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# DAVID CRONENBERG

AUTHOR OR FILM-MAKER? BY MARK BROWNING

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# **David Cronenberg: Author or Film-maker?**

Mark Browning

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'The time of desperate stratagems was over, the car crashes and hallucinogens,  
the deviant sex ransacked like a library of extreme metaphors.'  
(*The Kindness of Women*, J. G. Ballard)

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# INTRODUCTION: 'A LIBRARY OF EXTREME METAPHORS'<sup>1</sup>

**'There are things you can do in fiction and in writing that you simply cannot do in cinema and vice versa. I don't think one supplants the other; ideally they enhance, reflect one another...I have great respect for the art of fiction, huge in fact'.<sup>2</sup>**

In the 23-year period between *Videodrome* (1982) and *A History of Violence* (2005), Canadian director David Cronenberg has been repeatedly drawn to basing his films on the literary works of others. He has realized a series of adaptations from a number of sources, including *Naked Lunch* (1991) from William Burroughs' 1959 experimental novel, *Crash* (1996) from J. G. Ballard's 1973 cult text and *Spider* (2003) from Patrick McGrath's dark 1990 account of a mental patient's subjective universe. Even films not ostensibly adaptations draw on previous written material, for example, *Dead Ringers* (1988) derives directly from Jack Geasland and Bari Woods' novel *Twins* (1977). Almost in passing, Gaile McGregor, looking at Cronenberg from the perspective of Canadian culture, feels that 'literary parallels provide a key', but rather disappointingly provides few specific detailed examples.<sup>3</sup> This book will examine specific passages of literature that can be used to highlight previously neglected features of Cronenberg's cinema, endeavouring to avoid what Andrew Klevan sees as a lack of close reading in critical work on Cronenberg.<sup>4</sup>

In terms of critical analysis, the period upon which this book will focus is effectively 'book-ended' by the collection of essays *The Shape of Rage* (edited by Piers Handling, 1983) and *The Modern Fantastic: The Films of David Cronenberg* (edited by Michael Grant, 2000). Peter Morris' *A Delicate Balance* (1993) provides a sketchy outline of Cronenberg's work up to *Naked Lunch* (1991), and Chris Rodley's *Cronenberg on Cronenberg* (1992) and Serge Grünberg's *David Cronenberg* (2004), although very valuable, are both composed of a series of interviews with the



director, rather than detailed commentaries on his films. Michael Grant's *Dead Ringers* (1997) and Iain Sinclair's *Crash* (1999) focus on individual films, but until William Beard's *The Artist as Monster* (2001), there was no single-authored book-length study of Cronenberg in English, analysing the central span of his career. Beard's text is largely a compilation of previously published material (much of which is referred to in this study) and focuses on binary oppositions rather than detailed comment on the literary works of figures like Vladimir Nabokov. This book will also refer to certain philosophical figures, such as Ludwig Wittgenstein and Jean-Paul Sartre, whose work Cronenberg readily discusses in interviews.<sup>5</sup> The distinction between fiction and philosophy can be fairly protean, and the work of some philosophers such as Jean Baudrillard reads more like novels at times, and writers like the Marquis de Sade and Sartre juxtapose dramatic events with more abstract musings.

There is a nexus of literary connections surrounding Cronenberg's films, ranging from trivial facts like Burroughs' personal acquaintance with Debbie Harry, star of *Videodrome*, to more concrete examples, such as Burroughs' authorship of the preface to the American edition of Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1969).<sup>6</sup> Ballard, in turn, is a great admirer of Burroughs whose fiction, he believes, 'constitutes the first portrait of the inner landscape of the post-war world'.<sup>7</sup> All the main literary influences on Cronenberg discussed in this book, Nabokov, Burroughs, Ballard, Barker, even Brett Easton Ellis, use cinematic terms and allusions in their writing, all display a strong interest in film, and several have had some involvement with writing screenplays.<sup>8</sup> Cronenberg's literary awareness is present even in projects he never actually started, such as *Frankenstein*, those involving months of preparation, like *Total Recall*, based on Philip K. Dick's short story 'We Can Remember It For You Wholesale' (1966) and potential future projects, such as Martin Amis' 1989 novel *London Fields*.

### **Goals of the book**

The primary goal of the book is to consider how comparisons between literary texts and Cronenberg's films can highlight features of his work that have remained relatively neglected by critics and take this a stage further to reveal fresh areas that have, hitherto, not been commented upon at all. The consideration of the relationship between Cronenberg and literature will focus on three main areas. Firstly, the book will examine direct adaptations from a literary source, for example, Ballard's *Crash* and Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*. A key feature of such discussions will be what Cronenberg has made of his source material, including what has been added or removed and how literary material has been visualized. Secondly, the study will look at texts that have influenced Cronenberg's films more tangentially, including literary sources cited directly in the films themselves, which may or may not be acknowledged by the director himself, e.g. Bari Wood and Jack Geasland's 1977 novel *Twins* (itself based on a real event – see chapter 2). Thirdly, texts that can be used as analogous material, will be discussed, e.g. links that could be made

between *Videodrome* (1982) and Clive Barker's *Books of Blood* (1984, 1985) or Brett Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991). In these latter cases, there will be no attempt to prove a causal link (indeed this is not possible where the text was produced after the film concerned). Notions of influence will therefore fall into three (often closely related) categories: overt translation, covert translation and analogy.

