

The Politics of David Cronenberg’s Cinema of Body Horror

David Cronenberg’in Vücut Korkusu Sineması Siyaseti

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Abstract

The genre of horror film was invented with the production of *Dracula* (1931). Since then, a large number of horror films have been made. Even though horror has often been considered an inferior film genre, the 20th Century witnessed several filmmakers, directors and films that have contributed to the elevation of the horror film genre. The scope of horror films has extended, and the types of horror have diversified over time, especially during the 1970s and 1980s. Body horror is a peculiar sub-genre of horror film genre. Though its history is not too long, a significant number of body horror films have been made, known as cult classics today with their cult followers. David Cronenberg is one of the most influential and critically acclaimed body horror filmmakers and directors of the 20th Century. He started his career producing in the 1970s with urban panic films like *Shivers* (1975) and *Rabid* (1977). Over time, Cronenberg made a significant number of body horror films that influenced audiences worldwide and generations who grew up with these films. This research presents an overview of Cronenberg's films within the larger context of the politics of his body horror cinema. In doing so, the research closely focuses on three Cronenberg films in particular: *Videodrome* (1983), *The Fly* (1986) and *Crash* (1996).

Keywords: David Cronenberg; Body Horror; *Videodrome* (1983); *The Fly* (1986); *Crash* (1996)

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Öz

Korku filmi türü, *Drakula* filminin (1931) yapımıyla icat edilmiştir. O tarihten beri çok sayıda korku filmi çekilmiştir. Her ne kadar korku, çoğu zaman aşağı düzeyde bir

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film türü olarak görülse de, 20. yüzyıl, korku filmi türünün yükselişine katkıda bulunan çok sayıda film yapımcısı, yönetmen ve filme tanık olmuştur. Özellikle 1970’li ve 1980’li yıllarda korku filmlerinin kapsamı genişlemiş ve korku türleri çeşitlenmiştir. Vücut korkusu, korku filmi türünün kendine özgü bir alt türüdür. Tarihi çok uzun olmasa da, kült takipçileriyle günümüzde kült klasikler olarak anılan önemli sayıda vücut korku filmi yapılmıştır. David Cronenberg, 20. yüzyılın en etkili ve eleştirilenlerce beğenilen vücut korku filmi yapımcılarından ve yönetmenlerinden biridir. Kariyerine 1970’li yıllarda Ürperti (1975) ve Kuduz (1977) gibi kentsel panik filmleriyle yapımcılığa başlamıştır. Zamanla Cronenberg, dünya çapındaki izleyicileri ve bu filmlerle büyüyen nesilleri etkileyen önemli sayıda vücut korku filmi yapmıştır. Bu araştırma, Cronenberg’in filmlerine, vücut korkusu sineması politikalarının daha geniş bağlamı içindeki filmlerine genel bir bakış sunmaktadır. Bunu yaparken araştırma, özellikle üç Cronenberg filmine yakından odaklanmaktadır: Videodrome (1983), Sinek (1986) ve Çarpışma (1996).

Anahtar Kelimeler: David Cronenberg; Vücut Korkusu; Videodrome (1983); Sinek (1986); Çarpışma (1996)

“I’ll take all of you! I’ll feast on your flesh as I feed on your fear...
Pennywise, *It* (2017)

“If she looked upon the horror any longer, she would scream for the
rest of her life.”
George Langelaan, *The Fly*, *Playboy* (1957)

Introduction: A Brief History of Horror Cinema

The history of horror cinema is not too long, given the fact that the age of cinema is already not too long either. Indeed, compared to other forms of art such as music and stage theater, the art of cinema is too young and a phenomenon of the 20th Century basically. In fact, the roots of contemporary cinema as we know it go back to France to the year 1895, to the Lumière Brothers (Auguste and Louis Lumière), who were manufacturers of the device called *Cinématographe*², a rather primitive motion picture system of the times. Their first commercial public screening on 28 December

2 The word *Cinématographe* etymologically stems from a combination of two Ancient Greek words: *Kinema* (motion, movement) and *Grapho* (writing, recording). The word *Kinematographos*, therefore, means “writing moving images”.

1895 for around 40 paying visitors has traditionally been regarded as the birth of contemporary cinema.

The history of horror cinema is not too long, but it is interestingly too dense because many things happened in it in a couple of decades. The earliest attempts at making horror came from Georges Méliès, an illusionist (magician), film director and actor of the 19th and 20th Centuries. Méliès directed and released the silent film *The House of the Devil (Le Manoir du Diable)* in 1896, which is often considered the first horror film ever made. The film's story is about people's encounters with the Devil and phantoms. The film intended to amuse rather than scare its audiences. Yet, there was a human transformation scene into a bat-like a vampire, almost justifying the horror genre categorization. Méliès released a remake with the title *The Haunted Castle (Le Château Hanté)* in 1897. However, it is a challenge to technically consider these two films as first genuine horror because of their short durations: 3 minutes and 45 seconds, in their timed order.

There was no film genre widely known as 'horror' as such until the early 1930s. The cinematic horror genre was born with the release of *Dracula* in 1931.³ There were attempts between Méliès's horror films and *Dracula*, such as *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror (Nosferatu: Eine Symphonie des Grauens)* (1922), a silent German Expressionist vampire film. Though it was not officially categorized as horror in its times, Marriott and Newman⁴ declare it as a film that set the template for the genre of horror film.

Horror films did not exist until the 20th Century. However, horror stories have existed in folklore, traditions, daily practices, superstitions and myths of almost all cultures in the world for centuries. Therefore, it is not so surprising that early spoken and written literature has played a significant role in the stories of contemporary horror films. For instance, the animistic practices and voodoo culture of Haiti, which was initially brought to the French Caribbean by West African slaves, has constituted a significant impact on the formation of the Zombie culture in modern American cinema. This faith is based on the belief that everything has a spirit, living and non-living, which can be

3 John Oliver, "Why I Love... Bela Lugosi's *Dracula*," *British Film Institute*, October 20, 2016, accessed October 29, 2024, <https://www.bfi.org.uk/features/why-i-love-bela-lugosis-dracula>.

