

**MASCULINITY AND PROCESSES OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY
IN THE FILMS OF DAVID CRONENBERG**

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Abstract

Gender identity and the self-other relationship are important issues for feminist studies of popular culture. This dissertation contributes to this field of inquiry by examining David Cronenberg's films from a feminist dialogic perspective, focusing on their generic and stylistic articulation of masculinity and intersubjectivity, manifested from Scanners (1980) to Crash (1996) in the figure of the monstrous double.

Recently, Cronenberg's critical reception has changed. In the 1970s he was dismissed as a schlock horror director; now he is celebrated as an auteur. His films are the subjects of academic studies based variously in auteurist interpretations of authorship, in Freudian interpretations of subjectivity, and in feminist interpretations of their positive social significance. However, these interpretations are problematic, remaining mired in romantic notions of the author as a genius existing outside cultural history, validating androcentric conceptions of subjectivity based in the disembodied personal unconscious, and mistakenly valorizing quite nihilistic dramatizations of masculine non-recognition of embodied others (women and homosexual men).

But, a shift in theoretical orientation can redress these problems. The feminist dialogic approach used here rethinks authorship in terms of intersubjectivity. Following Mikhail Bakhtin, authoring is understood as the aesthetic and ethical gift of form bestowed by the author on the outer boundaries of the hero's body, paralleling the self-other relation in real life. When this activity is absent or inadequate, self and other (author and

hero) become confused, and pathological doubling results. The quality of such activity in Cronenberg's work, suffused as it is with images of the monstrous double, can then be explained in feminist dialogic terms of its embrace of phallic and narcissistic androcentric values which deny the existence of others as other subjects, and its predilection for the genre of horror which denigrates the human body.

The result is that, from this new theoretical perspective of the politics of recognition of others as other subjects (rather than as objects), Cronenberg becomes more difficult to validate, calling into question received opinion of his work as radically progressive, and the received paradigms of auteurism, Freudianism, and postmodern feminism that have been used to explain his art.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: David Cronenberg, Auteur?

David Cronenberg, auteur?

In the past two decades there has been a sea change in the critical evaluation of the films of David Cronenberg. In a frequently quoted article from 1975 in the popular magazine Saturday Night, Marshall Delaney treated the director with overt contempt: “One should say it straight out: The Parasite Murders, written and directed by David Cronenberg and produced by Ivan Reitman, with \$70,000 of the Canadian taxpayers’ money, is an atrocity, a disgrace to everyone connected with it—including the taxpayers.”¹ However, as Chris Rodley recounts, attitudes slowly began to shift. With the success of Scanners in 1980, the epithet “Cronenbergesque” came into circulation to signify “something specific in a quality commercial horror context”²—a more sophisticated horror aesthetic, a kind of ‘thinking man’s’ existential splatter. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s Cronenberg increasingly came to be regarded as a highly original and respected artist among his colleagues and peers, and institutionally. In the fall of 1993 the Royal Ontario Museum launched an exhibit of 250 drawings, props and creatures from Cronenberg’s films, entitled “The Strange Objects of David Cronenberg’s Desire.” The exhibit was curated by the Government of Ontario Art Collection for the ROM’s new Institute of Contemporary Culture, honouring Cronenberg’s work as “one of the most important and compelling expressions of the culture of our time.”³ And with his latest

film, Crash (1996), Cronenberg has won a Special Jury Prize for “audacity” at the prestigious Cannes film festival, and five awards at the Genies, including best director.⁴ So, whereas in the mid 1970s he was dismissed by Delaney as the schlocky king of “junk filmmaking,”⁵ critic Geoff Pevere, writing in a 1995 special issue of Post Script on Canadian cinema, reports that Cronenberg is now lauded as an “international auteur.”⁶

In the same issue of Post Script Bart Testa observes that auteurist approaches have become something of a critical preoccupation of Cronenberg studies in Canada and elsewhere:⁷

They proceed in the classic auteurist manner, first placing Cronenberg within a genre (assumed to be the horror film . . .), and then interpreting Cronenberg as a reshaper of horror to his personal thematics. Their efforts indicate a desire to forgive—more often merely to forget—the film’s imagery, and to subject his films to thematic deciphering.⁸

According to Testa, William Beard’s “The Visceral Mind: The Major Films of David Cronenberg” is the “most prominent and persistent Canadian representative”⁹ of the classic auteurist approach to Cronenberg and authorship—an approach which basically argues that “film is an art, and art is the expression of the emotions, experience and ‘world view’ of an individual artist.”¹⁰ In this article Beard clearly epitomizes the individualist assumptions and values of auteurism, with its emphasis on a (male) director who dominates the filmmaking process; on a director’s films as expressions of his unique personality; on an entire oeuvre as a

thematically and stylistically consistent record of a director's concerns and obsessions; and on the hierarchical distinction between the genius of the creative auteur and the mere technical proficiency of the metteur en scene. He writes that

Cronenberg's work manifests a high degree of consistency in its thematic concerns, distinct trademarks in its subject matter, considerable evidence of artistic self-consciousness, and a notably expressive cinematic technique. As originator, writer and director of his films Cronenberg is plainly a creator, and the movies he creates have a content and a tone of voice unlike any other.¹¹

The dichotomous relationship between mind and body, and that between individual and society; scientific rationalism versus the irrational instinctual unconscious; the balance of human nature gone awry: according to Beard, these are the themes and obsessions that Cronenberg treats with characteristic ironic humour and a cool and detached classicist visual style, and which secure him a place as a true original, if not a full-blown master, in the pantheon of auteurs.

Ten years later, in 1992 with Cronenberg on Cronenberg, Chris Rodley concurs with Beard's early 1980s auteurist analysis, even while acknowledging the datedness of auteurism as a critical paradigm in film studies by the late 1970s, and its usurpation by "more politically motivated forms of analysis: ideology; semiology; psychoanalysis."¹² Rodley writes that

Cronenberg has suffered somewhat from being the subject of a criticism politically out of step with film theory. In practice he is, of

course, a classic auteur, a writer/director who, it seems from the very first films, had concerns and obsessions that he has continued to worry away at. Cronenberg's one-time cinematographer Mark Irwin once observed that his director had been making the same film all his life: 'Probably the sum total of his works will be more impressive than any single film.'¹³

And, in turn, it seems that Cronenberg himself would concur with Rodley and Beard:

At a certain point I realized that what I liked about the classic filmmakers of the 1960s and 1970s, like Bergman and Fellini, was that you entered a world of their own creation when you went to see their films. That world was consistent from film to film. There was a tone, a feeling and dynamics that were consistently at work. It wasn't really conscious on my part that I should do the same, but I started to notice that what I was doing was also creating a world that had its own very specific dynamic.¹⁴

Unsurprisingly auteur-identified, Cronenberg also sees himself as an autonomous artist expressing (seemingly unconsciously) an idiosyncratic and highly individual world view. "Certainly," Rodley writes, "Cronenberg is likely to be unsympathetic to the notion that the auteurist discourse is redundant merely because it construes thematic consistency as solely personal, and in no meaningful way societal."¹⁵

What we have, then, in these auteurist interpretations of Cronenberg and his work, is what John Caughie calls a "fairly consistent romantic position in relation to creativity"—a "romantic conception of authorship

which depend[s] on the notion of a unified and free creative subject.”¹⁶ It is a conception of authorship (and subjectivity) which, as Cronenberg himself attests, places the male filmmaker as artistic genius firmly outside of history and culture:

When I start to make a film I try to completely clear my head of all the intellectual and cerebral considerations of the times I live in. I try to get in touch with something that’s more basic, intuitive and instinctive and then work outwards to details of time and culture. To me, any valid expression of that is legitimate art.¹⁷

Clearing his head of the times he lives in makes way for what is seen to be a profoundly personal expression of the deeper, darker psychic truths within.

Thus, along with the auteurist assumption in Cronenberg studies (and of Cronenberg himself) that the director is standing alone, outside of social forces, comes a concomitant psychoanalytic assumption: the assumption that the world view, themes and images in his art are really the products of “intuitive,” “instinctive” forces—of unconscious forces that well up in the individual psyche and work “outward” to the superficial “details” of time, culture, and social meaning. Indeed, if the creative artist or author is believed to exist autonomously, outside his cultural context, then the personal unconscious becomes a likely, if not inevitable, corollary to explaining the art: what other source of meaning could there be than the spontaneous inspiration coming from within the private psychic depths of the creative genius?

Again, Beard is exemplary of the way auteurist readings of Cronenberg have come to depend on a psychoanalytic model of the individual unconscious to explain his work—a model which itself depends on a structuralist system of binary oppositions (mind/body, self/other) and sexual difference (male/female) to explain the world of human interaction. According to Beard, Cronenberg's films are primarily "about . . . the dangers of the explosive unconscious forces that lie within everyone"¹⁸—mysterious, irrational forces involving violent sexual wishes and the repression and denial they undergo at the hands of a civilization dominated by reason and morality. "The same pattern . . . may be traced in almost every one of his features: a repressed protagonist forced to confront the 'natural' powers of the unconscious, and being destroyed in the process."¹⁹ He claims that underlying Cronenberg's entire oeuvre is a thematic and stylistic dialectic based on the dichotomies of unconscious/conscious, mind/body, self/other, individual/society in which the private, instinctual mind can find no real "release": it can only hope to attain a "fragile balance of opposites" while remaining mired in the "bog of subjectivity."²⁰ Piers Handling agrees: "Cronenberg's world is full of this continual dialectical tension, incorporating the dualities of good and evil, the mind and body, the rational and the irrational, the id and the superego, liberation and repression."²¹

What cannot go unacknowledged by these early auteurist/psychoanalytic/structuralist analyses of Cronenberg as a "unified and free creative subject,"²² however, is the unavoidable fact that the "bog of subjectivity" in question—whether Cronenberg's own or his protagonists'

(and they do seem to get hopelessly conflated)—is masculine, and that the dualistic world of dialectic tension it inhabits puts it in opposition to what is supposedly not masculine: the feminine. Yet, that fact is then variously disavowed.

For example, on the one hand, all evidence leads Beard to overtly characterize the Cronenberg hero in terms of his “powerlessness” and his “emotional avoidance”²³ of involvement with women. Curiously, however, he then neatly couches the specifically masculine sexual dynamics he has uncovered in generalized humanist terms: “In Cronenberg’s work the particular ordinary human conflict is the central question of emotional involvement as such: whether it is desirable, how it relates to instinct, what its consequences are and what are the consequences of its lack.”²⁴ I think Beard equivocates in this way because contemplation of the disturbing gender dynamics at work in Cronenberg brings the auteur critic into uneasy conflict with his romantic impulse to valorize the films and heroes and flatter the talent of a director he describes as an ultimately heroic self-conscious modernist, whose “golden artistic vision”²⁵ is demonstrated in the films’ moving display of a generalized (rather than gendered) “fear of the destruction of defining boundaries, a longing for wholeness and an agonized sense of its irreparable loss”²⁶ On the other hand, Piers Handling faces the “bog” more directly. He explains the powerlessness and fears of the Cronenberg hero explicitly in terms of gender and culture, using Robert Fothergill’s analysis of the emasculated Canadian male and “his moral failure, especially, and most visibly in his relationships with women”²⁷ to contextualize the issue.

In contrast Cronenberg himself, while also acknowledging the gender dynamics underlying his instinctual unconscious fantasies—his art—consistently sees them (and himself) as outside history and culture, beyond the pale of any social or moral accountability:

I'm male, and my fantasies and my unconscious are male. I think I give reasonable expression to the female part of me, but I still think that I'm basically a heterosexual male. If I let loose the social bonds to see what my sexuality is at its darkest and its most insane and its most amoral—not immoral—if I'm going to get into scenes of bondage and torture, I'll show a female instead of a male.²⁸

Moreover, as he elaborates on the gender implications of his work he becomes, like Beard, increasingly equivocal and evasive, if not disingenuous. "It's very difficult," he says,

to divine what's unconscious and what's conscious, but if you were to find by analysing my films, for example, that I'm afraid of women, unconsciously that is, I would say, 'OK, so what? What's wrong with that?' If I am an example of the North American male, and my films are showing that I'm afraid of women, then that's something which could perhaps be discussed, perhaps even decried. But where do you really go from there?

I would never censor myself. To censor myself, to censor my fantasies, to censor my unconscious would devalue myself as a filmmaker. It's like telling a surrealist not to dream.²⁹

Going from there, as it were, feminists with an intellectual, political and ethical stake in the social construction and representation of gender in

North American culture have been drawn to Cronenberg, his heroes, and his films, using a combination of auteurist, ideological, semiological, and psychoanalytical theories to investigate them in terms of his representation of the “uncensored” dreams of the heterosexual male unconscious in relation to women as other. A lively debate has ensued, centred in particular on Dead Ringers (1988).

In their analysis of Dead Ringers Florence Jacobowitz and Richard Lippe condemn Cronenberg as “complicit with a misogynist position” that is typical of “dominant masculinity” in that his work exploits and denigrates women.³⁰ However, Helen Robbins, Barbara Creed, and Marcie Frank have used feminist psychoanalytic approaches to demonstrate how Cronenberg’s work actually explores as an unconscious auteurist theme the forms of envy, anxiety, misogyny and homophobia at the root of dominant masculinity.³¹ Creed sees Dead Ringers as overtly characterized by “phallic panic,” “male hysteria,” and “the impossible nature of the masculine quest for wholeness and totality,”³² while Frank argues that this film reflects the impossibility of male fantasies of omnipotence by “recording the cost to the male body”³³ of masculine anxiety about and exclusion of the feminine. The power and “hope” of Cronenberg’s work, Elaine Showalter adds, is that he literally, graphically shows the male subject being “opened up” to public gender scrutiny. She writes that a few male reviewers of the film understood that men were the subjects being opened up. Cronenberg “shines a bright, cold light on inoperable terrors inside us.” Terrence Rafferty concluded, “and then leaves us staring, with blurred comprehension, at the

instruments in his pristine cabinets.” Even in 1988, it seemed unthinkable for a director to open up the man’s case; but Cronenberg’s twins marked a hopeful start.³⁴

Thus, the director’s purportedly radical deconstruction of the male subject has become a central argument for feminist validations of him as a postmodern auteur.

In a recent article I join the debate, using Julia Kristeva’s ideas on horror and the abject to contend that not only in Dead Ringers, but in Cronenberg’s work from Videodrome (1982) to M. Butterfly (1993), “men are graphically shown losing their privilege, power and ideal differentiation.” Instead of holding society together and installing order in the name of stereotypical omnipotent masculinity, these heroes themselves disintegrate. Their borders collapse, so that mind and body, self and other, nature and culture, animal and human, male and female, and life and death become confused and interpenetrate. As they cross all rational boundaries, these men deconstruct, transforming variously into “killing machines, maniacal insects, drug-crazed suicidal doubles, wildly hallucinating murderers, and transvestite sacrificial lambs.”³⁵ However, the violence of this “monstrous-masculine,” if you will,³⁶ is intimately linked to the self-other relationship more broadly conceived—to desired female and male figures in each film, and to masculine exclusion of the feminine and the masculine “other”—which I argue is highly significant:

The violence of these characters . . . is given representationally as the explosive ambivalence that occurs in men as they are attracted to others—to the enigma of origins and the pleasures of passivity and

dependence—and yet simultaneously repelled by others because of the masculine edict to deny the wish for relationship and ideally, aggressively individuate. However, the violence does not come simplistically from the misogynist reality that men hate women or from the homophobic reality that men hate gay men and want to kill them, but rather from the enculturated male fear of acknowledging the significance of others: from the equally true but displaced psychic reality that men also desire women and other men and want to bond with them but are consistently called upon to deny this desire. The violence erupts out of the tension generated by the wish and its denial, which are always at work, in fantasy and in representation, simultaneously. And on another level, the violence also erupts out of the equally disturbing tension generated by conflicting wishes: the desire to bond, as opposed to the desire for autonomy and omnipotence.³⁷

In conclusion I write that in the films of David Cronenberg, passive male heroes are “made to undergo violent fantasies of bonding and its denial in their relationships to women and men, fantasies that are accompanied by the monstrous mind/body collapse into abjection.”³⁸

Thus, by studying Cronenberg as an auteur and using Freudian psychoanalysis to probe what I have called the director’s high dives into “the morass of the male unconscious,”³⁹ recent feminist analyses adopt theoretical models that have been applied to the director since the early 1980s, adapting them to bear grim witness to the abject implosion of the isolated, atomistic male subject, while pinning “hope” on the possibility that

such disturbing representations of male fear and self-destruction (and destruction of others) could mark the “start” of a meaningful deconstruction of the modern patriarchal myths of the omnipotent masculine self.

The question that nags me now, however, is whether this positive focus on Cronenberg’s auteurist powers of deconstruction actually represents more of a false start than a hopeful one for critical feminist interpretations of his work. For, in the name of problematizing the autonomy and independence of idealized male heroes and letting the trouble with dominant forms of masculinity show, have we not in fact painted ourselves into a corner by valorizing Cronenberg’s nihilistic dramatizations of the withdrawal and suicidal despair of the white heterosexual male in the face of others, specifically women and homosexual men? How tenable is an analysis that, in the feminist name of critiquing masculinity’s lack of recognition of other subjectivities, brings us to a position where all we can do is applaud auteurist images of male psychic collapse, withdrawal from others, and death? To what extent do our postmodern/post-structuralist analyses of androcentric representations of the self-other relationship in Cronenberg still remain on modernist androcentric terms?

What I intend to do here is to reassess this strategy in which the feminist critique of the isolation of the atomistic male subject and his non-recognition of others ironically ends up endorsing that very subject by adopting the theoretical model of the personal unconscious of the genius auteur and accepting at face value, and even as radical, his representation of the withdrawn, lost, derelict, broken, suicidal male body. Is there more

to say about these images of refusal, and their author, beyond merely lauding their timely recognition and recording of the pain and suffering of white heterosexual masculinity? Have we stopped short in our assessments of the cost of these images—images that record the cost to the male body of masculine fear and exclusion of the other—to the larger body politic (a body politic which feminism argues clearly requires a critical rethinking of the values underlying androcentric culture and demands that hegemonic masculinity begin to recognize others)? I think this reassessment is necessary if we are to continue to speak in the name of a truly alternative, socially insightful, and critically responsible feminist view of the politics of masculine self-representation and representation of others in contemporary popular culture, and it will require a conceptual shift in the theoretical and methodological tools we have been using to think about, understand, and evaluate such images and their authors.

The theoretical tools of auteurism and psychoanalysis are clearly counterproductive to a feminist understanding of masculinity and the self-other relationship in Cronenberg because the individualist assumptions underlying these tools are committed to the very modernist myths of authorship and consciousness that feminism wants to question: on the one hand, the romantic myth of the isolated creative genius who stands outside his time, culture, and history; and on the other hand, the Freudian myth of the atomistic male psyche and its mysterious personal unconscious which exists largely in the realm of abstractions, disembodied, beyond concrete relations to others. What is called for is a new set of theoretical tools that can radically reorient feminist studies of Cronenberg, enabling us to leave

behind the individualistic, androcentric assumptions that still haunt our thinking about authorship and subjectivity and take up forms of analysis that can truly support, rather than ultimately compromise and undermine, both the social convictions and the concern with theorizing agency that have historically underpinned feminism as a political and ethical movement.

The remainder of this first chapter will address this call, briefly outlining how post-structuralist theories that critique auteurism, authorship and subjectivity through the Death of the Author thesis have influenced feminist inquiry. Chapters two and three will then demonstrate the shortcomings of these critiques compared to the explanatory power of a feminist dialogics based in Mikhail Bakhtin's early foundational work on authorship—widely referred to as his “architectonic” work on the philosophy of the act, and art and answerability—and in the Bakhtin circle's critique of the Freudian subject.

In chapter two I will address the question of authorship through an immanent reading of Bakhtin on authoring. He sees authoring as an ethical, aesthetic, and pragmatic act that is crucial to the relational foundations of human social existence, rather than a theoretical abstraction that can be divorced from the author as a flesh-and-blood historical agent, and effaced in the machinations of discourse. Through this alternative paradigm of authorship, the monologic romantic myth of David Cronenberg as a transcendent, creative genius who stands isolated from and outside his time, history, and culture, and his negation of any answerability or responsibility to his culture for his art, will be called into question.

Bakhtin's philosophies of the act, and art and answerability, place the author on the boundary between her unique ongoing creative existence (her active, agential being) and her cultural context (her debt to her social milieu); from this perspective, we can begin to reconfigure Cronenberg as mediating art and culture, explaining both his (unique) agency as an author and the (androcentric) influences on him and his work as a social being. Moreover, it will be shown how, in this capacity as an active being filtering these two realms of aesthetics on the one hand and social accountability on the other, Cronenberg's relationship to his heroes and his attitude to them form a parallel to that between the self and other in real life, through Bakhtin's central idea of I and the other, where the activity that the self/author is called upon to perform for the hero/other in art and in life is the same: the aesthetic and ethical consummative activity of the gift of form. According to Bakhtin, if this activity is absent or inadequate, confusion between I and the other occurs, and pathological doubling results.

Given Bakhtin's founding principle that ties art and living culture together through the authorial self as a form-giving agent, we will then be in a well-grounded philosophical position to deal in chapter three with the second modernist myth that, as feminists, we want to question: the Freudian myth of the atomistic psyche and its mysterious personal unconscious which exists largely in the realm of abstractions, disembodied, beyond concrete relations to other social beings. If self and other, author and hero, exist in living dialogic relationship to each other, then subjectivity must be rethought as a question of intersubjectivity—of the relationship of the

individual subject to other subjects as co-beings in co-consciousness, and not to others as mere objects for the privileged masculine self. Through a dialogue on subjectivity staged between Bakhtin and Freud with the help of V.N. Volosinov, Gerald Pirog, and Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, and using the further insights of L.S. Vygotsky on language, the Freudian model of the unconscious as the source of Cronenberg's life and art will be replaced by a Bakhtinian model which sees his psyche and its products as individual but never isolated, suffused with and necessarily participating in the socio-linguistic values of their cultural milieu. The body, consciousness, language, and extant others will become key factors in reconceptualizing Cronenberg as a creative subject, and the types of heroic subjects he creates, as boundary phenomena related to and motivated by other embodied consciousnesses through vision and voice. By staging this dialogue between Freud and Bakhtin, we can begin to more fully characterize Cronenberg's art in dialogic terms of the generic utterance, rather than in psychoanalytic terms of the "dark continent" of the personal unconscious, and to investigate the details of the general language style and the individual language style he articulates as an author as he mediates the social demands of his surrounding culture and the individual demands of his artistic vision, respectively, through his aesthetic activity.

This will then put us in a position to elaborate, in chapter four, a feminist dialogic reading of David Cronenberg's general language style as a gendered effect of masculinity and the horror genre. From the perspective of a feminist audience, Cronenberg clearly communicates through the desires, forms, and values of an androcentric late twentieth century North

American culture that has been thrown into crisis as the feminist and gay movements challenge masculine hegemony. Using the insights of Michael Bach, Jessica Benjamin, Stephen Frosh, George Herbert Mead, and Carol Gilligan in concert with the dialogic concept of intersubjectivity to describe the foundations of masculine subjectivity as romantic, phallic, and narcissistic—as I-for-myself consciousness withdrawn from embodied others as co-beings in co-consciousness—and Linda Badley’s work on the ubiquity of the horror genre, disgust with the body, and the ethos of mutilation to describe how that subjectivity now manifests across North American popular culture, we can situate David Cronenberg’s life and work in the general language style of institutionalized masculinity in withdrawal from embodiment, the feminine, and the other.

Then, in chapter five, it will be possible to contextualize Cronenberg’s individual language style in terms of this general language style. What we will discover is that Cronenberg’s attitudes as author-person are suffused with the monologic, romantic, phallic, and narcissistic sensibility and anxiety vis á vis embodied others characteristic of hegemonic masculinity in the last decades of the twentieth century, and that this sensibility in turn suffuses his activity as author-creator, categorically informing the genre of his utterances and the shape of their male heroes. Unable or refusing to participate in consummative form-giving activity, Cronenberg’s heroes, from Scanners through Videodrome, The Fly, and Dead Ringers in the 1980s to Naked Lunch, M. Butterfly, and Crash in the 1990s, manifest as monstrous doubles who are in turn unable or refuse to recognize and respect embodied others as other subjects in these narratives,

whether women or homosexual men. Rather than demonstrating the radical perversity in relation to masculine norms and standards that proto-feminist studies have claimed they do, these withdrawn heroes reveal themselves to be quite conventionally masculine in relation to the ‘perverse’ worlds in which Cronenberg repeatedly stages their deaths, and through which, he romantically, naively claims, they transcend reality through the profound ‘existential’ meditations he performs in his art.

Finally, in chapter six, we will conclude this study of David Cronenberg by clarifying the broader social and political significance of his work. Informed by recent thinking of Jessica Benjamin, Nancy Fraser, and Axel Honneth on the politics of recognition, we can challenge postmodern feminist valorizations of withdrawn, deconstructed male subjectivity in Cronenberg’s work by re-framing it within a dialogic feminist politics of recognition—one which sees subjectivity as an ethical and aesthetic intersubjective relationship between subjects, and so invalidates what is truly this director’s nightmare world in which masculinity poses, yet again, as the monologic subject, and others are denigrated and devalued as feminized objects.

The point of this thesis is to demonstrate that the work of David Cronenberg is not as radical and progressive as it has seemed to be, and as earlier feminists and Cronenberg himself have claimed it is. As a cinematic author, Cronenberg is not like, for example, Kaja Silverman argues R.W. Fassbinder is, truly perverse in relation to the phallus⁴⁰—he is, in fact, clearly phallic in relation to the perverse.

The death of the author?

Contemporary forms of criticism and aesthetic theory that have mounted a “challenge to the concept of the author as source and centre of the text”⁴¹ have had an obvious appeal to feminists attempting to think outside the androcentric confines of romantic individualism and put the author, creativity, and the art work (or text) in their social and historical context. Such forms as the post-structuralist debates on authorship that Rodley alludes to but then summarily dismisses as “politically motivated” have been important to feminists precisely because of their political motives and their demand for what Caughie has called

a reconsideration of the text or the world as a structured play of forces, relations and discourses, rather than as a site of final, unified meanings, authorized by their source. Where criticism has felt the weight of this challenge . . . it has attempted to open out (or even force open) the text as a process, obedient to a certain history and to certain ‘orders of discourse’, rather than to the personality and self-expression of its author. The function of such a criticism is, then, not to discover, or construct, the author, but to discover the history and the discursive organization which is foundational for the text, and which negotiates its relationship with its historical audience. Authorship, now, involves a consideration of the position of authors within specific histories . . . ; and it involves a conceptualization of how the author functions as a figure within the rhetoric of the text, and of how we use this figure (fictional, constructed, actual) in our reading, and for our pleasure.⁴²

For Elizabeth Grosz, the post-structuralist theories that variously emphasize the socio-historical positionality and function of the author, discourse, signification, textuality, and reading formations have provided feminism with a very “relevant counterbalance”⁴³ to the privileging of the modernist author.

She argues, for example, and rightly so, that Roland Barthes’ proclamation of the “death of the author,” Michel Foucault’s materialist conceptualization of the “author function,” and Jacques Derrida’s theory of the “author’s signature or trace” all problematize the romantic notion of the text as a straightforward and unidirectional, outward expression of an author’s interior, psyche, wishes, and intentions. Indeed, auteurism for them would represent an impossible attempt to “fix and control the meaning and inherent ambiguity of a text” by postulating a singular author to explain its origins, “and to ensure its unity and homogeneity.”⁴⁴ “For Barthes and Foucault, as for Derrida,” Grosz writes, “a text cannot be the expression of an individual’s interior, nor simply the representation of some social exterior, for it is an act of writing, the material manipulation of signs, discursive structures, textual elements, an act of inscription, with its own protocols, modes of constraint, and regulation.”⁴⁵ For them, it is the text which emerges as the new privileged site where the forces of agency (i.e., of an individual’s interior) and the forces of discourse (i.e., of the social exterior, history, readers) are enfolded and implicated together. And for feminists like Grosz concerned about retaining a sense of subjective agency—a sense of the discursive positioning of creative, embodied, gendered subjects who speak, and who speak to others—in their

thinking about post-structuralist conceptions of discourse, textuality, and the socio-historical production of cultural artifacts, this emphasis on the text as an act of writing, as an inscriptive action, has been highly relevant. Thus, she claims,

The text and the writer/reader are neither in a relation of exteriority nor interiority relative to each other. The text is not inhabited by an authorial presence, in whatever form, nor is the author simply the subject who, independent of writing, exists outside of and autonomously from the text. The relations between text and author/readers is more enfolded, more mutually implicating than either realism or expressivism can recognize The subject is necessarily implicated in the other's otherness, even when this other is a text. I am interested in the ways in which the author's corporeality, an always sexually specific corporeality — not the author's interiority, psyche, consciousness, concepts, or ideas — intrudes into or is productive of the text.⁴⁶

However, in my opinion the problem with post-structuralist theories of the text as an “act” of writing, and the problem with its ultimate relevance for feminists like Grosz who are “searching for a way of tying sex and politics to textuality”⁴⁷ have to do with the errors of theoretical abstraction these thinkers commit, such that the concrete, embodied, corporeal actor (both in the form of the individual author and the social other(s) to whom the author speaks) ends up slipping away.

Barthes' proclamation of the death of the author is exemplary in this regard:

In his story Sarrasine Balzac, describing a castrato disguised as a woman, writes the following sentence: 'This was woman herself, with her sudden fears, her irrational whims, her instinctive worries, her impetuous boldness, her fussings, and her delicious sensibility.'

Who is speaking thus? Is it the hero of the story bent on remaining ignorant of the castrato hidden beneath the woman? Is it Balzac the individual, furnished by his personal experience with a philosophy of Woman? Is it Balzac the author professing 'literary' ideas on femininity? Is it universal wisdom? Romantic psychology? We shall never know, for the good reason that writing is the destruction [my emphasis] of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.⁴⁸

And ending, I would add, with the very identity of the "other" body—the body reading or listening.

In addition to this, Foucault's fantasy of discourse that could circulate without an author, anonymously, indifferent to the subjective voice who's speaking, is equally abstract and problematic:

The author—or what I have called the 'author-function'—is undoubtedly only one of the possible specifications of the subject and, considering past historical transformations, it appears that the form, the complexity, and even the existence of this function are far from immutable. We can easily imagine a culture where discourse would circulate without any need for an author. Discourses,

whatever their status, form, or value, and regardless of our manner of handling them, would unfold in a pervasive anonymity

‘What matter who’s speaking?’⁴⁹

Thus, in their enthusiasm to problematize the ideal author in favour of a description of how the text itself works as a social-historical process or intertext involving shifting relations between the terms of author, text, and reader, both Barthes and Foucault end up with overly abstract conceptions of authorship that border on the ridiculous. Through figurative intellectual play the author (and by extension the reader) becomes a corpse: withered and withdrawn; anonymous; a vacant place; a negative; a site of infinite loss: a consciousness without a body; an evacuated identity whose unique voice, ultimately, does not really matter.

In the case of Derrida, the author is similarly suspect and devalued—deconstructed into a signature as the abstract, ghostly trace of “something.” He writes: “The drama that activates and constructs every signature is this insistent, unwearying, potentially infinite repetition of something that remains, every time, irreplaceable.”⁵⁰ And yet, at the same time as he deconstructs the author into a mere signatory trace, that “something”—that creative consciousness which activates and constructs the signature—does seem to matter to Derrida as an entity that is somehow active, unique, and irreplaceable. Grosz elaborates: “Although the author cannot control the text—every text exceeds its author—and although we can’t make inferences about the text through a knowledge of the author (nor of the author through a knowledge of the text), nonetheless there remains a process of inscription, some trace of the process of production of the text.”⁵¹

Moreover, that entity or inscription is something which remains in social relationship to an other, an addressee, who also matters: “It concerns the other to whom, at bottom, I entrust my signature.”⁵² As Grosz writes, Derrida’s author-as-signature “is not self-contained and given. cannot be a presence-to-itself, for it always requires a counter-signature, a reception, an other to sign for it.”⁵³ However, in my opinion, this interesting and welcome gesture by Derrida toward the significance of the social to authorship does not prevent his theory of the signature in the end from being hopelessly solipsistic, atomistic and abstract, and the concrete author and the concrete social other untheorized in it.

Significantly, Barthes’ conception of authorship is also haunted by the specter of the active, embodied, creative author in social relationship with, and answerable to, others. He writes of the author, reader, and text:

The text is a fetish object, and this fetish desires me. The text chooses me, by a whole disposition of invisible screens, selective baffles: vocabulary, references, readability. etc.; and, lost in the midst of a text (not behind it, like a deus ex machina) there is always the other, the author.

As institution, the author is dead, his civil status, his biographical person have disappeared; dispossessed, they no longer exercise over his work the formidable paternity whose account literary history, teaching, and public opinion had the responsibility of establishing and renewing; but in the text, in a way, I desire the author: I need his figure (which is neither his representation nor his projection), as he needs mine⁵⁴

Indeed, as Barthes insists, the mutual desire of writers and readers as active agents is always implicated in the question of authorship. But to assign agential desire to the text as a fetish object is really to obfuscate the issue. Surely, it is authors and readers, not inanimate objects, who activate language as social communication. Certainly, these notions of the “figure” or “trace” of the author that I need as reader, and vice versa, are overly vague and abstract attempts at what nonetheless remains the crucial late twentieth century postmodern theoretical project of socially and historically contextualizing the modernist author.