### **The importance of psychoanalysis to the horror genre and Cronenberg**

Psychoanalysis has certainly been an important tool in the analysis of film, evolving through the 1970s, where the theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, particularly those concerning the unconscious and sexuality, castration anxiety, oedipalized narratives and hysteria, were used to explore the notion of the apparatus of cinema and relationships between spectator and film. However, in an article in *Screen*, Richard Rushton suggests that 'the engagement between psychoanalysis and cinema has, to a large degree, disappeared from the agenda of most film students and scholars'.<sup>9</sup> This may be true in some areas of film scholarship but in the study of horror (and directors most frequently associated with this genre) such frameworks endure. Indeed, in 1998, *Screen* carried a number of pieces about David Cronenberg's *Crash* (1996), including models of criticism that overtly draw upon psychoanalytical models. This introduction is not dismissing psychoanalysis wholesale as a legitimate approach to the study of film per se but suggests that there are significant problems with using most psychoanalytical frameworks to analyse Cronenberg's work. This has implications for other film-makers who may have stylistic and aesthetic similarities with Cronenberg and for the horror genre as a whole, which has historically been viewed through the distorting prism of Freudian notions of psychoanalysis.

According to Noel Carroll, the adoption of Freudian analysis has become 'more or less the *lingua franca* of the horror film and thus the privileged tool for discussing the genre.'<sup>10</sup> In *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990), Carroll accepts that psychoanalysis can provide some insights into particular aspects of the horror genre but that it cannot offer a comprehensive account. One example of such insight comes in Carroll's discussion of Ernest Jones' *On the Nightmare* (1936), which follows a Freudian-influenced notion of repression and sees dreams as unconscious wish-fulfilments. As critics like Vicky Lebeau have explored, there are interesting parallels between the evolution of psychoanalysis, especially in the career of Freud and the development of cinema, and to make generalized links between the dream-like state of viewing a film in a cinema and a discipline, which includes the interpretation of dreams, seems fair.<sup>11</sup> However, such a totalizing critical framework, which can apparently be applied to any film, can also seem indiscriminate and likely to yield repetitive outcomes. There are occasional dreams in Cronenberg's work, notably in *Dead Ringers* (discussed in chapter 2), but even Lacanian notions of a divided subject struggle to ascribe consistent motivation to characters when they are part of highly subjective narratives, such as we find in *Videodrome* (1982), *Naked Lunch* (1991), *eXistenZ* (1999) and *Spider* (2003).

James B. Twitchell locates the psychological purpose of the horror genre as cultural fortification against sexual taboos, especially masturbation and incest and social roles ('precisely whom to avoid as reproductive partners').<sup>12</sup> However, Cronenberg's films work in precisely the opposite direction, challenging rather than reinforcing notions of what constitutes taboo acts. Twitchell's stance is undermined by assumptions that audiences of horror films, whilst admitting there is no research base for his assertions, are predominantly adolescent and male and cater for sadistic pleasures, apparently denying viewing positions which encompass female, post-teen and masochistic identification and pleasure (as explored subsequently by theorists such as Carol J. Clover).<sup>13</sup>

For Freudian-influenced critics like Robin Wood, horror films articulate the return of certain ideas that individuals have tried, unsuccessfully, to repress but which only emerge in unexpected and displaced locations.<sup>14</sup> He proposes that psychoanalysis, in conjunction with feminism and gay liberation and Marxism, can help to question how patriarchal capitalist ideology is created and perpetuated. For him, the horror genre's monstrous 'Other' represents the attempted but unsuccessful repression of characteristics and entities, which a dominant capitalist, heterosexual ideology needs to exclude in order to maintain its centrality. However, Wood's notion that 'normality is threatened by the monster,' is not borne out in Cronenberg's case.<sup>15</sup> The narratives of almost all of the films after 1982 (*Videodrome*, *Dead Ringers*, *Naked Lunch*, *Crash*, *eXistenZ* and *Spider*), problematize exactly what constitutes 'normality'. Even accepting Wood's broad definition of 'normality' as 'conformity to the dominant social norms', Cronenberg's work conveys little sense of an equilibrium from which the entrance of a monstrous 'Other' forces the narrative to depart or to which it might return in some kind of 'happy ending'.<sup>16</sup>

Wood describes how 'in a society built on monogamy and family there will be an enormous amount of surplus energy that will have to be repressed, and that what is repressed must always strive to return.'<sup>17</sup> However, in Cronenberg's work, at least up to *A History of Violence* (2005), the narratives make no attempt to construct 'a society built on monogamy and family'. The mechanisms that dominate the protagonists' central relationships include open and promiscuous marriages in *Naked Lunch* and *Crash*, thinly veiled incestuous desire in *Dead Ringers* and sado-masochistic pornography in *Videodrome*. The underlying assumption of Wood's case is that horror films are 'our collective nightmares' and yet it is Cronenberg's intensely personal vision that is part of what distinguishes his work from mainstream horror.<sup>18</sup>

It could be said that part of the appeal of horror films is the vicarious pleasure they allow in rehearsing and thereby subduing subconscious fears, such as one's own death by watching a series of victims succumb to a monstrous attacker. Contemporary horror films often focus on the physical and metaphysical limits of the body, both of the (usually female) victim of a monster and the monster itself.

This has been an important focus for psychoanalytical work such as Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection* (1982) and Barbara Creed's work, based on it, especially *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993). Abjection, castration anxiety and the position of the abject can provide useful insights if there is a monstrous mother figure who terrifies with the threat of castration. However, the films of Cronenberg under discussion here do not feature such a character type. Furthermore, Cronenberg has shown little or no interest in classic horror subgenres like werewolf or vampire tales, stalk-and-slash narratives or supernatural horror. Standard horror tropes like the screaming victim, male or female, play little part in his aesthetic. Protagonists largely accept and indeed embrace monstrous change and death as part of a process of evolutionary, biological change.