4 James Marriott and Kim Newman, *Horror: The Complete Guide to the Cinema of Fear* (London: Carlton Publishing Group, 2006), 20.

contacted and manipulated via rituals.⁵ One can figure the consequences of such old beliefs and practices on the imaginative capacities of horror filmmakers even today.

Horror films expanded especially during the 1970s and diversified largely in their own sub-genres. On the one hand, horror films and stories have created repetitive effects as several film projects considered several common themes such as Zombies, Vampires and so on. On the other hand, several unique, authentic and elevated horror films also emerged with major creative filmmakers behind them such as *The Exorcist* (1973), *Jaws* (1975) and *The Shining* (1980). *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) became the first horror film to be receive five Academy Awards (Oscars) including best film, best director and best leading actor and actress in 1992. The horror genre has often been the underdog in the film industry, but more recently, horror has also proven itself as an elevated artistic film genre.

Horror cinema has produced several sub-types of horror, classified in several ways in the existing literature depending on the selected criteria of classification. Table 1 below summarizes sub-genres of horror films imperfectly as these categories are interwoven and mostly overlap, therefore are not always mutually exclusive. For instance, *The Shining* (1980) is listed in Table 1 as psychological horror, but it is also a haunted house, in this case, a haunted hotel genre as well. Similarly, *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) is a comedy horror and *28 Days Later* (2002) is an epidemic horror, both having zombies in their stories. Thus, it is often challenging to categorize horror films into definitely and perfectly specified sub-genres. Furthermore, there must always be an ‘others’ category for the sub-genres that do not fit the list or left out possibly. Take Table 1, where ‘gothic horror’, ‘cosmic horror’ and ‘surgical horror’ are not even cited, maybe some or all to be included in Category 9 (Gore/Torture/Splatter) or Category 18 (Exploitation/Extreme).

5 *The Politics of Horror*, YouTube video, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t6Owf9N1R_Q.

Table 1: Sub-types of Horror Films

	Genre	Example
1	Serial killer/Slasher	<i>Friday the 13th</i> (1980)
2	Nature/Animals	<i>Jaws</i> (1975)
3	Ghosts/Spirits/Demons	<i>House on the Haunted Hill</i> (1999)
4	Giallo	<i>Don't Torture A Duckling</i> (1972)
5	Evil Children	<i>Village of the Damned</i> (1995)
6	Haunted House	<i>The Amityville Horror</i> (1979)
7	Epidemic; Pandemic	<i>28 Days Later</i> (2002)
8	Possession	<i>The Exorcist</i> (1973)
9	Gore/Torture/Splatter	<i>Saw</i> (2004)
10	Cannibalism	<i>Cannibal Holocaust</i> (1980)
11	Home Invasion	<i>The Purge</i> (2013)
12	Zombies/Vampires/Wolfman	<i>Night of the Living Dead</i> (1968)
13	Monsters/Frankenstein	<i>Alien</i> (1979)
14	Comedy Horror/Horror Comedy	<i>Shaun of the Dead</i> (2004)
15	Body Horror	<i>The Substance</i> (2024)
16	Extraterrestrial/Sci-fi Horror	<i>The Thing</i> (1982)
17	Psychological	<i>The Shining</i> (1980)
18	Exploitation/Extreme	<i>A Serbian Film</i> (2010)
19	All Others	

The world of horror cinema was diversified especially during the 1970s, the decade in which filmmakers could think and focus on brand new types of scaring the audience, also in accordance with the libertarian spirits and developing film technologies of the times. For instance, the Cannibalism genre was essentially born during the 1970s, with a series of films like *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980) and *Cannibal Ferox* (a.k.a. *Make Them Die Slowly*) (1981), which focus on Western people getting stuck in primitive locations and cultures, such as a cannibal community in Asia or Africa. Yet, one does not need to go to Africa for cannibalism as one can find cannibal stories in the US heartlands, as in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), a horror classic that tells the story of five youths attacked and slaughtered by a human-eating family in a Texas slaughterhouse.

Among the horror sub-genres, a particular category has been called ‘body horror’ as these films primarily focused on human body in their stories. Of course, when human body becomes a material to be exploited by the horror genre, it often includes disturbing, grotesque, even sometimes disgusting visualizations of terrible and hor-

rifying things that can happen to a human body or any non-human body. In a way, body horror genre can be compared to pornography genre by analogy as an extreme or ‘gross’ genre, both including excessive violence and evoking human sexuality one way or another.⁶

The body horror genre is revived again recently, thanks to the new release *The Substance* (2024), a story about a fading celebrity named Elisabeth Sparkle (Demi Moore) who falls from fame due to old age (fifty), and orders an underground, black market drug (substance). This is a drug that is supposed to create a younger version of herself, but with several risks and unexpected side effects. This process is depicted as a one-way journey with no return to the old normalcy, which makes the entire body transition even more disturbing. Furthermore, the younger version of Elisabeth comes out directly from her own body. The second section of this article makes an overview on body horror as a horror sub-genre, and the third section will focus on David Cronenberg’s cinema as a particular category in the body horror context with a focus on Cronenberg films’ political readings. The last section wraps up the major arguments and concludes the article.

Body Horror as a Horror Sub-Genre

Among the sub-genres of horror cinema, a genre that draws attention from audiences and film critics is what is called ‘body horror’, and for a good reason: the sub-genre of body horror is related to a very common fear of all of us, human beings, that is, degradation of the human body. Cruz defines body horror as “a genre trope that showcases often graphic violations of the human body”, arguing that it can also legitimately be called biological horror.⁷ Kuhn and Westwell define the concept as “contemporary variant of the horror film with a particular focus on human bodies that are subject to torture, mutilation, mutation, decay, degeneration, and transformation, usually shown in graphic detail”.⁸ When it comes to living bodies, the subject applies to all humans, including even animals. After all, the body is what we all have in addition to our souls according to some.

6 Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1991): 2.

7 Ronald Allan Lopez Cruz, “Mutations and Metamorphoses: Body Horror Is Biological Horror,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 40, no. 4 (2012): 161.

