

David Cronenberg: The Voyeur of Utter Destruction

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David Cronenberg began his career by making B horror films but later transcended the genre, creating gruesome, highly physical melodramas. One of the ways he has made this transition so smoothly is through the motif of sadomasochism, in which violence is directed at an objectified female. In watching Cronenberg films like *Videodrome*, *Crash*, *Dead Ringers*, and *A History of Violence*, it is easy to interpret one's horror as an indication of the director's offensive ideology. But one must also consider the possibility of a director distancing himself from his dramatic material through the use of horror techniques, and encouraging the viewer to do the same: a possibility that becomes clear through an investigation of the work of Laura Mulvey, one of film theory's most prominent feminists.

In her essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Mulvey discusses the cinematic convention of the objectified female and the man as the bearer of the look. She proposes that since the male protagonist directs the gaze of the spectator through subjective narration, mainstream Hollywood encourages the audience to identify with his voyeurism. She also claims that implicit in the voyeur-exhibitionist relationship between the male protagonist and the female lead is a sadomasochistic fantasy that is never explicitly realized: "The power to subject another person to the will sadistically or to the gaze voyeuristically is turned on to the woman as the object of both" (845). Because the Hollywood female lead is placed in a submissive role, film has not only reflected the sexism in society but also perpetuated it, affirming women's submissive role in society. She identifies this problem through the use of Hitchcock films as an emblem of mainstream Hollywood misogyny, and she defines sadomasochism as the use of pain to enhance sexual pleasure in both the inflictor and the recipient.

Mulvey calls for a new subversive film language to destroy these misogynist pleasures of spectatorship by provoking the viewer to analyze the look of the camera. She writes, "The first blow against the monolithic accumulation of traditional film conventions (already undertaken by radical filmmakers) is to free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space" (847). In other words, subversive filmmakers would need to eliminate the technique commonly referred to in film editing as the "eyeline match," in which a character's gaze is intercut with the subject of the gaze. This would free the look of the camera from the subjective look of the protagonist, and thereby heighten the audience's awareness of the camera's presence within the diegesis. Awareness enables analysis, which is the key to the destruction of pleasure. As Mulvey herself puts it: "analyzing pleasure, or beauty destroys it" (839), and "destruction of pleasure is a radical weapon" (838). Voyeurism, defined as the

pleasurable illusion of looking in on a private world, would thus be destroyed through analysis.

David Cronenberg achieves this same feat of destruction through slightly different means. He does not eliminate the eyeline match, nor does he avoid subjective narration. Whereas Mulvey talks about freeing “the look of the camera into its materiality,” Cronenberg frees the look of the male protagonist into its physical manifestations through the depiction of sadomasochism between the male protagonist and the female lead. Since Mulvey herself admits that the look of the spectator and the look of the male protagonist are intricately intertwined in the conventional narrative system to which Cronenberg adheres, Cronenberg’s subversion of Hollywood misogyny is in fact quite similar to Mulvey’s. Cronenberg’s films do provoke analysis of the nature of voyeuristic pleasure, as Mulvey urges, and this analysis has already had a destructive impact on that pleasure. There is then a possibility that Mulvey fails to acknowledge in her essay, namely that filmmakers can subvert the very techniques they use—that they can express ambivalence toward their own artistic tradition.

Both Mulvey and Cronenberg seem to feel that materiality or physicality makes film-going a more candid act. Cronenberg’s film *Crash*, from 1996, depicts a scenario in which a growing cult seeks sexual gratification through vehicular accidents. The male protagonist, a TV director, stumbles upon this subculture while trying to rejuvenate his sex life with his wife. In his article regarding that film, entitled, “A Vision of Masochism in the Affective Pain of Crash,” Anthony McCosker writes, “*Crash* explores new ways of corporealizing sexuality, bringing sexuality back to bodily experience” (43). Feminist film theorist Mary Ann Doane would not find this surprising: “It is precisely because the [female] body has been a major site of oppression that perhaps it must be the site of the battle to be waged” (384). If this is true, we can confidently say that Cronenberg heads straight for the battleground. But has he stumbled upon this battleground by chance? Or does his work have some purpose, some sociopolitical impact beyond entertainment?