This is not to deny that post-structuralist critics like Barthes, Foucault and Derrida have taken an important lead in what Caughie described as the very necessary and serious contemporary challenge to the ideal author as the originary “source” of the “final, unified meanings”⁵⁵ purportedly there to be uncovered in texts. However, in asserting that texts must be located in their own place, time, and culture in order for their meanings to be understood, that readers participate in the discursive construction of those meanings, and that individual authors can no longer be called upon to authenticate those meanings as intentional representations of their own full self-presence, post-structuralists have over-emphasized the socio-cultural system as a “structured play of forces, relations and discourses”⁵⁶ in which the author is always already spoken. As Fred Evans puts it, they “absorb all agency into language or its analogues (‘power,’ ‘narrative,’ ‘différance,)’” as infinitely proliferating discourses.⁵⁷

In their zeal to demystify the author in this way, it can be argued that post-structuralist theorists have merely been lead to reverse the problematic modernist emphasis on autonomous authorship at the expense of social context that they set out to critique: instead of the atomistic and isolated male author dominating the creation of meaning, we now have concern with the system dominating the “type” and “degree” of linguistic agency of the (gendered) speaking subject.⁵⁸ In my thinking, both extremes are untenable, and as feminists we need to rethink authorship in a rigorous way that can situate the subject in socio-cultural history without denying our very capacity and responsibility to act as creative individuals in language. We need a concept of subjectivity and authoring which can appreciate the paradox that there can be no socio-cultural history without individual actors, and no individual actors without socio-cultural history— which values linguistic agency as the mediator between individual subjects and discourse.⁵⁹ Indeed, the author as creative filter, as agent, as voice, as embodied material subject who acts and communicates keeps coming in through the back door of even the most sophisticated post-structuralist theories of the discursive construction of texts, belying the author’s putative demise. This is evident if we stop for a moment to contemplate the irony that, while Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida have been busy deconstructing the author as dead, as function, as trace, their personal reputations as three of the late twentieth century’s most creative thinkers and writers have simultaneously been built on the formidable authorial powers they display in their work. Few voices chime louder or have been more celebrated in the postmodern pantheon of “academic stars.”

Moreover, from a feminist theoretical perspective, these more or less 'hidden' residues of embodied authorship in post-structuralist theories and theorizing are even more problematic in terms of the gender dynamics they underwrite. In many ways, the dead author, the author function, and the trace share the same masculinist assumptions, values, and points of view underlying the ideal author that they claim to deconstruct. For example, like the modernist author or the auteur, the post-structuralist author is blindly gendered male (recall Barthes' description, itemizing "his civil status;" "his biographical person;" "his work"); he bears the mark (or, if you like, the vague trace) of the abstract, atomistic, isolated, universal Cartesian subject who slips in and out of historical discourse anonymously, almost magically; his physical presence as a material, gendered, speaking body in space and time is severed from his powers of creative consciousness; his creative agency is primarily associated with negative, if not violent, forces of indifference, loss, nihilism and destruction; and the other social subjects to whom and through whom his creativity necessarily speaks remain abstract—at worst absent (Foucault)—at best, an untheorized afterthought (Barthes)—or just another disembodied trace (Derrida).

Further, it has occurred to many feminists that the post-structuralist deconstruction of the authorial subject has come at a very telling historical juncture and can be read as part of a larger (white male) postmodern backlash against the agency of those previously marginalized groups who are just now beginning to challenge and undermine forms of typically heterosexual white male privilege and its historical monopoly on

authorship, subjectivity, and selfhood. Thus, Christine Di Stefano marshals several feminist voices to speak to Barthes' ersatz corpse. She writes:

As Nancy Hartsock has asked, Why is it, just at the moment in Western history when previously silenced populations have begun to speak for themselves and on behalf of their subjectivities, that the concept of the subject and the possibility of discovering/creating a liberating "truth" become suspect? . . . In other words, is postmodernism merely a sophisticated version of the sour grapes phenomenon? Jane Flax . . . suggests that postmodern theory is perhaps no less immune from the repressive and prohibitory functions practiced by other theories. In this case, she argues, the postmodern suspicion of the subject effectively prohibits the exploration of (a repressed) subjectivity by and on behalf of women. Like Wendy Brown . . . , she believes that the subject under fire from postmodernism may be a more specifically masculine self than postmodern theorists have been willing to admit. With Nancy Hartsock, she is "deeply suspicious of the motives of those who counsel such a move at the moment when women have just begun to remember their selves and claim an agentic subjectivity"60

And in response to Foucault's question, "What matter who's speaking?," and Derrida's sign-trace, Nancy K. Miller has this to say: "I would answer it matters, for example, to women who have lost and still routinely lose their proper name in marriage, and whose signature—not merely their voice—has not been worth the paper it was written on; women for whom

the signature—by virtue of its power in the world of circulation—is not immaterial.”⁶¹

Di Stefano goes on to enumerate four related claims around the issues of gendered authorship, subjectivity, and agency that further buttress feminist skepticism of deconstructive post-structuralist/postmodernist thinking on these topics:

First, that postmodernism expresses the claims and needs of a constituency (white, privileged men of the industrialized West) that has already had an Enlightenment for itself and that is now ready and willing to subject that legacy to critical scrutiny. Secondly, that the objects of postmodernism’s various critical and deconstructive efforts have been the creations of a similarly specific and partial constituency (beginning with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle). Third, that mainstream postmodernist theory (Derrida, Lyotard, Rorty, Foucault) has been remarkably blind and insensitive to questions of gender in its own purportedly politicized rereadings of history, politics, and culture. Finally, that the postmodernist project, if seriously adopted by feminists, would make any semblance of a feminist politics impossible. To the extent that feminist politics is bound up with a specific constituency or subject, namely, women, the postmodernist prohibition against subject-centred inquiry and theory undermines the legitimacy of a broad-based organized movement dedicated to articulating and implementing the goals of such a constituency.⁶²

Thus, we end up with serious questions about the “politics” and “political motivations” of post-structuralist theories of authorship and subjectivity from a feminist perspective.

To briefly recapitulate, these theories fall short on several feminist counts: they assume the author is male; they abstract (his) creative consciousness from (his) gendered body in the so-called “act” of writing; they inadequately contextualize the author, blind to the more primary relation, not between text and author, but between actual embodied subjects who write and speak, and actual embodied subjects who read and listen and, in turn, respond: and they see the author as a kind of absentee slum landlord, if you will, going about the ‘really important’ business of documenting negation, destruction, and loss in an existential abyss while the possibility and obligation of creatively, actively entering into the linguistically constructed social world is not recognized as the author’s more fundamental condition of existence, and the subject’s most challenging problem.

So, it would seem that whether we contemplate him from the theoretical position of the modernist auteur or the postmodernist deconstructor, Cronenberg gets to remain in his dark corner with his uncensored unconscious, responding to feminist questions and concerns about gender and social relations in his art with his smug “OK, So what?,” while we paint ourselves in with him, keeping now the modern genius company, now the postmodern ghost. I think John Caughie captures well the dilemma feminists have historically faced in Cronenberg studies when he writes that “the tendency to reject auteurism because it is ‘hopelessly

romantic' lends itself to an over-reaction in which the author appears as 'nothing but' an effect of the text, failing to elaborate what the effect does [my emphasis]."⁶³ Where the modernist romantic auteur with his tortured personal unconscious loses all sense of social and ethical connectedness, the postmodern discursive author loses all sense of individual activity, agency, and aesthetic responsibility.

Thus, I can appreciate William Beard's point when he laments current forms of postmodern theoretical inquiry that assign what he (and they) would call "political" value to Cronenberg's work, but are loath to assign it any "esthetic" value, or any ethical responsibility for it to its creative author:

Although academic film studies and cultural studies have increasingly turned their attention to Cronenberg—as signaled for example in recent essays by Barbara Creed, Marcie Frank, Adam Knee and Helen Robbins, and an entire Cronenberg number of the journal Post Script (forthcoming)—interest in these (non-Canadian) quarters has centered on his astonishing co-incidence with the heavily theorized "hot topics" of gender, the body and technology.

At the same time, Cronenberg is certainly not valued for the characteristics which have attracted this attention. Current academic film studies assigns only political, not esthetic value: notions of "quality" have been rendered nonsensical. So arguments as to the quality of Cronenberg's work fall on deaf ears. His subject matter and his treatment are anything but "progressive." Moreover at a time when the whole concept of authorship is problematic, his

obsessively personal themes and distinctive style have the status of valueless currency dating back to an antiquated auteurist misperception of cinematic significance.⁶⁴

What I would say to Beard by way of relieving his sense of loss at the demise of the modernist creative genius, however, is that while Cronenberg's status as auteur is now highly questionable because the concept itself has been revealed as clearly untenable, his continuing status as an author is far from "valueless." Indeed, reintroducing crucial questions of value and aesthetics into the debate on authorship and subjectivity from a feminist dialogic perspective is a central current underlying this project.

Moreover, I argue that contemporary forms of feminist inquiry, with their "hot topics" of gender and the body, are by no means categorically deaf to qualitative analysis of aesthetic activity in Cronenberg, including his themes and style. As a matter of fact, what I will attempt to account for as a feminist is what Cronenberg does as an author—is Cronenberg's unique creativity, his way of being an author, and the kinds of heroes, relationships, and social worlds he orchestrates; and I will do so while preserving and respecting his embeddedness as a gendered body in his socio-historical context as his (and as every unique human individual's) enabling condition. Rather than dichotomizing mind and body, self and other, author and society, art and social life in the way earlier work on Cronenberg has done, feminist principles demand that we find a way to think them together. In addition, we need to get at the value of authoring as both an aesthetic activity undertaken by subjective agents (whose creative

acts are uniquely theirs; who are answerable for their creative acts), and as an ethical activity undertaken by social actors (whose creative acts involve and affect others; who are responsible for these acts in their social context). What is called for is a qualitative theoretical and methodological approach to Cronenberg and his work, and to authorship, creativity, and art that not only speaks to (and beyond) concerns like Beard's and Caughie's about the fundamental importance of the aesthetic activity of authoring, but is compatible with the general feminist concern with theorizing that creative self, the author, in ethical relationship with others—and with ultimately theorizing the interrelationship between embodied, historical, active individual subjects in a gendered social world.

In my opinion, that approach is best begun, for reasons that will become progressively apparent in the next chapter, in Mikhail Bakhtin's moral philosophy of the act as the aesthetic and ethical event of authoring human selves and others both in Being/life and in art/culture. As Mary S. Pollock suggests, and I concur, "Bakhtin's earliest work is potentially the most radical and relevant for feminists"⁶⁵ because it assumes, pragmatically, that individual subjectivity is founded in language and language is fundamentally social. It is in Toward a Philosophy of the Act and Art and Answerability that "Bakhtin expands this idea by pointing out that socially determined language is at the heart of aesthetic activity, and aesthetic activity is essential for understanding the social nature of individual consciousness."⁶⁶ So it is to an exegesis of this work that I will now turn.

Notes

¹ Marshall Delaney, "Movies: You should know how bad this film is. After all, you paid for it," Saturday Night, September 1975, 83. "Marshall Delaney" is, of course, the pseudonym of the Canadian culture critic Robert Fulford, and The Parasite Murders, better known as Shivers, is also known as They Came From Within.

² Chris Rodley, ed., Cronenberg (Toronto: Knopf, 1992), 92.

³ For a review of the exhibit see Christine Ramsay and Kenneth Wilson, "The Strange Object of Canada's Desire: Cronenberg Under Glass," Point of View 23 (Winter 1993/94): 6-9.

⁴ As it happens, Crash has won commercial awards as well. In "Crash Golden," a short item in the Globe and Mail, 21 November, 1996, Christopher Harris writes:

Crash. David Cronenberg's controversial film about sex and cars, is the winner of the 1996 Golden Reel Award. The award goes annually to the Canadian film with the biggest Canadian box-office gross of the year. Crash did not even open until Oct. 4, only 2 1/2 weeks before the Oct. 20 deadline. In other words, Crash grossed more--at \$1.23-million--in those 17 days than any other Canadian film did in the entire 12-month period. (The film grossed \$400,000 in its first three days)" (E5).

⁵ Delaney, "You should know," 83.

⁶ Geoff Pevere, "Middle of Nowhere: Ontario Movies After 1980," Post Script 15:1 (Fall 1995): 9. Interestingly enough, the next issue of Post Script is another special issue on David Cronenberg.

- ⁷ Testa cites as exemplary Piers Handling's anthology The Shape of Rage: The Films of David Cronenberg (Toronto: General Publishing, 1983) and Mary B. Campbell's "Biological Alchemy and the Films of David Cronenberg" in Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film ed. Barry Keith Grant (Methuen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1984). See also the more recent Serge Grunberg, David Cronenberg (Paris: Cahiers du Cinema, 1992) and Rodley's Cronenberg on Cronenberg.
- ⁸ Bart Testa. "Technology's Body: Cronenberg, Genre, and the Canadian Ethos," Post Script 15:1 (Fall 1995): 39.
- ⁹ Ibid., 52.
- ¹⁰ John Caughie, ed., Theories of Authorship (London and New York: Routledge, 1981), 10.
- ¹¹ William Beard, "The Visceral Mind: The Major Films of David Cronenberg," in The Shape of Rage ed. Piers Handling (Toronto: General Publishing, 1983), 1.
- ¹² Rodley, Cronenberg, 18.
- ¹³ Ibid., 18.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 19.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 18.
- ¹⁶ Caughie, Theories of Authorship, 13, 14.
- ¹⁷ Rodley, Cronenberg, 119.
- ¹⁸ Beard, "Visceral," 2.
- ¹⁹ William Beard, "The Canadianness of David Cronenberg," Mosaic 27:2 (June 1994): 131.

- 20 Beard, "Visceral," 6.
- 21 Piers Handling, "A Canadian Cronenberg," in The Shape of Rage ed. Piers Handling (Toronto: General Publishing, 1983), 102.
- 22 Caughie, Theories of Authorship, 14.
- 23 Beard, "Visceral," 77.
- 24 Ibid., 74.
- 25 Ibid., 79.
- 26 Beard, "Canadianness," 117.
- 27 Handling, "A Canadian Cronenberg," 104.
- 28 Rodley, Cronenberg, 98-99.
- 29 Ibid., 99.
- 30 Florence Jacobowitz and Richard Lippe, "Dead Ringers: The Joke's on Us." Cineaction 16 (Spring 1989): 65.
- 31 Helen W. Robbins, "'More Human Than I Am Alone': Womb Envy in David Cronenberg's The Fly and Dead Ringers," in Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema eds. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 146.
- 32 Barbara Creed, "Phallic Panic: Male Hysteria and Dead Ringers," Screen 31:2 (Summer 1990): 125, 134.
- 33 Marcie Frank, "The Camera and the Speculum: David Cronenberg's Dead Ringers," PMLA 106:3 (May 1991): 468.
- 34 Elaine Showalter, Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle (New York: Viking, 1990), 143.

- 35 Christine Ramsay, "Male Horror: On David Cronenberg," in Boys: Masculinities in Contemporary Culture ed. Paul Smith (Boulder, Colorado and Oxford: Westview, 1996), 91-92.
- 36 In "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection," Screen 27:1 (January-February 1986), Barbara Creed discusses the "monstrous-feminine" as a concept of patriarchal/phallogocentric ideology which constructs "female sexuality as a difference which is grounded in monstrousness and which invokes castration anxiety in the male spectator" (44). I am using the "monstrous-masculine" here as a play on Creed to enable us to reconceptualize patriarchal values, turn the tables, and attempt to define what is "monstrous" in the masculine from a feminist perspective.
- 37 Ramsay, "Male Horror," 92.
- 38 Ibid., 93.
- 39 Ibid., 86.
- 40 See Kaja Silverman, Male Subjectivity at the Margins (New York and London: Routledge, 1992).
- 41 Caughie, Theories of Authorship, 1.
- 42 Ibid., 1-2.
- 43 Elizabeth Grosz, Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 12.
- 44 Ibid., 13.
- 45 Ibid., 13.
- 46 Ibid., 21.
- 47 Ibid., 21.

- 48 Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in Image Music Text, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Noonday Press, 1977), 142.
- 49 Michel Foucault, "What Is An Author?" in Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 138.
- 50 Jacques Derrida, Signeponge/Signsponge, trans. Richard Rand (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 20.
- 51 Grosz, Space, Time, and Perversion, 19.
- 52 Jacques Derrida, The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference Translation, ed. Christie McDonald (New York: Schocken Books, 1988), 52.
- 53 Grosz, Space, Time, and Perversion, 13-14.
- 54 Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text, trans. R. Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1975), 27.
- 55 Caughie, Theories of Authorship, 1.
- 56 Ibid., 1.
- 57 Fred Evans, Psychology & Nihilism: A Genealogical Critique of the Computational Model of Mind (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 186.
- 58 Ibid., 186. For another powerful critique of the monolithic system in structuralist and post-structuralist thinking, see also Nancy Fraser's "Structuralism or Pragmatics: On Discourse Theory and Feminist Politics" in Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist Condition

(New York and London: Routledge, 1997). She argues that these Saussurean models have only limited use for feminism because of their tendency to abstract from the very thing we need to focus on: “the social practice and social context of communication” (155). In place of this focus on language as a symbolic system or code, she calls for the “pragmatics model” operative in the work of thinkers like Mikhail Bakhtin and Pierre Bourdieu (and more problematically in Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray) which “studies language at the level of discourses, as historically specific social practices of communication” (155) involving individuals as social agents.

59 For Evans, we “cannot attribute the production of linguistic meaning to either subjects or discourse taken singly:” rather, “‘voices’ are the locus of linguistic agency,” and they are “neither reducible to nor separable from subjects and discourse” (Psychology & Nihilism 189).

60 Christine Di Stefano, “Dilemmas of Difference: Feminism, Modernity and Postmodernism” in Feminism/Postmodernism ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 75.

61 Nancy K. Miller, “The Text’s Heroine: A Feminist Critic and Her Fictions” in Conflicts in Feminism eds. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 118.

62 Di Stefano, “Dilemmas,” 75-76.

63 Caughie, Theories of Authorship, 15.

64 Beard, “Canadianness,” 115.

65 Mary S. Pollock, "What Is Left Out: Bakhtin, Feminism, and the Culture of Boundaries," in Bakhtin, Carnival and Other Subjects ed. David Shepherd, Critical Studies 3:2-4:1/2 (1993): 238.

66 Ibid., 238.

Chapter 2

The Question of Authorship

The philosophy of the act

As Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist observe, Bakhtin's thought on authorship, selfhood, and intersubjectivity in the social world is important for the way it enables us to think these concepts together as a complex and relative network of concerns. In framing the problem of the relationship of the self to the other in terms of the organizing principle of authorship, his philosophy is distinguished

not by his emphasis on the self/other dichotomy as such but rather by his emphasis on the essentially authorial techniques of dialogue and character formation which permit the poles of consciousness [I and the other] to interact while maintaining their fundamental difference from each other.¹

Authoring for Bakhtin, Clark and Holquist write, is not to be understood as romantic self-expression; rather, it is "the primary activity of all selves in a world dominated by the self/other distinction."² What Bakhtin understands is that each individual consciousness is profoundly responsible for authoring itself, not only or primarily through itself, but through relationship to other consciousnesses. In Bakhtin, this fundamental existential condition of alterity is not alienating to and negating of the self as it is, for example, in Jean-Paul Sartre;³ rather, to be open to the other, to be becoming through the other is our enabling condition, our possibility in Being, and it is to be celebrated. "As the world needs my alterity to give

it meaning,” he writes, “I need the authority of others to define, or author, my self.”⁴ Authoring for Bakhtin is an act, an ethical and aesthetic deed, which occurs in life and in art, in Being and in culture, on the boundary between self and other. “That which in his epistemology is modeled as the I/other distinction,” Clark and Holquist contend, becomes in his aesthetics the distinction between the author, who occupies a position analogous to the self, and the hero, who occupies a position analogous to the other.”⁵ Thus, the self/author does not transcend or stand outside culture and social reality; rather, the author is responsible and answerable to the hero in art as the self is responsible and answerable to the other in real life.

As I have outlined in chapter one, what Bakhtin’s thought can enable feminists to do is to reconceptualize the romantic (mis)alignment of creative authorship with the atomistic and isolated (masculine) self set against the other. For Bakhtin, the other is far from irrelevant in art and in life: in fact, the other is a value that is existentially indispensable to the self and to authoring. Through Bakhtin, I will demonstrate, we can challenge the romantic and modernist myths of authorship and consciousness, appreciate the post-structuralist insistence on contextualizing the author in terms of the social other and the political culture, while not losing the fundamental importance of the individual as active creative agent who is deeply implicated in and answerable for the work authored. In terms of advancing Cronenberg studies from a feminist perspective the effect will be fivefold: 1) we can give the lie to the romantic myth of Cronenberg as transcendent creative genius who stands isolated from and outside his time, history, and culture; 2) we can rethink the psychoanalytic

myth of Cronenberg's atomistic psyche and its mysterious personal unconscious as the self-generative source of his life and art; 3) we can retain the essential uniqueness of Cronenberg as a gendered author who is answerable and responsible for his art; 4) we can situate Cronenberg and his heroes in relation to, rather than set against, concrete individual others; and 5) we can clarify the broader social and political significance of Cronenberg's work.

But this effort will first require an immanent reading of Bakhtin's early foundational works, Toward a Philosophy of the Act, and Art and Answerability. I will begin by outlining the key concepts in Toward a Philosophy of the Act: the once-occurrent event of Being; aesthetic seeing; transgression; answerability; and I and the other. These preliminary ideas, focusing on the self-other relation as foundational to the question of authorship, lead into Art and Answerability and, in fact, will motivate Bakhtin's thinking throughout his life. Here, Bakhtin elaborates on the relation of author and hero as a parallel structure to the self-other relation: the hero is built and shaped in space, time and value by the author in art as the other is built and shaped in space, time and value by the self in real life. Then, after outlining those key concepts in Art and Answerability which explain how this form-giving aesthetic activity taking place between self and other, and author and hero, works (concepts such as the excess of seeing; the outward boundaries of the body; the inner and outer body; the outer body as an aesthetic phenomenon; sympathetic co-experiencing; the gift of form; and the spatial and temporal whole of the hero), I will show

the implications and value of Bakhtin's philosophy for thinking about, and rethinking, David Cronenberg as a cinematic author.

The once-occurrent event of Being

In Toward a Philosophy of the Act Bakhtin is concerned with describing the phenomenology of authoring as aesthetic activity in what he calls the ongoing, transitive, "open event-ness of Being."⁶ However, for Bakhtin, aesthetic activity can never "take possession"⁷ of the lived once-occurrent event of Being. The aesthetic is always an historical intuitive gesture made to commune with and enter into our existence as an ongoing event, but the objective product or representation it produces always leaves the "actual event-ness" it is after out of account:

Aesthetic intuition is unable to apprehend the actual event-ness of the once-occurrent event, for its images or configurations are objectified, that is, with respect to their content, they are placed outside actual once-occurrent becoming—they do not partake in it (they partake in it only as a constituent moment in the alive and living consciousness of a contemplator).⁸

What this means is that there is a fundamental split or disunity between our "actual and once-occurrent experiencing" of an act or activity in its inescapable wholeness as an event, and the "content or sense" we give it by representing it—whether in theoretical thinking, historical description, or aesthetic intuition.⁹ This is nothing other than the age-old problem of cultural activity struggling to (re)present—or author—life, but inevitably objectifying and abstracting it in the process.

Science, history, and art pretend that full possession of the once-occurrent event of Being is possible and achievable in the kinds of abstract meanings they produce, but what they really accomplish, according to Bakhtin, is the objectification of the authentic, authoritative, act, such that the act loses all its value, its energy, its qualitative self-determination as an event in Being. As a result of this kind of abstraction that derives from the side of representing, the world of culture (where we objectify our acts by re-presenting them) and the world of life (where our acts of creating, cognizing, contemplating, living, dying occur once and only once as ongoing events of Being) have confronted each other and maintained a mutual imperviousness. An abyss has formed, Bakhtin claims, between our lived lives and our way of representing ourselves—between the motives of our deeds and their products¹⁰—due to our increasing belief that theory, objectivity, and technology can author life. For Bakhtin, everything technological, “when divorced from the once-occurrent unity of life and surrendered to the will of the law immanent to its development,” is frightening because it has the potential to “irrupt into this once-occurrent unity as an irresponsibly destructive and terrifying force.”¹¹ In creating a world increasingly dominated by the abstractions of theory and technology, he writes, “we have conjured up the ghost of objective culture, and now we do not know how to lay it to rest.”¹²

From the point of view of the world of culture, culture and life are conceived as two different orders, and the effect is pernicious in that creative human actors and their activity become drained and objectified. What we must understand, writes Bakhtin, is that “[a]n act of our activity,

of our actual experiencing, is like a two-faced Janus. It looks in two opposite directions: it looks at the objective unity of a domain of culture and at the never-representable uniqueness of actually lived and experienced life.”¹³ An act, then, is an experience that takes place on a boundary (the boundary is a form of conceptualization which, as we will see, will continue to be central to Bakhtin’s later formulations of the I-other relationship, the author-hero relationship, consciousness, selfhood, intersubjectivity, the utterance, and genre.)¹⁴ Bakhtin explains how the wholeness of this two-sided reality of the act can only be appreciated, and its unification effected without its living energy being lost in abstraction and objectification, from the position of life—from a position in the “once-occurrent event of Being.” Anything theoretical or aesthetic

must be determined as a constituent moment in the once-occurrent event of Being, although no longer, of course, in theoretical or aesthetic terms. An act must acquire a single unitary plane to be able to reflect itself in both directions—in its sense or meaning and in its being; it must acquire the unity of two-sided answerability—both for its content (special answerability) and for its Being (moral answerability).¹⁵

The special answerability, he continues, “must be brought into communion with the unitary and unique moral answerability as a constituent moment in it” in order that “the pernicious non-fusion and non-interpenetration of culture and life could be surmounted.”¹⁶ Thus, culture as that which humans author—all that is theoretical, historical, and aesthetic—is no longer illogically severed from life and falsely objectified but is understood

as a constituent moment in the ongoing process of lived life as perpetual becoming from unique moment to unique moment.

What the performed act must then accomplish is the aesthetic activity of assembling, or architectonically building,¹⁷ these split or disunified parts of culture on the one hand and life on the other into a relative whole. In order for an act to reflect itself in both directions—toward culture/sense/content, and toward life/event/Being—it has to be answerable to both, for both, its content and its Being. Thus, every conscious thought of my Being, and its content, becomes unified for Bakhtin as each unique actor’s “own individually answerable act or deed.”¹⁸ My thought, whether theoretical thinking, historical description, or aesthetic intuition, is my answerable act. From the point of view of the philosophy of the act, I am accountable, responsible, answerable for the thoughts I author in life and the representations I make in culture, and it is this inescapable answerability that prevents my total objectification and abstraction by collective culture and at the same time determines the moral and social accountability of my self-activity. The “ought” at the root of answerability, writes Bakhtin, is not an abstract theoretical moment that comes from cultural norms, but “a distinctive category of the ongoing performance of acts or deeds . . . (and everything is an act or deed that I perform—even thought and feeling); the ‘ought’ is a certain attitude of consciousness . . .”¹⁹ of a moral subject as a source of lived values. The fact of the ought—the fact of my answerability—is thus grounded in Being and motivation, not in content and norms. Being evaluatively and

qualitatively encompasses theory, history, and aesthetics; they do not encompass it.

Danger accrues, however, when we live as if the abstractions of theory, history, and aesthetics are the whole world—as if they encompass Being. Then, our active and pragmatic participation in life as answerable and risk-fraught beings is objectified, abstracted, and ultimately finished. Then, Bakhtin suggests, “[a]ny kind of practical orientation of my life within the theoretical world is impossible: it is impossible to live in it, impossible to perform answerable deeds. In that world I am unnecessary. I am essentially and fundamentally non-existent in it.”²⁰ I am, as we have seen in the case of post-structuralist theory, impossible, absurd: a dead author—a ghost of objectifying culture—struggling to write myself into existence from the abstract point of view of a theory which declares me dead.

In contradistinction to the abstractions of structuralism, Bakhtin argues that any thinking on authorship and authoring, like any viable theory that hopes to bring insight to human existence, has to be brought into communion with “the actually occurring event of moral being” from a position in Being. Bakhtin compares the attempt “to force one’s way from inside the theoretical world and into actual Being-as-event”²¹ to “trying to pull oneself up by one’s own hair,”²² and this metaphor captures well the feelings of exasperation one inevitably suffers in trying to contemplate the activity of authoring from the point of view of post-structuralism. From the performed act “I” can get to its content/sense; but from content/sense “I” cannot possibly get to the act.²³ As a subject “I” mediate the unity of

the once-occurrent-event-of-Being, and its representation, as an answerable consciousness in the process of emotionally and volitionally acting a deed. Affect and will are fundamental to subjective agency. Ultimately, then, once-occurrent Being involves for Bakhtin a participative living-through the world, and this pragmatic concept of participation/involvement/communion becomes crucial to the philosophy of the act as a philosophy of social being(s). There is not one abstract theoretical actor/author in Bakhtin's philosophy of the act but a world of unique and once-occurrent social actors/authors in relationship to each other who sympathetically share in and consummate that world. They do so by aesthetic seeing.

Aesthetic seeing

Bakhtin understands aesthetic seeing as an act from the point of view of his philosophy of the act, and as such it must be answerable to both culture and life—to the object seen and contemplated and the actor seeing and contemplating it—from the actor's unique once-occurrent position in Being. To attempt to see from, and to attempt to find oneself in, the object is to try to bring Being into theory, and by doing this, as we have seen, one only succeeds in “casting oneself into non-Being.”²⁴

Aesthetic seeing is not pure and abstract theoretical contemplation of or reflection on an object which remains outside my act as event; rather, aesthetic seeing involves my actively “empathizing into” an object, so that I see it “from inside its own essence,”²⁵ by entering into the cultural field as a horizon of objects-for-me from my unique position in Being. Bakhtin will later coin the phrase “live-entering” to capture this ethical act of

entering into the event of Being with other subjects and objects by empathizing with them.²⁶ However, empathizing is only one moment of aesthetic seeing; if I remain in the moment of empathy I become trapped in the domain of re-presentation/culture/theory, cut off from my active position in life. Always straddling the boundary between life and culture, self and other (for that is my existential predicament as a human being) I must empathetically enter into the objects in culture that I wish to represent or consummate, while maintaining my own authoritative energy in Being as well as their status as whole, individual, once-occurrent subjective “I”’s or objects outside me. Therefore, for Bakhtin, the moment of empathizing and the moment of objectifying are not separable in reality;²⁷ they interpenetrate each other, united in the answerability of my aesthetic seeing as consummating, form-giving activity.²⁸

Transgredience

Aesthetic seeing as an architectonic building of parts into wholes, then, depends on my straddling the boundary between life and culture, self and other—on my taking up my position at once inside and outside the object of representation, on what Bakhtin calls my “transgredience.” He writes that the aesthetic moments of unity, wholeness, and self-sufficiency a subject feels do not exist within him; rather, they presuppose the activity of an empathizer who is situated outside the bounds of that subject, and who shapes and objectifies the “blind matter obtained through empathizing.”²⁹ With transgredience, I step over or step across to the other, experiencing aspects of the other while remaining myself.³⁰ By maintaining

transgression, and always returning to my position of outsidedness with respect to the cultural objects with which I empathize and which I try to represent and consummate, I bring the otherwise impervious worlds of culture and life into communion.³¹

However, if I fail to perform this act of aesthetic empathizing (that is, empathizing which is not pure coinciding but that empathizes and objectifies³²) by losing transgression and renouncing outsidedness, I lose myself and my ability to influence the world from my unique place in the once-occurrent event of Being. I forfeit my unique and once-occurrent active being; perceiver and perception become blurred; I become a passive empathizer; I become possessed; I become the object I set out to represent and consummate. In Bakhtin's words, I become "a double of myself, only someone pretending to be me. All I can do . . . is play a role, i.e., assume, like a mask, the flesh of another—of someone deceased."³³ I become, if you will, like a post-structuralist if I try to live from the point of view of theory; abstracted from Being, I become a lifeless object, a ghost of myself, a dead author. According to Bakhtin, for me to really understand an object in the world that I come upon or create, I have to see it aesthetically from a position of transgression—I have to understand "my ought in relation to it (the attitude or position I ought to take in relation to it), that is, to understand it in relation to me myself in once-occurrent Being as an event, and that presupposes my answerable participation, and not an abstracting from myself."³⁴ In relation to the not-I, I am alive; I must act.