8 Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell, *A Dictionary of Film Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

The keywords that make impression on several people's psyche include 'mutilation', 'decay', 'degeneration' and the like. First and foremost, several of us are afraid of death as we, humans, are the only living things who live knowing that they will die one day. So, all of us will one day experience the utmost degradation of our bodies, which forms the ultimate source of horror for some of us, especially in the horror-loving audience. This degradation can come in various forms including but not restricted to death only: zombification, diseases and epidemics, possession by evil forces, and the like. The most recent COVID epidemic also added to such widespread bodily fears among audiences at large.

The term 'body-horror' was coined in 1983 by Philip Brophy, an Australian musician, composer, filmmaker, writer and academic. In his article, Brophy argues that contemporary horror of the times particularly focused on human body as a target victim, regardless of the evildoer or the source of fear and destruction in a horror film's storyline. He lays out 'bodily destruction' as a common trend in horror, claiming that horror films of the times were less about death, and more about people's control of and their relations with their bodies, outright.⁹ Brody particularly cites John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982) and Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) when spelling out the key concept "body-horror" (Brophy 1983). After all, both films are about an extra-terrestrial life form with a food chain that includes very humans at the top. These life forms are ready to eat humans, absorb and mimic humans, or destroy and waste them right away for their own survival.

Wells describes body horror as "the explicit display of the decay, dissolution and destruction of the body, foregrounding bodily processes and functions under threat, allied to new physiological configurations and redefinitions of anatomical forms".¹⁰ In fact, body horror is quite close and even overlapping with another horror sub-genre called 'torture porn'. After all, both body horror and torture porn include graphic, grotesque, even disgusting levels of destruction on human body. Yet, while torture porn often includes a deliberate, direct intervention to a human body, like in a real torture session, body horror can often include non-intervening, rather evolutionary decadence on human body such as the outcome of a natural (or supernatural) disease,

9 Phillip Brophy, "Horrority – The Textuality of the Contemporary Horror Film," *Art & Text*, no. 3 (1983), accessed September 10, 2024, https://web.archive.org/web/20180910033121/http://www.philipbrophy.com/projects/rstff/Horrality_C.html.

10 Paul Wells, *The Horror Genre: From Beelzebub to Blair Witch* (London and New York: Wallflower, 2000), 114.

epidemic, medically explainable transformation, and the like. This is what differentiates films like *Saw* and *Hostel* franchises categorized more appropriately as torture porn from films like *Eraserhead* (1978), *Possessor* (2020) and *The Substance* (2024), all under the body horror category.

Aldana Reyes emphasizes the concept of ‘corporeal transgression’ when discussing the sub-genre gothic horror, a concept quite close to body horror. In his view, it is natural that some films do a better job reflecting bodily transformation stories visually and technologically than others, and over time, the influence of such films on people often declines rather than grows or expands. Despite the censorship, ratings and several legal restrictions from formal institutions on these art works, they still tell us a lot about the aspects and limitation of social and cultural taboos.¹¹

Body horror as a non-film genre existed even before the production of body horror films. Early examples in written literature include Franz Kafka’s novella *The Metamorphosis*, which tells the story of the salesperson George Samsa, who one morning wakes up to see that he has entirely transformed into a giant insect, a cockroach, horrible vermin, “ungeheuren Ungeziefer”.¹² Afterwards, George Samsa cannot leave his room, thus cannot go to work. He has to stay hidden from the rest of society. He also fails to maintain good relations with his family, his parents and his sibling, as a giant insect. After being spotted by the neighboring community, which creates further problems for his family, Samsa eventually commits suicide by hunger and dies before the next morning. Kafka’s novella has been reviewed from a variety of angles and perspectives over time, including psychological, sociological, feminist and the like.

Another major example for pre-cinema body horror is H. P. Lovecraft (1890–1937) and his literary works, such as novels, novellas and short stories. His artistic style of writing is often known as *Cosmicism*, named by Lovecraft himself, according to which there is no recognizable divine and superior will, such as a god, in the cosmic void of the universe. Human beings cannot matter less within the larger picture of the cosmos. In this regard, Lovecraftian cosmicism shares a lot with the current of nihilism, both stressing the insignificance of the human being in the intergalactic existence. Yet, cosmicism does not necessarily conclude that life is meaningless, contrary to nihilism. Contemporary films adapted from Lovecraft’s works are often

11 Xavier Aldana Reyes, *Body Gothic: Corporeal Transgression in Contemporary Literature and Horror Film* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014), 9.

12 Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis [Die Verwandlung]*, 1915.

of cosmic horror genre, which include *Re-Animator* (1985), *From Beyond* (1986), *Necronomicon* (1993), *In the Mouth of Madness* (1994) and *Dagon* (2001). Horror film directors like Stuart Gordon, Brian Yuzna and John Carpenter were all inspired by this literary genre of Lovecraftian horror, emphasizing the fear of the unknown and the incomprehensible mostly from extraterrestrial space or primordial creatures who come from who knows where.

There were earlier attempts for body horror filmmaking before the emergence of Cronenberg films, such as *The Fly* (1958) and *The Blob* (1958), to name only two. Even though not as graphic as the contemporary versions, *Frankenstein* (1910) and *Frankenstein* (1931) could also be counted as body horror at least in the theme: Frankenstein is a monster composed of mixed dead body parts assembled together. It is still fair to argue that one name that contributed to the making and elevation of body horror in modern times has been the Canadian filmmaker and director David Cronenberg. The advances of filmmaking science and technology in the recent decades also helped. Body horror has become a lifestyle for a film director in the case of this director. Cronenberg started with short and amateur films, but his transfer to the long feature-length films became the key factor for his widespread popularity in the medium and long run.

David Cronenberg as a Body Horror Film Director

Kellner defines David Cronenberg as a frontrunner explorer of “(post)modern panic, where bourgeois individuals are attacked by viral forces and undergo mutations of mind and body”.¹³ Indeed, the initial films Cronenberg directed makes such an image, a film director of urban panic, an accurate one. Cronenberg is actually known as an independent, leading master of body horror in the film industry since his early long feature-length films in the mid-1970s. These films reflected a dedication to body horror, even gore as they could have included exploitative and controversial contents, more than just disturbing, as well.