In the film *Videodrome*, a new type of pornographic broadcast is discovered emanating from Pittsburgh in which people are beaten, tortured, and electrocuted in a bare room with clay walls. The broadcast is known as videodrome, and it catches the attention of protagonist Max Ren, who seeks to introduce it onto his channel, and his love interest Nikki, who wants to star on the show. Professor Brian Oblivion, a character in the film, claims, “The battle for the mind of North America will be fought in the video arena: the videodrome.” Since that is the title of the film itself, we can infer that Cronenberg realizes he is engaged in a battle “for the mind,” despite his perverse focus on the body. He clearly intends to fight, so which side is he fighting for: the pleasures of patriarchal society, or the destruction of those pleasures?

Before we can say for sure, it is necessary to compare Cronenberg’s films to Mulvey’s analyses of films by Alfred Hitchcock. Mulvey examines Hitchcock’s films *Vertigo*, *Rear Window*, and *Marnie* through the lens of Freudian theory in order to demonstrate mainstream Hollywood misogyny as expressed through voyeuristic sadomasochism. By making this sadomasochism obvious to the viewer unschooled in Freud, Cronenberg enables more viewers to reach the same conclusions as Mulvey.

For example, in Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, a crippled photojournalist spies on his neighbors from his apartment window and becomes convinced that the man across the courtyard has murdered his wife. The male protagonist's voyeuristic tendencies are established by the fact that he is a photographer. The female lead's exhibitionism is established by her obsessive interest in dress and style. The male protagonist comments on her expensive dress, but only to mock its excess. In *Videodrome*, the male protagonist practically psychoanalyzes the female lead's dress, saying, "That dress. It's very stimulating. It's red. I mean, you know what Freud would have said about that dress." The female lead replies, "And he would have been right." Whereas the voyeur/exhibitionist relationship in Hitchcock relies on Mulvey's psychoanalysis to be discerned by the typical viewer, Cronenberg does the psychoanalysis for us.

Similarly, while Mulvey interprets the motivation behind the male protagonist's sadomasochistic desires as the female's embodiment of the male's "castration threat," Cronenberg depicts that threat literally (Mulvey 837). In fact, the female lead in *Videodrome*, indirectly through her alliance with videodrome, causes the male protagonist to literally and physically grow a vagina that also functions somewhat like a VCR. There's no need for Freud—the castration threat has been made real (see Fig.1):

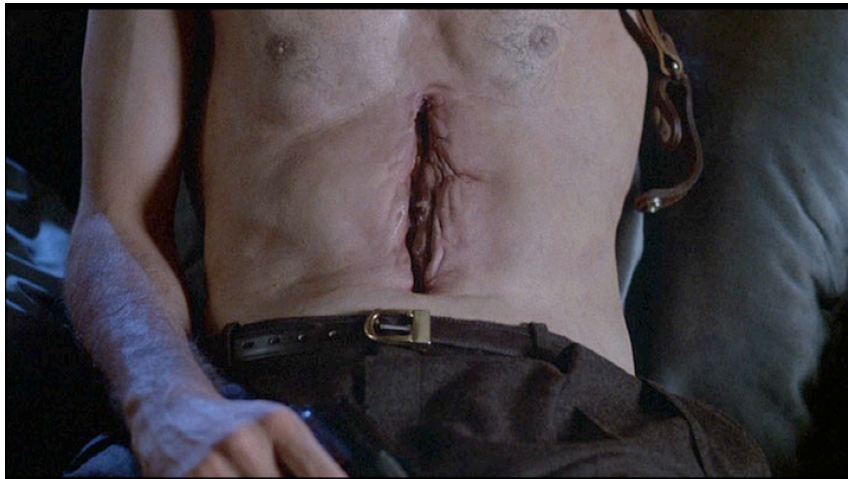


Figure 1

The implicit sadomasochism that Mulvey discerns in this type of relationship is also made plain to the viewer. Mulvey writes of the female lead of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, "Her exhibitionism, her masochism, make her an ideal passive counterpart to Scottie's [the male protagonist] active sadistic voyeurism" (846). Yet spectators who have not read Freud might not be able to discern the misogynist message of this sadomasochism because it is not enacted literally and materially. In *Videodrome*, the male protagonist watches the female lead on a television screen, making the voyeuristic nature of the relationship material. He then proceeds to whip the television screen with her image on it, making the sadomasochistic nature of the relationship material. The scene suggests that, like the male protagonist who directs our gaze, we are in some way violating the female lead by watching her