Answerability

My participation in the unification of objective content and subjective performance thus becomes my responsibility: my ethically performed act which Bakhtin argues can never be “tacked on from outside”³⁵ but which issues from within “the morally ought-to-be attitude of my consciousness”³⁶ It becomes my answerable deed grounded not in abstract authority but in my free volition as a unique and once-occurrent performative human being. From that position, and only from that position, can I fill the gap between life and culture, Being and content, sensibility and reason, deeds and words, the real and the ideal. “This answerability of the actually performed act,” says Bakhtin, “is the taking-into-account in it of all the factors—a taking-into-account of its sense-validity as well as of its factual performance in all its concrete historicity and individuality.”³⁷

Three moments are thus united in the answerable act as a decisive deed: theoretical validity, historical factuality, and emotional-volitional tone.³⁸ And it is language which gives utterance to this decisively performed union of theory, history and aesthetics through the “entire fullness of the word: in its content/sense aspect (word as concept) as well as its palpable-expressive aspect (the word as image) and its emotional-volitional aspect (the intonation of the word) in their unity.”³⁹ Through the word, I participate in the phenomenological world as an ongoing event. From my unique position I am answerable in word and deed to the objects I experience in the world. I carry out and achieve a relation to them where being and value (deed and word), through me, become an inseparable

event.⁴⁰ Furthermore, as I pronounce words about an object—as I begin to re-present it, to think it—I am simultaneously assuming and expressing an attitude toward it: “Insofar as I have thought of an object, I have entered into a relationship with it that has the character of an ongoing event.”⁴¹ Through my emotional-volitional tone I participate in the object. No thought, Bakhtin suggests, would actually ever be thought if it were not experienced—if a value-laden connection were not made between content and emotional-volitional tone for the thinker. Only emotional-volitional tone can “orient” and “affirm” content/sense in the once-occurrent event of Being.⁴² At its root, answerability is the emotional-volitional gesture of my unique consciousness as it participates in both content/sense and in life. To be answerable, then, is to “establish the unity of motive and aim, of actual performing and the sense of its content. This is the way in which a living consciousness becomes a cultural consciousness and a cultural consciousness becomes embodied in a living consciousness.”⁴³

For Bakhtin, the vital relation between me as an individual and the culture devolves on my answerability—on what he calls my faithfulness to my position as a unique and once-occurrent consciousness, and on my obligation to participate in Being as an event. However, as we have established, answerability is not something that can be expressed in abstract theory or imposed on me by abstract content: it can only be phenomenologically “described” and “participatively experienced.”⁴⁴ “It is not the content of an obligation that obliges me,” he writes, “but my signature below it.”⁴⁵ What this means is that my participation in Being is my unique and ongoing moral action of filling in my unique and once-

occurrent place in Being. My signature is not an abstract, fading, ghostly Derridean trace of where I was but an active gesture, in word and deed, that I am here:

Here lies the point of origin of the answerable deed and of all the categories of the concrete, once-occurrent, and compelling ought. I, too, exist . . . actually—in the whole and assume the obligation to say this word. I, too, participate in Being in a once-occurrent and never-repeatable manner In the given once-occurrent point where I am now located, no one else has ever been located in the once-occurrent time and once-occurrent space of once-occurrent Being. And it is around this once-occurrent point that all once-occurrent Being is arranged in a once-occurrent and never-repeatable manner. That which can be done by me can never be done by anyone else. The uniqueness or singularity of present-on-hand Being is compellingly obligatory.⁴⁶

The irrefutable fact of existence for Bakhtin is this: “my non-alibi in Being.”⁴⁷ Like a unique piece of a jigsaw puzzle, I fill a hole in existence—a hole which fits me and me alone. I am here in this once-occurrent moment performing this once-occurrent act and cannot claim to be anywhere else. I inhabit my form aesthetically and ethically.

Looking at once toward Being and toward life from my unique place, then, I exist in “the space between subjective and objective knowledge,”⁴⁸ as Michael Holquist puts it—on the boundary between the act and the account/re-presentation/meaning of it. There is a chasm between sensibility and reason that can only be filled by my active

existence. Now, the theoretical account of the act orders it—tries to contain its once-occurrent, chaotic fleetingness. But what Bakhtin tries to appreciate and respect is the profound significance of the difference between the act and the theoretical ordering. He offers the example of the practice of decimation in oppressive states, where every tenth person is killed as a form of collective punishment. From the abstract theoretical position, decimation might well produce discipline and maintain systematic order. But from the position of life—from the particular positions of every tenth person—the event has emotional-volitional tone: it means death and their evacuation from the unique place in Being that only they can fill. For Bakhtin, because I have no alibi in existence—because only I can take up my place—I am responsible, accountable for my acts, and this is not something I objectively know and cognize but something I feel and experientially answer for— “something I acknowledge and affirm in a unique or once-occurrent manner”⁴⁹ from my position in Being. From the universal or theoretical position, I see that everyone occupies their unique place; but from my unique boundary-position in Being—in “immediate proximity” to the borders of the whole of Being and “oriented within it as in a whole”— “I participate in Being as its sole actor”:

In all of Being I experience only myself—my unique self—as an I. All other Is (theoretical ones) are not I for me, whereas my own unique (non-theoretical) I participates in once-occurrent Being: I exist . . . in it. Furthermore, what is also given here in a non-fused yet undivided form is both the moment of my passivity and the moment of my self-activity⁵⁰

My act or deed or word encapsulates together two moments: the moment of my passivity (where I find myself in Being) and the moment of my self-activity (where I participate in Being and achieve and activate my uniqueness). However, this is not to say that I am the only being; rather, I am the only one who can actualize my being in its uniqueness, and therefore I must actualize it, and that actualization is always in relation to other beings—“to everything that is not I.”⁵¹

To be in life, says Bakhtin, “is to act, is to be unindifferent toward the once-occurrent whole,”⁵² to initiate participation in it and answer it as only I can. The fact is that my emotional-volitional being is essential to the world: “Of course, this fact may give rise to a rift, it may be impoverished: I can ignore my self-activity and live by my passivity alone. I can try to prove my alibi in Being, I can pretend to be someone I am not. I can abdicate from my obligative (ought-to-be) uniqueness.”⁵³ But if I live indifferently to the value of my once-occurrent Being, I live pretending, in doubt about the consequences and valid effects of my actions, escaping from my relation to the world and from what is free and volitional in myself, withdrawn from my answerability.

I and the other

Thus the lived relation between I and the other becomes crucial to Bakhtin’s philosophy of the act. But, he insists, “I” and “the other” are never interchangeable, never have the exact same ontological value in Being. This is because the self “come[s] forth” from within itself, whereas it “come[s] upon” others as it finds them. This situation creates “a

profound ontological difference in significance within the event of Being.”⁵⁴ I and the other are different, each obligated to different things: I to my “I”; and others to their “I”s. The value of the I as an “empty possibility of content” is valid and yet different for each individual. Seen from this perspective, “[m]an-in-general does not exist” for Bakhtin; rather,

I exist and a particular concrete other exists—my intimate, my contemporary (social mankind), the past and future of actual human beings (of actual historical mankind). All these are valuative moments of Being which are valid individually and do not universalize or generalize once-occurrent Being, and they are revealed to me from my unique place in Being as the foundations of my non-alibi in Being.⁵⁵

This means that a value in human existence, like death or love, is only meaningful when it correlates with the “I” who is its unique source and participant—when it is lived from within. For example, “for a disembodied, detached (non-participating) subiectum, all deaths may be equal. No one, however, lives in a world in which all human beings are—with respect to value—equally mortal.”⁵⁶ I live my death; I witness (sympathetically or with indifference) yours. From within my position my own death and the death of an other are profoundly different qualitative emotional-volitional events. But for Bakhtin this does not mean only my death or life is important, or that I live only for my sake. On this he is emphatic: “Let me repeat: to live from within oneself does not mean to live for oneself, but means to be an answerable participant from within oneself,

to affirm one's compelling, actual non-alibi in Being."⁵⁷ From my once-occurrent position on the boundary between life and culture, I must affirm my once-occurrent Being and I must affirm the world and humanity as valuable to me in that the other, too, exists as an "I" in relation to me, revealing relationship as a form of value—of loving emotional-volitional tone that I can't get in myself alone. Indeed, I cannot embrace myself the way I can embrace the other. To love is to assume an affective, emotional-volitional relation to the other from outside the other and from within the "I."

This means that Being has as many value-centres as it has once-occurrent "I"'s. It is built architectonically out the events of multiple acts of perception. All "I"'s are understood by Bakhtin as act-performing, participating consciousnesses who are constructed architectonically on the boundary between life and culture through three common moments in the I and the other design of once-occurrent Being where valuable acts or deeds occur: I-for-myself, the-other-for-me, and I-for-the-other.⁵⁸ "All the values of actual life and culture," he writes,

are arranged around the basic architectonic points of the actual world of the performed act or deed: scientific values, aesthetic values, political values (including both ethical and social values), and, finally, religious values. All spatial-temporal values and all sense-content values are drawn toward and concentrated around these emotional-volitional moments: I, the other, and I-for-the-other.⁵⁹

Each "I," then, enacts a unique individual opening in space and time that has emotional-volitional value relative to the world.⁶⁰ The world is

arranged around me as central for myself, and my active participation in it—with its objects, with the others I find in it—gives time its heaviness, space its texture, and boundaries their validity and meaning.⁶¹

But Bakhtin is careful to clarify that I-for-myself is not to be taken as a fundamental, supreme, and therefore abstract-theoretical universal value. If the world is arranged around my “I” as central for myself, it is also arranged around your “I” as central for yourself. Others, as “constituent members” of the world, are “real objects, interconnected by concrete event-relations in the once-occurrent event of Being.”⁶² The other-for-me and I-for-the-other are not auxiliary to I-for-myself but momentous with it—part of its active, participative, emotional-volitional life. Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson clarify these architectonic moments from the point of view of cognitive experience: The I-for-myself is “how my self looks and feels to my own consciousness,” and is experienced from within as heterogeneous, unbounded, unfinished, infinitely open and ongoing in the once-occurrent event of Being. The I-for-the-other is “how my self appears to those outside it,” and is experienced transgrediently and bounded as an object for them by their aesthetic seeing. The other-for-me is “how outsiders appear to myself,” and is experienced transgrediently and bounded as an object for me by my aesthetic seeing.⁶³

For Bakhtin, the world of art, better than the even more abstract worlds of history or theory, can be used to study the way this architectonic construction of Being works. This is because of the way the world of art undertakes to enact and represent the concreteness of unique individual

human acts, and because of its overt and intentional permeation with emotional-volitional tone. These qualities in art reveal and enable us to understand the basic architectonic structure of I-for-myself, I-for-the-other, and the-other-for-me that grounds actual human life and its possibility.

The Janus-faced “I” of aesthetic seeing is in art as it is in life, articulating, in both the realm of culture and the realm of life, the relational, architectonic value of the human being. As Bakhtin sees it, the world is arranged around a concrete value-center, which is seen and loved and thought. What constitutes this center is the human being: everything in this world acquires significance, meaning, and value only in correlation with man—as that which is human. All possible Being and all possible meaning are arranged around the human being as the center and the sole value; everything (and here aesthetic seeing has no bounds) must be correlated with the human being, must become human.⁶⁴

However, Bakhtin does not mean by this that the human that I see aesthetically—the other in life or the hero in art—is necessarily a value that has positive (“humanistic”) content, or is only valuable because it has positive content. The other or the hero may be a failure, “negative,” “bad,” or “pitiful;” but nonetheless they have value for me as objects of my unindifferent, active, participative, “interested” attention to my horizon in Being.⁶⁵ “Moreover,” he elaborates,

aesthetic seeing does not abstract in any way from the possible standpoints of various values; it does not erase the boundary between

good and evil, beauty and ugliness, truth and falsehood. Aesthetic seeing knows all these distinctions and finds them in the world contemplated, but these distinctions are not drawn out of it and placed above it as ultimate criteria, as the principle of viewing and forming what is seen; they remain within that world as constituent moments of its architectonic and are all equally encompassed by an all-accepting loving affirmation of the human being.⁶⁶

Aesthetic love is active yet objective in constituting the human being as the principle of aesthetic seeing. Thus, aesthetic seeing of an other in life or a hero in art does not mean blindly empathizing, identifying, and confirming them according to pre-given, theoretical norms and standards; rather, it means first affirming and acknowledging their existence as concrete figures in the multiformity and diversity of their circumstances.

Only by initially, and from outside them, lovingly contemplating others as human beings in their context as other-for-me can we really claim to “see” them at all.⁶⁷ In Bakhtin’s thought

Only un-self-interested love on the principle of “I love him not because he is good, but he is good because I love him,” only lovingly interested attention, is capable of generating a sufficiently intent power to encompass and retain the concrete manifoldness of Being, without impoverishing and schematizing it. An indifferent or hostile reaction is always a reaction that impoverishes and decomposes its object: it seeks to pass over the object in all its manifoldness, to ignore it or to overcome it. The very function of indifference biologically consists in freeing us from the manifoldness of Being.

diverting us from what is inessential for us practically—a kind of economy or preservation from being dissipated in the manifoldness.⁶⁸

It is the morally valuable act of love—love as a deep gesture of human conduct—which sets up the aesthetic architectonic event that enables the perceiving “I” to emotionally-volitionally sculpt, build, author the other from outside the other in space and time: through the fundamental value of my form-giving aesthetic seeing, I consummate or give valuative weight to the other as she does for me.⁶⁹

However, Bakhtin observes, there is a qualitative difference in the authoring or aesthetic seeing I perform in the world of art and that which I perform in the world of life, and the difference has to do with the kind of self-other relation achieved in each world: the difference is a question of the extreme, or ideal degree of transgression or outsideness potentially achievable in art. As Holquist explains, transgression

is reached when the whole existence of others is seen from outside not only their own knowledge that they are being perceived by somebody else, but from beyond their awareness that such an other even exists. It is a cardinal assumption of dialogism that every human subject is not only highly conscious, but that his or her cognitive space is coordinated by the same I/other distinctions that organize my own: there is in fact no way “I” can be completely transgressive to another living subject, nor can he or she be completely transgressive to me.⁷⁰

But in art, the aesthetic deed of contemplating, seeing, and giving form to the other, and the I/artist who performs that deed, are both located outside of and excluded from the unity of the world produced. The imagined, aesthetic, abstract, objectified world an artist creates is, for Bakhtin, a world that primarily affirms, not the artist, but the existence of other beings by finding and contemplating them from a position of value outside their bounds.⁷¹

The author in art, then, performs a “special answerability” for the content they create—attains a “special” transgression in their text which enables them to treat the other as both a self and an other: in the objectified world of art, aesthetic seeing enables authors to abstract from themselves and see from the privileged position of two consciousnesses as they give the hero the status of an “I” and the status of an other. Thus, Bakhtin suggests, aesthetic activity is “participation of a special, objectified kind.”⁷² From the point of view of art, the activity of aesthetic seeing is “special” in its answerability in that the author is potentially highly transgressive to the content (hero or world) created. Holquist elaborates:

The author of a novel, for instance, can manipulate the other not only as another, but as a self. This is, in fact, what the very greatest writers have always done, but the paradigmatic example is provided by Dostoevsky, who so successfully permits his characters to have the status of an “I” standing over against the claims of his own authorial other that Bakhtin felt compelled to coin the special term “polyphony” to describe it. Lesser authors treat their heroes as mere others, a relation that can be crafted in architectonics, and which

does not therefore require the aesthetic privilege of art for its achievement: it is what we all do anyway. And then there are those authors who treat their characters not only as others, but as having the otherness of mere things, lacking any subjectivity. They exploit their transgression of their characters much as scientists exploit theirs toward laboratory rats.⁷³

The more an artist can give the hero a subjective “I,” while giving form to the hero’s otherness as we all give form to others in life, and yet the less treat the hero like a mere thing, the better and more complex the art. However, as we have seen, art and life never simply interpenetrate: the artist’s aesthetic activity architectonically builds the world of art/culture and the world of life/Being into entities that relate to each other by aesthetically shaping the hero into an “I” —into an other self—into a relative whole; and the artist never lives with the hero in the world created for the hero but rather performs this activity from a position in the world of the once-occurrent event of Being, for this is the only place from which the act of aesthetic seeing can be performed in word and deed by the artist’s consciousness as a unique form-giving point of view.

In contrast, in the heterogeneity and manifoldness of ongoing life, I can never achieve the level of transgression I can in the closed, abstract world of art. In life, I am fundamentally and essentially situated inside the architectonic of Being where I cannot abstract myself, cannot experience the other’s “I” the way I can experience the “I” of the hero at the same time as I experience him as other in order to create him in art. In the world of

life, says Bakhtin, the “concretely affirmed value of a human being and my own value-for-myself are radically different”:⁷⁴

The highest architectonic principle of the actual world of the performed act or deed is the concrete and architectonically valid or operative contraposition of I and the other. Life knows two value-centers that are fundamentally and essentially different, yet are correlated with each other: myself and the other; and it is around these centers that all of the concrete moments of Being are distributed and arranged.⁷⁵

The author in life, then, performs a “moral answerability” for the unique place they and only they can occupy in the once-occurrent event of Being; he or she attains a “moral” transgression which disallows the complete abstraction of the self in order to experience the other’s “I.” The author in life cannot achieve the heights of transgression available to the author in art because, in life, I and the other exist on two different planes as two different value centers: “I” can never be the other. Indeed, Bakhtin asks, what would I have to gain in becoming the other? Nothing, for then I would lose my life, my ability to act in the once-occurrent event of Being. However, in art, the plane of the author and the plane of the hero can be and are made to overlap, forging the abstract plane of the hero as an aesthetic whole: in order to author my hero as an independent subject, a convincing ongoing self, a fictional whole, part of my job as an artist in aesthetic activity is to imagine/pretend that my hero and I are on the same plane, have the same value center, are interchangeable because in this way I am able to give him life as a character; the other part is to define my hero

as an other (an other-for-me, who is living objectively in the space/time/value of the fictional world as a separate, whole person) by maintaining my outsideness to him.

In Toward a Philosophy of the Act Bakhtin thus establishes authoring as an ethical and aesthetic activity which frames the fundamental human value of the correlative and contrapositional, answerable relationship of I and the other in both life and art. In his philosophy, the unique human being—the once-occurrent “I”—is the value centre around which Being and culture are organized and through which they have meaning. It is in Art and Answerability that Bakhtin is concerned to describe how the architectonic relations between living subjects that are ordered into the categories of “I” and “the other” in life also exist between authors and their fictional subjects in art. Here Bakhtin elaborates on the activity of authoring in art as a parallel phenomenon to the ethical and aesthetic activity of authoring in life, defining the author-hero relation in aesthetic activity in terms of its similarity to the self-other relation in real life. It is to the details of this comparison that I will now turn.

Art and answerability

In Bakhtin’s aesthetics, the author in art, like the once-occurrent “I” in life, is the unique value centre through whom the abstract and objectified world of art and the lived and heterogeneous world of Being are unified and made answerable to each other. As we have seen in the philosophy of the act, life and art are not the same, yet they are related; they are two different worlds, but they cannot be separated: “Art and life are not one,

but they must become united in my self—in the unity of my answerability.”⁷⁶ For Bakhtin, it is imperative for me as an author “to answer with my own life for what I have experienced and understood in art, so that everything I have experienced and understood would not remain ineffectual in my life.”⁷⁷ The risk is that if art is not made answerable to life, it becomes impoverished: the art itself becomes abstracted (art as pure art, art-for-art’s sake); the artist becomes mystified (art as romantic personal inspiration, art as a state of possession); and the world of artistic vision becomes a realm of escape, relieved of real value, where “it is certainly easier to create without answering for life, and easier to live without any consideration for art.”⁷⁸

What Bakhtin is interested to understand and describe in Art and Answerability, and what will continue to concern him throughout his life, is the question of how authors in art create value in culture through aesthetic seeing as an act of the unique once-occurrent event of their Being. Like the world of life, he says, “[t]he world of artistic vision is a world which is organized, ordered, and consummated . . . around a given human being as his axiological surroundings or environment,” and it is apparent that the way artistic objects gain their validity is through relationship to that human being.⁷⁹ How do they do so? Driven by what Holquist calls a “perceptual mandate to consummate,” the “I” in life and the author in art use vision, or their power of seeing, aesthetically—that is, they use their perception of the environment around them to emotionally-volitionally shape parts into wholes, giving boundaries to the infinitely open, unbounded, unfinalized “I” of the other or hero: In both art and life,

Holquist asks us to notice, “I consummate—or give finished form to—another. It is this fact that induces Bakhtin to make one of his bolder hypotheses: to treat the activity of perception as the structure of authoring. I give shape both to others and to my self as an author gives shape to his heroes.”⁸⁰

So if, as Clark and Holquist suggested, Bakhtin is to be distinguished by the originality of his reformulation of authorship as an activity of perception framing the relation of “I” to the other in Toward a Philosophy of the Act, then he is also to be distinguished by the originality of his reformulation of aesthetics as the activity of consummation the author performs in regard to the hero in Art and Answerability. The aesthetic as Bakhtin defines it, as Holquist notes, “is a category that has less to do with the traditional concern of aestheticians for ‘beauty’ than it has to do with the mysterious concepts of ‘isolation,’ ‘outsidedness,’ and ‘consummation.’” Bakhtin treats perception as “the activity of creating a text,” he continues, “much as authors make texts out of the givenness of the world outside art.” In this light, aesthetics involves actively fashioning persons, objects, or texts into the whole objects they are, and such consummation is then “treated as an act of authorship.”⁸¹ Aesthetics in Bakhtin’s sense involves aesthetic seeing as the self’s answerable perceptual activity of consummating or shaping the other into a relative whole in space and time, and it operates in both life and in art: the parallel activity performed by the “I” in life and the author in art is the visual reaction to and emotional-volitional shaping of the other. Like the self and other, the author and hero exist in aesthetic activity. However, as we have briefly seen in

Toward a Philosophy of the Act, that activity itself is qualitatively different in art than it is in life—the former case being, as Greg Nielsen describes it, an abstract ideal of the “lived relations of intersubjectivity,” which are always less than “pristine” in the latter.⁸² The author-hero relation, then, is understood by Bakhtin as parallel but not exactly equal to the self-other relation in lived life. But before examining how this conception of the author and hero in aesthetic activity is relevant for us in the case of David Cronenberg, it will be necessary to describe exactly how, according to Bakhtin, that aesthetic activity operates—how the “I”/author works to consummate, to bestow the gift of spatial and temporal form, to give a relative wholeness to the other/hero that she otherwise does not possess.

Excess of seeing

Consummated wholes, for Bakhtin, are never absolute because “wholeness is a kind of fiction that can be created only from a partial point of view”⁸³—the point of view of my “I” in the once-occurent event of Being. Looking at an other human being from within this unique horizon, or “compass of vision,”⁸⁴ or place that I-and-only-I occupy, my seeing has a particular value relative to the other which Bakhtin characterizes in terms of “excess.” In seeing an other I see in excess of him, filling in the things that, from his unique compass of vision—from within his once-occurent, ongoing, unfinalized “I”—he cannot see. In contemplating him from my concrete position of outsidedness, I perform a valuable act of completion, seeing and knowing what the other, as Bakhtin argues, “cannot see himself.” For example, there are parts of his body

that are inaccessible to his own gaze (his head, his face and its expression), the world behind his back, and a whole series of objects and relations, which in any of our mutual relations are accessible to me but not to him. As we gaze at each other, two different worlds are reflected in the pupils of our eyes. It is possible, upon assuming an appropriate position, to reduce this difference of horizons to a minimum, but in order to annihilate this difference completely, it would be necessary to merge into one, to become one and the same person.⁸⁵

And, as we have established in the philosophy of the act, such annihilation of difference, such total merger is not only undesirable, it is impossible. I and the other are not interchangeable in life: Only I can be me, and “[t]his ever-present excess of my seeing, knowing, and possessing in relation to any other human being is founded in the uniqueness and irreplaceability of my place in the world.”⁸⁶ In contemplating each other with our excess of seeing, then, we always remain on two different planes, as centres of perception outside each other.

Through cognitive thinking we are able to overcome this gap between us, creating an abstract relation between our “I”’s that stitches my perspective and your perspective together into what Bakhtin calls a “unitary and universally valid world.” “For cognition,” he continues, “there is no absolutely inconvertible relationship of I and all others; for cognition, ‘I and the other,’ inasmuch as they are being thought, constitute a relationship that is relative and convertible, since the cognitive subiectum as such does not occupy any determinate, concrete place in being.”⁸⁷ What

this means is that through cognition we are able to construct a general image of the whole social situation that neither of us can see alone. Thus, as Holquist puts it, we generalize the human subject.⁸⁸ We abstract from each “I”’s once-occurrent place in the world of Being, creating the shifting, convertible, relative subjective “I” that has no fixed place in Being but stands, in the world of culture and language, for all of life’s individual “I”’s. In this way, he observes, the unique conscious “I” in life becomes the universal subject in culture, literally embodying a “meaningful particularity that is otherwise a limitless generality, for thought in itself is always a potential, and therefore not inherently limited.”⁸⁹ Thought has the energy of infinite direction, and as such is not capable of consummating a whole.

Cognition works in this way to surmount the concrete outsideness we all experience in relation to each other. But the world it creates made up of the abstract convertibility of I and the other can only ever be thought, never perceived. This is because perception of any whole—whether the whole world of subjects or the whole other—presupposes the determined, embodied place of the contemplator.⁹⁰ In order to perceive, I must assume my once-occurrent place in Being which necessarily places me outside all others. The fact is that I can think from the abstract world where I and the other (all human subjects) are interchangeable; but I cannot perceive, live, act and create there.

The theoretical fiction of the whole, then, necessarily devolves on the foundational value of my excess of seeing as a function of my profound outsideness—as an aesthetic and ethical act performed from the world of

once-occurrent Being/life. Excess of seeing enables my answerable self-activity toward the other in all life situations—enables “all those inner and outer actions which only I can perform in relation to the other, and which are completely inaccessible to the other himself from his own place outside of me; all those actions, that is, which render the other complete precisely in those respects in which he cannot complete himself by himself.”⁹¹ Excess of seeing permits me to aesthetically unify and order the other—to “fill in” the other’s horizon while not impinging on the “distinctness” of her once-occurrent Being.

By way of exemplifying excess of seeing as this kind of form-giving activity, Bakhtin discusses the experience of a suffering person who, given the limits of his compass of vision, “does not experience the fullness of his own outward expressedness in being; he experiences his expressedness only partially, and then in the language of his inner sensation of himself.”⁹² From his “I”—from his position in the once-occurrent event of Being, says Bakhtin—he exists within the immediacy of inner experience in which he can feel but not see his muscles tensing, the expression of pain on his face, the entire picture of his whole prostrate body. What he needs me to do, and what I must do, is to perform aesthetic activity that can bound him, hold him, lovingly consummate him, contextualize him, and I can only do so by first empathizing, identifying, and projecting—by putting myself in his place and experiencing what he experiences. But how do I accomplish this? The means for such identification is my excess of seeing, my experience of all the features I can see that are outside his consciousness; through his outward expressedness I am informed of his inner experience.

In Bakhtin's words, "the outward expressedness of such features is the path by which I penetrate him and almost merge or become one with him from within."⁹³

Such near merger, however, is only one moment of value in aesthetic activity. Without co-incident objectification, without a concomitant return to my place outside the other, I lose myself in him, and then there is no act from my place in Being, and no ethical, cognitive, or aesthetic meaning to the event.

"When I project myself into another's suffering," Bakhtin writes, I experience it precisely as his suffering—in the category of the other, and my reaction to it is not a cry of pain, but a word of consolation or an act of assistance. Referring what I myself have experienced to the other is an obligatory condition for a productive projection into the other and cognition of the other, both ethically and aesthetically.⁹⁴

If the return into myself did not take place, the result would be what Bakhtin calls the pathological phenomenon of experiencing another's suffering as my own, a kind of infection between us, and nothing more. In using my excess of seeing as an emotional-volitional tool for empathizing, I must not confuse the other's experience with my own. I must return it to its rightful owner, the objective other I contemplate. The means for such objectification is also my excess of seeing, which I simultaneously use as a boundary-making tool for distinguishing the other as not-me.

Out of this double process, for Bakhtin, comes the aesthetic activity of consummation:

Aesthetic activity proper actually begins at the point when we return into ourselves, when we return to our own place outside the suffering person, and start to form and consummate the material we derived from projecting ourselves into the other and experiencing him from within himself. And these acts of forming and consummating are effected by our completing that material (that is, the suffering of the given human being) with features transgredient to the entire object-world of the other's suffering consciousness.

These transgredient features no longer have the function of informing but have a new function, the function of consummating.⁹⁵

From my position of transgredience I draw the inner and outer moments of the other together in a way she cannot do herself. With my excess of seeing, her inner experience gains what Bakhtin calls a heaviness or "plastic value," and so becomes an expression which embodies and consummates the suffering expressed. Thus, the other becomes an image I draw from "the excess of my seeing, volition, and feeling."⁹⁶ My excess of seeing gives value to the whole inner and outer manifestation of the other, enabling me to emotionally-volitionally identify with her inner reality by witnessing its outward expression from outside it. Thus, the body and its outward appearance as a bounded pictorial image in space and time become crucial elements for Bakhtin's thinking about the self/author's aesthetic activity of consummating—of making the other/hero into a relative whole. It is to the significance of the body in aesthetic activity that I will now turn.

Outward appearance

As we have seen, from my perspective—from my compass of vision in the once-occurrent event of Being—my own exterior is incomplete. I experience myself from within myself such that I cannot see myself as a complete whole. Only in fragments do I enter my own field of vision. I see my body parts unevenly: my feet or hands easily, the back of my shoulders or thighs with more effort and incompletely, but never my ears or the back of my head. For Bakhtin, “in the outwardly unified world that I see, hear, and touch, I do not encounter my own outward expressedness in being as an outwardly unitary object among other objects. I am situated on the boundary, as it were, of the world I see. In plastic and pictorial terms, I am not connatural with it.”⁹⁷ I experience myself as extended beyond all boundaries.

From this boundary position, my whole self as an outwardly expressed image eludes me, and Bakhtin demonstrates that no matter how hard I try to objectify myself, to feel myself from the outside, to visualize my own outward image through imagination, to contemplate myself in a mirror or photograph, I will always be struck by the “emptiness,” “ghostliness,” and “frightening solitariness” of the images that result.⁹⁸ This is because, due to the boundary I inhabit, my inner sensation of myself and my outward appearance exist on different planes, in different value-categories. “I,” that is, lack the emotional-volitional attitude to my own body and its whole image that could give it life and meaning in the outward unity of the concrete world.⁹⁹ Indeed, as we have seen in the philosophy of the act, I cannot love myself as I love an other. The aesthetic value of

outward appearance has no purchase in one's self-consciousness so that as a human being experiencing life in the category of my own I, I am incapable of "gathering" myself by myself into an outward whole that would be "even relatively finished."¹⁰⁰

In order for the two disparate planes of my fragmentary inner sensation of myself and my outward appearance to be joined so that I may become whole (i.e. become "as a human being among other human beings, as a hero among other heroes"¹⁰¹), Bakhtin writes,

[s]omething like a transparent screen has to be inserted between my inner self-sensation . . . and my outwardly expressed image: the screen of the other's possible emotional-volitional reaction to my outward manifestation—his possible enthusiasm, love, astonishment, or compassion for me. And looking through this screen of the other's soul (which is thus reduced to a means), I vivify my exterior and make it part of the plastic and pictorial world.¹⁰²

Without the other, my outward personality as a bounded whole simply cannot exist. Thus, Bakhtin speaks of "a human being's absolute need for the other, for the other's seeing, remembering, gathering, and unifying self-activity—the only self-activity capable of producing his outwardly finished personality."¹⁰³ The other, then, uses my outward appearance to give birth to or author me on a new plane of being as a self—as a relative whole. As an artist, I must perform the same self-activity for my hero—I must author her as an objective self outside me, and according to Bakhtin this requires, as we will see, "some genuine source of real strength out of which I would be capable of seeing myself as another."¹⁰⁴

Outward boundaries of the body

Intimately associated with this whole outward appearance given by the other is my inner experience of the outward boundaries of my body that encompass me and make me finite. Together, they delimit me, expressing the relationship between the world that surrounds me and my sense of my exterior. What is significant for Bakhtin is the fact that I experience this boundary in relation to myself very differently than I experience it in relation to the other. The other I experience as finite—as a “delimited empirical object” enclosed on all her sides by space in the external world.¹⁰⁵ She is in the world completely, never exceeding its bounds or her own. But myself I experience as infinite. I cannot see myself as totally delimited because “I am situated on the frontier of my horizon of seeing” and will never be able to see myself enclosed on all sides by space in the external world. “The most essential part of my actual experience of myself is excluded from outward seeing.”¹⁰⁶ From within my consciousness, from my unique place in Being, “I” do not make sense as an object among other human objects.

Once again, cognition serves to overcome this differential experience between “I” and the other through abstraction. Cognition ignores the difference, just as, we have seen, it ignores the uniqueness of the cognizing subject.¹⁰⁷ Thus, in thinking about it, I accept that I am a limited, bounded human being for others as they are limited and bounded for me. Yet, from the point of view of the ethical and aesthetic act in Being, I cannot, nor do I, experience myself in the form of a limited and bounded object; rather, I experience myself as a correlation of I and the other as

“image-categories.”¹⁰⁸ The form of the “I” is ongoing once-occurrent inner sensation; the form of the other is the bounded whole. For Bakhtin, only this key radical difference in form between “I” and the other as a fundamental existential-philosophical principle can enable ethical and aesthetic activity. It is there necessarily in both altruism (where my happiness and yours are evaluated differently) and in Christian values (where I love my neighbour differently than I love myself). And it is there in aesthetics (where I experience myself as the one-and-only subject and the other as object).

In the case of aesthetics, Bakhtin insists, the point is not the abstract correlation between subject and subject: the point is the “living correlation”¹⁰⁹ between me as the subject and the rest of the world as the object of my cognition, volition, and feeling. Whereas I experience my own consciousness as “encompassing” and “embracing” the world, I experience the other as “gathered” and “fitted” as a whole into his outward image. Thus, the outward image as a category of form cannot consummate and exhaust myself, but I do experience it as consummating and exhausting the other.¹¹⁰

The significance of all this is that the boundary line as my means for demarcating, filling in, and consummating the other cannot function in the same way to consummate me. “I” am not an object in nature for myself the way others are bounded, natural objects for me. For Bakhtin there is always something “essential” in me which I set over against the outside world: my subjectivity, or “inner self-activity,” confronts that world, rendering me not “entirely connatural” with it. In this way my inner self-

activity “exceeds both nature and the world: I always have an outlet along the line of my experience of myself in the act . . . of the world—I always have a loophole, as it were, through which I can save myself from being no more than a natural given.”¹¹¹

Located on the tangent of inner experience and outward appearance, I-for-myself am not bounded and defined spatially, whereas the other-for-me is given in space. Thus, outward appearance, while not essential within myself, is crucial to my active ability to aesthetically experience the other and to give his body value (by kissing it, embracing it, or contemplating it) in a way that I am unable to give value to my own. “After all,” says Bakhtin, only the other can be “clasped all around,” and felt and touched lovingly. Through my embrace a shape is given to the other’s fragile “here-and-now being.” and “in this act, the other’s outward existence begins to live in a new manner, acquires some sort of new meaning, is born on a new plane of being.”¹¹²

So, from my position outside the other “I” act aesthetically to emotionally-volitionally delimit her existence—I embrace her outward appearance, the boundaries of her body with my excess of seeing, and so give form to her once-occurrent “I”—her inner life—her soul. Thus

the other’s outward, delimited existence takes on the character of an axiologically resilient and heavy, inwardly weighty, material for shaping and sculpting the given human being—not as a physically closed and physically delimited space, but as an aesthetically closed and delimited space—as a living space that has the character of an aesthetic event.¹¹³

In this way, outward appearance and the outward boundaries of the body are understood by Bakhtin as, fundamentally, categories of the other—categories that “I” react to in consummating her as a whole being; they are not categories of the “I.”

