

DAVID CRONENBERG (1942–)

Canadian filmmaker and actor.

Toronto-born David Cronenberg is recognized globally as an iconic Canadian filmmaker and sometimes actor. Although he was seen early on as an outlier in the Canadian industry, which had been grounded historically in realism and documentary (Handling), Cronenberg's influence on the Canadian scene—one that also cultivated the pioneering work of other science fiction (sf) directors, like James Cameron and Ivan Reitman—has helped to pave the way for future arthouse directors in Canada (e.g., Atom Egoyan) and directors known for their work in cyberpunk culture (e.g., Denis Villeneuve and Brandon Cronenberg). Cronenberg was the subject of "Evolution," one of the first exhibitions at the TIFF (Toronto International Film Festival) Bell Lightbox Theatre in 2014, where many of the props used in his films were put on display, including some well-known to fans of cyberpunk culture, such as the Accumicon Spectacular Optometry International helmet used to brainwash Max Renn (James Woods) in *Videodrome* (1983), and Allegra Geller's (Jennifer Jason Leigh) MetaFlesh Game-Pods from *eXistenZ* (1999). In an article accompanying the online, virtual exhibition, Caroline Seck Langill writes that Cronenberg's films portray a science aesthetic that early on predicted our contemporary "reliance on and interaction with technology and its commingled objects." Through his attention to technological, as well as biological objects, Cronenberg's explorations of the intersection between media, the body, and the posthuman have become recognized as his signature traits in cyberpunk film and culture.

Cronenberg has directed over twenty films (including popular psychological horror and sf cyberpunk films), such as *Shivers* (1975), *Scanners* (1981), *The Dead Zone* (1983), *The Fly* (1986), *Dead Ringers* (1988), *Naked Lunch* (1991), *Crash* (1996), *A History of Violence* (2005), *A Dangerous Method* (2011), and *Cosmopolis* (2012). Many of Cronenberg's films have been produced in Canada, eschewing much of the high gloss aesthetics of the typical Hollywood blockbuster. Asked about his preference, Cronenberg has said that he sees his work as being closer to the arthouse cinema of the European industry than to the high budget glitz of American movies, despite admitting to being influenced by a range of American sf, horror, and psychological thrillers (Vanderburgh 87). His self-reflexive attitude toward the film and media industries comes across and is portrayed in films like *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* where he demonstrates an awareness of the conditions of power and control in production. These are themes evoked generally

in cyberpunk culture, of which Cronenberg is deemed to be an early pioneer thanks to his cult classic, *Videodrome*.

Similar themes come across in recent films, like his adaptation of Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2006), where Cronenberg builds an awareness of the ties between global networks of finance capital, corporate power, integrated networks of media simulation and spectacle, and the hyper-consumerism of techno-stimulated urban environments that have become staples of sf and cyberpunk culture and aesthetics. Cronenberg's films have therefore become sources of intrigue for critical and cultural theorists interested in the intersections between media, materiality, embodiment, hyperreality, biopolitical capital, and the postmodern. Writers focusing on these themes and topics often mix Cronenberg's work with the writings of cultural and media philosophers and theories, such as the schizoanalytic methodologies of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the simulation theories of **Jean Baudrillard**, theories of spectacle from Guy Debord, Fredric Jameson's historical materialist analysis of postmodernism, and the media theory of **Marshall McLuhan**. It is not surprising to see references to Cronenberg in early studies of virtual reality, such as Scott Bukatman's *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* or Mark Fisher's *Flatline Constructs*. Because his films reflect mediations of the body, often portraying fluidity between the biological and the technological, Cronenberg's films also correspond with cyberpunk's intrigue with **Donna J. Haraway's** cyborg theory, as well as theories of the posthuman (Hayles 33).

While his work is well placed at the origins of cyberpunk, Cronenberg's films depart somewhat from common tropes associated with the mode, such as depictions of cyberspace's informational networks portrayed in films like *TRON* (Lisberger 1982) or *The Matrix* (Wachowskis 1999). Instead, Cronenberg's films envision capital as a material, if not necessarily tangible, embodiment of time and space (Vint and Bould 227). *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* portray the materiality of the body immersed in new media spaces, and planes of corporate control. While still parlaying the corporate and networked aspects of late capitalism, Cronenberg gives us a closer, more grounded depiction of the reality of these networks, portraying the business models of media systems and cultural industries (cable television, the porn industry, the videogames industry) embedded in the urban and commercial landscapes of late-twentieth-century capitalism. In *eXistenZ*, for instance, the titular video game sees the front end of digital capitalist culture (including interfaces, storefronts, and commercial retailers) fold into its back end in sites of production and manufacture,

where technologies are built and programmed. Here we get to see the various layers of the video games industry's vertical structures of ownership and control, moving from spaces of exhibition (represented by a church) to that of distribution (a games store inside the game), to spaces of manufacturing—both at a game plant/farm, as well as a cabin in the woods where a games console, or 'pod,' is surgically repaired. Instead of fantasies of disembodied transcendence, where users enter imaginary spaces of virtual reality, or where characters metaphorically personify bits of information, as in *TRON* or *The Lawnmower Man* (Leonard 1992), Cronenberg presents us with direct transhumanist and bodily-infected representations of new media, where the human body connects to technological devices, and where bodies and technologies are seen both as productions and as ways for living experienced realities. Regarding the latter, the interconnectivity of media networks portrayed in Cronenberg's films, mixed with dimensions of power, authority, and desire, encourages viewers to call into question our lived perceptions of ordinary, non-mediated human reality.