David Paul Cronenberg was born in Toronto in 1943. He graduated from the English Language and Literature program at the University of Toronto in 1967, but did not pursue a further degree as he was already making short and sketch films at the time. Cronenberg made two short films, *Transfer* (1966) and *From the Drain* (1967), with

13 Douglas Kellner, “David Cronenberg: Panic Horror and the Postmodern Body,” *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 13, no. 3 (1989): 89.

a few hundred dollars.¹⁴ After making two short art-house features, *Stereo* (1969) and *Crimes of the Future* (1970), in the following years, Cronenberg went into partnership with Ivan Reitman, the film producer-director from Canada. Reitman played a big role in Cronenberg's ascension to international recognition as a film director as he produced his ever first and second full-length feature films, both horribly impressing critics and wider audiences, as well as cult film fans.

Reitman produced Cronenberg's first two full-length feature films, *Shivers* (1975) and *Rabid* (1977), both epidemic, urban-panic horror stories. *Shivers* is about slug-like creatures that spread in a city to create a bunch of sex zombies, who attack regular humans to have sex with them. *Rabid* focuses on a woman who develops an orifice under her armpit that hides a phallic/clitoral stinger she bites people with, which then leads to an exponential spread of a disease that transforms people to human-biting zombies. Neither film refrains from scaring its audience or turning their stomachs with gross, even grotesque imagery.

Table 2 below lists Cronenberg's filmography as film director. Afterwards, Cronenberg directed *The Brood* (1979) and *Scanners* (1981), both cementing Cronenberg's career as a body horror filmmaker. *The Brood* (1979) mixes body horror with pregnancy, giving birth and little evil children in a complicated story of psychological horror. The plot follows a man and his mentally disturbed ex-wife, who have to be exposed to a series of controversial therapy methods of her psychiatrist. A series of violent attacks and murders become the central theme of the film narrative. We see a woman, Nora, giving birth to new creepy children through an external cord, and licking her newborn baby to clean her up towards the end. *Scanners* (1981) starts directly with a graphic, bloody head explosion, probably the most frequently remembered scene of the film. The film's story unfolds in a world in which certain people with unusual and dangerous telekinetic and telepathic powers are known as 'scanners'.

Two films by Cronenberg were released in 1983: *Videodrome* and *The Dead Zone*. *Videodrome* (1983) was a combination of 'remote mind control' (via some waves, rays, etc.) conspiracy and a time of Betamax videotapes in North America. We follow the story of Max Renn, played successfully by James Woods, a television programmer and producer. After being over-exposed to videotapes by *Videodrome*, Max develops some hallucinations involving body horror, his own body horror. We see one hand of Max organically developing into an ugly, unusual handgun, half metal half flesh.

14 Chris Rodley, ed., *Cronenberg on Cronenberg* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), 13.

We also see his chest open, with a vagina-looking slit for the insertion of organic, breathing and moaning Betamax videotapes into his body for programming him for his controller's purposes. "Long live new flesh!" has been a remarkable line from the film. Based on the science-fiction thriller novel with the same title, *The Dead Zone* (1983) is about a schoolteacher who experiences a serious traffic accident, remains in coma for five years, and then wakes up after all these years to a new phase in his life. He discovers that he now has new psychic powers, which he did not have before the accident. As he touches a person, he can see the details of her life including her beloved ones, through her past consciousness and memories.

Table 2: David Cronenberg Filmography as Director

Year	Title
1966	Transfer
1967	From the Drain
1969	Stereo
1970	Crimes of the Future
1975	Shivers
1977	Rabid
1979	Fast Company
1979	The Brood
1981	Scanners
1983	Videodrome
1983	The Dead Zone
1986	The Fly
1988	Dead Ringers
1991	Naked Lunch
1993	M. Butterfly
1996	Crash
1999	Existenz
2002	Spider
2005	A History of Violence
2007	Eastern Promises
2011	A Dangerous Method
2012	Cosmopolis
2014	Maps to the Stars
2022	Crimes of the Future
2024	The Shrouds

Source: Compiled by the author from <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000343/>

The Fly (1986) came three years later, as Cronenberg decided to make a new film from the book and film of the same name, *The Fly* (1957), a sci-fi horror short story by George Langelaan and *The Fly* (1958), the film directed by Kurt Neumann, respectively.¹⁵ The film story is about a genius scientist who develops a technological device, machinery for the transportation of things, living and non-living. In both films, the scientist transforms into a hybrid of human and fly, a human-fly. Yet, the two films dealt with the special effects quite differently. While the 1958 version displayed a man with a big fly head and eventually a fly with a small human head, Cronenberg's film merged the two biologically, at the DNA level, in a much more advanced technological context.

After a series of experiments with different objects, including a failing attempt with a monkey, the scientist decides to use his own body for a transportation experiment. He enters the cabin (telepod) naked, unknowingly together with a medium-sized fly in the same cabin. The transportation device perceives the two as the same and mixes them biologically as the final output. In later times, he turns into a human fly by developing qualities and appearances that show his decay from a healthy human into a giant, grotesque and monstrous creature. This decay process includes his teeth, ears and fingernails falling out, distortion of his skin and outer experiences, as well as his psychological journey into being a fly in mind, his dehumanization.

Cronenberg's next was *Dead Ringers* (1988), a psychological thriller, a story about identical twin brothers and gynecologists, Elliot and Beverly, both played by Jeremy Irons. Women coming to their clinics are often initially seduced by one twin, then passed into the other one. Women do not recognize the change of twins. After a while, a woman loved by both twins leads to a series of events that disturb the equilibrium between the two twins, and events only start to get worse afterwards. *Naked Lunch* (1991) is a surrealist, science-fiction drama about an insect exterminator man of the early 20th Century, the protagonist, who starts hallucinating due to exposure to the insecticide. His typewriter turns into a giant cockroach and starts talking to him seriously like a man, with an adult male voice dubbed in. The cockroach-typewriter tells the protagonist to do things as well, such as killing his wife. The film narrative is often abstract and confusing, with a large number of symbolic events and things running in the background.