voyeuristically on a screen. In the image below, taken from *Videodrome*, the male protagonist kisses a voyeuristically objectified image of the female lead (see Figure 2).



Figure 2

Tania Modleski writes in her essay, “The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory”:

In Hitchcock’s films, women’s purses (and their jewelry) take on a vulgar Freudian significance relating to female sexuality and to men’s attempts to investigate it. One might think, for example, of the purse in the opening closeup shot of *Marnie* that contains *Marnie*’s ‘identity’ cards and the booty of her theft from patriarchy. (854)

The average spectator, however, would probably see merely a purse—not, as Modleski supposes, a guilty vagina. Hitchcock’s films generally served as mainstream genre pictures, and most viewers probably wanted to be entertained more than they wanted to crack the Freudian code. Cronenberg, on the other hand, makes the Freudian significance of the male protagonist’s voyeuristic investigation exceedingly obvious; there’s no need to decode.

In his 1988 film *Dead Ringers*, about two identical twins sharing the same office, apartment, and women, the male protagonists are gynecologists and the female lead is not only an actress (an obvious occupation for an exhibitionist), but more importantly his patient. When we first meet the female lead, she is subjected to the male protagonist’s incriminating gaze in the most physical of ways. She lies in his office with her legs open and the male protagonist peering into her vagina. He tells her she has a defect, and later they engage in sadomasochistic sex in which she is tied to a bed with medical tubes. The female lead cries, “You’re gonna spank me, doc. I’ve been bad, and I need to be punished.” It is as though her physical defect is deserving of punishment in the same way as *Marnie*’s psychological defect (her kleptomania), which is physically manifested only through the metaphor of the purse. The sadomasochism in Cronenberg’s films therefore reveals the Freudian implications

of the relationship between the male protagonist and female lead to the viewer unfamiliar with Freud's ideas.

Moreover, because Cronenberg's films point out the sadomasochistic nature of cinema itself, we are labeled as participants in such events, an idea rarely acknowledged by most moviegoers. Jean-Francois Lyotard writes of the corporeality of cinema in his essay, *The Unconscious as Mise-en-scene*: "It is the transcribing on and for bodies, considered as multi-sensory potentialities, which is the work characteristic of the mise-en-scene... The idea of performance... seems linked to the idea of inscription on the body" (88). It is as though moviegoers seek to be acted upon physically in some way, to have their bodies altered. Yet it is unlikely that most film spectators have read Jean-Francois Lyotard. Such a theory would be unnecessary when applied to a Cronenberg film, which has the psychoanalysis already built into the narrative. For example, in *Videodrome*, watching television induces a brain tumor in Professor Oblivion, and eventually persuades the male protagonist to shoot himself, exclaiming, "long live the new flesh." Lyotard's analysis of cinema as closely linked to the body, if applied to *Videodrome*, might seem trite and even understated.

Cronenberg's films also point out ways in which artists like Hitchcock sadistically exploit women for voyeuristic entertainment. For example, Hitchcock casts beautiful, voluptuous women as the female leads so that they can be gazed at by the audience through the eyes of the male protagonist. Cronenberg points out the perverse sadomasochism implicit in such an artistic choice. In the film *Crash*, for example, one character says, "I want really big tits so the audience can see them get all cut up and crushed on the dashboard." In Hitchcock films, we go to the cinema in order to voyeuristically violate the female lead. In Cronenberg films, the female lead's violation is physical. In *Dead Ringers*, when the male protagonist has gone insane, he invents torture instruments which he calls "gynecological instruments for mutant women." An artist who owns a gallery displays these misogynist sadomasochistic devices in a way that evokes the way Hitchcock panders to spectators by violating his female leads (see Figure 3).