Outer and inner body

According to Bakhtin, then, outward appearance and outward boundaries belong to the other, making the other’s body an “outer body” that is immediately given to me in space:

My emotional-volitional reactions to the other’s outer body are unmediated, and it is only in relation to the other that I experience the beauty of the human body in an immediate way—that is, the human body begins to live for me on an entirely different axiological plane, on an axiological plane inaccessible to my inner self-sensation and my fragmentary outer seeing. Only the other is embodied for me axiologically and aesthetically.¹¹⁴

But how, Bakhtin asks, if I experience the other’s body as a finished outward body, do I experience my own? The answer: as an “inner body”—as an ongoing “moment in my self-consciousness”—as “the sum total of inner organic sensations, needs, and desires that are unified around an inner center”¹¹⁵ and which found my actions.

Indeed, from this position of inner experience I am able to act and I strive to preserve myself from moment to moment as an ongoing being, but the wholeness of my outer body is unavailable to me. I cannot directly access it. In the once-occurrent event of Being the value of my outward

body is always mediated by my inner self-sensation: “I cannot react to my own outward body in an unmediated way,”¹¹⁶ the way, for example, I react to and consummate the outward body of the other. As a result, my experience of myself as an inner body is profoundly “cold and cruel: it is utterly devoid of any loving and cherishing elements, any aesthetic elements whatsoever.”¹¹⁷ I can never experience myself intuitively, directly as a whole, bounded, value-laden person. I cannot love myself as I love the other because I cannot experience the ethical and emotional-volitional relationship that is love in reference to myself. Thus, any value I do accrue, says Bakhtin, will have a “borrowed character” because it will depend on the recognition of my exterior granted by the other: “this recognition or acceptance descends upon me from others like a gift, like grace, which is incapable of being understood and founded from within myself.”¹¹⁸

For Bakhtin, then, the “plastic value” of my body is really out of my hands. It can only be sculpted and shaped for me by the other through gestures that recognize my value as a human being. It depends on the ethical and aesthetic acts of love that others perform for me throughout my life. The words and deeds of the mother are exemplary in this regard. Through the emotional-volitional tones emanating from her lips—through naming a child, identifying his body parts, and kissing him lovingly—the mother enables her child to find himself as contained and finite, to gain awareness of himself “as a something.” Thus, the association between inner experience and outward appearance—between my sense of my exterior and the world that surrounds me—is formed.¹¹⁹

For example, by calling the child's feet (which to him are merely fragments of his inner body) "footsies," and lovingly embracing them, the mother justifies and consummates them as beloved and beautiful parts of the child's whole embodied being. She gives her child the gift of seeing himself through her eyes, from her perspective outside what Bakhtin calls the "darkly stirring chaos of his inner body." Bakhtin believes that it is only through the emotional-volitional gestures and recognition of the m/other that I learn to speak affectively about myself and to experience my body aesthetically in its potential value as an outward body for others. I have an "absolute need" of the love that comes from outside me as a gift of form from the other: a love that, "even though it does not provide him with an intuitable image of his inner body's outer value," Bakhtin argues, "does make him the possessor of that body's potential value—a value capable of being actualized only by another human being."¹²⁰

Thus, from a point of view that appreciates the qualitative difference in significance between I (as an inner body) and the other (as a generalized objective physical body), Bakhtin is able to debunk the common assumption that the human body is merely or only a general physical object to be accepted at face value as self-delimited and self-sufficient. Rather, one's body is in existential relationship; it "needs the other, needs his recognition and form-giving activity. Only the inner body (the body experienced as heavy) is given to a human being himself; the other's outer body is not given but set as a task: I must actively produce it."¹²¹ The task of all "I"'s is to sculpt an outer body for the inner body of the other.

How? We have seen that from my compass of vision, from my perspective, from my unique position in Being, “I” and the others are not co-ordinated: “we move,” says Bakhtin, “on different planes of seeing and evaluating.”¹²² In order for me to produce the other’s outer body, those planes must somehow speak to each other or become unified through my aesthetic and ethical action. I, that is, must take a stand that produces meaning and value between those planes by taking myself “as an other among others.” “This operation,” Bakhtin writes, “is easily accomplished by abstract thought when I subsume myself under a norm that I share with the other (in morality, in law) or under a common cognitive law (a physiological, psychological, social law, etc.).” However, for Bakhtin, this is an abstraction

far removed from seeing my own concrete life and myself, the hero of that life, on one and the same plane with them. Such seeing presupposes an authoritative axiological position outside myself, for it is only in a life perceived in the category of the other that my body can become aesthetically valid, and not in the context of my own life as lived for myself, that is, not in the context of my self-consciousness.¹²³

The mother, in actively sculpting an outer body for her child’s inner body, takes on an authoritative transgradient position and uses her exterior emotionally-volitionally in being-for-the-other. Thus she becomes valid as a body among other bodies by living, not merely in Being (self-consciously, as I-for-myself) but on the boundary between “I” and the other (transgradiently, in terms of I-for-the-other and the-other-for-me).

Now, if “I” fail to achieve this authoritative position for seeing the other aesthetically, perceiving myself as another, and giving the gift of outer form to your “I,” Bakhtin warns, I am liable to suffer the confusion of doubling. Instead of using my exterior as my being-for-others, that is, I try to exploit it for myself. Instead of being toward the other, I return to myself, connecting my exterior with my own self-consciousness as if to deny the unbounded and unfinished experience of I-for-myself and attempting to render myself whole: “In this case, the reflection of myself in the other, i.e., that which I am for the other, becomes a double of myself. This double irrupts into my self-consciousness, clouds its purity, and deflects my self-consciousness from its direct axiological relationship to itself.”¹²⁴ Like Narcissus, I become trapped in my own image, reflecting myself to myself instead of reflecting and consummating the outer body of the other for the other and letting the other do the same for me. Or, alternatively, I become trapped in the image of the other, like someone who “strives to visualize” his own external image, and, losing “the proper, purely inner stance in relation to his own body,” becomes “morbidly sensitive” to the outward impression he is making. Such a person typically comes to appear “awkward,” “unwieldy,” and unsure of what to do with his or her hands and feet. Bakhtin suggests that

[t]his occurs because an indeterminate other intrudes upon his movements and gestures and a second principle of axiological comportment toward himself arises for him: the context of his self-consciousness is muddled by the context of the other’s consciousness of him, and his inner body is confronted by an outer body that is

divorced from him—an outer body living in the eyes of the other.¹²⁵

Understanding this difference in value between the inner body and the outer body (between experiencing myself and experiencing the other), and yet being able to see myself as another without doubling or losing myself in the other—this becomes a crucial task that is posed to each one of us, and to which we must respond.

According to Bakhtin, this necessary response hinges on my imaginative capacity, whereby I evoke an emotional-volitional image of myself as the hero of the whole of my life, but “without any intention of communicating this image of my life to the other, of embodying it for the other.”¹²⁶ What this means is that “I” must somehow remain active, open, unfinalized, and unfinished in my exterior—effaced of my external image of myself. I must allow my outer body to be completed by others for me, while their outer bodies are completed by me for them through a distribution of “[a]ll of the plastic and pictorial values (colors, tones, forms, lines, images, gestures, postures, faces, and so forth)” between them and the world they inhabit. I myself, however, will “enter this world as an invisible bearer of those emotional-volitional tones which issue from the unique and active axiological position I have assumed in this world and which imbue this world with a particular coloration.”¹²⁷ In this way I author the other’s body but do not immediately turn the attitude of consummating back on myself. My own face becomes the transparent screen whereby I see myself as another without becoming the other. As an author I enclose the inner body of the hero with her outer body, but my

own inner body is never enclosed in this way by me. Thus, for Bakhtin, the outer body represents the central value in creating aesthetic form.¹²⁸

Outer body as an aesthetic phenomenon

Bakhtin comes to his position on the centrality of the outer body to aesthetic activity through a critique of expressive aesthetics—the dominant aesthetic theory of his time. Expressive aesthetics explains aesthetic activity as “empathizing with” or “co-experiencing” the inner state of an object. An object, that is, expresses a kind of soul which I co-experience by abiding in it and co-inciding with it.¹²⁹ Bakhtin’s problem with expressive aesthetics, of course, is that it is “unsound at its very foundation”¹³⁰ because it ignores the principle of the contraposition of I and the other upon which, in his opinion, aesthetic activity must be based. For expressive aesthetics, being located inside the object or hero in question and empathizing with it is the fundamental principle, while for Bakhtin such identificatory activity alone is extra-aesthetic because it can account for neither the whole work of art, nor the essence of form.

As regards the whole of the work, Bakhtin explains, I can never contemplate it by experiencing the inner state of each of its parts. He gives the example of a work in which I can certainly contemplate each figure or hero by co-experiencing each separately, but this will always leave me without any unitary experience of the work as a whole. In order to appreciate the whole work, I must co-experience with the author, because while the hero expresses only himself, the author expresses the whole. However, there are problems with claiming co-experience with the

expressive author: namely, I fall into the danger of losing involvement in the work and becoming identified with the author-as-person, or, I place the author “on a par” with her own heroes and lose involvement with the author by identifying her with the heroes in her work. For Bakhtin it is very important to carefully distinguish between the kind and nature of co-experiencing the contemplator undergoes with respect to the author, and that with respect to the hero:

Co-experiencing with the author, insofar as he has expressed himself in a given work, is not a co-experiencing of his inner life (his joy, anguish, desires, and strivings) in the same sense as our co-experiencing with the hero is. Co-experiencing with the author is a sharing of the actively creative position he has assumed in relation to what is presented, i.e., it is not co-experiencing any longer, but co-creation. It is precisely this co-experienced creative relationship of the author that constitutes the specifically aesthetic relationship which needs to be explained.¹³¹

In aesthetic activity as Bakhtin understands it, I am co-creating the whole work with the author, not merely co-experiencing aspects of it.

For example, when I as author-contemplator aesthetically approach objects such as a cliff on a shore, what I must clearly do is actively experience them, vitalize them, fashion them into “potential heroes” who bear their own destinies. “That is,” Bakhtin says, “I must endow them with a determinate emotional-volitional attitude, make them human. By doing all this, I gain for the first time the possibility of approaching them aesthetically, i.e., I actualize the fundamental condition for aesthetic

vision.”¹³² However, such live-entering or co-experiencing is only the first stage of my response. In order to produce a whole work out of the cliff and shore, I must step outside the image I create, taking a stable position beyond the fear or awe that might come with such experiencing—taking a transgradient position from which I can draw the outward boundaries of the heroic subject in its context, and so justify its being.¹³³ The aesthetic whole of the object or other is not something I experience but something I produce.

Expressive aesthetics makes a further mistake, according to Bakhtin, by reducing form to the “purity of expression,” so that the function of form is seen “to aid co-experiencing, to give expression as clearly, fully, and purely as possible to an interiority.”¹³⁴ Here form is not seen as consummating content—as introducing a new principle transgradient to inner content—but merely as expressing it. Thus, the form of the author and the form of the hero coincide, as if they are one and the same subject expressing a single soul, once again ignoring the fundamental difference between I and the other. For expressive aesthetics, form issues mysteriously from within an object, authoring itself, whereas for Bakhtin, form is a relational activity that descends on an object from the aesthetic seeing of the other. For expressive aesthetics, the only goal of form is to “enable us to experience an object internally,”¹³⁵ whereas for Bakhtin, the goal of form is to bring the inner and outer aspects of the object together, enabling us to experience the whole object—its inner and outer aspects—on a new plane, on an aesthetic plane, from a position outside it.¹³⁶

Outsidedness, then, is crucial to the new plane of experiencing that art enables. What the author-contemplator experiences are not the various feelings of the hero (after all, the hero is not “real” and so his feelings do not actually exist) but the hero’s whole inner life or soul. Thus the author-contemplator’s horizon does coincide with the hero’s, but in order to create the hero as a whole, the author-contemplator must step back, enriching the inner life—the inner body—of the hero by giving it outer form. “Art,” says Bakhtin, “gives me the possibility of experiencing not just one but several lives, and this enables me to enrich the accumulated experience of my own actual life.”¹³⁷ Aesthetic activity enables co-experiencing, not of a purely identificatory, empathetic kind where I become the hero or other contemplated, but of a compassionate, sympathetic, relational kind, where I love the other as an other—as a unique and once-occurrent life in body and soul.

Sympathetic co-experiencing

Bakhtin calls this new plane of co-experiencing “sympathetic” co-experiencing, and for him it is the epitome of aesthetic form-giving activity:

Sympathetic co-experiencing of the hero’s life means to experience that life in a form completely different from the form in which it was, or could have been, experienced by the subjectum of that life himself A sympathetically co-experienced life is given form not in the category of the I, but in the category of the other, as the life of another human being, another I. In other words, a

sympathetically co-experienced life is the life of another human being (his outer as well as his inner life) that is essentially experienced from outside.¹³⁸

What sympathetic activity accomplishes is the goal of form: the union of the inner body and the outer body on the same plane in order to produce the human being as an integral whole. In sympathetic co-experiencing, I take a creative, emotional-volitional, responsive attitude, not only to the inner life of the other (empathetic co-experiencing) but to her outward appearance as well. Thus, I give her form, adding a new value or aesthetic dimension to her lived life. For Bakhtin, only this kind of qualitative gesture can unite “one’s own directedness with a direction and one’s own horizon with an environment. A whole, integral human being is the product of the aesthetic, creative point of view and of that point of view alone.”¹³⁹ Aesthetic activity, then, is never a simple “expression” of a lived life from within it. From within itself, as we have seen, a life is merely cold and cruel, unable to embrace itself. Aesthetic activity proper brings the warmth of outer perspective to bear, emotionally and volitionally, on that life.¹⁴⁰

So, rather than being the self-expression of the hero, or even the author’s expression of the hero, aesthetic activity is better understood as an “imaging forth” of the hero by the author.¹⁴¹ It is the author’s self-activity in relation to the hero that articulates form. Moreover, the hero’s passivity in this regard is not something that is given to the author but something that the author must accomplish by maintaining her sympathetic stance outside the hero, and the merger of pure empathy or in-dwelling

always remains a seductive danger that threatens to collapse the outward boundary that the author is called upon to sculpt for the hero. The ability to achieve this outsideness is therefore not an easy enterprise. It is a difficult struggle. But it produces an invaluable ethical and aesthetic deed: the form-giving activity of consummation between author and hero.

The author's aesthetic activity, then, is essentially a boundary phenomenon: it takes place on the boundary between immanent co-experiencing and constructive outsideness—on the relational tangent between the other and the I. Aesthetic self-activity, writes Bakhtin, “always operates on the boundaries (form is a boundary) of a life-experienced-from-within.” It operates at the points where that life is “turned outward, where it comes to an end (in space, time, and meaning) and another life begins, that is, where it comes up against a sphere of self-activity beyond its reach—the sphere of another's self-activity.”¹⁴²

In this way, out of the existential principle of the contraposition of I and the other in Toward a Philosophy of the Act, Bakhtin draws a picture of aesthetic activity as a creative event between author and hero in Art and Answerability:

An aesthetic event cannot have merely one participant who would both experience his own life and express his own experiencing in an artistically valid form, because the subjectum of lived life and the subjectum of the aesthetic activity which gives form to that life are in principle incapable of coinciding with one another.

There are events which are in principle incapable of unfolding on the plane of one and the same consciousness and which presuppose

two consciousnesses that never merge. Or, in other words, what is constitutive for such events is the relationship of one consciousness to another consciousness precisely as an other. Events of this kind include all of the creatively productive events—the once-occurrent and inconvertible events that bring forth something new.¹⁴³

Always presupposing the existence of two distinct consciousnesses, Bakhtin develops a notion of aesthetic activity that can never be explained in the usual romantic terms of a single expressed consciousness. Where expressive aesthetics diminishes the aesthetic event by theoretically reducing its complexity to the unitary plane of a single consciousness, Bakhtin appreciates its complexity (how it is staged on the boundary between creative co-consciousnesses), and its transformative powers (how it transmutes the object of contemplation formally into more than it could be alone). The productiveness and vitality of a life as an event, he writes, “does not consist in the merging of all into one. On the contrary, it consists in the intensification of one’s own outsidedness with respect to others. one’s own distinctness from others: it consists in fully exploiting the privilege of one’s own unique place outside other human beings.”¹⁴⁴

In the end, it can only be impoverishing to be asked to renounce rather than use one’s own uniqueness. How, Bakhtin asks, would it enrich the event if I merged with the other, and instead of two there would now be only one? And what would I myself gain by the other’s merging with me? If he did, he would see and know no more than what I see and know myself; he would merely repeat in himself that want of any issue out of itself which characterizes my

own life. Let him rather remain outside of me, for in that position he can see and know what I myself do not see and do not know from my own place, and he can essentially enrich the event of my own life.¹⁴⁵

This brings him full circle, back to his critique of theoretical consciousness from Toward a Philosophy of the Act. Theoretical consciousness abstracts the fundamental distinction between I and the other, negating all the unique lived consciousnesses outside the universal I. Aesthetic consciousness, in contrast, is “a loving and value-positing consciousness, is a consciousness of a consciousness: the author’s (the I’s) consciousness of the hero’s (the other’s) consciousness.” The aesthetic event is a meeting of two consciousnesses, distinct from each other, where the author’s consciousness, Bakhtin writes, “relates to the hero’s consciousness not from the standpoint of its objective makeup, its validity as an object, but from the standpoint of its subjectively lived unity.” Thus, the hero’s consciousness is “concretely localized and embodied (the degree of concreteness is variable, of course), and lovingly consummated.”¹⁴⁶ Through sympathetic co-experiencing, the value of aesthetic consciousness is born.

The gift of form

This leads Bakhtin to a very original conceptualization of aesthetic form, not as the unitary property of an expressive object that is “bounded and validated within” a self-consciousness,¹⁴⁷ but as the relational gesture of an author toward her object, toward her hero and his life—as a gift bestowed on one consciousness in need of boundaries by another who is in

a position to give them—as a creative reaction of “aesthetic love.”¹⁴⁸ “Form is a boundary,” writes Bakhtin, “that has been wrought aesthetically”—a boundary of the body as well as of the soul and the spirit.¹⁴⁹ Through an author’s excess of seeing as transredient boundary-making activity, the other is embodied as a physical object (outer body) with a living life (inner body or soul) who has value (meaning). As author-contemplators.

We open the boundaries when we “identify” ourselves with the hero and experience his life from within; and we close them again when we consummate him aesthetically from without. If in the initial movement from within we are passive, then in the answering movement from without we are active—we create something absolutely new, something “excessive.” And it is this meeting of two movements on the surface of a human being that consolidates or gives body to his axiological boundaries—produces the fire of aesthetic value (much as fire is struck from a flint).¹⁵⁰

Thus, the other comes to exist on a new plane—as a valued spatial and temporal whole—through the aesthetic activity of the author who produces, in the aesthetic event, a living relationship of two consciousnesses on the boundaries of the body: herself and her hero.

The spatial and temporal whole of the hero, and the hero as a whole of meaning

The human being as it exists in art is the human being in its “totality.” Bakhtin writes—the human being as a whole in space, and as a

whole in time, and as a whole in meaning or value who can only be produced from outside his life through the boundary-making activity of the author.¹⁵¹

The author, as we have seen, is concerned primarily with the outer boundaries of the hero's body. In giving that form, moreover, the author simultaneously creates a relationship between the hero and the world of objects that surround him in space.¹⁵² Thus, the author's aesthetic activity of creating the hero as a whole being correlated with and contextualized in his whole all-encompassing environment is "completely transgredient" to the hero's consciousness. In seeing the hero as a spatial whole, the author sees him in a way that the hero can never see himself from within his lived life due to his necessarily limited horizon or compass of seeing as a living consciousness.

So, to briefly recapitulate: through the theory of form as a gift it has been established "that man's outer body constitutes an aesthetically significant moment and that the object-world is the environment of his outer body;" moreover, we understand that "the aesthetic interpretation and organization of the outer body and its correlative world is a gift bestowed upon the hero from another consciousness." It comes from the author-contemplator, and as such "it is not an expression of the hero from within the hero himself, but represents the author-other's creative, constructive relationship to the hero."¹⁵³ However, Bakhtin continues, if the whole outer body is an aesthetically significant moment in creating the spatial whole of the hero, the whole inner body, or soul, is equally valid in creating the temporal whole of the hero. In other words, Bakhtin is

suggesting that there is an analogy between the transgredient form-giving activity that the author performs for the hero's body in space, and that which she performs for the hero's soul in time:

As the given, artistically experienced whole of the hero's inner life, the soul as well is transgredient to the hero's self-consciousness, to his directedness to meaning in living his own life. We shall see that the soul, as an inner whole that comes to be in time, the soul as a given, presently existing whole, is constituted in terms of aesthetic categories; the soul is spirit the way it looks from outside, in the other.¹⁵⁴

As the author works on the boundaries of the body from outside, in the category of the other, she also works on the boundaries of the soul from outside, in the category of the other. In the latter case, however, she works, more specifically, from outside the inside, if you will—from “the boundaries of inner life, i.e., at the point where the soul is inwardly turned (‘adverted’) to the outside of itself. The other human being is situated outside [her] and over against [her] not only outwardly, but also inwardly.”¹⁵⁵ Indeed, the hero's lived inner experiences are not the same as, are not identical to, the author's and do not belong to her; rather, they are sympathetically understood and co-experienced by the author from her position outside them. Like the outer body, they are lovingly cherished, consummated, and given form—clothed, as Bakhtin puts it, with “inner flesh” by the “inner eyes.”¹⁵⁶ In this way, as an author, I transpose the other's inner body to a new plane of existence: the plane of existence of a beloved soul. Together, then, the form of the body and the form of the

soul descend on the hero as a gift of love or grace from outside; neither can be generated from within the cold, dejected, “spurious” spirit of I-for-myself.¹⁵⁷ For Bakhtin, the whole soul, like the whole body, can only be produced by the aesthetic activity of the author—by her transgression, by her excess of seeing, by her sympathetic co-experiencing.

So, whereas the outer body is formed and shaped by the author’s excess of seeing in spatial terms and correlated with the hero’s whole environment, the soul or inner body is formed and shaped by the author’s excess of seeing in temporal terms and correlated with the hero’s whole lived life. The excess of seeing the author performs in the latter case is an excess of seeing in relation to the temporal boundaries of the hero’s life. Just as the hero’s “I” has no form of axiological approach to his outward appearance, so his “I” has no form of axiological approach to his own birth and death. “In the life I live and experience from within myself,” Bakhtin writes, “my own birth and death are events which I am in principle incapable of experiencing; birth and death as mine are incapable of becoming events of my own life.”¹⁵⁸ Again, what we have in birth and death is a manifestation of the fundamental difference between the “I” and the other.

For example, when I die, Bakhtin explains, I do not part from myself, while your death is experienced by me as a parting—as the absence of a unique and beloved whole human being. Moreover, I can think of the world without me, but I cannot experience it as an emotional-volitional event. In order to do so, I would have to see myself as others see me, where my death is “an event of their lives.” “My birth, my axiological

abiding in the world, and, finally, my death” Bakhtin sees as “events that occur neither in me nor for me. The emotional weight of my own life taken as a whole does not exist for me myself.”¹⁵⁹ My birth and death must be given to me by the other who authors me as a whole human being among others.

Through her active, sympathetic attitude toward the unfolding time of my life, and by remembering and missing me after my death, the other produces my soul and consolidates and finalizes my life. We have seen that in my experience of myself as a body in space I am unfinished, ongoing, always yet-to-be, and that the same holds true for my experience of myself as a spirit in time. I-for-myself am not bounded and defined temporally, whereas the other-for-me is given in time. While the other is in time and space, “I” am not wholly in them: I exceed the bounds of both the spatial and temporal worlds. Situated on the boundary, I cannot “fit my whole life into time”¹⁶⁰ or my whole body into space. I have a “loophole” out of space and time, as Bakhtin puts it, that prevents me from being a naturally given whole. Only the other can find and build me as a whole human being in an environment across time. Time and space, then, are not things that I live in but “instruments that I master” in order to organize and shape the other.¹⁶¹

As an author I produce the inner life of the hero as her whole soul, measured in the rhythms of time, just as I produce the outer life of the hero as her whole body, measured in the forms of space. Measuring the rhythm of the hero, for Bakhtin, involves the author’s placing her in the past as a whole being by artistically plotting her life, telling her story.

Thus, the hero's "I-for-myself," which she lives as her "actual, fateful, risk-fraught absolute future," is "surmounted by rhythm—the very boundary between the past and the future . . . is surmounted in favor of the past."¹⁶² As such, temporal rhythm does not express the hero's inner experience but rather represents the author's emotional-volitional form-giving reaction to the hero's experience of unconsummatedness—to her I-for-myself, to her givenness in a state of cold indigence, to her ongoing spirit. Rhythm is the loving gesture of form bestowed on the mortal life of an other. "Where there is rhythm," says Bakhtin, we find two self-activities; "one of these lives and experiences its own life and has become passive for the other, which actively shapes and sings the first."¹⁶³

Yet again in Bakhtin's philosophy we come upon the difference in principle between the "I" and the other: where the spirit is a category of the "I," the soul is a category of the other. Experienced from within, the soul is the unformed, cold, momentous spirit of ongoing consciousness where "the world's mortal body disintegrates"¹⁶⁴; experienced from outside, it is the warmth of the author's memory of the whole hero. My soul is not my self-expression, but the form of "my relationship to the other and to the other's self-expression."¹⁶⁵ And what this means for Bakhtin is that, in a profound sense, I am not the hero of my own life: "My time and my space are the time and space of an author, and not those of a hero I can aesthetically justify and consummate the other in such time and space, but not myself."¹⁶⁶ In other words, as I-for-myself, I exceed the bounds of abstract theoretical reason: I live what amounts to the

“insanity” of not coinciding with myself! For Bakhtin the principle that organizes my life from within myself

is solely my consciousness of the fact that in respect to all that is most essential I do not exist yet. The form of my life-from-within is conditioned by my rightful folly or insanity of not coinciding—of not coinciding in principle—with me myself as a given. I do not accept my factually given being; I believe insanely and inexpressibly in my own noncoincidence with this inner givenness of myself. I cannot count and add up all of myself, saying: this is all of me—there is nothing more anywhere else or in anything else; I already exist in full.¹⁶⁷

In effect, I am authored. Only the other can render me full and whole; only the other can co-ordinate my inner and outer being from his position outside me. Together, we form an event in which we mutually affirm and preserve each other’s fleeting and ongoing I-for-myself consciousness, giving birth to each other’s body and soul on a new axiological plane of being.¹⁶⁸

Thus, in the aesthetic approach to the world (the approach, we will recall, that recognizes I and the other as co-consciousnesses), writes Bakhtin, I come to understand that it is the other I consummate who is the hero of the world, not me. Whereas I have only a horizon, a fragmented body, and an ongoing conscious spirit, the other has an environment, a history, and a soul. It is the other, not me, who is a beautiful whole in this world, and who holds the shape in which meanings are deposited. Indeed,

it is about the other that all the stories have been composed, all the books have been written, all the tears have been shed; it is to him that all the monuments have been erected; it is only with others that all the cemeteries are filled; it is only others who are known, remembered, and recreated by productive memory It is only in the world of others that an aesthetic, plot-bearing, intrinsically valuable movement is possible¹⁶⁹

As an author, my aesthetic interest is invested in actively sculpting the spatial and temporal whole of the hero from my unique position outside him. My task, then, is to produce a character as the “form of the author-hero interrelationship” that actualizes “the whole of a hero as a determinate personality”¹⁷⁰ through boundary-making activity. I must use, that is, “all the privileges of [my] all-round position outside the hero” (i.e., my excess of seeing, my transgression, my sympathetic co-experiencing) to translate the activity of the hero into the “aesthetic language”¹⁷¹ of a whole body and soul—of a meaningful, subjectively unique, independent, lived life—that stands over against me as a distinct consciousness. My struggle to do so is the essence of aesthetics for Bakhtin: the activity of consummation and boundary-making is a visual and emotional-volitional reaction to the other which produces something new, meaningful, and valuable in life and in art.

At this point I will provide a brief summary of this activity before turning to an examination of the form this authorial reaction takes in the work of David Cronenberg and the larger significance of Bakhtin’s philosophy of authoring to Cronenberg studies for feminism.

The author and hero in aesthetic activity

In life, Bakhtin explains, because of the heterogeneous and ongoing once-occurrent character of Being, what I react to aesthetically is the “isolated self-manifestations of a human being and not to the whole that he is, not to all of him.”¹⁷² In life, the multitude of “I”s live from moment to moment, “scattered” in our relationship to each other, unfinalized, “interested not in the whole of a human being, but only in those particular actions on his part with which we are compelled to deal in living our life and which are, in one way or another, of special interest to us.”¹⁷³ In life, the other as a “whole” person always eludes me, just as the whole of my own personality eludes me. But in art, because of the abstract and fixed character of cultural re-presentations of life, I can react more comprehensively “to the whole of the hero” and am able to give her the kind of determinate structure I cannot ultimately give the other in real life.¹⁷⁴

The aesthetic activity of creating this stable image of a whole hero, however, is no easy task. Such an image can only be produced through the author’s struggle with herself, since, as we have seen in the philosophy of the act, an object/other can only gain determinateness in its relation to a reactive “I.”

What Bakhtin’s aesthetics does, then, is to rethink authorial creation as an act, not of expressing my isolated autonomous self, but of experiencing my reactive relation to the other/object/hero. Authoring in this sense is an “active form-giving energy” that lives in the “I and the other” fact of human relationship, not in the author’s psyche.¹⁷⁵ An

author is manifested not in an isolated personal consciousness, but in the very structure of the cultural product generated by her reaction to an other: “in the structure of the active vision of a hero as a definite whole, in the structure of his image, in the rhythm of disclosing him, in the structure of intoning, and in the selection of meaning-bearing features.”¹⁷⁶ It is the author’s way of seeing the hero—the author’s emotional-volitional attitude to the hero—that actively structures and gives the hero form. Thus, Bakhtin understands the author and hero to be constituent parts of the work as an artistic whole. But this is not to say that the author is the hero—that the hero is always a mere biographical manifestation of the author’s life, or a representation of the author’s unconscious; this cannot be because the whole author and the whole hero belong to different planes or worlds: one to life, the other to art. Rather, the author is constituted on the boundary, in both realms: 1) in the work of art as author-creator, and 2) in life as author-person. The author-as-person is in life—is in the once-occurrent event of Being—and so is outside the whole of the work of art, while the author-as-creator is inside the work as part of its structure, giving birth to, and identifying and empathizing with, the hero. Thus, the creational structure of a work is a philosophical question of the fundamental principle of the philosophy of the act: the correlation and contraposition of I and the other. From the point of view of life, outside the work of art, the hero is contraposed to the author since they exist in different worlds. But from the point of view of art, inside the work, the hero is correlated to the author since they exist in the same world as the

author gives birth to the hero out of his consciousness: author and hero are “correlative moments in the artistic whole of a work.”¹⁷⁷

Now, what the artist must do is unite, make answerable, her position in life (outside the work) and her position in art (inside the work) through her capacity for transgression: She must identify with and “live a part”¹⁷⁸ of the hero from within him, while bearing and sustaining both the hero as a consummated whole and the work as a consummated whole from outside them. The hero’s wholeness cannot be given to him from a position of identification inside him, for then the author would “be” the hero and this is impossible, for as we have seen, they exist in two different worlds, and, moreover, all active and alive “I”s are once-occurrent; rather, through the author’s outsidedness, the hero’s wholeness

is bestowed upon him as a gift—from another active consciousness: from the creative consciousness of an author. The author’s consciousness is the consciousness of a consciousness, that is, a consciousness that encompasses the consciousness and the world of a hero—a consciousness that encompasses and consummates the consciousness of a hero by supplying those moments which are in principle transgredient to the hero’s consciousness and which, if rendered immanent, would falsify this consciousness.¹⁷⁹

For Bakhtin, it is transgression which enables the author-as-creator to actively, aesthetically, empathize with the hero (empathize, we will recall from the philosophy of the act, in a way that is not pure coinciding but that empathizes and objectifies) without becoming possessed by the hero, while

it also enables the author-as-person to see in excess of the hero and the hero's world from her position in Being, outside the world of art.¹⁸⁰

In this way, the author performs an “aesthetically productive relationship”¹⁸¹ to the hero involving three key moments: 1) the author gives the hero life by empathetically collecting and concentrating the hero from within the open event of her being; 2) the author gives the hero form by supplying the hero the context he himself cannot see (i.e., his “full outward image,” his “exterior,” the “background” behind him, his death); and 3) the author gives the hero a justified existence regardless of the hero's goodness or badness, success or lack of success in his historical life-trajectory.¹⁸² In other words, through her consummating consciousness, the author centres the hero, gives boundaries to the hero, and shapes the hero in relation to his contextual whole. Thus, Bakhtin writes, “[t]he hero's consciousness, his feeling, and his desire of the world . . . are enclosed on all sides, as if within a band, by the author's consummating consciousness of the hero and his world; the hero's self-utterances are encompassed and permeated by the utterances of the author about the hero.” The hero's cognitive and ethical interestedness in his own lived life as an event, Bakhtin continues, “is encompassed by the author's artistic interestedness in the hero and his life.”¹⁸³ If the author achieves this level of transgression, then the hero is born as a “new human being on a new plane of existence”¹⁸⁴—born and sustained in art by the ethical and aesthetic actions of the author-as-creator in art and the author-as-person in life.

