessary.

As I have tried to stress, a major problem for the general reception of his work (from the later phase of his career) lies in the atmosphere of epistemological uncertainty pervading his movies. Adopting the distorted, hallucinatory point of view of the protagonist, who frequently functions as the films’ monster, creates this sense of uncertainty. To complicate matters even more, “the omnipresence of first-person hallucinations [is] presented in the same register as everything else” (Beard 2003: 153). Many of Cronenberg’s features end openly, without standard closures; at the same time their narrative developments generate questions that are left unanswered or are quite simply unanswerable.

Such open “writerly” film texts are not immediately inviting for the general audience trained to expect closed “readerly” movies, which leave little room for the viewer’s imagination. This particular “writerliness” – as well as their thematic connection to important cultural theories of the day – makes them perfectly suited for academics who must publish before they perish and would rather exercise their analytical skills on material that encourages doubt, speculation and reflection. A minority of viewers – the cult audience – will always find these elements engaging while appreciating many other attractions of Cronenberg’s work: consistent attention to the human body and its dangerous transformation, constant testing of boundaries of standard science, sexuality and, perhaps most of all, his melancholic approach to the human condition and its existential givens.

It is probably fair to say that during his career Cronenberg switched his cult audiences, that his contemporary admirers appreciate different aspects of his work than the teenage drive-in crowd of the 1970s and early 1980s. It may be no coincidence that his latest feature *Spider* includes no disturbing bodily details and no special effects. The later Cronenberg has matured into an accomplished auteur, confidently handling the craft of cinema to such an extent that special effects not only become unnecessary, but downright redundant.

Endnotes

- ¹ Incidentally I can confirm this by first hand experience: during my 1999 stay on a Fulbright Fellowship in Los Angeles I had the strange pleasure of watching the film by myself. In the whole multiplex theater I found myself entirely alone.
- ² For an insightful list of differences between the two films and a convincing assessment see Cynthia Freeland's article 'Penetrating Keanu: New Holes, but the Same Old Shit'.

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