This interrogation of our 'lived perceptions' comes across in *Videodrome* when Max wears the VR Accumicon helmet, or when his hand becomes fused with a gun; or, in *eXistenZ*, through the depiction of the game bioports, where players hook directly into the game console through a biocord that links into their spines. However, aspects of embodiment and the organic are also flipped in cases where technologies are represented as animate and living. The videocassette that Convex (Leslie Carlson) inserts into Max's (James Woods) body in *Videodrome* to brainwash him comes to life and is animated to appear to be more biological than technological. Similarly, the game console in *eXistenZ* is represented as a kind of biological organism, and when the console is damaged, games designer Allegra Geller brings it to her former mentor, Kiri Vinokur (Ian Holm), who performs surgery on the pod to rescue it. As Mark Fisher points out, often it is the machines in Cronenberg's films that "turn out to be anything but inert, just as human subjects end up behaving like passive automata" ("Work and Play" 72). Other examples of animated technology persist in Cronenberg's films, such as the typewriter in *Naked Lunch*, which transforms into a giant insect, or in *The Fly* when Seth Brundle's (Jeff Goldblum) DNA is technologically altered and mixed with a housefly, and they slowly transform into a posthuman hybrid. As he transforms into Brundlefly, the former scientist's rational humanistic identity is increasingly merged with the raw instincts of the fly.

Cronenberg's films in general navigate a biological–technological nexus that differs from other cyberpunk narratives. Specifically, while cyberpunk often relies upon the *metaphor* of fluid and mutable bodies surfing virtual realities and fulfilling cyberspatial fantasies, Cronenberg's films show technologies mediating our reflections about embodiment; our posthuman bodies are tethered to a corporeal reality dominated by proliferating new media. Although these depictions reflect the paranoid horror of corporate control common to cyberpunk culture, Cronenberg draws these themes out in ways evidently aroused by media theory, particularly with thinkers like the Canadian media studies pioneer Marshall McLuhan, who is recognized as the inspiration for the character of Dr. Brian O'Blivion (Jack Creley) in *Videodrome*. As we see in this film and elsewhere in Cronenberg's oeuvre, McLuhan's concept of media as "extensions of man" spills into the kinds of posthumanist theories that his own work is known to inspire within cyberpunk culture. For example, Scott Bukatman writes that "Cronenberg's spatialization of both bodily and viral forces presents a collision between McLuhan's extension of the body beyond its biological boundaries and Baudrillard's vision of the usurpation and dissolution of individual power" (83).

Loss of control portrayed by the characters in both *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* adds to feelings of paranoia present throughout cyberculture, depicting paranoia, conspiracy, and espionage intersecting with struggles over power, usually between tech corporations and resistance movements. In *Videodrome*, Max is driven automatically to carry out the programming of Convex's brainwashing, killing colleagues at the TV station where he works, as well as attempting to assassinate O'Blivion's daughter, Bianca (Sonja Smits). In *eXistenZ*, characters inside the virtual world of the game act out pre-programmed behaviors automatically as part of the ludic elements needed to move the game along. These struggles are often depicted at the subterranean level and involve the dark decay of subculture in the urban environment, rather than in the overt visible spaces high above the ground. This contributes to a feeling of flatness in the films, brought on by a loss of identity that raises questions about the surface level of appearances versus the stability of ontological reality. *Videodrome* in particular "presents a destabilized reality in which image, reality, hallucination, and psychosis become indissolubly melded [... as] image addiction and viral invasion" (Bukatman 85).

Cronenberg's interest in the mutual evolution and the hybridity of the human–machine marks his distinct appeal for cyberpunk

culture. Bodily invasion and loss of control are themes that permeate his world, often showing instances where subjectivity is arrested and replaced with the automatic. Cronenberg's films emphasize structures of external control by media systems, instead of those of internal emotion and the individual. Media as systems, and less as screens, are shown to break down our assumed sense of interiority. Everything, beyond an overt paranoia, exists at the surface level of the body; and, in fact, the body becomes the locale of signification and connection to the real in his films, and a site of psychosexual, social, and political conflict, made evident with the battle cry from *Videodrome*, "long live the new flesh!"

See also: **Jean Baudrillard, Donna J. Haraway, Marshall McLuhan**

Works

- Bukatman, Scott. *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Post-Modern Science Fiction*. Duke UP, 1993.
- eXistenZ*. Directed by David Cronenberg, performances by Jennifer Jason Leigh, Jude Law, Ian Holm, and Willem Dafoe, Dimension Films, 1999.
- Fisher, Mark. "Work and Play in *eXistenZ*." *Film Quarterly*, vol. 65, no. 3, 2012, pp. 70–73.
- . *Flatline Constructs: Gothic Materialism and Cybernetic Theory-Fiction*. Exmilitary, 2018.
- Handling, Piers. "A Canadian Cronenberg." *The Shape of Rage: The Films of David Cronenberg*, edited by Piers Handling, Academy of Canadian Cinema/General Publishing, 1983.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*. U of Chicago P, 1999.
- Jameson, Fredric. "Postmodernism, Or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." *New Left Review*, no. 146, 1984, pp. 53–92.
- Seck Langill, Caroline. "The Menace of Things: David Cronenberg's Vibrant Objects." *David Cronenberg: Virtual Exhibition*, 2014, <http://cronenbergmuseum.tiff.net/artefacts-artifacts-eng.html>.
- Vanderburgh, Jennifer. "GHOSTBUSTED! Popular Perceptions of English-Canadian Cinema." *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2003, pp. 81–98.
- Videodrome*. Directed by David Cronenberg, performances by James Woods, Sonja Smits, Debbie Harry, Peter Dvorsky, and Jack Creley, Universal Pictures, 1983.
- Vint, Sheryl and Mark Bould. "All That Melts Into Air is Solid: Rematerialising Capital in *Cube* and *Videodrome*." *Socialism and Democracy*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2006, pp. 217–43.

Matthew Flisfeder