However, achieving this high level of transgression is very difficult. Bakhtin describes it as no less than the author's struggle for life: "This relationship of the author to the hero . . . is a deeply vital and dynamic relationship: the author's position of being situated outside the hero is gained by conquest, and the struggle for it is often a struggle for life"¹⁸⁵ — her own and her hero's. On this point it is well to return to Clark and Holquist's observations on Toward a Philosophy of the Act where they see Bakhtin's thought as "a philosophy of creation, a meditation on the mysteries inherent in God's making people and people's making selves, with people creating other people in literary authorship as a paradigm for thinking at all levels of creation."¹⁸⁶ Indeed, our difficult birth into conscious life through others elaborated in his early work continued to occupy Bakhtin's thought throughout his life. "Just as the body is formed initially in the mother's womb," he writes in the early 1970s, "a person's consciousness awakens wrapped in another's consciousness,"¹⁸⁷ as does a hero's wrapped in an author's. And what the author must navigate in art are the dangerous distortions and doublings that can occur when one is called upon to be not only empathetically inside the other/hero but also bodily outside, beside and against him in order to consummate him. The difference in life is that, while similar distortions and doublings may occur as I "enter into the other" in the act of empathizing, "I" am never actually physically "inside" and born out of the other's consciousness the way the hero is abstractly physically "inside" and born out of the author's consciousness—except, of course, during gestation and up to the moment of birth. The difference between life and art seems

to hinge on the question of abstraction and ideal forms. A woman in childbirth gives an “I” to a new and separate human being; a self gives form to an other who already exists; while an author gives an “I” to abstract, fictional, idealized human beings, whether babies, children, or adults.

In attempting to gain this necessary position of transgression outside the hero, what the author is doing is assuming a position in relation to and toward the hero, just as “I” assume a position in relation to and toward the other in real life. In order to do this, two moments are involved: identification and objectification. The author-as-person—as once-occurrent “I”—must abstract herself, must experience herself as creator from the plane of the other. In order to create and consummate the other, “[she] must become another in relation to herself, must look at [her]self through the eyes of another.”¹⁸⁸ As Bakhtin explains it, this exercise is nothing extraordinary. We abstract or separate from ourselves like this constantly in daily life, looking for reflections of ourselves from the plane of other people’s consciousnesses, looking for ourselves in the eyes of others, trying to grasp what is transgredient to our own consciousness.¹⁸⁹ Moreover, given the once-occurrent ongoing nature of the event of my Being, these moments of myself that I recognize through others are ordinarily not consolidated—do not ordinarily gain self-sufficiency and permanent presence—in my consciousness. This is because “[a]fter looking at ourselves through the eyes of another, we always return—in life—into ourselves again, and the final, or, as it were, recapitulative event takes place within ourselves in the categories of our

own life.”¹⁹⁰ The last word always belongs to my own consciousness from the point of view of Being. When I fail to remain answerable in the ongoing event of my own consciousness—when I fail to return constantly into myself—when I capitulate completely to the point of view of the other, the reflections of the other can solidify, acting as blocks to the ongoing event of my Being, as “‘dead points,’ as obstructions of any accomplishment, and at times they may condense to the point where they deliver up to us a double of ourselves.”¹⁹¹

The same risks are borne in the world of art if the author’s return to the self fails to occur. In order for the author-as-person to effect her “aesthetic self-objectification into a hero,”¹⁹² the author-as-creator must separate from herself as person—seeing in herself an other (the whole of the hero)—finding a point of support outside the hero’s consciousness, and providing the hero with a background transredient to his consciousness. “If the author loses this valuational point of support outside the hero,” Bakhtin suggests, there are several possible scenarios in terms of the degree and quality of transgreience achieved: 1) “[T]he hero takes possession of the author,” such that the author can only experience from a position of identification within the hero’s life. 2) “[T]he author takes possession of the hero,” such that the author can only experience from a position of objectification outside the hero, expressing himself more than his consummative relation to the hero as other. For Bakhtin, this describes the situation of the hero in romanticism: “the Romantic is afraid to give himself away in his own hero and leaves some inner loophole in the hero through which he could slip away and rise above his own

consummatedness.” This scenario will become key to the analysis of Cronenberg, his relationship to his heroes, and the theme of the double that pervades his work in the pages ahead. 3) “[T]he hero himself is his own author,” such that the author abandons the hero to himself, who then merely plays a role and is left to aesthetically interpret his own life—ironically or satirically.¹⁹³

In art as in life, then, it is transgression which enables consummation of the fundamental existential principle of I and the other as two non-coinciding co-consciousnesses:

If there is only one unitary and unique participant, there can be no aesthetic event. An absolute consciousness, a consciousness that has nothing transgressive to itself, nothing situated outside itself and capable of delimiting it from outside—such a consciousness cannot be “aestheticized”; one can commune in it, but it cannot be seen as a whole that is capable of being consummated. An aesthetic event can take place only when there are two participants present; it presupposes two non-coinciding consciousnesses.¹⁹⁴

Without transgression, there is simply no properly aesthetic activity.

David Cronenberg as an author in aesthetic activity

Understood as an auteur, David Cronenberg is nothing if not an “absolute consciousness”—a “unitary and unique participant” in the artistic cinematic expression of themes he consciously believes are important or are otherwise located in his mysterious personal unconscious. Understood as an author according to post-structuralism, David Cronenberg comes

dangerously close to being nothing at all—a theoretical entity whose activity in producing art is lost to abstraction. But understood as an author according to Bakhtin, David Cronenberg is nothing unless he is situated individually and socially—a non-coinciding co-consciousness in aesthetic activity with other consciousnesses. Looking at Cronenberg as an author in aesthetic activity through the early philosophy of Mikhail Bakhtin, then, we can indeed begin to rethink many of the assumptions of traditional Cronenberg studies with a feminist view to appreciating him as an author who is a unique creative gendered agent and at the same time an answerable social actor.

First, we have been able to give the lie to the romantic myth of Cronenberg as a transcendent creative genius who stands isolated from and outside his time, history and culture. That is, with Toward a Philosophy of the Act and Art and Answerability we find David Cronenberg in the once-occurrent event of Being, not as an abstracted romantic genius standing apart from ourselves and our culture but rather as any other human being, straddling Being and content/sense, actively participating at one and the same time in his unique and once-occurrent life and in culture. Life and culture are not impervious but are joined in Cronenberg's aesthetic activity as a filmmaker, making him answerable to both worlds—the world of individual once-occurrent Being, and the world of others.

What this concept of answerability does is that it prevents Cronenberg from being objectified and abstracted from culture (the genius standing alone) while it determines the moral and social accountability of his self-activity as an author—his creative art. Thus, his claim that what he

does when he creates is to “clear his head of all the intellectual and cerebral considerations of his times” becomes highly significant, telling, and problematic, as do his “OK, So what?” attitude in regard to feminists who critique his artistic treatment of women and others as devaluing, and his disingenuous if not blindly self-serving retort that to “censor” his art would “devalue” himself as a filmmaker. Answerability, that is, gives us a way as feminists to place Cronenberg as an author in cultural context even as he struggles to convince us that, as an artist, he is beyond cultural influence and social responsibility.

At the same time, however, the concept of answerability does not negate Cronenberg’s creative consciousness as unique to him. Indeed, only Cronenberg can be Cronenberg—only Cronenberg can make a Cronenberg film, and we must appreciate this fact. But along with this fact goes a concomitant one for Bakhtin: the fact that Cronenberg has no alibi in being. Since he and only he fills up his unique place in Being, he is inescapably answerable in word and deed for the aesthetic activity he performs as an author and its emotional-volitional tone. Only he can actualize his unique place through his ought in relation to the other: his I-for-myself gains value and meaning only in the context of the I and the other design of Being—only in the context of I-for-the-other and the other-for-me. That is, in the authoritative act of creating his art, Cronenberg cannot claim to be anywhere else but in the event of the answerable act toward others. However, what has been traditionally claimed in Cronenberg studies and by Cronenberg himself is that he, in fact, is elsewhere: to be David Cronenberg as auteur is to be legitimately

indifferent, passive, inaccessible, unanswerable—to be withdrawn into his isolated personal unconscious, his psyche, his instinct. Moreover, Cronenberg, as the atomistic psychological subject, is believed to express this isolated romantic self, such that his heroes and the whole films themselves then come to be understood as representations of his mysterious unconscious, and he himself seems to become the hero of his own work.¹⁹⁵

In contrast, as we have seen, to be David Cronenberg as an author for Bakhtin is to act personally¹⁹⁶—to be unindifferent toward the whole of Being/life/self and culture/sense/other; to affirm the human being, others, and humanity and to acknowledge the existence of others as necessary to himself and valuable; to participate with and react to others as only he can from his unique position of outsidedness by giving the gift of form in body and soul; to answer for the consequences of his actions in life and art. Moreover, what Cronenberg does in life and art is not to express himself as an author but to experience his answerable relation to his heroes as others. Indeed, the hero in life and in art is not to be found in the category of the ongoing authorial “I” but in the category of the other as a relative whole. Aesthetic value cannot possibly come out of the cold, indifferent chaos of Cronenberg’s ongoing once-occurrent consciousness—his I-for-myself; rather, it can only be created out of the relation of himself to others—out of the fundamental principle of I and the other which grounds human life as a social field of non-coinciding but interactive co-consciousnesses. With Bakhtin, then, we can begin to look at Cronenberg with new eyes through a philosophical understanding of authoring as active, form-giving energy that lies in the “I and the other”

fact of human relationship, not in the solipsistic expression of the author's closed and abstract psyche.

This grounding will enable us, in the second place, to rethink the Freudian psychoanalytic myth of Cronenberg's atomistic psyche and its mysterious personal unconscious as the self-generative source of his life and art. Indeed, Bakhtin's early philosophical thinking on authoring as framing the fundamental social problem of the relationship of the self to the other, and as consummative activity involving the bodily boundaries of selves itself emerged out of a dialogue with Freudianism that offered an extended critique of the latter on several counts: its belief in the abstract instinctual biological organism and in the monistic and romantic separate individual; its skepticism toward consciousness; and its refusal to engage pragmatically with the real effects of the social environment on the self as an embodied consciousness. In this dialogue, the psyche, the self, and consciousness are reconfigured by Bakhtin as sociological problems rather than properties of the atomistic individual. Starting from a philosophical and sociological position that assumes the intersubjectivity of non-coinciding co-consciousnesses, Bakhtin encourages an understanding of the psyche, not as a mysterious place outside culture and history and hived off in the depths of the individual organism, but as a borderline phenomenon along the boundaries of the body that separates two worlds: the inner organism and the outside world/social environment/other. The conscious self (the I-for-myself), as we have seen, has no value unless it is embodied, given the gift of form by others. Indeed, consciousness, as we will see, cannot possibly be derived from nature or unconscious instinctual drives;

rather, it comes with language—with the material of signs—and is an abstract fiction outside objectification and embodiment in the material of words, gestures, etc. toward others. Thus, the self is not sui generis or given as a whole unto itself but is located in space, time, and value through relationships to other selves, co-consciousnesses. The embodied self is authored by the ethical and aesthetic boundary-making activity of the other. By following this historical dialogue of Bakhtin with Freud, we will come to understand the centrality of the body, consciousness, language, and others to authoring in the case of David Cronenberg. I will then be able to show how, as an author, Cronenberg is manifested not in a mysterious personal unconscious but in the actual cultural products he produces and in the way they hold the structure of his aesthetic activity—his emotional-volitional relation to his heroes as embodied others.

Once we have established and understood Cronenberg in terms of Bakhtin's concept of authoring based in a foundational existential intersubjectivity, we can begin, in the third place, to discuss the essential uniqueness of Cronenberg as a gendered author who is answerable and responsible for the form and content of his art. Here, feminist analyses of masculinity and masculine subjectivity will enter into dialogue with Bakhtin's insights. For example: if, as Bakhtin suggests, to be artistically and aesthetically interested is to see the other, not the self, as the hero—is to be interested in consummating, in giving inner and outer form to another life—then how, I am compelled to ask, does Cronenberg's orientation to gender values come to bear on the way his artistic interest or authorial activity manifests itself? Given the feminist work that has been

done in revealing the anxiety that many heterosexual men in our culture experience in acknowledging the existence of others and in being toward others while struggling to maintain the rigidity of body boundaries and the kinds of emotional distance required by phallic norms of behavior and identity, I will argue that Cronenberg's masculinity clearly affects and influences the aesthetic activity—the way he structures the consummation of his heroes as others—in his art. Cronenberg's films are aesthetic representations of masculine issues—of the difficulties phallic heterosexual men can have in acknowledging the existence of others as animated, conscious human beings, in engaging in the aesthetic and ethical activity of consummation, in giving the gift of form to make others relatively whole. Posing as narcissistic full presence, phallic masculinity is terrified of being dissipated in the manifoldness of Being, often becoming either indifferent to the existence of other consciousnesses and profoundly withdrawn, or hostile to them and hysterically driven to violently overcome them. For many of these men, the capacity for sympathetic co-experiencing and its requirement that one be able to look at oneself through the eyes of another in order to empathize at the same time as one retains one's outsidedness becomes overwhelming, a source of doubling, madness and horror. In the case of Cronenberg, the horror genre, and the fantastic, become the forms in which the romantic author expresses, not himself, not his profound and mysterious unconscious, but his emotional-volitional attitude to his heroes—his masculine terror at intersubjective reality and the boundary-making activity it requires toward others.

This will lead us to the fourth step, situating Cronenberg and his heroes in terms of, rather than set against, concrete social others. As regards Cronenberg himself, his relationship to his heroes is one marked by a decided aversion to boundary-making activity. As we will see, rather than giving his heroes the gift of form and making them relatively whole others, he seems to take possession of them, treating them like his “little lab experiments,”¹⁹⁷ whom he lets slip away to rise above their own consummatedness. Indeed, Cronenberg’s male heroes all seem to be left in the cold chaos of I-for-myself, without boundaries themselves or the capacity to give them, failing to achieve even minimal transgression, doubling, and, ultimately, suicidal.

Finally, in the fifth place, we can clarify the broader social and political significance of Cronenberg’s work for feminism. Indeed, in Cronenberg, heterosexual masculinity seems to experience intersubjectivity and boundary-making activity, not as the invaluable potential to recognize the other as one’s co-consciousness in being, but as the ugliness and horror of extreme non-recognition. As such, Cronenberg and his work does not stand magically outside social, political, and historical reality but are better understood as symptomatic of it.

Notes

¹ Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, Mikhail Bakhtin (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Belknap, 1984), 80.

² Ibid., 94.

³ Ibid., 70.

⁴ Ibid., 65.

⁵ Ibid., 88.

⁶ M.M. Bakhtin, Toward a Philosophy of the Act, trans. Vadim Liapunov, ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 1. According to Toward a Philosophy of the Act, authoring is not primarily or only about the abstract world it produces in the objects it creates; rather, it is about the answerable act or deed it performs in the world it inhabits as an event in that world: “Hence,” Bakhtin writes,

it should be clear that a first philosophy, which attempts to describe Being-as-event as it is known to the answerable act or deed, attempts to describe not the world produced by that act, but the world in which that act becomes answerably aware of itself and is actually performed--that a first philosophy of such a kind cannot proceed by constructing universal concepts, propositions, and laws about this world of the answerably performed act (the theoretical, abstract purity of the act), but can only be a description, a phenomenology of that world. An event can be described only participatively” (Toward 31-2).

Thus, the philosophy of the act is not an abstract theory of the events of the world but a phenomenal description of that world which itself participates in that world as an event.

⁷ Ibid., 1.

⁸ Ibid., 1.

⁹ Ibid., 1-2.

¹⁰ Ibid., 54.

¹¹ Ibid., 7.

¹² Ibid., 55-56.

¹³ Ibid., 2.

¹⁴ In his late work, Bakhtin is still very much absorbed in the boundary or, as he calls it, the “border zone,” as the place of ultimate creativity—the place of “benevolent demarcation” and cooperation where something new and original and vital takes place. See M.M. Bakhtin, “From Notes Made in 1970-71” in Speech Genres & Other Late Essays, trans. Vern W. McGee, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 136-137.

¹⁵ Bakhtin, Toward, 2-3.

¹⁶ Ibid., 3.

¹⁷ Architectonics, understood as the interrelated structuring of events in the world, is a crucial concept in Bakhtin’s philosophy of the act. In Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), Michael Holquist explains the relation between architectonics and aesthetic activity:

Aesthetics, a major topic of Bakhtin's early essays, is treated as a subset of architectonics: architectonics is the general study of how entities relate to each other, whereas aesthetics concerns itself with the particular problem of consummation, or how specific parts are shaped into particular wholes. In dialogism wholeness, or consummation, is always to be understood as a relative term: in Bakhtin, consummation is almost literally in the eye of the beholder in so far as it is always a function of a particular point of view" (150).

Consummated wholes, then, are always relative: they are made up of parts, produced by acts executed from particular points of view in the ongoing once-occurrent event of Being; they are never absolute.

18 Bakhtin, Toward, 3.

19 Ibid., 6.

20 Ibid., 9.

21 Ibid., 12.

22 Ibid., 7.

23 Ibid., 12.

24 Ibid., 17.

25 Ibid., 14.

26 See Greg Nielsen, "Bakhtin and Habermas: Toward a Transcultural Ethics," Theory and Society 24: 6 (December 1995): 812.

27 Bakhtin, Toward, 15.

28 Ibid., 14.

- 29 Ibid., 14-15.
- 30 Nielsen, "Bakhtin and Habermas," 812, 832. See also M.M. Bakhtin, Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M.M. Bakhtin, trans. Vadim Liapunov, ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 233.
- 31 Bakhtin, Toward, 15.
- 32 Ibid., 17.
- 33 Ibid., 18.
- 34 Ibid., 18.
- 35 Ibid., 23.
- 36 Ibid., 24.
- 37 Ibid., 28.
- 38 Ibid., 28.
- 39 Ibid., 31.
- 40 Ibid., 32.
- 41 Ibid., 33.
- 42 Ibid., 34.
- 43 Ibid., 35.
- 44 Ibid., 40.
- 45 Ibid., 38.
- 46 Ibid., 40.
- 47 Ibid., 40.
- 48 Ibid., xiii.
- 49 Ibid., 40.

- 50 Ibid., 41.
- 51 Ibid., 42.
- 52 Ibid., 42.
- 53 Ibid., 42.
- 54 Ibid., 74.
- 55 Ibid., 47.
- 56 Ibid. 48.
- 57 Ibid. 49.
- 58 Ibid., 54.
- 59 Ibid.. 54.
- 60 Ibid., 57-58.
- 61 Ibid., 60.
- 62 Ibid.. 61.
- 63 Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics (California: Stanford University Press, 1990), 180.
- 64 Bakhtin, Toward, 61.
- 65 Ibid., 61-62.
- 66 Ibid., 63-64.
- 67 What Bakhtin is getting at here is the notion, in theology, that it is the sin that is bad, not the sinner. It is the principle behind the Catholic confessional as well, and it can also be seen as the ethics of many forms of therapy. An interesting book to read with these ideas in mind is Mikal Gilmore's Shot in the Heart (New York: Doubleday, 1994). It is an autobiographical account of the family life—the life context—of Mikal and

his brother Gary Gilmore, who was executed for murder in Utah in 1978 after refusing his right to appeal his death sentence. It is, in my opinion, a very moving performance of aesthetic seeing and sympathetic co-experiencing from a position of transgression as Mikal attempts, not to make excuses for his brother's violence, but to explain it in terms of the very brutal and destructive environment in which Gary was raised.

68 Bakhtin, Toward, 64.

69 Ibid., 64, 65.

70 Holquist, Dialogism, 32-3.

71 Bakhtin, Toward, 73.

72 Ibid., 73.

73 Holquist, Dialogism, 34.

74 Bakhtin, Toward, 73.

75 Ibid., 74.

76 Ibid., 2.

77 Bakhtin, Art and Answerability, 1.

78 Ibid., 2.

79 Ibid., 187.

80 Michael Holquist, introduction to Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M.M. Bakhtin, by M.M. Bakhtin, trans. Vadim Liapunov, ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), xxx.

81 Ibid., xxiv.

82 Nielsen, "Bakhtin and Habermas," 834.

- 83 Holquist, introduction to Art and Answerability, x.
- 84 Ibid., 236.
- 85 Bakhtin, Art and Answerability, 23.
- 86 Ibid., 23.
- 87 Ibid., 23.
- 88 Holquist, introduction to Art and Answerability, xxii.
- 89 Ibid., xxviii.
- 90 Bakhtin, Art and Answerability, 23-4.
- 91 Ibid., 24.
- 92 Ibid., 25.
- 93 Ibid., 26.
- 94 Ibid., 26.
- 95 Ibid., 26-27.
- 96 Ibid., 27.
- 97 Ibid., 28.
- 98 Ibid., 30.
- 99 Ibid., 30.
- 100 Ibid., 35.
- 101 Ibid., 31.
- 102 Ibid., 31.
- 103 Ibid., 35-36.
- 104 Ibid., 31.
- 105 Ibid., 36.
- 106 Ibid., 37.

107 Ibid., 37.
108 Ibid., 37-38.
109 Ibid., 38.
110 Ibid., 39.
111 Ibid., 40.
112 Ibid., 41.
113 Ibid., 42.
114 Ibid., 51.
115 Ibid., 47.
116 Ibid., 47.
117 Ibid., 48.
118 Ibid., 48, 49.
119 Ibid., 50.
120 Ibid., 51.
121 Ibid., 51.
122 Ibid., 59.
123 Ibid., 59.
124 Ibid., 59.
125 Ibid., 59-60.
126 Ibid., 60.
127 Ibid., 60.
128 Ibid., 92.
129 Ibid., 63.
130 Ibid., 64.

- 131 Ibid., 66.
- 132 Ibid., 66.
- 133 Ibid., 66-67.
- 134 Ibid., 67.
- 135 Ibid., 68.
- 136 Ibid., 79.
- 137 Ibid., 80.
- 138 Ibid., 82.
- 139 Ibid., 82-83.
- 140 Ibid., 83.
- 141 Ibid., 84.
- 142 Ibid., 85.
- 143 Ibid., 86-87.
- 144 Ibid., 88.
- 145 Ibid., 87.
- 146 Ibid., 89.
- 147 Ibid., 91.
- 148 Ibid., 90.
- 149 Ibid., 90-91.
- 150 Ibid., 91.
- 151 Ibid., 99.
- 152 Ibid., 99.
- 153 Ibid., 99-100.
- 154 Ibid., 100.

- 155 Ibid., 101.
156 Ibid., 102.
157 Ibid., 101.
158 Ibid., 104.
159 Ibid., 104, 105.
160 Ibid., 127.
161 Ibid., 109-110.
162 Ibid., 117.
163 Ibid., 120.
164 Ibid., 134.
165 Ibid., 134.
166 Ibid., 106.
167 Ibid., 127.
168 Ibid., 128-129.
169 Ibid., 111-112.
170 Ibid., 174.
171 Ibid., 174.
172 Ibid., 4.
173 Ibid., 4, 5.
174 Ibid., 5.
175 Ibid., 8.
176 Ibid., 8.
177 Ibid., 12.
178 Ibid., 12, 234.

- 179 Ibid. 12.
- 180 Ibid., 12.
- 181 Ibid., 14.
- 182 Ibid., 14.
- 183 Ibid., 13.
- 184 Ibid., 14.
- 185 Ibid., 15.
- 186 Clark and Holquist, Mikhail Bakhtin, 80.
- 187 Bakhtin, "From Notes Made in 1970-71." 138.
- 188 Bakhtin, Art and Answerability 15.
- 189 Ibid., 16.
- 190 Ibid., 17.
- 191 Ibid., 16.
- 192 Ibid., 17.
- 193 Ibid., 17-22.
- 194 Ibid., 22.
- 195 This tends to happen, as we have seen, in William Beard as auteur critic as well as in feminist work that ends up turning the questionable images in Cronenberg's work into a discourse of valorization of Cronenberg himself.

196 In Toward a Philosophy of the Act Bakhtin writes:

I participate in the event personally, and every object or person with which I have to do in my once-occurrent life participates personally.

I can perform a political act or a religious ritual in the capacity of a

representative, but that already constitutes a specialized action, which presupposes the fact of my having been actually empowered to perform it. But even here I do not definitively abdicate my answerability in person; on the contrary, my representative and empowered status in itself takes into account my personal answerability. The tacit presupposition of life's ritualism is not humility but pride. One has to develop humility to the point of participating in person and being answerable in person" (52).

¹⁹⁷ See David Breskin, "David Cronenberg: The Rolling Stone Interview," Rolling Stone 623 (February 1992), 70. And see Holquist, Dialogism, 34.

Chapter 3

Intersubjectivity: The Self as a Boundary Phenomenon

In the preceding chapter I have presented Bakhtin's philosophically-based alternative to the first of the two modernist myths informing traditional interpretations of David Cronenberg and his work, which I have suggested are in need of radical rethinking from a critical feminist perspective: the romantic myth of the author as isolated transcendent genius who stands outside his time, culture, and history. Through Bakhtin and his master architectonic principle of the correlation and contraposition of I and the other, I have reconfigured authoring as consummating self-activity performed in relation to others, contradicting claims about authoring as Cronenberg's romantic self-expression. In this chapter, I will turn to the second of these myths, that of the atomistic male psyche and its mysterious personal unconscious as the self-generative source of life and art. Here I will present the Bakhtin circle's critical alternative to the Freudian self, or subject: the dialogic self, or intersubjectivity—an alternative that began to be outlined in V.N. Volosinov's Freudianism: A Critical Sketch.¹

Underlying Volosinov's critique of Freudianism, however, is a clear debt to Bakhtin's philosophy and the architectonic groundwork he laid down in Toward a Philosophy of the Act and Art and Answerability. As Clark and Holquist observe, "Bakhtin's old argument for socializing epistemology in the master distinction between self and other is integrated into the Freud book with almost no modification."² Conceived by the

Bakhtin circle as individual but never isolated, the psyche is shot through with social and linguistic value. Working pragmatically once again with Bakhtin's grounding ethical and aesthetic principle of I and the other in critiquing Freudianism as we did in critiquing romanticism, we will come to understand the psyche, the body, the self, and consciousness as problems that are fundamentally intersubjective and intimately connected to language as the material shared by co-consciousnesses, rather than as isolated properties of the abstracted and atomistic individual whose utterances well up spontaneously from within his psychic depths.

“Even the most intimate self-awareness,” writes Volosinov, is not primarily sovereign and self-generated; rather, it is an attempt to translate oneself into the common code, to take stock of another's point of view, and, consequently, entails orientation toward a possible listener In this regard, consciousness, provided that we do not lose sight of its content, is not just a psychological phenomenon but also, and above all, an ideological phenomenon, a product of social intercourse.³

Thus, moving Cronenberg studies out of the romantic conception of authorship (which emphasizes self-expression) will also mean moving out of the Freudian conception of selfhood (which emphasizes the personal unconscious), and so moving toward a conception of the self as a co-being, or co-consciousness based in an intersubjective dialogic, and ideological, reality. In such a reality, Bakhtin understands existence to be grounded in otherness, structured in dialogue, and shaped by human consciousness as a constant exchange between the activities of the “I” and everything that is

not-I-in-me. Clark and Holquist suggest that in Bakhtin the distinction between self and other is “the primary opposition on which all other differences are based: the highest structural principle of the actual world of deeds is the concrete architectonic and epistemological opposition between I and the other.” Moreover, they continue, “[t]he self/other dichotomy in Bakhtin does not, as in Romantic philosophy, emphasize the self alone, a radical subjectivity always in danger of shading off into solipsistic extremes.” Neither is the self “a presence wherein is lodged the ultimate privilege of the real, the source of sovereign intention and guarantor of unified meaning.”⁴ The Bakhtinian self, as we will see, is, indeed, never whole; rather, it is best understood as a boundary phenomenon existing in an open, animated, dialogic “relation of simultaneity”⁵ to other selves and other consciousnesses.

As James Wertsch observes, the real insight and power of Volosinov’s argument with Freud about subjectivity as a “struggle for consciousness” is that it looks for the activity that “most fundamentally defines us as human” on the social, rather than the individual, plane. Unlike Freud, Volosinov “begins with a fundamentally social epistemology. Whereas other psychological theories of the time were reaching toward the social, Volosinov viewed social activity as the category from which all else flowed.”⁶ So, while Freudianism itself has been rightly criticized for its overly dogmatic Marxist polemicism,⁷ in Wertsch’s opinion it is nonetheless to be considered “an important step in the Bakhtin Circle’s attempt to explore the social and semiotic forces that underlie human consciousness,” going far beyond “most treatments today of the relationship

between the psychological and the social.”⁸ Shifting the basis of inquiry from a psychologistic analysis of individual human expression to a socio-semiotic analysis of collective human communication, Volosinov and the Bakhtin circle profoundly reconfigure the parameters of Freudian subjectivity, rethinking the significance of the body to subjectivity, the significance of consciousness to subjectivity, the significance of language to subjectivity, and the significance of others to subjectivity in ways that will prove invaluable to a feminist rethinking of gendered subjectivity in the work of David Cronenberg in the chapters ahead. It is to the details of this reconfiguration that I will now turn.

Subjectivity and the body

“What we call the ‘human psyche’ and ‘consciousness’ reflects the dialectics of history to a much greater degree than the dialectics of nature. The nature that is present in them is nature already in economic and social refraction.”—V.N. Volosinov⁹

From the point of view of the Bakhtin circle, Freudianism is fundamentally flawed in its biological determinism—in its vulgar attempt “to derive all cultural creativity from the biological roots of the human organism.”¹⁰ Focusing on the isolated individual as an organically unified physiological fact, Freud argues that one’s subjectivity is shaped primarily by one’s biological being—by sexual instinct.

Indeed, Freudian psychoanalytic theory rests on a conception of the self as a monadic and isolated ego that emerges out of the physiological

sensations, desires, and drives of the id. Others are initially significant only as objects that the infantile id uses instrumentally for instinctual self-preservation and self-gratification in its efforts to satisfy the pleasure principle and achieve a singular homeostasis. However, in the face of pressures and demands from the external world—in the face of the reality principle—the ego emerges, or, as Gerald Pirog puts it, is “forced out of” the id.”¹¹ As Freud conceives the self, then, it is an individual “psychical id, unknown and unconscious,”—a surface upon which the ego rests and from whose “nucleus, the Pcpt. system,” the ego develops.¹² Pirog elaborates:

Freud’s psychic topography of id, ego, and super-ego posits the id as primary or foundational and upon which the ego emerges as a developing surface phenomenon whose purpose is the regulation of id-impulses in relation to reality. For Freud, instincts exist per se as natural endopsychic forces which are primarily libidinal, and which reside in the reservoir of instinctual impulses, the id. Repression arises as a means of defense against libidinal incestuous and aggressive parenticidal impulses involved in the Oedipal situation, itself, for Freud, an ultimate cause. The agency of repression is the ego, which itself develops as the “otherness” of the id becomes established through repression. Thus the ego originates out of the id, it is its derivative.¹³

Mediating the frontier between the internal instinctual id and the external physical world, the ego is linked to perception through the senses—through the surface of the body. This means that the ego for Freud is “first and

foremost a bodily ego” that is “ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly from those springing from the surface of the body. It may thus be regarded as a mental projection of the surface of the body, besides . . . representing the superficialities of the mental apparatus.”¹⁴

“Thus,” writes Pirog, “from the very earliest stages of a person’s development, from the individual’s primitive oral phase on through the phases determined by the other erotogenic body zones, this aspect of the ego serves as a means for the id to extend itself into the world.”¹⁵ The libidinal impulses of the id are satisfied through the body and its erogenous zones with the help of the ego and its cathexes onto available erotic objects in the world—initially the mother and later the father as primary and secondary care-givers, respectively. As the child develops and is called upon to repress and abandon these early erotic attachments (motivated by awareness of the father’s competition for the mother’s attention, or Oedipal rivalry) these objects undergo internalization. They are set up inside the ego, and object-cathexis comes to be replaced by identification. “It may be,” Freud suggests,

that this identification is the sole condition under which the id gives up its objects. At any rate the process, especially in the early phases of development, is a very frequent one, and it makes it possible to suppose that the character of the ego is a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes and that it contains the history of those object-choices. It must, of course, be admitted from the outset that there are varying degrees of capacity for resistance, which decide the

extent to which a person's character fends off or accepts the influences of the history of his erotic object-choices.¹⁶

Repression of forbidden erotic impulses, and same-sex identification with the father's desire for the mother in boys and with the mother's desire for the father in girls, becomes the basis on which subsequent normative heterosexual identifications and love relationships are built and the super-ego as moral censor or internalized patriarchal authority is formed. "In order to accomplish the repression of these forbidden desires, the infantile ego internalizes the obstacle to the id's gratification within itself: i.e., it borrows its father's strength, at the cost of giving the super-ego its father's character."¹⁷

Morality, then, and "all social and ideological reality," is a function of mastering first the Oedipus complex and then sibling rivalry—is a function of subordinating the incestuous and/or aggressive libidinal impulses of the id to the standards imposed by the super-ego on the guilty ego. In Freud, as Pirog suggests,

[s]ocialization is directly linked to repression and the economics of masochism. The formation of the individual ego through identification is determined by the autonomous, self-enclosed play of primitive, impersonal and altogether natural forces that remain operative and fundamental throughout a person's life, structuring social experience which remains only at the outer layer of the ego where it mediates between the id and the world.¹⁸

The goal of psychoanalysis as a practice designed to alleviate the hysterical/neurotic symptoms of repression and masochism on the egoic body is

therapeutic abreaction of these early sexual fantasies and rivalries, leading in Freud's estimation to a reasoned but always tentative management of the dark, irrational forces of the id, or instinctual unconscious, by rational consciousness.