Figure 3

But since Cronenberg is doing the same things as Hitchcock, isn't he just part of the same problem identified by Mulvey? As Janet Maslin wrote in her review of *Videodrome* for the New York Times, "There are times when it is dangerously unclear, in the midst of Max's lurid, sadomasochistic fantasies, whether *Videodrome* is far removed from the kind of sensationalism it seeks to satirize" (Maslin). Movie critic James Bowman, in his article, "On Sex and Violence," criticizes Cronenberg and other directors such as David Lynch when he says, "Are they, by an amazing stroke of irony, actually ridiculing the sex-and-violence connection they are ostensibly promoting? No, probably not" (64). It is possible, though doubtful, that Cronenberg is *not* trying to make cinematic sadomasochism so unpalatable that we reject it in all its forms.

Yet even if Cronenberg is not ridiculing the sex-and-violence connection, even if he *is* promoting it on the screen, he is probably only doing so to prevent it in real life. The main character of *Videodrome*, Max Ren, chooses programming for his pornography channel for a living, presenting hidden urges to the public in a way that parallels David Cronenberg's role as a director. As Max Ren puts it, "Better on TV than in the streets." According to such logic, enacting these fantasies on screen prevents the viewer from enacting them in real life.

So perhaps for those who are attracted to the type of relationship Mulvey finds so disgustingly misogynist, Cronenberg also serves a more socially positive role than Hitchcock. In Hitchcock's *Marnie*, a sexually frigid man-hating habitual thief called Marnie marries the man who catches her in exchange for his silence to the authorities. On one occasion, the male protagonist says to the female lead, "I'm fighting a powerful impulse to beat the hell out of you." The male protagonist manages to beat that impulse; perhaps as a result, the sadomasochist spectator is denied the ability to satisfy his violent urges vicariously through the male protagonist. The viewer is allowed to experience voyeuristic sadomasochism, but that is not fulfilling enough, because it would probably not be physical enough for a self-identified sadomasochist.

Because the Cronenberg protagonist barely fights the impulse to "beat the hell out of" the female lead, we are allowed to experience the same rush that the male protagonist feels. As Professor Oblivion says, "Whatever appears on the video screen emerges as raw experience for those who watch it. The hallucination can therefore act as a substitute for reality." And according to another character in *Videodrome*, "You don't have to actually hurt anybody. You just have to think about it." This kind of dialogue supports the notion that even if Cronenberg is not far removed from the kind of sensationalism he seeks to satirize—even if he is a panderer like Hitchcock—he still aims to perform a socially positive act.

Yet the majority of us don't have sadomasochist urges, or if we do, we derive more horror than pleasure from them. It is this "mainstream" audience member that ought to be the main target in Cronenberg's war against the misogynist cinematic vocabulary of mainstream Hollywood. Because Cronenberg not only acknowledges but explores the grotesque physicality of Hitchcock's sadomasochism, he lays his perversions out on the table, which makes them far more accessible to the viewer unschooled in Freud. Hitchcock was popular for his ability to satisfy his audience's urges. For the sadomasochist, perhaps, Cronenberg plays a similar role.

But Cronenberg makes most “normal” viewers so disgusted and ashamed of these urges that for many it is difficult to “like” a Cronenberg film. As Roger Ebert wrote regarding *Crash*, “I admired it, although I cannot say I ‘liked’ it” (“Crash”). His feelings toward *Dead Ringers* are similar: “It’s the kind of movie where you ask people how they liked it, and they say, ‘well, it was well made,’ and then they wince” (“Dead Ringers”). Anthony McCosker writes, “Often manifesting as outrage and discomfort, the unsettling spectatorial experience of *Crash* is far from empty” (45). He also summarizes the critical response at large: “Reviews in news media around the world reiterated the moral outrage expressed in the British news media” (38). When the film was screened at Cannes, some attendants fled the theater in protest, horror, or a combination of both. The film was even banned for a period of time in Great Britain.