Crash (1996) and *Existence* (1999) were two more films of Cronenberg that were

15 George Langelaan, "The Fly," *Playboy*, 1957.

released in the late 1990s. *Crash* was based on J. G. Ballard's novel with the same title, published in 1973.¹⁶ *Crash* (1996) is an erotic thriller at the borderlines of pornography due to its excessively sex-driven narrative and mostly coarse flow of events including sexual. The film focuses on a group of urban people, loose in traditional loyalty, sexually attracted to cars, metal and car crashes, as well as the damaged bodies after car crashes. *Existenz* (1999) is about a new, futuristic and organic virtual reality game, played within a focus group. The game can only be played with ultra-sustainable bio-technological devices, called bio-ports with game connectors that are surgically inserted into all players' spines. As the group starts to play the game, a series of unexpected events occur that drive two main characters throughout the game flow of events, often shifting from one game to another, getting lost in finding back the reality they had started with.¹⁷

Cronenberg made the following films in chronological order starting with the 2000s: *Spider* (2002), *A History of Violence* (2005), *Eastern Promises* (2007), *A Dangerous Method* (2011), *Cosmopolis* (2012), *Maps to the Stars* (2014), *Crimes of the Future* (2022) and most lately, *The Shrouds* (2024). Not all these films included body horror or any extremity, but each had an edge of its own. *Spider* (2002) made us get lost in the disturbed mindset and memory of Dennis Cleg (played by Ralph Fiennes), a man with schizophrenia and known as Spider. Having just been released from a mental institution, Spider is provided with a room in a halfway house, particularly for the mentally disturbed. He there meets new friends. He remembers his own childhood, his parents, and some events, tries to piece them together. Some characters swap between flashbacks and some flashback scenes includes both his adulthood and childhood in the same space, which further confuses the audience about the reference of reality in schizophrenia.

Cronenberg started to work with Viggo Mortensen, an American actor and filmmaker, starting with *A History of Violence* (2005). This director-actor collaboration proved to be long-term and productive as they produced critically acclaimed films in later years, *Eastern Promises* (2007), *A Dangerous Method* (2011) and *Crimes of the Future* (2022). *A History of Violence* (2005) is an adaptation from a graphic novel by the same title, written by John Wagner (1997). Tom Stall (played by Viggo Mortensen)

16 J. G. Ballard, *Crash* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973).

17 For instance, they start playing *Existenz* but wake up at the end to having just finished playing *Transcendenz* instead. So, the audience cannot make sure which game they just played, and whether they are back to reality or still in the game.

lives a peaceful rural life in a rural town of Indiana, together with his loving wife and two children. He owns a diner in his town. One day, two spree killers visit his diner and as the visit is driven violently, Tom saves himself and the people in the diner by attacking and killing the two killers.

As Tom becomes a national hero on all TV channels after this incident, he has to welcome new visitors to his diner: this time, a trio of mafia men, led by Carl Fogarty (played by Ed Harris), who claims that Tom Stall's real name is Joey Cusack, and he has an earlier life history in mafia that no one else around him actually knows. The film and its crew were nominated for a variety of awards, and won some of them too, including Chicago Film Critics Association Awards (David Cronenberg as best director and Maria Bello as best supporting actress), French Syndicate of Cinema Critics' Awards (best foreign language film) and Toronto Film Critics Association Awards (best film, best Canadian film and best director). The film includes a variety of scenes with violence, sometimes even excessive, graphic violence, constituting body horror.

Eastern Promises (2007) is more like a mafia-gangster thriller with a highly acclaimed cast of actors including Naomi Watts, Vincent Cassel and Armin-Mueller Stahl in addition to Mortensen. The film starts with a jump scare scene, an attack of throat cutting on a Russian mafia, in a Turkish hair-dresser shop in London. Anna (played by Naomi Watts), a Russian English midwife living with her mother and uncle in London, witnesses the birth operation of a fourteen-year-old Russian teenage girl Tatiana, who dies during the birth. She discovers her diary to get exposed to the notes that uncover a variety of dirty facts about an existing Russian mafia group settled in London, including sex trafficking and statutory rape crimes. The film includes a brutal bathhouse scene, in which Nikolai, a Russian gangster (played by Viggo Mortensen) fights completely naked against two men attacking him fatally with sharp blades. The film also includes scenes of Russian gang life including interrogation and tattooing sessions with graphic details.

A Dangerous Method (2011) was about the intersecting lives of three people, Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis (Viggo Mortensen), Carl Gustav Jung, the founder of analytical psychology (Michael Fassbender), and Sabina Spielrein (Keira Knightley), initially Jung's patient and later a physician and one of the first female psychoanalysts of her time. *Cosmopolis* (2012) follows Eric Parker (played by Robert Pattinson), a young billionaire and currency speculator in his late 20s, who takes a ride across Manhattan amid traffic jams and interesting visits and outside events, including an anti-Capitalist demonstration. *Maps to the Stars* (2014) takes us to the

lives of two celebrities, a young boy actor and a washed-up actress, their relations with their close surroundings, their fears, their dreams and desires, as well as their relationship with the Western world as a whole. More recently, Cronenberg came up with *Crimes of the Future* (2022) and *The Shrouds* (2024). The former felt a little bit of slow burner compared to other Cronenberg films, and received mixed reviews, mostly positive. The most recent *The Shrouds* (2024) had its world premiere in 2024 Cannes Film Festival, and it is scheduled to be released theatrically in January 2025.

All in all, Cronenberg started as an influential body horror creator from the beginning and remained so even though not all films and stories included outright body horror over the years. For the sake of Cronenberg's politics of body horror, a closer examination of his three films will be presented in the last section: *Videodrome* (1983), *The Fly* (1986) and *Crash* (1996). These films were selected because each represents a different climax in Cronenberg's style of creating body horror. The times of these films are from Cronenberg's middle career years, excluding the 1970s and the 2000s. It is fair to argue that the 1980s and 1990s both represent golden age times in Cronenbergian body horror (see Table 2). A more realistic, down to earth essence developed in Cronenberg's films starting with the 2000s, which included body horror but not at excessive, overwhelming limits. All three films contain stories and scenes with realistic or non-realistic scenes of excessive gore or exploitation. The most down to earth is *Crash* (1996), while *The Fly* (1986) and *Videodrome* (1983) would make a tie in futuristic fantasy. *The Fly* (1986) is the goriest of the three.