For the Bakhtin circle, Freud's psychoanalytic theory of egoic subjectivity based in the play of unconscious instinctual forces within the autonomous individual represents a crude and problematic overestimation of the biological aspects of life at the expense of its historical and social aspects. For example, the isolated biological organism, and the three basic life-events that befall it as an animal—namely, birth, sex, and death—“begin to compete with historical events in terms of ideological significance and, as it were, become a surrogate of history.”¹⁹ Thus, with Freudianism, Volosinov complains, we can't see the forest for the trees. Focused on the seemingly private history of the singular organism—focused subjectively—we lose sight of how that individual—objectively—can only really exist in the context of the historical flow of all people in the human chain of birth, sex, and death.

Moreover, this “dehistoricizing emphasis on sex,” this “insistence on the purely physical,” write Clark and Holquist, have the further effect of “dematerializing the living physical body into abstractions.”²⁰ As Volosinov puts it, nowhere do Freud and his followers deal “directly with the material composition and material processes of the bodily organism; they look only for somatic reflections in the psyche, that is, in the final analysis, they also subordinate everything organic to the methods of introspection—they psychologize the organic.”²¹ The actual physical body

becomes completely dissociated from its material environment such that erogenous zones in the psyche are seen as responsible for a person's entire characterological and behavioral formation (i.e., the anal fixations of the anal-retentive character type). Thus, this formation is seen as entirely confined within the subjective psyche, as if it were an isolated entity.²²

In these ways Freud becomes, for the Bakhtin circle, part of the symptomatic overemphasis on supreme individuality characteristic of modernist ideology generally, with its "sui generis fear of history," its "ambition to locate a world beyond the social and the historical," and its "search for this world precisely in the depths of the organic."²³ What Volosinov suggests is that modernity's biological individual does not really exist. It is a faulty abstraction. The only way a human person can become real and productive is in and through her culture and history, and the entry into history is not achieved by merely being born physically: animals are born physically, but they do not enter history. "What is needed," he claims, is

a second birth, a social birth. A human being is not born as an abstract biological organism but as a landowner or a peasant, as a bourgeois or a proletarian, and so on—that is the main thing. Furthermore, he is born a Russian or a Frenchman, and he is born in 1800 or 1900, and so on. Only this social and historical localization makes him a real human being and determines the content of his life and cultural creativity. All attempts to bypass this second, social, birth and to derive everything from the biological premises of the organism's existence are vain and doomed beforehand to fail. Not a

single action taken by a whole person, not a single concrete ideological formation (a thought, an artistic image, even the content of dreams) can be explained and understood without reference to socioeconomic factors.²⁴

Clearly, Volosinov argues, the individual body needs this other body—the social body—in order to be born at all.

Hence the Bakhtin circle's participation in the attempt to replace Freud's physicalist instinctual model of the self and its focus on abstract inner bodily drives by Bakhtin's existentialist phenomenological model of the self and its pragmatic focus on our actual experience of the body as it is placed in the social world, among other bodies. Based in the philosophical principle of the fundamental difference between I and the other, there is, according to Bakhtin, a corresponding fundamental difference in the experience of the body. As we have seen, where the fragmented inner body is an experience of the I, the whole outer body is an experience of the other: The value of the inner body (as an ongoing "moment in self-consciousness"; as the "sum total of inner organic sensations, needs and desires"; as the cold and cruel I-for-myself) is in marked contrast to the value of the outer body (as a whole that I cannot react to in an unmediated way; as the gift of outer form that can only be bestowed on me by the other and on the other by me). There is, as Pirog puts it, a "non-correspondence" for Bakhtin between the deepest private self (I-for-myself) and the public self (I-for-the-other; the other-for-me) which deeply implicates the body, such that I require the other's excess of seeing of the outward boundaries of my body to stitch my inner and outer body

together into my “self” as a relative whole. For Pirog, “It is important to always keep in mind the centrality for Bakhtin of the individual’s physical placement in the world which determines this constant slippage between the experience of her inner and outer selves.” Since I have no approach to myself from outside myself, I am “forced to grope toward the mediation of the other” in order to constitute myself, body and soul.²⁵

Holquist agrees that selfhood for Bakhtin is profoundly a question of physical placement in the world—of “particularity,” “situatedness,” and “location” relative to other similarly bodied selves.²⁶ A human subject is located by vision and voice. Through the physiology of seeing and speaking I take up a unique visual and vocal point of view relative to your physiological powers of vision and voice, inhabiting a distinct place in the world. Thus, like Freud’s, Bakhtin’s concept of the self assumes that the human subject is a body before it is anything else. However, Bakhtin’s subject is not an abstract biological force but an actual living physical body which conforms to two fundamental laws discovered by contemporary physics that apply to all physical bodies: “The first is that two bodies cannot occupy the same space at the same time; the second is that the time/space of any specific body can only be known relative to a particular reference system appropriate to it.”²⁷ What these laws come together to suggest to Bakhtin is that while 1) I and only I can occupy my unique place in space and time as a living body (I am unique in the once-occurrent event of Being; I have no alibi in being), 2) I need an other body, a relative self, as a reference point to give that place meaning and value as an embodied consciousness. As we have seen, your self-activity co-ordinates my

consciousness with my living body; without the other's consummating, form-giving activity that makes me whole in space and time, I remain an inner body, unfinished, without access to my outer boundaries or beginning or end, lost in the, for me, infinitely ongoing experience of my inner self-sensation.

So, while each human being has a definite beginning and end as a body, it is not merely a body. It is a body that is conscious, and as Holquist observes, this raises a paradox:

others may see us born, and they may see us die; however, in my own consciousness "I" did not know the moment of my birth; and in my own consciousness "I" shall not know my death. Consciousness "for its own self, in terms of its own consciousness . . . can have neither a beginning nor an end." In thinking through this distinction (the difference between the mode of knowledge others have of my beginning and end, and the way I myself am forced to imagine such limits), the second physical law we mentioned above comes into effect: the necessity that says a particular body can be located only by invoking a reference system appropriate to its particular situation.²⁸

In Bakhtin, consciousness does not simply well up out of the instinctual body to form a kind of neat correspondence or merger with it in the individual ego; rather, the self as consciousness, and the self as body are always two distinctly different categories of experience which can only be co-ordinated by the other: consciousness, as a category of the ongoing once-occurrent I-for-myself, is chaotic, infinite, unfinished, while the body, as a category of the other, is given in space and consummated as whole

only by invoking the other, just as the soul is given in time and consummated as whole only by invoking the other. Bakhtin is arguing, says, Holquist, that since consciousness cannot perceive its beginning or end and so experiences itself as infinite, beginnings and endings lie in the category of the other, not the “I.”²⁹ To become a human subject—a “conscious body”—a self with a unique place, I need the other to locate me in space, time, and value as a relatively finalized whole.

So, where the Freudian body is about the inner drives, repression of impulses, masochism, and mistrust that manage to produce a guilty and tentatively socialized individual subject, the Bakhtinian body is about the consummative activity that mutually creates social subjects. As Pirog formulates the difference, the Freudian subject’s biological birth involving the animal’s libidinal instinct is replaced by the Bakhtinian subject’s social birth involving the human being’s “absolute aesthetic need for the other.” It is a need that goes beyond the physiological one for food and protection; because we are congenitally incomplete as human beings, we need others to give us our historical selves. For Bakhtin, he writes,

the self is formed as a response to our position in space and time: as individuals, we are physically unable to grasp the totality of our selves in the world. This physical limitation has profound consequences for the development of character. Because of it, we must rely on the other’s privileged position outside of us . . . to complement what it is that we can know about our own selves. We are, then, in a constant state of complementarity with others, who must also seek in us their own completed selves in space and time.³⁰

Rather than autonomous, self-contained, and largely self-motivated individual organisms who see others as mere instrumental objects, we are fundamentally incomplete individuals who are in relationships of basic need and love with others as consummative actors.

Recall how, for Bakhtin, the mother-child relationship is exemplary in this regard: how the mother's gestures of attention and recognition give plastic form and value to her child's inner body (its darkly stirring chaos of sensations and needs) by fashioning for it a beloved outer body, and how, by extension, the "other's response (responsibility) to the primal need for love in another sculpts (*izvajat'*) the latter's personhood by granting it value." Furthermore, continues Pirog, it is crucial to note that Bakhtin's philosophy is careful not to abstract this process from the physical body:

It is, in fact, through the (m)other's actual physical place outside of her child and her attribution of value to the child through his body that the as yet inchoate experience of his own developing personality—his "vnutrennee telo," how he perceives himself to be in the world—is given a designation, direction, satisfaction and a link to the outside world. Unlike Freud, Bakhtin views this situation as one of potential growth or self-realization, rather than of taboo, repression, and eventual repetition. Need here is not the immutable, regressive, impersonal force of libido which remains primitive and to whose demands the ego is always at risk of regressing. Need is conceived, rather, wholly in semiotic terms—the language, intonations and gestures of emotion—and it ties cognitive development to the development of character.³¹

The very structure of our being in the world causes reciprocal need and a relationship of responsibility to arise between us, as my own need for an other compels my response to their need.

According to Pirog, Bakhtin's replacement of Freudian instinct with need then has repercussions in terms of Freud's understanding of identification. Rather than simply identifying with and 'internalizing' the mother and others as instrumental objects in our journey to selfhood (which, for Bakhtin, is an impossible abstraction given the once-occurrent event of Being and our non-alibi in being, as well as the fact that as physiological actors we exist toward others and cannot possibly, magically, bring embodied others into ourselves), we learn to see ourselves in another and as another. "Identification," Pirog writes,

is a process in which the self reaches out to another and returns to itself enriched by what it has seen both of itself and of the other, and enriching, in return, the other in a kind of dialectical play of mutuality, "which is infinitely repeated without ever being the same." Yet my recognition by others is not inevitable or governed by natural law: it is bestowed upon me by others as grace and can neither be substantiated (obosnovana) nor understood. Biological life simply lives, without the possibility of any inner justification. It takes on value only within another's sympathy and compassion for that life.³²

What is distinctive and unique about human subjectivity is that we are authored by the aesthetic and ethical self-activity of others, and, in turn, we act to author them in the language of the other—in the language of the

whole outer body and the birth and death of the soul. For Pirog, “[o]ur success in our quest to create our own selves hangs very much on the chance of our finding authoritative others with whom we can engage in the business of authoring.” According to Bakhtin a self cannot articulate its experience of itself except by translating “the language of inner experience into the language of the other’s valuation.”³³ For the self’s experience of itself to have value, it must be mediated through the emotional-volitional reaction of the other.

Holquist explains how, under the influence of the thinking of physiologist Aleksey Ukhtomsky on what he called the “dominanta,” or the highest level of organic control processes in the body, Bakhtin’s ideas on the invaluable authoring relation that bridges the seeming gap between body, mind, and world developed. Ukhtomsky observed that the central nervous system operates by constant self monitoring, or biological “listening,” to ensure its regularity, and by constant rhythmic response, or biological “answering,” to ensure its co-ordination with other bodily systems. In other words, the processes of the body are extremely fine-tuned to the experience of time and place, and this requires an extraordinary sensitivity, on the one hand, “to the most minute fluctuations in rhythm,” and on the other hand, to the location within its own internal geography where the need for “adjustment” has arisen. Holquist suggests that the dominanta is “essentially a clock combined with a range finder,” and that “it performs these gauging operations simultaneously in the constantly ongoing work of the body.”³⁴

These relations of listening and answering at the biological level within the active organism's constantly ongoing once-occurrent event of Being inspired Bakhtin's insight that they are also operating at the social level between human beings as conscious individuals, enabling him to begin "to conceive the relations of mind and world as a dialogic continuum rather than as an unbridgeable gap." The relation of the body to its physical environment, as Holquist suggests, furnished Bakhtin with a metaphor for conceptualizing the relation of individuals to their social world. "In both cases," he writes,

the emphasis is on ceaseless activity. The body is seen as a system by which the individual answers the physical world; in order to do so coherently it must model its environment, track and map it, and then translate its data into a biological representation of it—the body answers the world by authoring it. Analogously, mind can be seen as a system by which the individual answers the social world: responding strongly or weakly to some impulses, screening others out, consciousness constantly tracks its place amidst the axiological hierarchies in which it moves. It responds to social stimuli by authoring its own responses. Homeostasis is the body's mechanism for actively responding to the other, utterance is the mind's. In both cases, authorship is a means for shaping meaning in a long and complex chain of interactions.³⁵

Ultimately, then, what we have in Bakhtin is a much less atomistic conception of the individual organism, homeostasis, and the body than the abstract, physicalist model Freudianism provides. Indeed, the body's

significance to subjectivity does not lie in the abstract myth of its unmediated, isolated, autonomous organic unity based in the egoic body's derivation from the instinctual id, but in the way each unique and once-occurrent body exists in historical relationship with the world and is called upon to "answer" that world "by authoring it."³⁶

Subjectivity and consciousness

"The false tendency toward reducing everything to a single consciousness, toward dissolving it in the other's consciousness"—M.M. Bakhtin³⁷

The Bakhtin circle's emphasis on the social nature of consciousness—on, as Holquist so well formulates it, the conscious mind as a system by which the individual answers the social world—derives in large part from their skepticism in regard to the modern distrust of consciousness and social relationships characteristic of Freudianism. In Freud, Volosinov suggests, a misguided attempt is made to "minimize the role of consciousness in cultural creativity," and to "replace all objective socioeconomic categories with subjective psychological or biological ones"—misguided because, "[a]fter all, 'the essence of man is not an abstraction inherent in each separate individual. In its reality it is the aggregate of social relationships.'"³⁸

Indeed, Freud's focus on finding the essence of man, or the psychical, in the depths of each separate individual in The Interpretation of Dreams establishes what remains for him twenty three years later in "The

Ego and the Id” the “fundamental premiss of psycho-analysis”: namely, the “division of the psychical into what is conscious and what is unconscious,”³⁹ and the privileging of the unconscious as an all-powerful yet mysterious and contradictory biological-organic force. “It is essential,” he writes in the germinal book on dreams,

to abandon the overvaluation of the property of being conscious before it becomes possible to form any correct view of the origin of what is mental. In Lipp’s words, the unconscious must be assumed to be the general basis of psychical life. The unconscious is the larger sphere, which includes within it the smaller sphere of the conscious.”⁴⁰

As the private property of each human organism, the unconscious is emphatically “the true psychical reality; in its innermost nature it is as much unknown to us as the reality of the external world, and it is as incompletely presented by the data of consciousness as is the external world by the communications of our sense organs.”⁴¹ Thus, the role of consciousness in human reality (which heretofore had been understood as more or less definitive of humanity) becomes with psychoanalytic theory a mere “sense-organ for the perception of psychical qualities” that arise elsewhere, which qualities, for Freud, come to establish a whole other reality or “form of existence not to be confused with material reality.” He calls that reality “psychical reality,”⁴² and characterizes human mental life as a perpetual conflict between these two forms, the material-perceptual surface of egoic consciousness which operates tendentiously to control the mysterious-psychical depths of the unconscious and its primitive sexual

instincts. “The excitement of Freudianism,” writes Volosinov, “was the excitement of discovering a whole new world.” It was, on the one hand, an unknown continent that seemed to exist beyond history and culture; yet, on the other hand, it was seen as “extraordinarily close to us, ready at any moment to erupt through the crust of our consciousness and find reflection in our utterances, our slips of the tongue, our gestures, our behavior.”⁴³ And, of course, in our dreams.

While Freud’s emphasis on the mysterious individual unconscious as the true psychological reality remained unchanged over the years between the writing of The Interpretation of Dreams and later work such as “The Ego and the Id,” the concept itself underwent significant modifications. The development of the Freudian unconscious is usually understood to unfold in three stages: 1) the Freud-Breuer, or pre-psychoanalytic stage, from 1890 to 1897, 2) the id psychology, or psychoanalytic stage, from 1897 to 1914, and 3) the ego psychology, or metapsychological stage, from 1914 to 1939.

In the first stage, the unconscious is defined as a kind of “foreign body” that penetrates the psyche and disrupts its integrity.⁴⁴ Here the “hypnoid” unconscious is said to store deliberately forgotten experiences or “psychical traumas” associated with “fright, anxiety, shame or physical pain” originating in the individual’s actual environment (and more or less covertly including “sexual seduction” by fathers and/or uncles) which consciousness defends against by converting into pathological somatic symptoms (such as “neuralgias,” “anaesthesias,” “paralyses,” “convulsions,” “chronic vomiting,” “anorexia,” “visual hallucinations,” etc.) in the hysteric, or by manifesting as symbols in the dreams of more healthy

people.⁴⁵ Through confession of the trauma in language, and with the aid of hypnotic techniques and suggestion on the part of the physician, a kind of cathartic purging can take place: these repressed, affect-laden reminiscences stored in the unconscious are “abreacted,”⁴⁶ integrated into consciousness, and so discharged. Anna O., one of Freud and Breuer’s first patients, coined the phrase “the talking cure” to describe the process⁴⁷ and, indeed, as Freud would soon write in his work on dreams, “It is true that the physician cannot learn of these unconscious processes until they have produced some effect upon consciousness which can be communicated or observed.”⁴⁸ Only through the language of consciousness (achieved psychodynamically by transforming unconscious “thing” presentations into conscious word presentations with the help of the preconscious), then, can the dark recesses of the individual’s unconscious be reached and, for Freud, “scraped” like pus “out of a carious region.”⁴⁹

In the second stage, however, the unconscious undergoes a kind of cleansing or normalization, if you will, and comes to be understood as part of the “perfectly regular” psychical life of all individuals, as well as a “productive source of psychical forces and energies for all domains of cultural creativity, especially for art.”⁵⁰ Here, the seduction theory that dominated the first stage is abandoned for the theory of infantile sexual instincts (libido) and ego instincts (aggression); the concept of their repression is developed; and hypnosis and suggestion are replaced by the method of free association, the couch, and the problem of transference. As we have seen, Freud begins to see the unconscious in constant conflict with the conscious as the latter strives to repress what are now the former’s

innate and natural incestuous sexual instincts and aggressive ego instincts by identifying with and internalizing the father's Oedipal prohibitions. Fear, shame, and guilt become the basis of the normal ego as these sexual and aggressive impulses are more or less successfully repressed in the unconscious. In effect, the subject's whole being and subsequent developmental history depend on the loss of organic unity with the mother and Oedipal rivalry, and the way in which these events shape the deepest levels of each individual's unconscious—our unique psychological reality. Throughout adult life, according to Freud, we will unconsciously displace these repressed instincts and wishes onto others as substitute maternal and paternal objects, and so in the patient's relationship to the therapist such "transference" must be managed and exposed very carefully. By mapping the dark and "unspeakable" continent of the repressed unconscious and overcoming resistance to it through dream analysis and free association on the couch, the psychoanalyst helps the patient make the irrational, idic unconscious subject to the forces of rational consciousness.

In the third stage the theory of instincts is greatly modified. "Instead of the earlier division into sexual instincts (continuation of the species) and ego instincts (preservation of the individual)," as Volosinov writes, "a new binary division has appeared: (1) the sexual instinct, or Eros, and (2) the death instinct."⁵¹ The shift here is away from the conflict between conscious and unconscious toward the meta-conflict between life and death; away from making the unconscious conscious toward analysis of the ego defenses which keep the unconscious unconscious in the name of life and civilization; away from narcissism as a libidinal perversion toward normal

ego-libido, or self-preservative love. Whereas “[p]athological research has directed our interest too exclusively to the repressed,” Freud writes, it is now time to “learn more about the ego.”⁵² Transferences and resistances are no longer seen as obstacles, but have become opportunities to understand the individual subject and her unconscious complexes. Moreover, that which is repressed in the unconscious is no longer absolutely separate from the conscious “I” or ego; rather, the ego is now conceptualized as part of the unconscious in its highest sphere, the superego, making id, ego and superego all part of the province of the unconscious. The dynamics of repression here involve the censorious superego such that “the conscious ‘I’—the ego—is compelled to submit to a force emanating from the depths of the unconscious, but a force that is, at the same time, moral, often even ‘hypermoral’ to use Freud’s own term.”⁵³ Out of identification with the father’s Oedipal prohibitions, the superego is formed and becomes the individual’s unconscious self-censor—“the voice of inner authority, of duty, of the highest commands of conscience, entirely independent of the ego.”⁵⁴ Between the id—which presents “things” unconsciously and carries them out in “some material which remains unknown;”⁵⁵ which “cannot say what it wants;”⁵⁶ which is “nonverbal”⁵⁷—and the superego—which speaks volumes—is the ego and what remains, for Freud, the questionable powers of conscious perception in the face of the mysterious and contradictory unconscious: “If anyone,” Freud writes, “were inclined to put forward the paradoxical proposition that the normal man is not only far more immoral than he believes but also far more moral than he knows, psychoanalysis, on whose findings the first

half of the assertion rests, would have no objection to raise against the second half.” And he elaborates in a note how “This proposition is only apparently a paradox: it simply states that human nature has a far greater extent, both for good and for evil, than it thinks it has—i.e. than its ego is aware of through conscious perception.”⁵⁸

Indeed, then, what has evolved out of Freud’s successive conceptualizations of the isolated individual unconscious is what Holquist calls one of our most “cherished beliefs” about the modern subject: the belief “that the experiences in our deepest psyche are unknowable, and that there must therefore be a qualitative difference separating individual (inner) experience from social (outer) experience.”⁵⁹ With Freudianism the subject has come to be understood in terms of the popular metaphor of a solitary iceberg, the unfathomable depths of which represent its unconscious, its largely unknowable inner psychic reality, while its exposed tip stands for its conscious ego, its dim awareness of those psychic depths as well as its comparatively insignificant relation to its outer material and social reality. However, for the Bakhtin circle, the existence of the unconscious as this separate reservoir repressed beneath consciousness and the social, which contains the dark forces of each monadic organism’s private psyche, is highly questionable. It is not that they deny that thoughts and ideas and feelings can be suppressed or denied; rather, they question whether thoughts, ideas and feelings can ever be represented or stored unconsciously as abstract “thing presentations” in “some material which remains unknown.”

The problem is elucidated by Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, who investigates it in an immanent reading of the Freudian subject from an original philosophical perspective. He argues that the notion of the unconscious subject of psychoanalysis collapses into absurdity when we ask ourselves who is thinking these “unconscious” thoughts: “for once it has been established that ‘it’—or the id—thinks without my knowing, without the ego’s knowing anything about it, then we have to ask: Who is It? Who is thinking, in this instance (who, then, is thinking me?). Is this unconscious thinking therefore a thinking attributable to no subject?”⁶⁰ Asking “who represents unconscious thoughts to him/her/itself” leads Borch-Jacobsen to the conclusion that Freud’s psychoanalytic thinking (thinking the terms “thinking” and “unconscious representation” together) is highly problematic: “By maintaining these terms, by continuing to use them in an unqualified fashion,” he asks, “do we not risk dismissing the entire problematics of subjecti(vi)ty, by heedlessly passing it off under the name of ‘unconscious’?”⁶¹

For Borch-Jacobsen the problematics of subjectivity are inescapably conscious, and inescapably social, and he demonstrates how Freudianism is haunted by this fact. According to Borch-Jacobsen, it was by rejecting the technique of hypnosis and supposedly ‘solving’ the problem of suggestion (the infection of the patient by the doctor’s interpretations, ideas, words) through the technique of the psychoanalytic “talking cure” (wherein face-to-face contact and the possibility of hypnotic suggestion are avoided by having the patient free-associate from the couch while the doctor remains behind her and out-of-sight as a kind of abstract, disembodied listener or

reflective mirror) that “psychoanalysis had constituted itself as psychoanalysis.”⁶² Invested in a monadic and monologic conception of the self whose spontaneous talk represents the ‘private property’ of his deepest unconscious drives and intentions, Freud founds psychoanalysis on “the abandonment of suggestive psychotherapy and the cathartic method in favor of free associations, the repudiation of the ‘hypnoid’ unconscious in favor of a dynamic and repressed unconscious, a waning of interest in ‘artificial sleep’ in favor of analysis of ‘spontaneous dreams,’ and so on.”⁶³ Thus, as Borch-Jacobsen sees it, Freud’s theory is erected on the claim that psychoanalysis is able to finally dissipate the riddle of hypnosis and suggestion and the interpenetration of the self and the other that had nagged psychiatry for years; however, as Freud had to admit despite himself, suggestibility came home to roost in “the shape of the transference.”⁶⁴ What must be understood is that “hypnotic suggestion had returned into psychoanalysis, as psychoanalysis. The dependence of the hypnotized subject on the hypnotist; the establishment of an elective, exclusive, somnambulant bond; suggestibility; even thought transmission—all this had come back up, at the very core of analytic treatment, in the form of transference.”⁶⁵ Borch-Jacobsen continues, making the compelling argument that hypnosis was abandoned by Freud, “not because suggestion theory had been incorporated within a more powerful theory [i.e. psychoanalysis]; rather, it was abandoned by virtue of a denial, a rejection, a suppressed hostility that was obscure, so to speak, to itself.”⁶⁶ Haunted by the implications of transference and countertransference for psychoanalysis (namely, that we are always profoundly caught up in other

subjects—in the intentions, words, language of others), Freud, insisting on the unconscious as the instinctual psychical depths of the individual, ‘explains’ transference as a mere epiphenomenon of the libidinal desire operating between patient and doctor.⁶⁷ As for hypnosis and suggestion and their challenge to the private unconscious and the isolated, autonomous self, Freud “simply wished to hear nothing further on the subject”⁶⁸

Ultimately, the problem with the Freudian subject is threefold: it makes us wonder what fantastic species of subject could possibly be storing thoughts unconsciously; how they could be storing them without words; and why this process necessarily unfolds in a vacuum. Indeed, for Volosinov, the most telling thing about “the early Freudian concept of the unconscious” is that “Freud had not found direct and unmediated access to the unconscious but had learned about it through the conscious of the patient himself.” And, moreover, “the same thing has to be said about his mature method. Indeed, here is what Freud himself says on this point in his latest book: ‘All our knowledge is invariably bound up with consciousness. We can come to know the unconscious only by making it conscious.’” What Freud’s psychoanalytic theory and method really amount to, for Volosinov, are an “interpretive analysis” by the psychoanalyst as an other consciousness of “conscious formations” unearthed by a combination of introspection and the influence of the analyst and given in verbal form by the patient.⁶⁹ Clearly, he argues, “Freud’s whole psychological construct is based fundamentally on human verbal utterances; it is nothing but a special kind of interpretation of utterances. All these utterances are, of course, constructed in the conscious

sphere of the psyche."⁷⁰ And they depend for their very existence, of course, on language—not as a private product of individual invention and expression, but, as we will see, as a public product of the aggregate of social relationships and social communication. The implications of this for the Bakhtin circle's understanding of subjectivity and its connection to language are enormous.

Subjectivity and language

“Were it to be deprived of the word, the psyche would shrink to an extreme degree; deprived of all other expressive activities, it would die out altogether.”—V.N. Volosinov⁷¹

Indeed, as Freud himself is repeatedly forced to admit, we cannot get to the mysterious psychoanalytic unconscious except through consciousness itself, except through thoughts conveyed by the subject in language. Conscious introspection remains for the Bakhtin circle, emphatically, “the sole method of authenticating the reality of psychical events,” and with such introspection, “all the products of the unconscious take the forms of desires or impulses, find verbal expression and in that shape, that is, in the shape of a motive, enter into a person's awareness.”⁷² The significance of this observation for their critique of Freudianism is that it suggests that the psychoanalytic emphasis on the verbal (material) conscious and the non-verbal (psychical) unconscious as two separate and distinct realities in perpetual conflict within the individual subject is fundamentally flawed.

Volosinov notes how, in Freud's psychoanalytic formulation, the 'conscious' and 'unconscious' are always at odds; they suffer a mutual hostility and incomprehension, and are always trying to deceive each other. But surely, he reasons,

interrelations of this sort are only possible between two ideas, two ideological trends, two antagonistic persons, and not between two natural, material forces! Is it conceivable, for instance, that two natural forces engage in mutual deception or mutual nonrecognition?

Of course, only after entering into consciousness and donning the forms of consciousness (the forms of desires, thoughts, etc. with specific content) can products of the unconscious engage in conflict with ethical precepts or be perceived as deception of the "censorship."

Thus, the whole of Freud's psychical "dynamics" is given in the ideological illumination of consciousness. Consequently, it is not a dynamics of psychical forces but only a dynamics of various motives of consciousness.⁷³

A dynamic struggle certainly exists on the playing field of consciousness, Volosinov agrees; but, he argues, it involves the struggle between individual human beings as separate consciousnesses who communicate behaviorally, ideologically, socially through language, not two abstract forces which operate as separate realities (one organic, one social; one psychical, one material) and yet, somehow, arbitrarily, manage to interact within the individual psyche as its personal expression.

For Volosinov, the problem in Freud's theory is that it "projects the entire dynamics of the interrelationship between two people into the individual psyche."⁷⁴ That is, the "extremely complex social interrelationship between doctor and patient" which belongs to objective relations in the external world and provides the context for the patient's utterances in analysis (involving, for example, differences in sex, gender, age, social status, profession, etc.) is attributed to the patient alone and her singular subjective consciousness, as if these utterances simply well up from the depths of the personal unconscious through a miraculous translation from one form of reality (psychical reality or instincts) to another form of reality (material reality or words). Indeed, Freud is correct in his assertion that there is a basic opposition in the mind; the subject is not logically identical to itself, does not coincide with itself. But that opposition is not between two varieties of reality; rather, it is existential—it is, as Clark and Holquist put it, "what Bakhtin said it was in The Architectonics, an agon between the I-for-myself and the other."

The psychical mechanisms readily disclose their social derivation to us. The 'unconscious' stands in opposition not to the individual conscious of the patient but, primarily, to the doctor, his requirements and his views. 'Resistance' is likewise primarily resistance to the doctor, to the listener, to the other person generally.⁷⁵

For the Bakhtin circle, then, people, not natural forces, are in constant conflict in the mind, and the material of that struggle is the material of consciousness—signs, words, utterances, language—not some mysterious

psychical material that remains largely unknown and its translation into words accessible to consciousness untheorized.

The point to be understood is twofold: 1) the content of the psyche is socially derived and ideological-linguistic, not simply or primarily organic activity, and 2) the content of the psyche is individual but never isolated.