Psychoanalysis can be helpful in making links between the subtext of a film and the culture of which it is a part or upon which it comments, as seen in the socio-historical aspect work of critics like Charles Derry (1977), Peter Biskind (1983), Andrew Tudor (1989) and Vera Dika (1990). However, if Robin Wood feels that the notion of the 'return of the repressed' only has validity when applied to a political context, then this is precisely what is missing here. Cronenberg takes great pains to remove from his work any suggestion of a sociological link. Directorial choices in each of the films discussed in this study make allegorical readings of his films difficult, such as the cutting of any references to parents from the adapted source of *Dead Ringers*, the removal of time markers from the narrative of *Crash*, and the basic structure of *Naked Lunch* showing a narrative in the process of being constructed. In *eXistenZ*, Cronenberg took the conscious decision to remove any technical or cultural references which would allow sociological readings of the film. So, there are no computers or TVs, no running shoes, no jewellery or patterns on the clothing. Cronenberg explains that 'it's my attempt to dislocate the audience without being really obvious about it.'<sup>19</sup> It could be said that this very absence draws the viewer's attention to underlying issues but this is 'political' with a small 'p'. Cronenberg focuses on existential dilemmas of what it is to be human, rather than how these conflicts are played out in wider society. Occasionally, the outside world intrudes, such as when the Mantle brothers' deviance in *Dead Ringers* can no longer be ignored (see chapter 2) but the environments in which Cronenberg's protagonists move are largely enclosed, private, and mostly highly subjective. In terms of character, they are often eccentric outsiders and not typical of a class, a gender or ethnicity; it is their *difference*, not their typicality, which makes them interesting and possibly also hard for audiences to relate to at times. Attempts to argue that his films constitute sociological statements, for example, Xavier Trudel's suggestions that *Crash* represents a warning about the dangers of cults, just seem contrived and unconvincing.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, Cronenberg has been criticized for overtly severing links where they existed in his source material, so that in relation to *Crash*, Iain Sinclair feels that Cronenberg's film 'depoliticises Ballard's frenzied satire.'<sup>21</sup>

In terms of surface content, Cronenberg's work includes topics that do feature in a range of psychological theories: repression (homosexuality in *Naked Lunch*), interpretation of dreams (*Dead Ringers*) and sexual activity that could be regarded as perverted and a compulsion towards death (*Crash*). However, once specific analysis starts, it soon breaks down. Marq Smith attempts to view *Crash* using Freudian notions of fore-pleasure, seen as a stage on the way to full consummation or end-pleasure. He accepts Freud's definition of perversions as 'sexual activities which...linger over the intermediate relations to the sexual object', but such definitions, including 'sexual activities which...extend, in an anatomical sense, beyond the regions of the body that are designed for sexual union',<sup>22</sup> are explicitly questioned in *Crash*. Cronenberg has been interested in re-siting sites of sexual interaction, ever since Forsythe's dream in *Shivers* (1976) where 'even old flesh is erotic flesh' and Rose's penile armpit growth in *Rabid* (1977), but this process finds further articulation with Gabrielle's vaginal-style scar in *Crash*. Notions of 'perversion' can only hold true if there is a consensual norm, from which characters are seen to 'deviate'. Significantly at *no* time in the film does any character express any doubts or qualms about any of the sexual activities undertaken, which raises the question of whether an action in a fictional world can be dubbed perverted if no one in that world sees it as such. The notion of what constitute 'perversions' is culturally determined and, therefore, will change over time, such as the increase in importance in the late twentieth century of active fore-pleasure in a sexually enlightened, and particularly post-AIDS, culture.

In 1972, as Ballard was putting the finishing touches to his novel *Crash*, Bernardo Bertolucci was directing *The Last Tango in Paris*, featuring a sex scene where Maria Schneider, as Jeanne, suggests to Marlon Brando, as Paul, that they try to 'come without touching'. Bertolucci, an admirer of Cronenberg's *Crash*, also dramatizes the potential power of touch, *not* in the sense of end-pleasure as Freudian perversion but as a perfectly legitimate end in itself, including a transcendent capacity often associated with religious experience. Smith admits as much in referring to 'a different order of sexual contact' in *Crash* which 'takes the form of an offer of both explicit and discreet instances of touching between human and extrahuman bodies, bodily parts, things, and surfaces. Some of these instances confer a different manner of sexuality, others imply a nonsexual intimacy', such as the slow tracking shot used as Catherine lingeringly caresses James' injured leg.<sup>23</sup>

In analysing the overt sexual content of *Naked Lunch*, *Crash* or *Videodrome*, and the barely suppressed homoerotic impulses of *Dead Ringers* (1988), assumptions of normative relations between the sexes are not helpful. Developments in reproductive technology, gay and lesbian equality, greater economic female liberation and the open discussion of many topics so suppressed in Freud's era, that they were not even recognized, casts a Freudian model of the family based on married heterosexuality as largely redundant. Ideas that Freud took as psychological givens, like the manifestation and frequency of hysteria, are now seen

to vary according to cultural shifts and Freud's psychoanalytical approach 'presumes heterosexuality to such a degree that it often appears to demand it'.<sup>24</sup> In Cronenberg's work, sexual practices linked to masochism and sadism are not tied exclusively to heterosexual relationships and a range of sexual contexts, including extra-marital sex, sex with prostitutes, sex in public places and 'deviant' sexual practices, such as anal sex, sado-masochism and lesbianism, all take place with little apparent discrimination between them.