Cronenberg's Body Horror Closer: Videodrome, The Fly and Crash

***Videodrome* (1983)**

Andy Warhol defined *Videodrome* (1983) as the "Clockwork Orange of the 1980s".¹⁸ *Videodrome* is a unique body horror of its own with grotesque images and deformities. It is a psychological body horror that sets in the early 1980s and blurs the borderline between reality and imagination in a mind-bending flow of events. Its storyline and presentation are open to multiple interpretations. The title of this film sounds like a game title rather than a movie. Released as early as in 1983, the times go back to

18 John Slyce, "We Have the Technology: The Conditions of Art and Its Experience in a Would-Be Age of the Technological Sublime," in *More than Real: Art in the Digital Age, 2018 Verbier Art Summit*, ed. Daniel Birnbaum and Michelle Kuo (Verbier Art Summit, 2018), 178.

years in which today's long-outdated Betamax videotapes were mostly common and in widely use.

Videodrome's storyline follows the viewpoint of the main protagonist Max Renn, who is the head of Civic TV, a TV channel that shows explicit content ranging from soft-core pornography to hardcore violence. Max gets exposed to and falls under the influence of Videodrome, a pirated TV frequency that shows explicit content of graphic violence including murder, torture and rape. While searching about the Videodrome deeper like an inspector, Max realizes that Videodrome is produced by a big company to transform the American and Canadian populations towards a desired direction. Videodrome does this by sending electro-wave frequencies to the audiences from the TV. He also starts to hallucinate as he digs deeper into Videodrome.¹⁹

Videodrome is depicted as a videotaped source of alternative virtual reality. We never see a different technological version of Videodrome other than a vision on TV or an awful, diseased Betamax video cassette. For instance, we do not see a game cartridge version of it. The film starts quite realistically, with no signs of disturbance at the beginning. One of the initial signs of reality distortion comes when Max's TV calls directly his name to invite him to Videodrome rather hypnotically: the television box starts to move as if it is breathing, almost cracking, and the television screen grows outwards like an inflated balloon. In fact, Max hallucinates the TV screen seducing him via the image of a woman that Max previously had an affair with, Nicki Brand (played by Deborah Harry). With symbolic abstractions, in a way, Max has sex with his TV by fondling its inflated screen, which focuses on Nikki's lips closer and closer.

More than just hallucinations, Videodrome, in fact, creates a brain tumor in Max's body, and that tumor grows like a new organ. It makes Max see things and creates new bodily parts on his body such as a slit on his abdomen and a half-organic handgun on his hand. Throughout the second half of the film, Max is used by rivaling companies against one another. He becomes a pawn of Videodrome initially, then gets re-programmed by another company and turns into an enemy of Videodrome, targeting and assassinating its major actors and his old friends.

All in all, the film is about how new technology changes our lives and our own bodies. Max's version is too mixed with technology, outside our realistic borderlines, but

19 *Videodrome: Horror Movie Review- Body Horror Movies*, YouTube video, accessed November 21, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x8nWC6JJNZ0>.

it creates an atmosphere open to multiple interpretations: are bodily changes indeed happening or is it just inside Max's imagination? How does Max translate into a new body at the end? Does he imagine suicide at the end for himself, or was it a new start for Max? Videodrome ends by making the audience remain with a lot of questions along those lines.

The Fly (1986)

Similar to John Carpenter who re-made *The Thing from Outer Space* (1951) and elevated it later by making *The Thing* (1982) out of respect and a professional film direction including successful makeup and gorgeously disgusting special effects, Cronenberg re-made *The Fly* (1958) and elevated it to *The Fly* (1986) with quite bold and new ideas. Both Fly films are adaptations from a short story of the same title *The Fly* (1957) by George Langelaan, a French British writer and journalist. This short story was published in the June 1957 issue of *Playboy*²⁰ and inspired generations of Fly-loving filmmakers and audiences. Both Fly films are accurately based on this short story about a scientist who comes up with a molecular transporter that materializes and realizes the instant transfer or teleportation of objects possible from one place to another. This is a technology we can dream but fall short of making today. So, we can argue this is a futuristic, sci-fi story.

In the case of the scientist in the story, this is an instant teleportation of objects, living and non-living, from one telepod (chamber) of the transporter to the other telepod. What happens in the story is that the scientist uses himself, his own body, as a guinea pig to see whether he could teleport himself from one telepod to the other directly. Unfortunately for the scientist, unbeknownst to him, a fly also enters the initial telepod that the scientist enters in, and the two, the scientist and the fly, are fused at the atomic, DNA level, creating a giant and grotesque human-fly, or as in the Cronenberg version (1986), Brundlefly.

In the earlier film version (1958), shot in black and white, the fusion is displayed as transfers of limbs between a human and a fly: the scientist has the head and the left arm of a fly while retaining his human mind, while the fly has a miniature head and a left human arm. Cronenberg's version (1986) makes a bold step further, also more in accordance with the original story, and displays the fusion of a scientist with a

20 Langelaan, "The Fly." Also see: Mark A. Vieira, *Hollywood Horror: From Gothic to Cosmic* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2003), 173.

fly at the most essential, biological, DNA level, which eventually leads the scientist develop into a big human-fly, eventually decaying into sub-human levels, turning into a flesh-and-bone creature. Though it is generally categorized as body horror or sci-fi thriller, *The Fly* (1986) is, in fact, a story of a scientist's tragedy, a tragic story. In a way, we can argue that it is a Kafkaesque story due to similar themes between a human and a pest or insect, be that a fly or a cockroach. Both are tragic stories that turn our stomachs upside down while being exposed to them in reading the story or seeing the film.