In his work on the philosophy of language, Volosinov explains how the “individual consciousness is a social-ideological fact” that comes about only within semiotic material and only with others. Consciousness, he writes, “can arise and become a viable fact only in the material embodiment of signs.” To understand a sign means to perform an act that refers the sign in question to the wealth of other signs that one already knows and uses. Understanding is a “chain of ideological creativity” effecting a response to a sign with other signs. Moreover, that ideological chain never breaks—never plunges into a mysterious “inner being” that is “nonmaterial in nature and unembodied in signs.” Rather, it

stretches from individual consciousness to individual consciousness, connecting them together. Signs emerge, after all, only in the process of interaction between one individual consciousness and another. And the individual consciousness itself is filled with signs. Consciousness becomes consciousness only once it has been filled with ideological (semiotic) content, consequently, only in the process of social interaction.⁷⁶

Consciousness cannot possibly be derived from one individual’s instinctual organic material or nature, as Freudianism claims, because the sign material that fills consciousness can only arise socially, “on interindividual

territory”: territory that is not “natural,” or biologically-defined, but a product of organized interaction between people. “The individual consciousness not only cannot be used to explain anything,” says Volosinov, “but, on the contrary, is itself in need of explanation from the vantage point of the social-ideological medium.”⁷⁷

The problem of individual consciousness, then, is not an ontological problem of the difference between the unconscious and the conscious for Volosinov. “[T]here is no leap involved between inner experience and its expression, no crossing over from one qualitative realm of reality to another. The transit from experience to its outward expression occurs within the scope of the same qualitative realm.”⁷⁸ It cannot be explained in terms of two separate types of reality and the psychical dynamics of the repression of the one by the other.⁷⁹ Rather, individual consciousness is a social-ideological problem of the difference between inner and outer experience that is produced in both cases in language—as inner and outward speech, respectively:

Any human verbal utterance is an ideological construct in the small. The motivation of one’s behavior is juridical and moral creativity on a small scale; an exclamation of joy or grief is a primitive lyric composition; pragmatic considerations of the causes and consequences of happenings are germinal forms of scientific and philosophical cognition, and so on and so forth. The stable, formulated ideological systems of the sciences, the arts, jurisprudence, and the like have sprung and crystallized from that

seething ideological element whose broad waves of inner and outward speech engulf our every act and our every perception.⁸⁰

This route that leads “from the content of the individual psyche to the content of culture is a long and hard one,” says Volosinov, but “it is a single route,” at all stages of which “the human consciousness operates through words.”⁸¹

“What sort of reality,” then, “pertains to the subjective psyche?” Quite simply, for Volosinov and the Bakhtin circle, “The reality of the inner psyche is the same reality as that of the sign.” There is no psyche outside the material of signs. Certainly there are physiological processes taking place in the nervous system, but there is

no subjective psyche as a special existential quality fundamentally distinct from both the physiological processes occurring within the organism and the reality encompassing the organism from outside, to which the psyche reacts and which one way or another it reflects. By its very existential nature, the subjective psyche is to be localized somewhere between the organism and the outside world, on the borderline separating these two spheres of reality. It is here that an encounter between the organism and the outside world takes place, but the encounter is not a physical one: the organism and the outside world meet here in the sign. Psychic experience is the semiotic expression of the contact between the organism and the outside environment. That is why the inner psyche is not analyzable as a thing but can only be understood and interpreted as a sign.⁸²

And the fundamental sign that fills consciousness is the word as both “the semiotic material of inner life” and “the purest and most sensitive medium of social intercourse.”⁸³ Thus, the word “constitutes the foundation, the skeleton of inner life,”⁸⁴ just as it constitutes the foundation of interindividual communication in the social world. What the Bakhtin circle has done in rethinking the reality of Freud’s subjective psyche is to “boldly reformulate the distinction between the unconscious and the conscious as a difference not between two kinds of reality, since both concepts are variants of the same phenomenon, consciousness,”⁸⁵ but between inner and outer experience of the content of consciousness as it is organized by language in the sign as word. In this light it is false to think of a division or boundary between the psyche and ideology as regards content since “every outer ideological sign, of whatever kind, is engulfed in and washed over by inner signs—by the consciousness.”⁸⁶

The tendency to think of the psyche as “individual,” in binary opposition to, or isolated from, the ideological as “social” is equally misguided for Volosinov:

The individual, as possessor of the contents of his own consciousness, as author of his own thoughts, as the personality responsible for his thoughts and feelings,—such an individual is a purely socioideological phenomenon. Therefore, the content of the “individual” psyche is by its very nature just as social as is ideology, and the very degree of consciousness of one’s individuality and its inner rights and privileges is ideological, historical, and wholly

conditioned by sociological factors. Every sign as sign is social, and this is no less true for the inner sign than for the outer sign.⁸⁷ However, this is not to suggest that the personal psyche and ideology are indistinguishable. There is, certainly, a “sort” of division or boundary between the psyche and ideology, but it exists in regard, not to content, but to form. The word exists in both inner experience and outer experience: the difference is whether it is vocalized or not; whether it is suppressed or openly shared with others; whether it is “unofficial” or “official” consciousness.⁸⁸ Thus, for the Bakhtin circle, unofficial consciousness, or inner speech, is ultimately “just as material as is outward speech,” or official consciousness, and just as social.⁸⁹

Given this emphasis on grounding “the psyche in social factors”—on taking “external society,” rather than the Freudian unconscious, as the “starting-point of consciousness”—the key psychological question now becomes, as Caryl Emerson suggests, “how precisely does environment impress a personality, how do outer words become inner speech?”⁹⁰ An insightful answer, both Emerson and James Wertsch claim, is to be found in the work on language acquisition in children by Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, who believed that the “internalization of socially rooted and historically developed activities [such as speech communication] is the distinguishing feature of human psychology, the basis of the qualitative leap from animal to human psychology.”⁹¹ Vygotsky was a contemporary of Bakhtin and his circle, and while there seems to have been minimal contact between them (except for Volosinov’s brief reference to Vygotsky in Freudianism), Wertsch writes, their “ideas on inner speech” are

complementary and together “provide a coherent way to deal with Volosinov’s dictum that ‘human psychology must be socialized.’”⁹²

Uncomfortable with Freud’s notion that individuals are decidedly solipsistic organisms who are reluctant to adjust to and participate in their environment, Vygotsky believed that language is a tool which allows us to achieve the pragmatic goal of accessing, communicating with, and knowing our world. By studying concrete acts of speech in child development (the focus on human semiotic activity and experience rather than abstract theorizing has clear resonances with Bakhtin’s philosophical premises), he saw that the way we learn sign systems such as language is a mediated social process of ingrowth rather than an autonomous and isolated process of outgrowth.⁹³

A child cannot translate much of the speech he hears into his rudimentary signal systems, because the ability to generalize comes slowly. Until the age of two years, language serves the human child as a 32-“word” vocabulary serves the chimpanzee throughout its life: words, or better vocalizations, are purely emotional, they coincide with gestures but exclude any simultaneous intellectual activity. The child passes out of this chimpanzoid stage when he begins to ask for the names of objects, and at this point there occurs one of th[e] critical moments in maturation: “thought becomes verbal and speech [becomes] rational.”⁹⁴

Indeed, as animals we are not born with language, nor does it rise spontaneously into the ego out of the organism or the instinctual id; rather,

it seeps in from outside, as Vygotsky demonstrated through observation and experiments with children's external speech.

As Wertsch explains, external speech "is the speech form Piaget (1926) had labeled 'egocentric.'" But in contrast to Piaget's belief that "egocentric speech is an index of children's as yet unsocialized thought and hence a speech form that dies out with age," Vygotsky held that "egocentric speech is a transitional semiotic form between external, social speech and inner speech. Hence its fate is to 'go underground' rather than to die out."⁹⁵ What Vygotsky noticed, according to Emerson, was that children start speaking by talking aloud to others and also to themselves, and that only later, at the ingrowth stage, does the need to vocalize activities diminish and thought become an internalized personal language. Where Piaget assumed egocentric speech represented the externalization of internal fantasies and thoughts by the immature ego as language welled up from within it, Vygotsky saw it as representing a preliminary stage in the internalization of "external verbal interactions." This explains why egocentric speech is visible in three-year-olds, but unnoticed in seven-year olds: "the older the child, the more thoroughly has his thought become inner speech. 'Development in thinking,' Vygotsky concludes, 'is not from the individual to the socialized, but from the social to the individual.'"⁹⁶

Emerson describes how, in Vygotsky's model of language, the first speech of a child is thoroughly social. Sounds and words evoke particular responses which must be "reinforced by adults" in order to begin to generate meaning for the child. She comes to realize only gradually that she can use language to actively affect her environment. When this

happens, her speech can be said to transform into two different systems that are nonetheless interconnected. One is the system of “adult social speech” which functions to adjust the child to the social world; the other is the system of “personal language” which functions to realize an internal world:

When internalization begins, egocentric speech drops off. The child becomes, as it were, [her] own best interlocutor. Crucial to this process, however, is the presence of a challenging verbal and physical environment. The descriptive “monologue” of which egocentric speech is composed can be internalized creatively only if questioned and challenged by outside voices. In this way alone is intelligence possible, intelligence defined not as an accumulation of already-mastered skills, but as a dialogue with one’s own future and an address to the external world.⁹⁷

As Emerson further observes, the connections between thought and speech are not simply given within the individual organism by a “neutral” and “objectified” language that somehow translates drives into words, as in the Freudian model. Rather, those connections are developmentally incremental, and cannot claim “a one-to-one fit”:

There is speech without thought, as in chimpanzees and infants; there is also thought without speech. Where the two areas overlap is ‘verbal thought,’ and this is coincident with language. Since we can share only what we articulate and communicate, it is this linguistic dimension alone that has historical validity.⁹⁸

“For Vygotsky,” Emerson continues, “the Word is a powerful amalgam: part sign, part tool, it is the significant humanizing event. One makes a self

through the words one has learned, fashions one's own voice and inner speech by a selective appropriation of the voices of others."⁹⁸ Thus, Vygotsky and Volosinov come to meet in their estimation of the power of the word as "the medium of consciousness"⁹⁹ and so in the importance of language in the history of human subjectivity.

As Volosinov suggested, the human animal does indeed require a second, social birth, and that birth is nothing less than its entry into consciousness through the medium of language. "Individuals," he concurs with Vygotsky, "do not receive a ready-made language at all, rather, they enter upon the stream of verbal communication; indeed, only in this stream does their consciousness first begin to operate."¹⁰⁰ Use of verbal thought is the crucial accomplishment which marks the beginning of the child's unique consciousness becoming formed and filled with cultural content and entering the social struggle—which marks the beginning of each subjective psyche, but as a thoroughly social phenomenon:

The content of the human psyche—a content consisting of thoughts, feelings, desires—is given in a formulation made by consciousness and, consequently, in the formulation of human verbal discourse. Verbal discourse, not in its narrow linguistic sense, but in its broad and concrete sociological sense—that is the objective milieu in which the content of the psyche is presented. It is here that motives of behaviour, arguments, goals, evaluations are composed and given external expression. It is here, too, that arise the conflicts among them.¹⁰¹

Without the living word—without inner speech appropriated from without and internalized—no personal psyche could exist. The nature of inner speech is thoroughly dialogic, its units resembling “the alternating lines of a dialogue” more than a “passage of monologue.” Indeed, writes Volosinov, inner speech must be conceived as inner dialogue. “Only by ascertaining the forms of whole utterances and, especially, the forms of dialogic speech, can light be shed on the forms of inner speech, as well, and on the peculiar logic of their concatenation in the stream of inner speech.”¹⁰² Decidedly, for Volosinov, it is the social environment that gives one words saturated with meaning and value judgments. This means that “nothing verbal in human behavior (inner and outward speech equally) can under any circumstances be reckoned to the account of the individual subject in isolation; the verbal is not his property but the property of his social group (his social milieu).”¹⁰³ The individual mind, as Wertsch puts it, is multivoiced: “even psychological processes carried out by an individual in isolation are viewed as involving processes of a communicative nature.”¹⁰⁴

It is with this early work on subjectivity and language by members of the Bakhtin circle and their interest in the word “in the mouth of a particular individual person” as a “product of the living interaction of social forces,”¹⁰⁵ then, that Bakhtin’s broad and far-reaching thinking on the dialogic nature of human subjectivity and the philosophy of the utterance would soon emerge. From the 1930s with The Dialogic Imagination, through Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics and “The Problem of Speech Genres,” to notes made in the early 1970s, just before his death,

Bakhtin continually worked toward a philosophy of the utterance grounded in the key principle of I and the other from his philosophy of the act: In the notes he writes that “in the most vital, experienced life only I, thou, and he exist. And only in this life are such primary realities as my word and the other’s word disclosed.”¹⁰⁶ For Bakhtin, the word, like the act (or as an act) stands as a primary philosophical cause, or principle, with explicit reference to the famous Biblical source of life in logos according to John 1:1: “In the beginning was the word.”¹⁰⁷

The word, as he conceives it, provides the fundamental grounding for each human life in the socio-linguistic world. Each person lives “in a world of others’ words” in which our “entire life is an orientation in this world, a reaction to others’ words (an infinitely diverse reaction), beginning with my assimilation of them (in the process of initial mastery of speech) and ending with assimilation of the wealth of human culture (expressed in the word or in other semiotic materials).”¹⁰⁸ Encountering and interacting with others’ words is a complex and ongoing life-event. The word, writes Bakhtin, is not merely a fixed “material thing” belonging to my consciousness and relating to an object in a singular way, but a constantly changing medium of interactive dialogue. The word lives as a substance in transit between mouths, contexts, social groups, and generations, never gravitating to a single consciousness or voice. So, when any speaker uses a word, it is not neutral but inhabited by and refracted in the voice, aspirations, and evaluations of others. There is “no access to one’s own personal ‘ultimate’ word.”¹⁰⁹

Bakhtin thinks of the word in two senses: 1) in terms of its meaning, and 2) in terms of its use:

Neutral dictionary meanings of the words of a language ensure their common features and guarantee that all speakers of a given language will understand one another, but the use of words in live speech communication is always individual and contextual in nature. Therefore, one can say that any word exists for the speaker in three aspects: as a neutral word of a language, belonging to nobody; an other's word, which belongs to another person and is filled with echoes of the other's utterance; and, finally, as my word, for, since I am dealing with it in a particular situation, with a particular speech plan, it is already imbued with my expression. 110

The word, whether external or internal speech, always swims in an environment that gives it a value, a judgment, an accent, an emotional-volitional tone. And not only is it answerable to the word that goes before it, it anticipates the response that comes after it.¹¹¹ Intending to be heard and to be answered, the word is dialogic— “born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it.”¹¹² In fact, Bakhtin argues, consciousness itself, given its birth in language, is dialogic, open-ended, constituted by the infinite world of others' words, struggling on the shifting boundary where these shared words are exchanged.¹¹³

According to Bakhtin, consciousness brings a quality of infinitude and unfinalizability to human existence. Being conscious, an “individual” is not alone but rather has begun to be reflected in and to reflect the consciousnesses of others. In becoming the witness and the judge “of the

whole human being” of the other, human consciousness as a whole (and, in effect, my own specific consciousness) adds an extra dimension to existence. Recognizing (witnessing) and justifying (judging) human existence, I am able to change its very sense—to give it freedom through my active use of the word: “Authenticity and truth inhere not in existence itself, but only in an existence that is acknowledged and uttered.”¹¹⁴ For Bakhtin, the act of the utterance is fully social, marking the “meeting of two consciousnesses”¹¹⁵ on the boundary where words are exchanged. Thus, the utterance lives on the plane of becoming, always presupposing others’ utterances that come before and will come after it, always a link in an infinite and unfinalizable chain of human communication and responsiveness.

This chain of communication and response necessarily inhabits a world of sound—what Bakhtin calls the human “logosphere” which is constituted by silence, its disturbance by the uttered word, and the pause that precedes and demarcates all words. In this logosphere, Bakhtin says, the word has two aspects: its aspect as a means on the level of the repeatability of words in the language; and its aspect as a goal on the level of the unrepeatability of the unique, personal utterance. It is through the utterance that “language joins the historical unrepeatability and unfinalized totality of the logosphere.”¹¹⁶ Every utterance, as the word of a speaking person authored from a particular position in the social hierarchy and characterized by a tone, style, and genre, enters into dialogue with other utterances. Thus, my nuanced utterance as an unfinalized individual personality (rather than a fixed psychological egoic subject) speaks,

recognizes, evaluates, and reacts in a world of others' unfinalized individual personalities (rather than a world of objects). "In the process of dialogic communication, the object is transformed into the subject (the other's I)."117 The other is not an object of my subjectivity, but another animated conscious dialogic subject. To understand the other in this world, then, is to participate in a dialogic "co-creativity" that "determines, obligates, and unites" one to the other in a struggle that produces "mutual change and enrichment." "The person who understands," writes Bakhtin, "must not reject the possibility of changing or even abandoning his already prepared viewpoints and positions."118 According to the philosophy of the utterance, there is no real living understanding in language without recognizing repeated elements or words, being open to discovering the new, and appreciating the unrepeatability, uniqueness, and infinite potential of the whole interaction. As Volosinov said, speech goes on infinitely as the process of inner and outer verbal life: "The outwardly actualized utterance is an island rising from the boundless sea of inner speech; the dimensions and forms of this island are determined by the particular situation of the utterance and its audience."119

In this world of others' words, this world of the utterance, then, meaning becomes contextual, potentially infinite, and is only actualized by another's meaning—by a question put to an audience or addressee with open acknowledgment of one's own outsideness with regard to, and with respect for, the addressee's status as another speaking subject. Here in the logosphere, where everything essential takes place on border zones and all positions, viewpoints, and truths are relative, it becomes crucial that one

demarcates one's own position ethically, with a benevolence that anticipates and welcomes rejoinder. For Bakhtin, ethical personalities are determined through intersubjective relations that occur continuously from birth to death; and "the better a person understands the degree to which he is externally determined (his substantiality), the closer he comes to understanding and exercising his real freedom."¹²⁰ The semantic world of the utterance, in his estimation, is as deep and bottomless and free as the world of physical matter, and the world of culture is as "boundless as the universe."¹²¹ But the freedom of subjective self-awareness is an historical development closely related to language, and so necessarily to the other:

Within the arena of almost every utterance an intense interaction and struggle between one's own and another's word is being waged, a process in which they oppose or dialogically interanimate each other. The utterance so conceived is a considerably more complex and dynamic organism than it appears when construed simply as a thing that articulates the intention of the person uttering it, which is to see the utterance as a direct, single-voiced vehicle for expression.¹²²

Even in his very late thinking about the utterance Bakhtin will gesture back to ideas raised in Toward a Philosophy of the Act regarding the way the self relies on the other for its completion in space and time ("I and the other exist in living sensation") in order to point to the way in which the self and the other exist in "living sensation" through the utterance as the active meeting place of consciousnesses on the boundary where words are exchanged in the dialogic, multivoiced reality of living language.¹²³

In "Discourse and the Novel" Bakhtin begins to outline the role of the utterance in what he calls the "heteroglot" world of language as a dialogic struggle "among socio-linguistic points of view, not an intra-language struggle between individual wills or logical contradictions."¹²⁴ According to Bakhtin, there are two forces in language, centripetal and centrifugal. The centripetal forces are those forces of language (such as linguistic norms, official ways of speaking and thinking) that unify and centralize the verbal-ideological world against the centrifugal forces of heteroglossia that disunify and decentralize it. Centripetal forces operate "in the midst of" this heteroglossic, stratifying reality of living language:

At any given moment of its evolution, language is stratified not only into linguistic dialects in the strict sense of the word (according to formal linguistic markers, especially phonetic), but also—and for us this is the essential point—into languages that are socio-ideological: languages of social groups, "professional" and "generic" languages, languages of generations and so forth And this stratification and heteroglossia, once realized, is not only a static invariant of linguistic life, but also what insures its dynamics: stratification and heteroglossia widen and deepen as long as language is alive and developing. Alongside the centripetal forces, the centrifugal forces of language carry on their uninterrupted work; alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification, the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification go forward.¹²⁵

In this scenario, the role of the utterance is a synthetic one, joining the psyche and ideology, serving as a point of intersection and tension where

centrifugal and centripetal forces come to bear in the subject. The utterance itself, like the self, is Janus-faced. It has a twofold function, answering “the requirements of its own language as an individualized embodiment of a speech act” as well as “the requirements of heteroglossia.”¹²⁶

As such, any utterance is a contradictory and tension-filled amalgam of both individual and general language styles where language can only be realized “in the form of individual concrete utterances (oral and written) by participants in the various areas of human activity.” In these areas of activity, relatively stable types of utterances, which Bakhtin calls speech genres, develop which demonstrate specific themes, styles, and structures (such as daily rejoinders, everyday narration, various forms of writing, military orders, business documents, political commentary, scientific statements, literature, and so forth) across the extreme heterogeneity of social life.¹²⁷ For Bakhtin, to ignore the profound significance of the individual utterance to human social life is to court the dangers of abstraction, to distort historicity, and to weaken the connection between abstract language (words, sentences) and collective human life (speaking subjects). “Utterances and their types, that is, speech genres, are the drive belts from the history of society to the history of language.”¹²⁸ The environment in which they “live and take shape” Bakhtin designates “dialogized heteroglossia”—an environment that is “anonymous and social as language, but simultaneously concrete, filled with specific content and accented as an individual utterance.”¹²⁹

According to Bakhtin, the utterance in practice has two essential characteristics: it, not the isolated and abstracted individual word or sentence, is the “real unit of speech communication;” and it is finalized. In other words, it has essential and fundamental boundaries:

For speech can exist in reality only in the form of concrete utterances of individual speaking people, speech subjects. Speech is always cast in the form of an utterance belonging to a particular speaking subject, and outside this form it cannot exist. Regardless of how varied utterances may be in terms of their length, their content, their compositional structure, they have common structural features as units of speech communication and, above all, quite clear-cut boundaries.¹³⁰

And the thing that marks these boundaries is the constant change of speakers in any act of communication:

Any utterance—from a short (single-word) rejoinder in everyday dialogue to the large novel or scientific treatise—has, so to speak, an absolute beginning and an absolute end: its beginning is preceded by the utterances of others, and its end is followed by the responsive utterances of others (or, although they may be silent, others’ active responsive understanding, or, finally a responsive action based on this understanding). The speaker ends his utterance in order to relinquish the floor to the other or to make room for the other’s active responsive understanding.¹³¹

In communicating with another, one does not exchange words, phrases, or sentences; rather, one exchanges unique personal utterances that are built

out of words, phrases, and sentences as functional language units.¹³² Any single utterance, then, “is a link in a very complexly organized chain of other utterances.”¹³³ To learn to speak is to be oriented to the listener, to presuppose a language system, and to anticipate a response. To learn to speak is also to learn to construct utterances in speech genres, to cast oneself into generic forms in order to communicate and mean.

Bakhtin observes how the change in speaking subjects that determines the boundaries of the utterance is very clear in actual daily dialogue between people. It is less obvious in larger, more complexly organized instances of generic cultural communication but nonetheless the dynamics of change and exchange in the utterance remain the same. Any work of a scientific or artistic genre is an authored unit of speech communication that manifests an individual style or world view. It is this individual imprint that creates the boundaries that distinguish the work from the author’s predecessors, and from other works in the same school or opposing schools. Thus the work, says Bakhtin, is oriented toward the other and their response, just like the rejoinder is oriented in dialogue:

The work is a link in the chain of speech communion. Like the rejoinder in a dialogue, it is related to other work-utterances: both those to which it responds and those that respond to it. At the same time, like the rejoinder in dialogue, it is separated from them by the absolute boundaries created by a change of speaking subjects.¹³⁴

For Bakhtin, any utterance involves a semantic plan and an expressive tone on the part of the speaker, as well as a given speech genre with its typical

addressee who provides the speaker with an “apperceptive background” for verbal exchange in the world.¹³⁵

As Holquist puts it, in the environment of the utterance—in this environment of dialogized heteroglossia where existence is not owned, but shared, such existence “will manifest itself as the condition of being addressed.”¹³⁶ “To understand existence as ‘addressed to me,’” he explains,

does not mean I am a passive receptacle into which events fall, as letters drop into mailboxes. Addressivity means rather that I am an event, the event of constantly responding to utterances from the different worlds I pass through In other words, addressivity is expressivity; what we usually call life is not a mysterious vitalistic force, but an activity, the dialogue between events addressed to me in the particular place I occupy in existence, and my expression of a response to such events from that unique place. When I cease to respond, when there are—as we say so accurately in English—no signs of life, I am dead.¹³⁷

In this light, the kind of mysterious, vitalistic individuality that traditional Freudian psychology knows is only a “hypothetical individuality,” abstracted, in Bakhtin’s words, from the “axiological weight of the I and the other” as unique existential addresses in relation to one another.¹³⁸ As Volosinov says, the utterance “is constructed between two socially organized persons There can be no such thing as an abstract addressee, a man unto himself, so to speak.”¹³⁹ Thus, an utterance or genre with no addressee—with no other—inhabits the realm of the absurd,

for unless we account openly for the speaker's attitude toward the other and his utterances, we cannot understand the genre or the style of speech.¹⁴⁰

Ultimately, the philosophy of the utterance recognizes that the subjective utterance is not an isolated, abstract property of the self, but a lived reality filled with "dialogic overtones." "After all," Bakhtin writes, "our thought itself—philosophical, scientific, and artistic—is born and shaped in the process of interaction and struggle with others' thought, and this cannot but be reflected in the forms that verbally express our thought as well."¹⁴¹ Indeed, speech genres, whether scientific, artistic, or even philosophical ones, as normative forms of the utterance in practice, reflect this essential dialogue, enabling unique individual speakers to express and exchange the primary realities of their own words in the infinite world of the logosphere. By "its very nature," says Bakhtin, life is "dialogic":

To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium.¹⁴²

Human existence is dialogue: it is this insight, Holquist argues, that makes Bakhtin's philosophy of the act and of the utterance distinctive, and perhaps the most powerful, among "several modern epistemologies that seek to grasp human behavior through the use humans make of language."¹⁴³

In terms of the issue of subjectivity and language with which I am concerned here, what Bakhtin and his circle ultimately enable us to do is to rethink the Freudian psychoanalytic subject with its emphasis on the individual's personal unconscious and its largely self-generated talking cure, replacing it with the dialogic subject whose consciousness is always a shared social phenomenon and whose speech is generated by "words and forms that can belong to 'no one.'" For any individual consciousness who lives in it, Bakhtin writes,

language is not an abstract system of normative forms but rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world. All words have the "taste" of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions. Contextual overtones (generic, tendentious, individualistic) are inevitable in the word.¹⁴⁴

With language, then, human subjects are not in a relation of solitary ownership to our words, but in a relative position to others' words, on the boundary between ourselves and others where language is shared. It is not out of a dictionary that a speaker gets his words, says Bakhtin, but out of other people's mouths and contexts. The word is always "half someone else's." I make it my own by suffusing it with my own accent or intention. And some words will resist my appropriation of them: Language is not simply a "neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated—overpopulated—with

the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process.”¹⁴⁶

Indeed, as the Bakhtin circle so convincingly argues, the content of the psyche is socially derived and ideological-linguistic, not simply or primarily private, unconscious organically-based material; and the content of the psyche is individual but never isolated: As a dialogic, speaking subject, “I’ can realize [my]self only on the basis of ‘we.’”¹⁴⁷

Subjectivity and others: intersubjectivity

No human events are developed or resolved within the bounds of a single consciousness No Nirvana is possible for a single consciousness. A single consciousness is contradictio in adjecto. Consciousness is in essence multiple. Pluralia tantum

Not another person remaining the object of my consciousness, but another autonomous consciousness standing alongside mine, and my own consciousness can exist only in relation to it. —M.M. Bakhtin¹⁴⁸

Emphasizing the social quality of personhood as a challenge to Freud's pseudo-scientific and individualistic instinctual ego, Bakhtin's dialogism sees the world as a socio-linguistic field where selves experience, as Pirog puts it, “a subjective need for mutual recognition which arises not merely out of the opposition of the external world to internal nature, but out of a view of the world as an intersubjective field, as the creation of other subjects who can both act and be affected by another's actions.”¹⁴⁹ In Bakhtin's own words, the subject can only be determined in “intersubjective relations.”¹⁵⁰ Thus, what is painfully missing in Freud is

“a principle which accounts for the need for the other in terms of an inescapable seeking after mutuality or intersubjectivity”¹⁵⁰—an acknowledgment of the profound “fatedness of alterity,” which requires that we understand the important role simultaneity plays in human perception and existence. As Holquist puts the dialogic paradox, “we are all unique, but we are never alone. Bakhtin’s enterprise is founded on the situatedness of perception and thus the uniqueness of the person, but it abhors all claims to oneness.”¹⁵¹ Monologism is the concept Bakhtin uses to describe all such claims.

According to Bakhtin, Freudian psychoanalytic theory is monologic; it “denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and equal responsibilities, another I with equal rights (thou). With a monologic approach (in its extreme form) another person remains wholly and merely an object of consciousness, and not another consciousness.”¹⁵² But with a dialogic approach consciousness is not naturally self-motivated, self-contained and object-oriented; it gravitates toward relationships with other consciousnesses; it is “accompanied by a continual sideways glance at another person.”¹⁵³ Here, the self is related, not primarily sexually to others as internalized objects, but emotionally-volitionally (including sexually) to others as other subjects—subjects in mutual existential need of love and completion. “As Bakhtin makes clear in his discussion of the relationship between a mother and her child,” Pirog writes,

the physical, bodily needs of the child are entirely bound to his emotional and cognitive needs. Neither takes precedence over the other. Infantile dependence is not limited to the satisfaction of

libidinal desire through the singular attachment of the child to his mother's breast. It is already a complex relationship in which the child learns to cope with his fragility and dependence by learning to assimilate the intersubjective ground of his own identity. It is the particular way a mother responds to her child, how her particular love complements his need, that gives first form to the developing personality. And this primary relationship is fully reciprocal in that it is not only need that the child expresses but also love.¹⁵⁴

Rather than being internally split or compartmentalized by a boundary between conscious material reality and unconscious psychological reality, the self is itself a boundary phenomenon on the threshold between "one's own and someone else's consciousness"¹⁵⁵ that has social, aesthetic, ethical, and existential value. Rather than being infiltrated and occupied by another as internalized object, the self meets the other on their mutual body boundaries through acts of looking, touching, and speaking, and returns to itself enriched and changed, having, in turn, enriched and changed the other in the process. To be a conscious human subject, then, "means to be for another, and through the other, for oneself. A person has no internal sovereign territory, he is wholly and always on the boundary; looking inside himself, he looks into the eyes of another or with the eyes of another."¹⁵⁶

Interestingly enough, in his critique of Freud, Borch-Jacobsen is also lead to pursue this same notion of the self as a boundary phenomenon, but to quite different ends. Where Bakhtin sees the boundary as a place for the mutual visual, physical, and verbal enabling of self and others as

simultaneous co-consciousnesses, counterposed, yet interrelated,¹⁵⁷ Borch-Jacobsen sees it as an abyssal non-consciousness—as the “point of otherness”—as the place where the conscious sovereign subject loses, rather than finds, the self in the other because the self, in effect (and through mimetic affect—through an hypnotic identificatory emotional tie) “becomes” the other: “Perhaps,” he writes, the Freudian ego “is not ‘master in its own house.’” Perhaps “its house is haunted, its property inhabited by something entirely ‘other.’”¹⁵⁸

Why, Borch-Jacobsen asks, does the other and her consciousness, her word, her discourse, affect me? “Why am I affectable, suggestible, persuadable by the discourse of the other—even, and especially, when he says nothing?”¹⁵⁹ Indeed, the question of the other leads him exactly where it leads Bakhtin, and exactly where Freud (in abandoning hypnosis for the atomistic unconscious) did not want to go: into the solitary ego’s “haunted house” of affect, identification, the emotional (volitional) tie, and intersubjectivity. He writes that to

affirm that “the earliest emotional tie with another person” is identification is, in effect, to assert that affect as such is identificatory, mimetic, and that there is no “proper” affect except on the condition of a prior “affection” of the ego by another. Another does not affect me because I feel such and such an affect in regard to him, nor even because he succeeds in communicating an affect to me by way of words. He affects me because “I” am that “other,” following an identification that is my affection, the strangest alteration of my proper autoaffection.¹⁶⁰

Before ego instincts or verbal persuasion exists a “prior affectability, a (‘spontaneous receptivity’)”¹⁶¹ for Borch-Jacobsen that marks the birth of all subjects in the act of (devouring) incorporation: “Because ‘I am the breast’ (in Freud’s famous phrase), because I am nothing before this earliest identification and because such is my birth, affect comes about—in other words, my being affected (affection) by an otherness (altérité) that is my identity or my ‘selfness’ itself.” “This first ‘emotional tie’ to another,” he continues,

which is also the unrepresentable event of my “own” birth, can never be remembered, never be recalled to memory. This is also why it can never be “dissolved,” as Freud would have it. But (and this is what happens all the time, if it happens) it can be repeated—for example, in hypnotic trance, or in the oblivion of the transference. In the end, in this strange rite of passage that today we call “psychoanalysis,” perhaps the only stake is this: repeating, repeating the other in oneself, dying to oneself—to be reborn, perhaps, other.¹⁶²

So, according to Borch-Jacobsen, for the subject of psychoanalysis to ask who he is— “who thinks, who wishes, who fantasizes” within him—is not in his power. That question takes one beyond oneself and one’s unconscious representations toward the “‘point of otherness’—where I am another, the other who gives me my identity.”¹⁶³ In the beginning is the mimetic identification from which no subject can escape; in the beginning is the other in whom all subjects, to varying degrees, construct their alibis.

While Borch-Jacobsen's deconstructive powers are nothing short of brilliant, and his emphasis on the emotional/social underpinnings of subjectivity a welcome insight, his thinking nonetheless ultimately suffers what Bakhtin would call the trap of monologic theoretical abstraction: unique individual consciousnesses lose their fundamental distinction and become one, while the body literally disappears. Indeed, what Borch-Jacobsen fails to notice is that "affectability" and "spontaneous receptivity" cannot possibly be born prior to but are clearly born simultaneous with the body. What he overlooks is that, even though I do depend for my existence on mimetic identification, there is a crucial sense in which my body and its boundaries (as a gift from the other; as a gesture of the other's affective, emotional-volitional relation to me) are and remain the social and historical, tangible proof of my unique existence in the once-occurrent event of being: because of them I have no alibi in being; because of them I and the other are not interchangeable; because of them consciousnesses do not merge. When lost in mimetic identification or empathy with the other, I never "become" the other; we do not become "one": I merely look with his perspective from the boundary on which we struggle. Indeed, sometimes, in the extremes of pathology, I get confused and seemingly lost on that boundary; yet I am lost, not "in" the other, but more accurately "with" the other, my co-consciousness in the world of intersubjective relations.

In Bakhtin, then, and categorically so, I am not and can never be the other. Granted, I do have the capacity for sympathetic co-experiencing with the other, and I must exercise it, but from a position outside him—

from the position of transgression where affect, mimesis, identification always involve sympathy coupled with a return to my unique position in once-occurrent being—where I enact the boundary-making capacity of my consciousness and give the other’s fragmented inner self sensation the gift of whole outer form—where I take on aspects of the other while remaining myself.¹⁶⁴ In Borch-Jacobsen, in contrast, the crucial capacity of consciousness for boundary-making activity is lost, and the whole subject as an embodied consciousness disappears in theoretical abstraction. In this light, the difference between Freud, Borch-Jacobsen, and Bakhtin might be most simply explained in terms of the monadic (“I am”), dyadic (“I am the other”), and triadic (“I-for-myself, I-for-the-other, the-other-for-me”) structure, respectively, of their models for thinking about human subjectivity.

Bakhtin’s focus in conceptualizing the self as a boundary phenomenon, then, involves broad concepts of loving emotional empathy and aesthetic bodily consummation as basic social and existential needs characteristic of each triadic human consciousness as it finds itself in partnership with other triadic consciousnesses, in contrast to the narrow unconscious sexual instincts and internal object relations that drive Freud’s monadic self, and as Pirog suggests, “result in an unbridgeable gap between subjects, who are for each other merely objects in the world.”¹⁶⁵ Given Bakhtin’s fundamental philosophical distinction between consciousness as a category of the “I” and the body as a category of the other, we have seen how “something like a transparent screen” has to be inserted in triadic consciousness between “my inner self sensation” (the I-for-myself) and my

“outwardly expressed image” (the I-for-the-other and the other-for-me) in order for my inner consciousness and my outward appearance to be joined together to create my “whole self” as an embodied consciousness. That screen is the other’s possible emotional-volitional reaction to my outward appearance— “his possible enthusiasm, love, astonishment, or compassion for me. And looking through this screen of the other’s soul (which is thus reduced to a means), I vivify my exterior and make it part of the plastic and pictorial world.”¹⁶⁶

In his early work on authoring and the philosophy of the act Bakhtin explains how, in infancy and early childhood, we depend on others to be our screen—to participate with us on the boundary and give us this gift of wholeness in what, in his later work on the philosophy of the utterance, he elaborates as the dialogic field of intersubjective consciousness where subjects are determined in relations of “concreteness (name), integrity, answerability, and so forth” in a logosphere of “inexhaustibility” and “open-endedness.”¹⁶⁷ Using bodily gestures and language, we continue this struggle to mutually consummate others as co-consciousnesses throughout life in the unfinalized dialogic socio-linguistic world. However, and this is where Borch-Jacobsen’s thinking on the self as a boundary phenomenon clouds and confuses the issue, we never cease to be our own unique consciousness: “My self-activity comes to meet an other life from outside its bounds,”¹⁶⁸ making pure empathy, in-dwelling, or internalization impossible. In my sympathetic participation with others and their triadic consciousness, I, like them, am always on the boundary, meeting their need for consummation through words or touching gestures,

but always returning to I-for-myself. Bakhtin calls this the activity of “live-entering,” in which “I actively live into [vzhivaiu] an individuality, and consequently do not, for a single moment, lose myself completely or lose my singular place outside that other individuality.”¹⁶⁹ Indeed, when consciousnesses fail to adequately provide this crucial boundary-making activity for each other, they become vulnerable to the cold, dark chaos of I-for-myself—radically open to the rest of the world and therefore simultaneously confused in their self-other relationships and weakened in the authoritative boundary-making value of I-for-the-other and the-other-for-me. The result, as Bakhtin says, is pathological infection of I and the other and the spectre of the double (a ghost that will prove significant to us in terms of the issue of intersubjectivity in the case of David Cronenberg).