A critical standpoint that sees the portrayal of same-sex relationships or sadistic acts as necessarily implying disgust is going to struggle to accommodate Cronenberg's work. In relation to the car wash scene in *Crash*, Creed asserts that this scene is 'the only one in which sex involves vaginal entry and in which the woman is beaten' and, furthermore, feels that Catherine, 'contrary to her expectations is not aroused by Vaughan's violence'.<sup>25</sup> This ignores the likelihood that at least some of the rear-entry sex is vaginal, especially the earlier scene of Catherine sitting astride James in their flat (although it is an impossible distinction to prove either way) and also passes over Catherine's apparent acquiescence to being treated in this way. Creed feels that 'unlike the anal sex scenes (which almost always commence with the woman offering her breast to the man), and the episode of "wound" sex, this one is not only "disconnected", it is sadistic'.<sup>26</sup> However, Catherine *does* offer her breast as before, her lengthy staring at Vaughan in the car does indicate attraction and what Creed sees as a weakness, dismissing the scene as 'sadistic', is arguably a crucial point for Ballard and Cronenberg. For them, Creed's criticism, that 'the possibility of union between human and machine is displaced, in the main, on to the woman's body', represents a creative development in the range of human sexuality in which concepts of gender seem less important than a potential fusion with technology.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, Creed describes the parrot cage scene in Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch* (1991) as 'horrific and sadistic', but this is attributing to the characters the emotions of this particular viewer.<sup>28</sup> Sadism can be pleasurable and it is ambiguous whether Kiki is either horrified or that he is being 'raped' as Creed asserts. Barker's *The Hellbound Heart* (1986), which he directed as *Hellraiser* (1987), contains an episode very similar to *Crash*'s post-car wash scene in which monstrous villain Frank seduces the heroine, Julia, and their coupling 'had, in every regard *but the matter of her acquiescence*, all the aggression and joylessness of rape', and 'the bruises were trophies of their passion'.<sup>29</sup> Like the rough rear-entry sex in *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992), between Nick (Michael Douglas) and Beth (Jeanne Tripplehorn) and what Cronenberg terms the 'gangster-sex' of Tom-as-Joey and Edie on the stairs in *A History of Violence* (2005), it contains the same key proviso of *consent*. Cronenberg's and Clive Barker's mutual distrust of simplistic and manipulative psychoanalysis is seen in the casting of Cronenberg as the deranged therapist Decker in *Nightbreed* (1989), based on Barker's own 1988 novel, *Cabal*.

A problem with Creed's notion of the 'monstrous-feminine', is that there are very few films that neatly fit her theoretical paradigm, and those that do, such as *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979), seem to constitute a self-fulfilling prophecy, i.e. she discovers in the film the model that she proposes, rather than deriving a model from the evidence in the film. Cronenberg's films clearly do feature notions of monstrosity but apart from *The Fly* (1986), in the last 20 years, there is a lack of what might be termed a clear-cut monster, even given Robin Wood's broad definition of what this term might constitute.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, an underlying problem for psychoanalytical frameworks is that they cannot accommodate alternative ways of reading a text. Sequences cited as evidence of Creed's theories can be read in ways that do not support her argument, particularly connected with imposed moral judgements about sexual activities and pleasure.

Creed's position partly relies upon Kristevan theories, which themselves are problematic. Kristeva's notions of what is 'clean' and 'proper', are extremely subjective and protean concepts, dependent on cultural factors and given to change over time.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, Kristeva's position attempts to illuminate ideas of sexuality in the context of Old Testament morality, thereby rather blurring the logical sequence of cause and effect, seeking to explain God-given law in psychological terms. Kristeva categorically states that '[a]n unshakeable adherence to Prohibition and Law is necessary if that perverse interspace of abjection is to be hemmed in and thrust aside,' that 'he who denies morality is not abject' and that abjection is explicitly linked to acts that are 'immoral'.<sup>32</sup> However, notions of perversity are meaningless in the amoral universes of films like *Naked Lunch*, *Dead Ringers* and particularly *Crash*. For Kristeva, abjection manifests itself as a 'rite of defilement' and 'persists as exclusion or taboo'.<sup>33</sup> However, it is not feasible to draw on incest taboos in particular to explain character motivation, when no parental relationships are contained in the main films discussed here and when the only familial relationship is between the brothers in *Dead Ringers*. For all the discussion in Kristeva about narcissism, she has to admit that 'a narcissistic topology has no other underpinning in psychosomatic reality than the mother-child dyad,' a relationship axis which Cronenberg explicitly denies us between 1982 and 1999 and only uses in *Spider* (2003) as part of an unreliable, delusional memory.<sup>34</sup>

As the generic label suggests, horror tends to evoke visceral responses, particularly fear, by exposure to images, which audiences find repulsive or shocking. However, fear, both in the characters on screen, or engendered in the viewing audience by sudden movement or sound, does not play a significant part in Cronenberg's films after 1982. Indeed, images, which we might find shocking are usually approached by languid camera movement and held in shot for several seconds, such as the two-headed lizard in *eXistenZ*. This reflects Cronenberg's fascination with the notion of sentient existence as being in a state of flux, constantly evolving into alternative incarnations. These might be potentially horrific but there remains a strong sense of fascination, which we are encouraged to share

by Cronenberg's insistence on opening up and showing aspects of bodies, at which we might otherwise choose not to look (see chapters 1 and 2) and by the persistent avoidance of a voice-over in all his work, which could provide a voice of consolation and comforting explanation for what we are seeing. If Kristeva believes that the individual suffering a state of abjection 'causes, along with loathing, one word to crop up – fear,' then it would seem irrelevant to films largely devoid of this.<sup>35</sup>

The scarcity of clear attempts by Cronenberg to evoke fear in his audience after 1982 is also one reason why Freud's notions of the uncanny, often central to psychoanalysis of horror films, are also not particularly helpful here. It could be argued that in a film such as *Dead Ringers*, the appearance of the phenomenon of the double, which is a central example of Freudian notions of the uncanny, should make reference to Freud illuminating. However, apart from the single scene where Clare sees both brothers together for the first time, the uncanny is not evoked. Unlike Clare, the cinematic viewer has seen both brothers from the beginning as children and by using real identical twins rather than computer-aided motion photography, Cronenberg acclimatizes us to this unusual sight. By the time we encounter the adult Mantles in medical school, we are not likely to be surprised by their appearance any more than any other characters within that scene, who show no reaction at all to working alongside identical twins. To use a Freudian approach to Cronenberg's work would have to ignore the aesthetic reality of his style.