The Fly (1986) has scenes that can be categorized as political or even philosophical. As Seth Brundle the scientist (played by Jeff Goldblum) turns into a giant Brundlefly, his body deforms, and his voice deforms to the extent that his own teleportation device no longer recognizes its creator's voice. As he turns into Brundlefly slowly yet steadily, he also realizes that his mind has also been weakening, and he is turning into a fly mentally as well. At some point during his bodily transformation, he asks his journalist ex-girlfriend Veronica "Ronnie" Quaife (played by Geena Davis) if she ever heard of 'insect politics'. During the tragic conversation between the two, Ronnie and Seth (Brundlefly), Seth says that he is not only bodily but also mentally transforming into an insect, and now, he realizes that "insects do not have politics". They are brutal with no compassion and no compromise; thus insects are never to be trusted. He even humorously says he wants to be the first insect politician, but he cannot as the insect inside him is now awake. Seth realizes that he will not be able to control his actions like a human after a while as he is driven by primitive impulses he never had before. Eventually, Seth openly says to Ronnie "I'll hurt you if you stay".²¹

As Seth turns into Brundlefly, his bodily changes also include being able to walk on the walls and on the ceiling. He naturally beings to vomit digestive enzymes on his food before eating,²² which he also videotapes for display to others. *The Fly* storyline also includes the concept of pregnancy, as they come to learn that Ronnie is about to give birth to Seth's child. Ronnie has nightmares about her giving birth to a large, human-sized maggot, which constitutes one of the most disturbing scenes of the film.

21 Piotr Panic, *The Fly (1986)- Insect Politics*, YouTube video, accessed October 26, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hKXqCFIJhSk>.

22 It is known and has been observed scientifically that flies do not have teeth. Therefore, flies do not eat like mammals do because they cannot chew solid food. Flies must spit out or vomit their own enzyme-rich saliva on their food to be able to dissolve it for eating in liquid form.

Towards the end, Seth as Brundlefly kidnaps Ronnie to his apartment from the abortion clinic and offers her a new body to be made as a fusion of Seth, Ronnie and the fly. As Ronnie resists, Seth enforces her to the telepod for their ultimate fusion. She accidentally rips off Brundlefly's jaw, pushing his final metamorphosis into a big, insect-ish human creature, shedding its eyes, its face and its entire skin. Eventually, Ronnie escapes from the telepod with the help of a friend, who shoots the connecting cables between telepods and the main device. Seth gets fused with parts of the metal telepod door accidentally and comes out of the other telepod as a combination of Seth, the fly and the telepod (metal). Ronnie shoots the final creature to end his pain, and the film ends with that big tragedy for Seth.

Crash (1996)

This film is based on the novel with the same title, written by J. G. Ballard. In terms of visual craziness and disconnection from reality, *Crash* is the most down-to-earth among the selected three Cronenberg films. The film starts with a couple, James Ballard and Catherine Ballard (played by James Spader and Deborah Kara Unger), having sexual affairs with other women and men separately, and sharing their extra-marital adventures with one another at home. Catherine has sex with a man in an aircraft hangar, while James makes out with his female assistant at a film set. Neither Catherine nor James was sexually satisfied for different reasons. Catherine ended up unsatisfied most probably because of the anxiety of getting caught by anybody walking in, and James was interrupted by his film crew. So, they both wish one another "maybe the next time". This is how *Crash (1996)* opens. Thus, it is obvious that we are not to witness a story of sexual morality or purity from the very beginning. This is a sexually explicit story of bodily pleasures and bodily horror with its own pornographic, violent and dark edges on purpose. *Crash* is to disturb the audiences on purpose. Due to its content, it was rated NC-17 in the US, a rare category even above R (Restricted).

Crash (1996) premiered at Cannes Film Festival in the same year, received a Special Jury Prize, and divided the audiences almost right away, with its lovers and haters swung into opposite directions. It eventually created a cult film image with its own fanatic audiences. James has a head-to-head crash with another car one day, killing its male driver, and hurting his wife Dr. Helen Remington (played by Holly Hunter) seriously, who was sitting next to the driver's seat. In the hospital, they get closer to have an affair later. They also meet Dr. Robert Vaughan (played by Elias Koteas), who is obsessed with not only car crashes but also bodily bruises. Both James and

Helen become Dr. Vaughan’s followers as they discover Vaughan engaging in car crash rehearsals and actual crash shows in public, as an illegal, underground activity.

The film includes consecutive sexually explicit scenes of heterosexual and homosexual relationships, both woman-to-woman and man-to-man. At some point, Catherine and Vaughan have sex in a car, and that night, Catherine asks James if he bodily desires Vaughan while they are also having sex. Later we also witness James and Vaughan having sex in Vaughan’s car. A fifth character shows up from the car crash group, named Gabrielle (played by Rosanna Arquette), who has a vulva-like wound on her thigh because of a car crash, with steel braces covering her leg. At some point, James and Robert pursue each other by the cars they are driving separately, which ends up with Vaughan’s having a fatal traffic accident, ending his life. Afterwards, we witness Gabrielle and Helen kissing and fondling in the wreck of Vaughan’s car. The film ends with James and Catherine pursuing each other at high speed on a highway, which ends up with Catherine’s car going off the road, falling into a grassy median. The couple still prefers to have sex under Catherine’s wrecked car anyway, with Catherine wishing James “maybe the next time”.

Table 3: Comparative Basic Info Table of Three Selected Cronenberg Films

	Videodrome (1983)	The Fly (1986)	Crash (1996)
Directed by	David Cronenberg	David Cronenberg	David Cronenberg
Produced by	Claude Héroux	Stuart Cornfeld	David Cronenberg
Written by	David Cronenberg	George Langelaan	J. G. Ballard
Screenplay by	David Cronenberg	Charles Edward Pogue	David Cronenberg
		David Cronenberg	
Music by	Howard Shore	Howard Shore	Howard Shore
Cinematography	Mark Irwin	Mark Irwin	Peter Suschitzky
Cast	James Woods	Jeff Goldblum	James Spader
	Sonja Smits	Geena Davis	Holly Hunter
	Deborah Harry	John Getz	Elias Koteas
	Peter Dvorsky	Joy Boushel	Deborah Kara Unger
	Les Carlson	David Cronenberg	Rosanna Arquette
Runtime	89 minutes	96 minutes	100 minutes
Production Country	Canada	US	Canada
Language	English	English	English
Distributed by	Universal Pictures	20th Century Fox	Alliance Communications
Edited by	Ronald Sanders	Ronald Sanders	Ronald Sanders
Poster Motto	First it controls your mind. Then it destroys your body.	Be Afraid. Be Very Afraid.	-