Monohla Dargis attempts to explain these types of reactions in her review of the 2005 Cronenberg film, *A History of Violence*. In that film, a humble family man’s transformation into a local hero through a brutal act of “heroism” causes a chain of violent repercussions and forces him to defend his family while attempting to restore peace and order into their lives. The film traces the protagonist’s effort to grapple and subdue the violent impulses within himself that arise in the wake of his heroic deed. In one scene, the male protagonist loses control and rapes his wife on a wooden staircase. She writes, “The great kick of the movie—or rather its great kick in the gut—comes from Mr. Cronenberg’s refusal to let us indulge in movie violence without paying a price” (Dargis). Botting and Wilson provide a similar explanation for viewers’ responses to Cronenberg in their essay “Automatic Lovers”: “*Crash* refuses to evoke or simulate the sensational and spectacular effects that one would expect from a film that draws an equivalence between sex and car crashes” (189). That both reviews speak of some sort of “refusal” on Cronenberg’s part—the refusal to indulge, the refusal to sensationalize—is significant. Essentially, he is refusing to pander to our expectations for sanitized sadomasochism and sanitized misogyny, expectations which directors like Hitchcock catered to by expressing our urges through voyeurism and purses, metaphors for much deeper and more physical perversions. Cronenberg refuses to let us ignore the sickness in these ostensibly sanitized films, and more importantly, the sickness in ourselves as viewers of those films. Roger Ebert describes the relationship between Cronenberg and the sanitization of mainstream Hollywood quite clearly:

Take out the crashes and the injuries, and substitute the usual romantic movie story line, and it would be easy to understand this progression. For the first crash, substitute a chance meeting at a party. Have the husband make a fool of himself. Have them meet later by chance. Have them survive a dangerous experience. Let them feel sudden sexual attraction. No one in the audience would bat an eye if there was then a sex scene. (“Crash”)

Adverse reactions are key to provoking debate, says Anthony McCosker: “The media event of *Crash*, then, *affords the chance to rethink* the general notion of sadomasochistic sexuality in terms of a more concerted examination of masochism... as mass media experience” (31, emphasis mine). Similarly, he argues that “this film and the media events that encompass it have *provided a site for an encounter* with the

corporeal specificity of masochistic sexuality” (37, emphasis mine). We can therefore gather that Cronenberg’s film has allowed us to consider masochism in mass media as a corporeal event.

It seems, then, as though Laura Mulvey’s predictions have been proven correct, though in a slightly different way than she intended. She hoped to make the sadistic gaze of the camera more material and more obvious to the viewer by perhaps allowing the figures onscreen to acknowledge the presence of the camera and the spectator. After all, voyeurism depends on a one-way dominant gaze. Mary Ann Doane explains, “If a character looks at and speaks to the spectator, this constitutes an acknowledgment that the character is seen and heard in a radically different space and is therefore generally read as transgressive” (378). Yet in *Videodrome*, the female lead often looks at and speaks to the male protagonist when he watches her on television, the effect of which is indeed quite jarring. These instances are symptomatic of a more general attempt on Cronenberg’s part to make us aware of the protagonist’s gaze and to materialize it into physical sadomasochism rather than voyeuristic sadomasochism. As predicted by Mulvey and pointed out by McCosker, the effect of this materialization is an awareness that provides an opportunity for analysis. Furthermore, as Mulvey and various other critics like Roger Ebert suggest, this analysis leads to the destruction of pleasure. This approach, described by Ebert in his review of *Dead Ringers* as “the objectivity of a scientist” (“Dead Ringers”), is far different from the usual romanticization of voyeuristic sadomasochism in mainstream Hollywood. In *Rear Window*, for example, the diegetic soundtrack consists mainly of a love song that the female lead claims “sounds like it’s being written just for us.” Cronenberg is just as much of a voyeur as Hitchcock, but unlike Hitchcock he manages to subvert the very techniques he employs. ❖

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