### **Lacan and the question of 'flatness'**

Lacanian notions that rely on a Saussurean linguistic model of a stable relation between signifier and signified in which phonetics and semantics can be straightforwardly mapped are problematic, as such concepts have been largely dismissed. The grammatical revolution that Noam Chomsky caused with *Syntactic Structures* (1957) moved the analytical focus from word to sentence and questioned how Saussurean structures cope with ambiguity, language change or how meaning is made from previously unheard sentences. Furthermore, Lacan problematically ascribes to linguistic features the status of psychological phenomena, equating a Saussurean signifier with the conscious and a signified with the unconscious. Despite Saussure's original attempt to avoid assumptions about how individuals think when they use certain words, this is how Lacan applies Saussurean theory and yet still keeps his analysis focused on the operation of language as if it were an entity independent of the speaker who uses it. Modern developments in cognitive science and neurology by figures like Oliver Sacks show language processing as more complex than the kinds of binary relationships adopted by Lacan.

The best way to show the shortcomings of psychoanalysis as a theoretical model in relation to Cronenberg is to consider closely the most detailed example of where this model has been tried. Parveen Adams' essay on *Crash*, 'Death Drive', represents the most detailed attempt to date to apply psychoanalysis (here of a Lacanian variety) to Cronenberg's work. Adams suggests that *Crash* 'puts you at



the very limit of three-dimensional space', which she terms 'flatness', claiming that 'the film alters the psychical situation of the viewer by depriving us of all the usual parameters of depth.' Her position is based around notions of visible construction, the use of repetition and a lack of overt framing in filmic enunciation. However, Adams' argument about how Cronenberg constructs screen space can be refuted almost point for point. Certainly in *Dead Ringers*, the reverse tracking shots of the Mantle brothers firstly as boys and then as students, in which they do not walk in front of each other, emphasize a plane within and across the shot, not *through* the frame in order to create depth.<sup>36</sup> However, by contrast, in *Crash*, where Cronenberg does not have to consider the restraints of motion-controlled photography, the forward tracking shots in the opening scene, the love scene in the apartment and the pile-up sequence all create a sense of depth.

Adams compares *Crash* with Robert Bresson's *Lancelot du Lac* (1974) and asserts that Bresson 'sets a limit on flatness with a depth that constitutes itself through a series of flat but *nested* surfaces', which she calls '*formal depth*.'<sup>37</sup> Cronenberg is effectively following the advice of Carl Dreyer, who once suggested that to heighten audience involvement in the image, 'one could move away from the perspectivistic picture and pass on to pure surface effect. It is possible that by taking this direction we might obtain quite singular aesthetic effects.'<sup>38</sup> Dreyer's notion of reducing the third dimension, depth, and thereby relating the first two (the horizontal and vertical) to Time and Spirit, the fourth and fifth respectively, may partly explain why, for critics like Bertolucci, *Crash* seems 'a religious masterpiece'.<sup>39</sup> Adams does not discuss Cronenberg's car wash scene in detail, but here the forward motion of the car in combination with the electric roof and window creates an elaborate mosaic of screening devices moving vertically and horizontally, which obscure parts of the frame but also focus attention on the remaining parts, which reveal the interior of the car and the embracing lovers, effectively creating a high-tech version of the iris. Indeed, the screen is more than just segmented because as the glass is tinted, the focus of viewer attention is not completely closed off, so that this closing of the shell of the car also creates a sense of playing with varying planes of depth. This is also captured in the shifting vectors in the credit sequences of *M Butterfly* and *eXistenZ*, which give the illusion of different movements and speeds within three dimensions. Movement *across* the frame creates the illusion of depth *within* it.

For Adams, this 'flatness' is partly achieved by Cronenberg's camera placement that 'involves a limited, narrow direction of view where you remain in the same place even though you are moving, and where what you see does not vary.'<sup>40</sup> She does not provide specific details but this effect is present in James' taxi ride back from the hospital.<sup>41</sup> Adams cites Cronenberg describing how he 'put it (the camera) more *outboard* of the car body...' and elsewhere he has spoken about how, in an attempt to avoid cinematic clichés about sex and cars, he 'split the screen, the driver on the left half and the road, far down the road, on the right.'<sup>42</sup> However, this does not produce, as she claims, an effect in which 'what you see

does not vary.<sup>43</sup> The camera may be fixed but the car in question (James' taxi) is moving. This creates the effect of clinging onto the car with one's head pressed sideways against the door as if in an embrace – the pose adopted by Catherine at the close of the first scene in the aircraft hanger and later by Gabrielle in the car showroom. The effect of this is the sense that 'you hadn't seen this relationship of driver to car, or car to road, or car to car before,' so that both passenger and the length of the car and a portion of road can be viewed simultaneously.<sup>44</sup> In relation to cars, Cronenberg rarely uses conventional camera placement in this film, like a shot from the bonnet through the windscreen, undermining Adams' claims that 'in *Crash*, the film's construction remains in the background even as we experience the flatness.'<sup>45</sup> Indeed, for Sinclair, the drifting tracking shot of the opening scene, which is 'stately and voyeuristic in intent, announces the presence of the crew,' emphasizing that what we are witnessing 'is being staged for the benefit of an audience.'<sup>46</sup> Far from construction being hidden, it is highly foregrounded as reflected in one of Cronenberg's additions to Ballard's novel, the reconstruction of the James Dean crash as a spectacle (discussed at greater length in chapter 4).