Conclusion and Discussion

David Cronenberg is a mastermind and master maker of body horror cinema, thanks to the quality and elevation of his films over the years. It was quite obvious from the onset of his career as filmmaker that he intended to be a film director of horror, bodily horror in particular. Over time, we can argue that Cronenberg acquired a progressive path of making more elevated films in his later years. As far as we can observe, Cronenberg does not prefer to deliver explicit political messages to his audience directly. However, we also know that he is a secular-liberal personality with progressive, left-wing world views, and he self-identifies as an atheist, defining atheism as acceptance of how the universe works and what is real in it only,²³ with no further thoughts on the surreal or metaphysical whatsoever. Plus, Cronenberg does not hesitate to criticize, even bash American conservative, right-wing politics.²⁴

In this context, Cronenberg would not be expected to give conservative, religious or moral messages in the first place. For instance, a ‘morally corrupt’ and ‘dirty’ Max Renn, the head of Civic TV, a sleazy TV channel broadcasting dirty and pornographic content, would not be expected to be well-respected during the film entirety in the American mainstream conservative context. Yet, Cronenberg makes us feel for such a TV boss in *Videodrome* (1983). The audience feels and associates with him in the film as he is presented as a quite likeable character, due to Cronenberg’s secular-liberal worldview and his non-judgmental take on the story and its actors.

Body horror is a controversial sub-genre of horror, and it will continue to be. In Milligan’s words, “it’s the filmic representation of body horror that leaves us more vulnerable to the full force of seeing bodies like ours mutate into the represented unrepresentable”.²⁵ Cronenberg’s films reflect our own personal bodily fears to us, our own fears of decay and death. As long as our human fears survive over time, the sub-genre of body horror will continue, expand and gain new momentums in the future, and continue to benefit from Cronenberg’s mindset. This mindset cannot be

23 Henry Barnes, “David Cronenberg: I Never Thought of Myself as a Prophet,” *The Guardian*, September 12, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/sep/12/david-cronenberg-suicide-fantastic-exit>.

24 Anthony D’Alessandro, “‘Crimes of the Future’s David Cronenberg Slams Conservative U.S. Politics: ‘In Canada... We Think Everyone in the U.S. Is Completely Insane,’” *Deadline*, May 23, 2022, <https://deadline.com/2022/05/crimes-of-the-future-david-cronenberg-roe-vs-wade-cannes-film-festival-1235031178/>.

25 Caleb Milligan, “Uncomfortable in the New Flesh: Adapting Body Horror in the Cinema of David Cronenberg,” *Trespassing Journal*, no. 6 (2017): 40.

a conservative one for sure. On the contrary, it must be liberally brave to be able to question deeper into our darkest anxieties and reflect our fears so that we overcome them as a social species.

Cronenberg's films are political. However, the term 'political' in this context must be accompanied with a critical footnote: not political in the casual use of the term, not directly and explicitly political, not in a clearly identifiable liberal, conservative, socialist, feminist, etc. direction. These films are not didactic either. The term 'political' is used here in a more holistic, generic framework according to which politics can be observed rather indirectly and/or implicitly at micro, meso and macro levels. If the audience is looking for a message, maybe it is in the hidden meanings and interpretations. Cronenberg films might proceed or end up crazy from time to time, but they often do not start out crazy. On the contrary, stories of Cronenberg films can be truly slow-paced, establishing events and characters in a prolonged introduction, for instance.

Rather than revealing direct messages, Cronenberg's films often constitute a framework within which a series of characters build up and experience a common theme, stimulant or occurrence, an event, a process, which can take forms of: playing collectively a surreally futuristic game, being Videodromed, turning into a human-fly biologically, crashing cars, living in a Hollywood life, being busted by gangsters, creating a new limb and so on. Characters are often constructed powerfully in the common story and its flow of events. The audience is often made to feel and care for the main characters, including the protagonist if any.

Cronenberg's films contain not only bodily mutations, transformations and degradations, but also in-depth questions about social relations, inter-personal perceptions, decisions that people make, incentives that people take, workings of the inner mind, and so on. At the film endings, the audience can sometimes get confused about what just happened or cannot be sure as to which sub-narrative was the most accurate. Secondary, even third screenings often become necessary to go over the entire story and its readings in its full details. If the genre is science-fiction and includes supernatural processes, the audience might be more prepared for an ending in chaos, or any ending. However, if the genre is less science-fiction and more down-to-earth realistic drama, the chances of confusion at the ending is more likely and unexpected. Not all films end up with twists either. Not everything is illuminated with full information at the end of Cronenberg's films, even purposely. In several film endings, the director's purpose feels confusing rather than enlightening the audience, raising more questions

or questioning the answers rather than answering questions.

Body horror has become a critical instrument to convey messages to larger audiences explicit and implicit. A contemporary example of that we can speculate loosely about a potential ‘Cronenbergian effect’ or inspiration is *The Substance* (2024). Directed by Coralie Fargeat, the director of *Revenge* (2017), cinematographed by Benjamin Kračun, *The Substance* (2024) stars Demi Moore, Dennis Quaid and Margaret Qualley, each performing at elevating levels. In particular, the film follows a fading TV celebrity, Elisabeth Sparkle (played by Demi Moore). On her 50th birthday, Elisabeth, a once-celebrated but now-faded TV celebrity, is fired by her producer Harvey (played by Dennis Quaid) due to her age, and she orders a black-market product called ‘the substance’ that generates a younger version of herself (played by Margaret Qualley) with unexpectedly negative effects. *The Substance* (2024) not only disgusted the audiences due to its bloody, violent and gory content, but also demonstrated a lot about the asperity and selfishness of the entertainment sector, personal ambitions of its actors, the hypocrisy of the audiences about freshness and beauty, slipperiness of tv and film producers, and so on.

Looking deeper into a few scenes with body horror, it is fair to say simply the idea of an illicit substance to make body doubles is a Cronenbergian idea to start with. Furthermore, the methodology of body doubling, literally a body coming out of the former body via its back clear-cut like in a cesarean surgery, later to be stitched graphically, also feels quite Cronenberg-inspired. Needless to say, Cronenberg does not hold the monopoly of body horror. However, it is fair to argue speculatively that new generation body horror filmmakers do, must and can benefit a lot from the artwork of earlier generations including Cronenberg films and stories. Cronenberg films have collectively constructed a strong film school for future generations as this example also demonstrates, and they will most probably continue to inspire future generations in film art and industry.

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