Adams' analysis of what she sees as the flatness in *Crash* is dependent on a Lacanian notion of subject formation in relation to the Other, involving a sequence whereby there must be phases of seeing, comprehending and concluding before the subject can enter the three-dimensional space of the Other. However, time is precisely the dimension that Cronenberg denies the audience by placing them in a perpetual present. Notions such as memory and related narrative features like flashbacks (except in *Spider*, where it is problematized) play no part in Cronenberg's aesthetic in the films discussed here. The limitations of Freudian and Lacanian paradigms can be seen in Adams' designation of the accident between Helen and James, in which Helen's husband is killed, as 'a primal scene'.<sup>47</sup> Notions of primal scenes only make literal sense during discussions of childhood trauma and no children feature in any substantial way in this or indeed any other Cronenberg film in the period 1982–1999 (see chapter 6 for discussion of this in relation to *Spider*). *Dead Ringers* is the only minor exception to this and, after a very brief prologue, Cronenberg removes any mention of a family background which is present in the source material, thereby denying any attempt to read adult psychosis as the product of a childhood trauma. Even if taken metaphorically, and with a definition of 'primal' stretched to mean the first example of an adult trauma, the concept does not work in relation to *Crash*. The accident between Helen and James may be the first crash we see and the first involving James, but the scars on the dead man's hand, Helen's instinctive reaction in revealing her breast and her later familiarity with Seagrave and other crash devotees all suggest that this is not the first time that she has experienced a crash.

Adams asserts that '*Crash* swallows up space, producing the effect of flatness. If this is true, *Crash* cannot accommodate a space of voyeuristic desire.'<sup>48</sup> The

problem is that Adams' premise is not true and the film can accommodate desire. For example, the car wash scene and the central love-making scene between James and Catherine are both very overtly voyeuristic. In particular in the latter scene, we experience a POV that slips into the room apparently unseen and gradually moves closer to the bed, cutting in on the axis, giving a privileged view of the sex act, using the standard porn trope of an unseen viewer. Whether desire is produced in the cinema audience is unprovable without detailed physiological research but within the confines of the film, characters take part in sex acts that, put bluntly, would not be possible without a modicum of desire. Adams' suggestion that the film 'describes the space in which death begins to appear as the object of a new desire, the desire not to desire', is rather undermined by the fact that Vaughan does die, apparently happy.<sup>49</sup> Although there is the suggestion of circularity (which chapter 5 will suggest is developmental rather than empty), there is also closure in the figure of Vaughan, who effectively consummates his relationship with death. His sex acts with an airport prostitute, Catherine and with James himself are steps on the way to his ultimate expression in the death crash.

Certainly, there is a scarcity of *jouissance*, particularly for female characters. In the third scene, the questions between James and Catherine only refer to female pleasure and parallel the exchange between Joan and Lee in *Naked Lunch*, where there is a verbal sharing of sexual infidelities between a married couple (albeit with the resignation of the husband rather than active involvement in contriving liaisons as in *Crash*). However, James can still perform sexually, and Vaughan in the car wash produces visual evidence of *jouissance*. Indeed, the sperm, which is held in shot on Catherine's hand, seems almost designed to verify its possibility in the world of the film. The film portrays an evolution in the language of desire, not a denial that it can take place at all. It may be soulless and require stage-managed repetition, but it endures, as does the relationship of James and Catherine.

The flatness that Adams ascribes to a lack of self-reflexive awareness in *Crash* is more precisely created by what Victor Sage refers to as 'extreme stylisation', involving Cronenberg's direction of acting style, which is traceable to literary origins.<sup>50</sup> Referring to Ballard's *Crash*, Stuart Laing suggests that 'the most common adjective is stylized' and Cronenberg translates that notion of stylization into the minimal gesture and facial reaction, and monotone, almost soporific delivery of his protagonists, particularly in his realization of the character of Catherine.<sup>51</sup> In the very opening scene, Deborah Ungar strikes a pose akin to a figurehead on a ship with arms outstretched and hair blowing back in a strong wind. Rather than psychoanalysis, it is intertextuality that is helpful here. Cronenberg is drawing, without acknowledgement, on a precise scene in J. G. Ballard's *The Kindness of Women* (1992). Blond-haired Sally Mumford approaches pilot David Hunter as he climbs from his Tiger Moth and 'she peeled away her silk scarf as if they were about to make love under its wing' and 'as she stood on tip-toe and kissed David, her crutch ruled the airfield.'<sup>52</sup> Ballard's description of Catherine, in

particular 'the porcelain appearance of her face,' 'the perfect forgery of an Ingres' and her most attractive quality to James, 'her total acceptance of any situation', is realized by Cronenberg in Ungar's glacial demeanour.<sup>53</sup>

The logic of Adams' assertion that 'a desire without an object must be a wish not to wish' is also flawed.<sup>54</sup> A desire, like pleasure, cannot exist without an object and it does not follow that lack of an object creates a nihilistic drive towards death. Rather, it creates an impulse to search for a new object as we see in James and Catherine's infinite deferral ('Maybe the next one...') and reflects the fact that they choose to stay together through the course of the narrative. This search, one that Cronenberg shares with the early work of Clive Barker, does not elevate the characters beyond desire but involves them in the development of a new language with which to express it.

### **The parergonal logic of the frame**

As Salman Rushdie notes in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (2000), '[t]he only people who see the whole picture are the ones who step out of the frame.'<sup>55</sup> If we need a theoretical explanation for the flatness in *Crash*, then a more helpful notion might be Jacques Derrida's notions of 'the parergon'. Derrida defines the parergonal logic of the frame as referring to a liminal space that is derived from material not solely within the filmic space, nor outside it, but in the relation between the two.<sup>56</sup> Although in *The Truth in Painting* (1987), as the title suggests, Derrida's primary context is painting, his concepts of the parergon can be usefully applied to film. Derrida's parergonal logic, largely a deconstruction of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement* (1790), describes a fluid concept, by which the spectator is positioned and repositioned in relation to the cinematic frame and also contains the excesses of a text, which might include features that we do not usually see in film. Derrida takes issue with Kant's notion of what features constitute an artwork and what should be considered mere 'ornamentation (parergon), i.e. what is only an adjunct and not an intrinsic constituent in the complete representation of the object.'<sup>57</sup> Kant's examples of drapes on statues and colonnades of palaces are also considered by Derrida, but it is the framing of pictures which is of primary significance here.

The concept of the parergon problematizes notions of what is 'inside' and what is 'outside' an artwork, a key concern of Cronenberg, particularly in relation to films like *Dead Ringers* (see chapter 2). More broadly, this idea also could be used to describe the interwoven textual connections between critical readings of the films themselves, the many interviews that Cronenberg has given over his career and biographical facts about his own background. It is tempting, like Kant, to try and exclude certain factors when making an aesthetic judgement about a work of art, but, as Derrida shows, it is far from simple to 'distinguish between the internal or proper sense and the circumstance of the object being talked about.'<sup>58</sup> Such a process is flawed when features that initially appear to be beyond the work are

actually part of the totality of its meaning. The extra-textual material used in this book thus functions as a parergon, in that it is 'in addition to the ergon, the work done, the fact, the work, but it does not fall to one side, it touches and cooperates within the operation, from a certain outside.'<sup>59</sup>

A prime reason for the flatness of *Crash* is that significant scenes draw their meaning from a parergonal logic. Adams mentions Christian Metz's interest in the field of enunciation, particularly the operation of frames within frames and claims that they are 'singularly missing from *Crash*', although she does admit that 'I could not easily elaborate the argument' without recourse to a comparison with Bresson.<sup>60</sup> However, issues of framing are raised right from the opening of the film. In the credit sequence, there is the illusion of the text approaching the viewer by becoming larger and by appearing to pass over slight undulations, there is the creation of depth within the blank screen space. The text does not fade out or pass to the right or left of the frame as might be expected. Instead, it becomes blurred and almost seems to overwhelm the viewer before falling away, as if we were standing at the end of a conveyor belt with objects falling off in front of us. This suggests there is a space between the screen and the image, which is created by the presence of the spectator, with the image blur conveying the sense of an invaded focal distance.

The second scene appears to position the viewer from within a car looking out, but the 'screen' and its borders are both revealed as an illusion. The fascia of a dashboard is pushed away to reveal that what we had assumed was the frame of the cinematic screen was in fact only the frame of the windscreen. Such effects do not create a flatness as Adams suggests but rather create a depth that includes the viewer. The call for James to give his stamp of approval for a Steadicam shot also applies to us. We are, in effect, required to be present to complete the shot as we are part of the parergonal logic of the framing. This is not a psychological point in which 'the voyeur completes a space' such as Adams makes but a literal feature of Cronenberg's camera placement.<sup>61</sup> Adams' claim that there is a lack of framing devices is contradicted implicitly by the presence of James' anonymous sexual partner, the 'camera girl', responsible for framing and focusing and explicitly so in the following scene where James is clearly framed leaning against a doorway before moving across to Catherine who is visually defined by the concrete of the balcony and the roof of their apartment.

A further feature of the parergon, which contributes to the 'flatness' of *Crash*, is absence. As Derrida states, 'the parergon...is called in by the hollowing of a certain lacunary quality within the work.'<sup>62</sup> This is not the 'lack' of Lacanian theory. Derrida is referring here explicitly to what he sees, and what Kant admits, are flaws in *The Third Critique*. It is the gaps in Kant's thinking, particularly the lack of a theory of framing, which intrigues Derrida, and the point at which his own thoughts on the parergon come into play.<sup>63</sup> What critics like Botting and Wilson see as a critical

deficiency is at the heart of Cronenberg's aesthetic here: absence is not a flaw, it is what *Crash* is about. Action can take place off-frame but still affect what we *do* see. In *Crash*, we do not see Vaughan's murder of a pedestrian by the airport or, indeed, his own death, but we do see its consequence as James becomes the new Vaughan, driving his battered Lincoln and tempting death by running Catherine off the road. It is not by depriving the viewer of depth cues as Adams suggests, but the blend of glacial acting and the movement around and through the parergon that provides access to the Lacanian Real.

### The Real

Adams is more persuasive when she states that 'the film is indeed about the re-emergent failure to integrate some impossible kernel of the Real.'<sup>64</sup> According to Lacan, the Real is whatever is excluded or cannot be symbolized; it continually resurfaces, highlighting its own repression and a pursuit of the Real constitutes a seeking after impossibility.<sup>65</sup> Adams does recognize that the film 'bears closely on the Real' but chooses not to pursue this in detail.<sup>66</sup> For Lacan, it is only possible to discover one's true desire by experiencing demands that cannot be met, an impossibility, an experience in the Real. Vaughan's 'project', although explained in rather vague terms about 'benevolent psychopathology' (and later undercut in a dismissive comment), could be seen as a mission to discover the reality of his desire in such a way. He cannot be involved in a celebrity accident without contriving one (with Elizabeth Taylor in Ballard's novel) and, hence, is forever pursuing an unattainable ideal.

A problem with the psychoanalytical method represented by Adams' piece is that what is posited as a metaphor about internal thought processes, the notion of 'psychical space', for example, is then discussed as if it had an external, concrete reality. In discussing Cronenberg, there is no need to have recourse to some of Lacan's more bizarre notions like *the lamella*, an amoeba-like creature that 'is something extra-flat' that can 'run around'.<sup>67</sup> In attempting to apply the figure of the *lamella*, 'the libido as indestructible life' to the notion of the wound, Adams is led to overstate its importance, asserting that 'you can see how the attempt at the experience of sexuality in the Real relies upon the wound.'<sup>68</sup> However, there are no wounds in the first three scenes, Vaughan's encounter with an airport prostitute, James' first sexual exchange with Helen or the subsequent and parallel scene with Catherine. A perception of wounds can act as a catalyst and aphrodisiac to a sexual encounter within the Real, such as the verbal descriptions of Vaughan's scarred genitalia, but it is not the only means of access to the Real. Adams suggests that *Crash* inhabits 'the domain of the death drive, where the trauma repeats and something is lost over and over again.'<sup>69</sup> However, what this 'something' might be is not entirely clear, and the film features repetition that is incremental and progressive as new wounds are formed rather than old ones re-opened, i.e. the narrative operates within the Real but seeks to go beyond it.

One of the main proponents of the value of Lacan, Slavoj Žižek, is interested

primarily in the ubiquity of the Real rather than Lacan's earlier structuralist work on the nature of the signifier. In his developments of Lacanian thinking, Žižek overcomes some of the problems associated with theories that can be traced back to Freudian-influenced notions of sexuality. Žižek enthusiastically draws on examples from popular culture, including film, in his refinements of how the Real might be accommodated. Particularly relevant for Cronenberg is Lacan's notion of *le sinthome*, an invisible fragment of the Real, present in every subject but resistant to symbolization. The main additions that Cronenberg makes to Ballard's novel (the reconstructed James Dean crash, the tattooing and the ending) could all be read as encounters with the Real. The crash reconstruction particularly recreates the space of an event from the past, where there were no witnesses and could be seen as a Lacanian *symptom*, a compromise with the Symbolic and the means by which the unconscious can repress acceptance of the terrifying nature of the Real.

Žižek draws on two literary examples to exemplify his notion of the eruption of the Real, which can be usefully compared to Cronenberg's *Crash*, as both involve a focus on borderline states represented by car windows. Žižek cites a Robert Heinlein short story, 'The Unpleasant Profession of Jonathan Hoag' (1942).<sup>70</sup> This narrative involves a protagonist called Randall, who becomes aware that his everyday world is actually constructed by otherworldly beings as a work of art. Occasionally, there are faults in the creation, which are assessed by disguised visitors. During one such visit, Randall is instructed to drive home but under no circumstances must he or his wife open any of the windows during the journey. The trauma of witnessing a car accident leads Randall to disobey this instruction and he has a momentary glimpse of a terrifying, formless void, which is usually masked by a more comforting vision of reality, projected onto the window. The pile-up sequence in the film of *Crash* also features a car carrying the protagonist and his wife, who are tempted to stop by curiosity at the sight of an accident. The way in which Vaughan, their passenger, cranes to get a clearer view of the carnage reflects how his project is centrally concerned with creating the circumstances when he could have a literal collision with the Real.

Žižek briefly mentions a second example of a car windowpane functioning as a metaphorical barrier/screen with the Real, drawing on a different J. G. Ballard text, *Empire of the Sun* (1984).<sup>71</sup> Here the young protagonist, Jim Ballard, on his way back from a night at the cinema, describes the excitement of watching lurid street life in Shanghai as seen through a windscreen. To his youthful imagination, it seems that 'the spectacle outside the theatre far exceeded anything shown on the screen.'<sup>72</sup> His wish that something would break into his cosy and safe world (which could be read as an intrusion of the Lacanian Real) comes true as his home and family are shattered when the Japanese attack the city and subsequent visions through car windows are tinged with a guilt as he blames himself for what he is witnessing. Both Žižek's examples are from inside a car looking out and feature the windows

of the car becoming a screen onto which is projected a view of reality that is a symptom of the Real. By contrast, Cronenberg focuses on a viewing position from outside a car looking in, not only from a fixed position as in the taxi shot but also a more mobile, roving, voyeuristic view as in the car wash scene and the later pile-up sequence, where we are taken on a languorous tracking shot, allowing us to peer in at bodies in shock. Both locate the Real at an interface, but Cronenberg looks at the Real particularly in relation to what might constitute the borders of the human body (or a near analogous object in *Crash*, the car).

For Lacan, the Real is an unrepresentable kernel of meaning that resists the Symbolic coding of language and is manifested in the return of traumatic events. However, a key part of *Crash* is the *lack* of trauma experienced by those on screen. Adams uses the term 'trauma' in the sense of 'that which is traumatic, involves a violent shock and implies a wound', but *Crash* explores what can be represented by exploring the limits of the Symbolic.<sup>73</sup> Adams suggests that the film of *Crash* 'shows us what a world where trauma failed to operate would be like', but both novel and film insist on a 'presentness' precisely to convey that the 'death of affect' is not some futuristic phenomenon but is already an implicit part of urban modernity.<sup>74</sup> Lacan places language as the prime force shaping human identity and it also occupies a central position in Cronenberg's cinematic aesthetic, albeit not in the Lacanian sense of linguistic development. Psychoanalysis strives to move trauma into the arena of the Symbolic via talking about problems in therapy. However, Cronenberg is interested in the limits of language. In *Dead Ringers*, he dramatizes the inability of the Mantle brothers to sustain an existence in the Lacanian realm of the Symbolic. Beverly finds himself unable to speak; not initially to Elliot about his feelings for Claire or at the end to Claire about his feelings for Beverly. He cannot escape the Real, the impossible, but neither can he stay there. Death is the only other option open to the twins.

Adams' reading of *Crash*'s sexuality as 'textured like a wound, gaping, open, unsutured', can be taken further in relation to Žižek's notions of a Lacanian Real.<sup>75</sup> Adams' intuition, stated rather than argued, could be partly due to Cronenberg's use of techniques that Žižek identifies in the work of Krzysztof Kieślowski. For Žižek, the failure of an exchange of objective and subjective shots to produce a suturing effect, produces what he terms an 'interface', in which 'a part of drab reality all of a sudden starts to function as the "door of perception", the screen through which another, purely fantasmatic dimension becomes perceptible.'<sup>76</sup> In addition to the conventional suturing conventions such as shot/reverse-shot, Žižek describes how Kieślowski creates a shot in which 'we see a person in close up face-to-face and, behind him or her, on a glass partition...a larger-than-life reflection of the face of another person with whom the person we see directly is engaged in a conversation. By means of this simple procedure, the spectral dimension is rendered present in the middle of an utterly plain scene.'<sup>77</sup>



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