In Bakhtin’s formulation of subjectivity, then, unlike in Borch-Jacobsen and Freud’s, there is no alibi in being: I do not become the other and the other does not become me; there is no abstract other internalized in me, nor an atomistic unconscious which splits me ontologically and lets me off the hook of my responsibility, as a unique conscious being, to author the other from the boundaries on which we meet—to locate, consummate, and complete the other’s unique consciousness in space, time, and value.

However, Pirog reminds us, for Bakhtin there is an important sense in which my deepest self, my creative being “resists the utter domination of completion by the other”¹⁷⁰—resists being a mere object in the category of the other for the other. Living on the threshold, on the boundary between myself and others, on the tangent of the world I see, my consciousness “exceeds both nature and the world” of others. For Bakhtin,

“I always have an outlet along the line of my experience of myself I always have a loophole, as it were, through which I can save myself from being no more than a natural given”¹⁷¹—from being no more than the fixed image given to me by the other. Where the other “coincides with himself”¹⁷² from my point of view due to my authoring activity (which gives him the gift of whole form in body and soul which his “I” otherwise does not possess), I myself “never coincide with me myself.” I, as the subject of the act of self-consciousness “exceed the bounds of this act’s content. And this is not a matter of abstract discernment, but a matter rather of securely possessing an intuitionally experienced loophole out of time, out of everything given, everything finitely present on hand.”¹⁷³

In other words, I-for-myself consciousness always involves an “escape hatch” that lets me out of complete finalization. I am always moving. Pirog explains, beyond and ahead of my own biography:

It is the consciousness of the very fact that in the most essential way “I am not yet” that forms the organizing origin of my life outside myself. Because of this dynamism, I can never sum myself up, I myself can never present myself as complete. Bakhtin conceives this situation as a kind of insanity (bezumie) of unfounded faith and hope in the mercy of the other, within whom there is that same madness of in principle not coinciding with herself, that same incompleteness of life, that impels her toward me.¹⁷⁴

From our positions outside each other, tangential to the world, self and other live together, but in a mutual contradiction to each other that has the quality of an active event. At the point where the other experiences

himself as a negative, cold and chaotic ongoing consciousness, the self comes to affirm and validate him with its form-giving energy. It is only in dialogue and consummative activity—only “within structures of discourse”¹⁷⁵ where my “I” as internal speech, as unofficial consciousness, struggles with the demands of authoritative others and institutions, with external speech as official consciousness—that I can reveal and represent my deepest self, and be given by the other (given the gift of form), but nonetheless never submit to ultimate finalization.

The key point for Bakhtin is that my deepest inner speech is always dialogically oriented. It is discourse which finds itself in contact and conversation with another’s discourse, yet it does not fuse with it, swallow it up, or become dissolved in its “power to mean.”¹⁷⁶ This dynamic struggle and dialogic interrelationship between my discourse as “internally persuasive discourse” and another’s discourse as “authoritative discourse,” then, is the authentic speech activity that determines the history of my unique “individual ideological consciousness.”¹⁷⁷ In this light, my consciousness evolves dialogically by awakening “to independent ideological life” within the world of alien discourses that surround it. Initially, I cannot separate myself from those discourses. Only as I develop do I come to distinguish between my thought and your thought, my discourse and yours. In fact, the hallmark of human development is the ability to separate one’s own internally persuasive discourse from others’ authoritative discourse, such that one’s thought begins to work “in an independent, experimenting and discriminating way.” Internally persuasive discourse evolves through assimilation of one’s own word and someone

else's. They are organized together from within us and animate our relationships with new words and new contexts. Thus, Bakhtin sees our ideological development as an active struggle within us for hegemony among "various available verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions and values. The semantic structure of an internally persuasive discourse is not finite, it is open; in each of the new contexts that dialogize it, this discourse is able to reveal ever newer ways to mean."¹⁷⁸ As Pirog puts it, the self is formed as a continual process of internalizing the voices of others and realigning "our self-image in light of what we believe others have given us of ourselves," so that "[h]ow one carries out the task of becoming conscious is, for Bakhtin, accomplished intersubjectively through the interpenetration of voices in dialogue."¹⁷⁹

Holquist agrees: it is in dialogue—in the word—that consciousness is there and manifest; otherwise, he observes, as the ongoing, unbounded, infinite once-occurrent event of being, it simply cannot see itself:

So as always to be an open site where the event of existence can have its occurrence, the self must never stop in time or be fixed in space. Since, however, being finished in time and being specifically located in space are conditions necessary for being "seen" in perception, the self is by definition invisible to itself. In the wake of a still-potent Romanticism, it is necessary to repeat that there is nothing mysterious about this invisibility, for it is merely structural. The self's non-referentiality can be understood by analogy with the non-referentiality of "I" as the first person pronoun in natural language. If each is to perform its function of indicating a unique

place that must be shared by everybody (which is what the self marks in existence, and what the “I” marks in language), then they must both refer to nothing—or at least not refer to anything in the same manner other signs refer.¹⁸¹

The self is by definition invisible to itself, and, for Holquist, this invisibility is akin to the invisibility of the unconscious, but he does not interpret it as mysterious, uncanny, or unfathomable. It is simply a general token of absence that can be filled in any particular utterance. It is invisible only at the level of system. At the level of performance, in the event of an utterance, the meaning of “I” can always be seen. It can be said, then, that the pronoun “I” marks the point of articulation between the pre-existing, repeatable system of language and my unique, unrepeatable existence as a particular person in a specific social and historical situation.¹⁸²

“Existence, like language,” Holquist continues, is a “shared event”—a “border incident” that both separates and connects the “immediate reality of my own living particularity (a uniqueness that presents itself as only for me) with the reality of the system that precedes me in existence (that is always-already-there) and which is intertwined with everyone and everything else.”¹⁸³

Where Pirog would challenge Holquist’s interpretation of the intersubjective dialogic self, however, is on the same point on which he challenges what he calls Volosinov’s rather too “objective” definition of inner experience: on his seemingly categorical dismissal of the significance of any gap between my deepest self—my invisible I-for-myself—and my

capacity to present it by uttering it—any gap, that is, between psyche and ideology.¹⁸² In other words, Pirog asks, is all inner experience necessarily knowable and accessible? Where the meaning of “I” can always clearly be seen as a manifestation of dialogue, can it always be clearly understood? What Pirog is getting at, of course, is the double-sided problem of creativity and pathology, where normative meanings and ways of speaking are deliberately side-stepped and challenged on the one hand, and where words do not become properly social on the other hand, and so the communication of meaning is obstructed.

For Pirog the question that cannot be ignored is: What are the senses in which a subject can hide from dialogue? In Freud, of course, the monadic individual ego flees libidinal-instinctual demands and the reality principle through repression, such that “conscious motivations present in the public use of language are transformed into unconscious, as it were, delinguisticized motives.” In other words, they are censored. “The ego denies identity with this defended against part of the psyche, the id, ‘which is represented mediately in observable symptoms and immediately in pathological, ‘paleo-symbolic’ elements that creep into language.’”¹⁸³ In contrast, Pirog observes, in his thinking on creativity, pathology, and the unsayable through the work of Dostoevsky, Bakhtin “does not deny the existence of something like the unconscious” inhabiting the gap between ideology and psyche where the I-for-myself can hide.¹⁸⁴ Bakhtin includes what Freud takes to be the “id” or “unconscious” in all those forces that “lie outside” individual consciousness and externally define it (forces “from environment and violence to miracle, mystery, and authority”); but in that

place, under the influence of these forces, consciousness “loses its authentic freedom, and personality is destroyed.”¹⁸⁵

Why? Because for Bakhtin only a genuine dialogic relationship could constitute the freedom of an authentic individual subjectivity; because, as Pirog writes, “[o]nly in a relationship of genuine, responsive understanding do I and other reciprocally constitute each other as individuals with equal rights and equal responsibilities and mutually recognize in each other an equal and free consciousness rather than the object of consciousness.” Language, rather than reflecting beings in the world, expresses a relationship between beings. Consciousness, as we have seen, does not gravitate toward itself as a finite whole but toward relationship with other unfinalized consciousnesses. “For Bakhtin,” Pirog continues,

what I can honestly and freely know about myself can only be known ‘while revealing myself for another, through another and with the help of another.’ Only the dialogic nature of consciousness liberates us by preventing our finalizing ourselves and each other in external objectifications and reifying definitions. The exclusion of the unconscious is not a denial of its existence but an epistemological strategy aimed not only at delimiting what it is about being that we can know and understand, but also at safeguarding against authoritative utterances which reify, dominate and oppress.¹⁸⁶

In Bakhtin, the principle of dialogic intersubjectivity precludes any meaningful retreat into an absolute private realm of withdrawal and escape from the social on the part of an individual subject. Certainly the zone of

I-for-myself is something like the personal, private, subjective unconscious in that it is purely my unique place in existence, and I-and-only-I can fill it. But the dialogic nature of language and consciousness preclude overemphasis on it at the expense of its place in “the system of coordinates ‘I-for-myself and another person.’”¹⁸⁷

Indeed, as Bakhtin understands it, the I-for-myself is characterized by a kind of radical freedom and open-endedness.¹⁸⁸ It has a liminal quality, touching both my deepest inner self sensation or spirit that is the most unprocessed by society and ideology (I-for-myself), and my being toward others (I-for-the-other, the other-for-me). Pushed to its extreme limits in one direction, my I-for-myself attempts to be for itself, to have the final word, to hide from dialogic relationship, to deny the “I” of others and be the one and only “I”, to live only in the loophole and not toward the other’s consciousness. Living in the loophole as I-for-myself, I try to “get around the other’s words and to replace them in [my] soul with an affirmation of [my] own self”—I try to “free [my]self from the power of the other’s consciousness and to break through to [my] self for the self alone”—and so I am in danger of inhabiting the place of madness where I try to sum myself up, present myself as complete and whole and without need of the other’s consummative powers. Yet, while living in the loophole can represent ultimate pathology, it can also represent ultimate creativity for Bakhtin. For the loophole is also the place of the creative sideways glance, the shared word, the dialogic.¹⁸⁹ Pushed in the other direction, my I-for-myself enters the logosphere where I agree to or am forced to “reveal and explain [myself] dialogically.”¹⁹⁰ In the I-for-

myself, in consciousness, then, I am forever in the loophole where I have the option of trying to get out of the dialogue and be for-myself and where I have the freedom of glancing toward the other in answerability and responsiveness. In a profound sense, then, we can see Bakhtin's loophole as the stage, the place, the zone of the uttered act—it is the site of the Janus-faced subject who looks, as we have seen in Toward a Philosophy of the Act, in two directions: at the domain of culture, and at the never-representable and ongoing uniqueness of actually lived and experienced life in the once-occurrent event of Being.

What this suggests is that for Bakhtin the active, creative, unique subject can best be defined as having, not a personal unconscious that is an isolated and enclosed “microcosm” with “its own little history, its own little natural world,”¹⁹¹ but an “unfinalized and undecided core” of consciousness oriented in the potential “struggle, argument, and agreement” of internally persuasive discourse, external discourse, and the dialogic.¹⁹² This core can harden up and refuse speech, it can enter into dialogue willingly, or it can be invited, teased, forced into dialogue by the other's provocative word. In any case, it is the relation of core to core, zone to zone, consciousness to consciousness that guarantees each intersubjective consciousness their “individual freedom, but also establishes the possibility for a genuine community.”¹⁹³ Every subject indeed has a private and intimate side to their life and can hide the truth about himself from himself and others, writes Pirog, and dialogism does not deny this possibility; but what is at stake for Bakhtin is “what a person can reveal about him or herself ‘in a free act of self-consciousness and discourse’ without

submitting to an externalizing, reifying, second-hand definition.” The process of consciousness awakening to an independent ideological life is exactly the struggle that occurs between the demands of normative, generic, authoritative discourse and the agency of the self’s internally persuasive discourse. Moreover, it is a process of moral development, wherein active engagement with the discourse of the other leads to a gradual liberation from the other’s authority. “In this process,” Pirog continues,

the element of authority that was simply domination can be replaced by the less violent force of insight and rational decision. The penetrating word, never sovereign or decisive, plays a crucial role in this process as it ‘actively and confidently [interferes] in the interior dialogue of the other person, helping that person to find his own voice.’ It interrogates and provokes self-consciousness into revealing and representing itself without giving it a predetermined or finalized image. It is a kind of speech act [my emphasis] that influences the hearer in such a way that he or she can take up an authentic interpersonal relation with the speaker.¹⁹⁴

Thus, with others and through others, intersubjectively, as an author among authors, the speaking subject “invests his entire self in discourse” from the point of view of life/being/creativity, and “this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life” from the point of view of art/content-sense/culture.¹⁹⁵ It is to David Cronenberg and his heroes as such discursive, or dialogic intersubjectivities that I will now turn.

Discourse in life and discourse in art: aesthetic activity in David Cronenberg

Discourse is like a “scenario” of the immediate act of communication in the process of which it is engendered, and this act of communication is, in turn, a factor of the wider field of communication of the community to which the speaker belongs. In order to understand this “scenario,” it is essential to reconstruct all those complex social interrelations of which the given utterance is the ideological refraction.—V.N. Volosinov¹⁹⁶

Through the Bakhtin circle’s thinking on authorship and (inter)subjectivity we begin to see the typical discussions of Cronenberg and his heroes—those that unfold as romantic meditations on his fundamental genius as an auteur, and/or as psychoanalytic accounts of the shocking depths of the morass of his personal unconscious—as perhaps more obfuscatory than explanatory of what is actually being communicated by the artist as a discursive subject (a co-being, a co-consciousness) in his work. Thinking in terms of Bakhtin’s philosophies of the act and the utterance and their reconfiguration of authoring and subjectivity, respectively, we begin to see how Cronenberg’s authorial voice as a speaking subject is dialogized, how “no single instance” of his artistic utterances “can be reckoned exclusively to [their] utterer’s account.” “Every utterance,” Volosinov reminds us, “is the product of the interaction between speakers and the product of the broader context of the whole complex social situation in which the utterance emerges.” Whether a simple speech act in daily life, or a complex work of art, the utterance takes its form and meaning, not from the isolated subjectivity of the

speaker, but from the speaker in her social milieu. Art, like any ideological-discursive form, is “immanently social,” reflecting in its author-hero relation the self-other relation in real life, reflecting in its discursive scenario of the “living communication” among speaker, hero, and audience the living discursive communication among speaker, topic, and listener in real life:

“the artistic” in its total integrity is not located in the artifact and not located in the separately considered psyches of creator and contemplator; it encompasses all three of these factors. It is a special form of interrelationship between creator and contemplator fixed in a work of art.

A “sociological poetics” is required, Volosinov emphatically asserts, to “understand this special form of social communication realized and fixed in the material of a work of art” so as to apprehend the special uniqueness of its communicative form.¹⁹⁷

As Bakhtin understands it from this point of view of a sociological poetics, then, art is not the reified realm outside culture and social life that David Cronenberg and others have claimed it is—not the property of the psyche of the individual genius. Rather, the aesthetic, like the theoretical, must be brought into “communion with Being”—with actually lived and experienced life through the potential of the performed act to unify content/sense (art, theory, science) and Being (life).¹⁹⁸ Art, as a constituent of the ongoing creativity of the unique once-occurrent event of a subject’s being, is brought into social discourse as the performed aesthetic activity of the author who, we will recall from Toward a Philosophy of the

Act, straddles Being and content/sense, life and culture. Thus, the otherwise “impervious worlds” of culture and life are joined in the author’s answerable act which reflects or speaks in both directions (toward Being and toward discursive content)—are brought together and enabled to interpenetrate via Cronenberg as a unique and once-occurrent but co-conscious speaking subject and his films as poetic utterances.

Considered in terms of Bakhtin’s Janus-faced understanding of aesthetic activity, then, Cronenberg’s utterances must be examined in both their aspects: as looking on the one hand toward content/sense/culture, and on the other hand toward his unique being/creativity/life; as looking on the one hand back toward the implications of social discourse and ideology on his work, and on the other hand forward toward the implications of his ongoing authorial creative consciousness and his relationship to the heroes he creates in a world dominated by the fundamental architectonic principle of I and the other and a concomitant intersubjectivity. They must be examined, that is, as tension-filled concrete amalgams of both general and individual language styles.

As regards the first aspect, culture (or general language style), I will use chapter four to look at Cronenberg’s poetic utterances in terms of the way they answer what we have established are the requirements of social-discursive heteroglossia; that is, in terms of their dialogic context in the heteroglot world of culture which, as we have seen, always involves audience, situation, and speech genre. Volosinov articulates this dialogic relationship between utterance, audience, situation and speech genre as one in which

Situation and audience make inner speech undergo actualization into some kind of specific outer expression that is directly included into an un verbalized behavioral context and in that context is amplified by actions, behavior, or verbal responses of other participants of the utterance The very type of structure these little behavioral genres will achieve is determined by the effect of its coming up against the extraverbal milieu and against another word (i.e., the words of other people).¹⁹⁹

Thus the poet, Volosinov suggests, is not isolated in his utterances but rather

acquires his words and learns to intone them over the course of his entire life in the process of his every-sided contact with his environment. The poet begins to use those words and intonations already in the inner speech with the help of which he thinks and becomes conscious of himself, even when he does not produce utterances A poet's style is engendered from the style of his inner speech, which does not lend itself to control, and his inner speech is itself the product of his entire social life. "Style is the man," they say; but we might say: Style is at least two persons or, more accurately, one person plus his social group . . . —the constant participant in a person's inner and outward speech.²⁰⁰

What I will do, from a feminist perspective, is to situate Cronenberg's poetic utterances in the contemporary discursive context of the issue of gender, androcentric values, and the vicissitudes of institutionalized

masculine subjectivity, and to examine their stylistic debt as such to the horror genre.

Then, as regards the second aspect, lived life (or individual language style), I will use chapter five to look at Cronenberg's utterances in terms of the way they answer what we have established are the requirements of their own language as individualized embodiments of the speech act; that is, in terms of the form of the emotional-volitional tone with which Cronenberg, as an author in aesthetic activity based in the self-other relation in real life, reacts to his male heroes and has them react to each other in his films. For the form of a poetic work, Volosinov again suggests, is determined "by how the author perceives his hero—the hero who serves as the organizing center of the utterance"²⁰¹—the hero as an other consciousness.

The guiding question that will emerge at the end of this feminist dialogic analysis of Cronenberg and his work is this: What forms of intersubjective relationship between I and the other, what forms of consummative activity, what forms of answerability, response, and recognition, get "fixed" in David Cronenberg's art? What I hope to demonstrate is that Cronenberg's work is not a private romantic monologue that comes out the content of his personal unconscious, but part of a shared dialogue between his unique and once-occurrent consciousness and the other—the social world manifested in his attitude to his heroes and their attitudes to each other. Indeed, as L.A. Radzikhovskii observes, consciousness, in art as in life, is not homogeneous but dialogic; it is based not in the logical "necessity to convey or obtain certain information (content)" but in the existential "need of a person to relate to another."

Consciousness or mind, he writes, “has something in it that is distinct from its content, something that organizes that content, gives it weight and reality.” The artist is really trying, not to express content, but to convey this “something,” this “other” in the word or utterance as the meeting point of “the reality of the world and one’s own mind”²⁰² It is to a dialogic feminist analysis of this activity in David Cronenberg that I will now turn, showing how the social world and the author’s intersubjective consciousness meet in the stylized generic utterance.

Notes

¹ Freudianism: A Critical Sketch, trans. I.R. Titunik, ed. Neal H. Bruss (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1976) is a key work in the Bakhtin-Freud dialogue authored by V.N. Volosinov. As Michael Holquist describes it, Volosinov was a member of a group of Russian intellectuals and friends who came together in Nevel and Vitebsk in 1918 to debate contemporary philosophical and political issues—a group that has come to be known as the “Bakhtin circle,” after Mikhail Bakhtin, its “intellectually dominant member” (Holquist, Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 3). Holquist writes that while “Bakhtin’s interests were broad,” they were

no more so than those of the group of young people he joined in 1918, although it was the latest work in philosophy that attracted their most passionate attention. It was here, in the study and disputation of texts by contemporary German philosophers, that the nucleus of an ongoing ‘Bakhtin circle’ was formed. It included the then musicologist Valentin Voloshinov, and the then journalist and organizer of literary events Pavel Medvedev, both of whose names would later become entwined with Bakhtin’s in disputes over the authorship of several texts written in the 1920s (3-4).

For further discussion of the Bakhtin circle and the ongoing debates over the authorship of the works it produced, see Katerina Clark and Holquist’s Mikhail Bakhtin (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Belknap, 1984); Gary Saul Morson, “Who Speaks for Bakhtin?: A Dialogic Introduction,” Critical Inquiry 10:2 (December 1983); Nina Perlina, “Bakhtin, Medvedev,

Volosinov: An Apple of Discourse,” University of Ottawa Quarterly 53:1 (1983); and Irwin Titunik, “Bakhtin &/or Volosinov &/or Medvedev: Dialogue &/or Doubletalk,” in Language and Literary Theory ed. Benjamin A. Stolz et al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984). My concern here is not with these debates but with the significance of Freud for Volosinov and the Bakhtin circle as it grew out of the group’s participation in “attempts to found a Marxist psychology” in the Soviet Union of the 1920s, which compelled them to interrogate Freudianism and to “engage the issue of Freud’s place in psychological theory” (Clark and Holquist, 171).

² Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, Mikhail Bakhtin (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 1984), 181-182.

³ Volosinov, Freudianism, 114-115.

⁴ Clark and Holquist. Mikhail Bakhtin. 65.

⁵ Holquist, Dialogism, 19.

⁶ James V. Wertsch, foreword to Freudianism: A Critical Sketch, by V.N. Volosinov, trans. I.R. Titunik, ed. I.R. Titunik and Neal H. Bruss (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1976), ix-x.

⁷ See, for example, Gerald Pirog, “The Bakhtin Circle’s Freud: From Positivism to Hermeneutics,” Poetics Today 8:3-4 (1987). Between Volosinov’s Freudianism and later work of Bakhtin’s own, Pirog sees “two distinct views on the unconscious” (592), each related to a different philosophical tradition—Volosinov’s to Marxist materialist scientism; Bakhtin’s to hermeneutics. He writes that while

acknowledging Freud's contribution of having brought language to the center of psychological inquiry, Volosinov accuses him of blindness to his own discovery. But Volosinov is equally blind to a fundamental problem in his own critique. His approach is marked by a scientific bias that forces him into an 'objectivism' which not only founds his critique of Freud, but also makes it impossible for him to see certain aspects of Freud's writings on language and human interaction which are in fact at least comparable to Bakhtin's, which view the object of study in a fundamentally different way from that of the natural sciences (593).

Volosinov's method is "that of the natural sciences whose 'objectivism assumes the existence of a world of self-subsistent facts whose lawlike connections can be grasped descriptively, apart from the structures of experience and action'" (594). Thus, Pirog finds that "Volosinov's insistence that there are underlying laws which govern human behavior is in marked contrast to Bakhtin's writings where the emphasis is always on man's 'unfinalizability,' freedom, liberation, action" (594), and his article goes on to explore that contrast.

⁸ Wertsch, forward to Freudianism, xiii.

⁹ Volosinov, Freudianism, 83.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹¹ Gerald Pirog, "Bakhtin and Freud on the Ego," in Russian Literature and Psychoanalysis, ed. Daniel Rancour-Laferriere (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1989), 402.

- 12 Sigmund Freud, "The Ego and the Id," in On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis, trans. James Strachey, ed. Angela Richards, The Pelican Freud Library vol. 11 (London: Penguin, 1984), 362.
- 13 Pirog, "Bakhtin and Freud," 403.
- 14 Freud, "The Ego and the Id," 364-365.
- 15 Pirog, "Bakhtin and Freud," 403.
- 16 Freud, "The Ego and the Id," 368-369.
- 17 Pirog, "Bakhtin and Freud," 404.
- 18 Ibid., 405.
- 19 Volosinov, Freudianism, 11.
- 20 Clark and Holquist, Mikhail Bakhtin, 175-176.
- 21 Volosinov, Freudianism, 71.
- 22 Ibid., 72.
- 23 Ibid., 14.
- 24 Ibid., 15.
- 25 Pirog, "Bakhtin and Freud," 406.
- 26 Holquist, Dialogism, 12.
- 27 Ibid., 165.
- 28 Ibid., 165.
- 29 Ibid., 165-166.
- 30 Pirog, "Bakhtin and Freud," 407-408.
- 31 Ibid., 408-409.
- 32 Ibid., 409.
- 33 Ibid., 407.

- 34 Michael Holquist, "Answering as Authoring: Mikhail Bakhtin's Trans-Linguistics," in Bakhtin: Essays and Dialogues on His Work, ed. Gary Saul Morson (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 69.
- 35 Ibid., 69.
- 36 Clark and Holquist, Mikhail Bakhtin, 175.
- 37 M.M. Bakhtin, "From Notes Made in 1970-71," in Speech Genres & Other Late Essays, trans. Vern W. McGee, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 141.
- 38 Volosinov, Freudianism, 12,14.
- 39 Freud, "The Ego and the Id," 351.
- 40 Sigmund Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams, trans. and ed. James Strachey, The Pelican Freud Library vol. 4 (London: Penguin, 1976), 773.
- 41 Ibid., 773.
- 42 Ibid., 226, 776, 782.
- 43 Volosinov, Freudianism, 30.
- 44 Ibid., 34.
- 45 Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, Studies on Hysteria, trans. and ed. James and Alix Strachey, The Pelican Freud Library vol. 3, (London: Penguin, 1974), 54-56, 63, 376.
- 46 Ibid., 58, 59.
- 47 Ibid., 83.
- 48 Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams, 772.
- 49 Freud, Studies on Hysteria, 392.

- 50 Volosinov, Freudianism, 35. See Freud's works on art and literature, particularly those on Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo in Art and Literature, trans. and ed. James Strachey, The Pelican Freud Library vol. 14, (London: Penguin, 1985).
- 51 Ibid., 45.
- 52 Freud, "The Ego and the Id," 357.
- 53 Volosinov, Freudianism, 47.
- 54 Ibid., 47-48.
- 55 See Freud, "The Unconscious," in On Metapsychology, trans. and ed. James Strachey, The Pelican Freud Library vol. 11 (London: Penguin, 1984), 206-207; and see also Freud, "The Ego and the Id," 358.
- 56 Freud, "The Ego and the Id," 401.
- 57 Volosinov, Freudianism, 48.
- 58 Freud, "The Ego and the Id," 393.
- 59 Holquist, Dialogism, 49.
- 60 Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, The Freudian Subject, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 4.
- 61 Ibid., 4, 5.
- 62 Ibid., 147.
- 63 Ibid., 149.
- 64 Sigmund Freud, "Transference," in Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis, ed. James Strachey and Angela Richards, trans. James Strachey, The Pelican Freud Library vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1973), 498.
- 65 Borch-Jacobsen, The Freudian Subject, 150.

- 66 Ibid., 150.
- 67 See Freud, "Transference." 498-500.
- 68 Ibid., 150.
- 69 Volosinov, Freudianism, 49.
- 70 Ibid., 76.
- 71 V.N. Volosinov, Marxism and the Philosophy of Language, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1973), 29.
- 72 Ibid., 77.
- 73 Ibid., 77.
- 74 Ibid., 80.
- 75 Clark and Holquist, Mikhail Bakhtin, 180.
- 76 Volosinov, Marxism, 12, 11.
- 77 Ibid., 12.
- 78 Ibid., 28.
- 79 For a contemporary popular critique of Freud's concept of repression, see Fredrick Crews, "The Revenge of the Repressed." The New York Review 17 November (1994), 54-60 (and "Letters to the Editor," 42-48); and "The Revenge of the Repressed: Part II," The New York Review 1 December (1994), 49-58. The question of repression is at the centre of a lively debate around the validity of memories of childhood sexual abuse that are being therapeutically "recovered" in epidemic proportions in North America in recent years. Crews has written an incisive and informative, if vitriolic and occasionally reductive, two-part article that

analyses the “recovered memory movement” and questions, not only its use of repression, but the very value of repression as both a scientific concept and a therapeutic tool.

80 Volosinov, Freudianism, 88.

81 Ibid., 87.

82 Volosinov, Marxism, 26.

83 Ibid., 14.

84 Ibid., 29.

85 Clark and Holquist, Mikhail Bakhtin, 180.

86 Volosinov, Marxism, 33.

87 Ibid., 34.

88 Volosinov, Freudianism, 85.

89 Ibid., 21.

90 Caryl Emerson. “Bakhtin and Vygotsky on Internalization of Language,” The Quarterly Newsletter of the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition,” 5:1 (January 1983): 9, 10.

91 L.S. Vygotsky. Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes, ed. Michael Cole et al. (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1978), 57.

92 Wertsch, forward to Freudianism, x. See Wertsch’s Voices of the Mind: A Sociocultural Approach to Mediated Action (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991) where he stages a very insightful and useful dialogue between Vygotsky and Bakhtin; see also Wertsch’s

Vygotsky and the Social Formation of Mind (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1985).

⁹³ To explain this process Vygotsky uses the example of the development of the act of pointing in children:

Initially, this gesture is nothing more than an unsuccessful attempt to grasp something, a movement aimed at a certain object which designates forthcoming activity. The child attempts to grasp an object placed beyond his reach; his hands, stretched toward that object, remain poised in the air. His fingers make grasping movements. At this initial stage pointing is represented by the child's movement, which seems to be pointing to an object—that and nothing more.

When the mother comes to the child's aid and realizes his movement indicates something, the situation changes fundamentally. Pointing becomes a gesture for others. The child's unsuccessful attempt engenders a reaction not from the object he seeks but from another person. Consequently, the primary meaning of that unsuccessful grasping movement is established by others. Only later, when the child can link his unsuccessful grasping movement to the objective situation as a whole, does he begin to understand this movement as pointing. At this juncture there occurs a change in that movement's function: from an object-oriented movement it becomes a movement aimed at another person, a means of establishing relations. The grasping movement changes to the act of pointing....

Its meaning and functions are created at first by an objective situation and then by people who surround the child (Vygotsky, Mind in Society, 56).

94 Emerson. "Bakhtin and Vygotsky," 10.

95 Wertsch. forward to Freudianism, x.

96 Emerson. "Bakhtin and Vygotsky," 11.

97 Ibid., 11.

98 Ibid., 11

99 Ibid., 11, 12.

100 Volosinov, Marxism. 15.

101 Ibid., 81. See also Bakhtin's, "Toward a Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book," in Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) where he writes that "the discovery of the internal uniqueness of consciousness does not contradict materialism. Consciousness comes second, it is born at a specific stage in the development of the material organism, and it dies (also objectively) together with the material organism (sometimes even before it)..." (290).

102 Volosinov, Freudianism, 83.

103 Volosinov, Marxism. 38.

104 Volosinov, Freudianism, 86.

105 Wertsch, Voices of the Mind. 13.

106 Volosinov, Marxism, 41.

- 107 Bakhtin. "From Notes Made in 1970-71," in Speech Genres & Other Late Essays, trans. Vern W. McGee, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 144.
- 108 Ibid., 152, 158.
- 109 Ibid., 143.
- 110 M.M Bakhtin, "Discourse in Dostoevsky," in Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 202.
- 111 M.M. Bakhtin. "The Problem of Speech Genres," in Speech Genres & Other Late Essays, trans. Vern W. McGee, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 88.
- 112 M.M. Bakhtin. "Discourse in the Novel," in The Dialogic Imagination, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 280.
- 113 Ibid., 279.
- 114 Ibid., 293.
- 115 Bakhtin. "Notes," 138.
- 116 Ibid., 136.
- 117 Ibid., 134.
- 118 Ibid., 145.
- 119 Ibid., 142.
- 120 Volosinov, Marxism, 96.
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Chapter 4

Masculinity and the Horror Genre

At the conclusion of chapter one I suggested that a central current underlying this project is to reintroduce crucial questions of value into thinking about authoring and subjectivity in general, and to examine their relevance in the case of David Cronenberg in particular. Having reconfigured the romantic myth of the author and the Freudian myth of the atomistic male psyche as they bear on Cronenberg in terms of a dialogic concept of the ethical and aesthetic foundations of intersubjectivity, what I would like to do now is to further contextualize that concept from a specifically feminist perspective on masculinity and cultural values. In other words, I will bring dialogism and feminism together to interpret the world and the work of this controversial artist who has heretofore largely been understood as challenging hegemonic forms and values.

In contrast to this popular interpretation, I will argue that intersubjective relations in the films of David Cronenberg are hardly radically anti-establishment; rather, they unfold quite clearly in a world of established androcentric values. His utterances, formulated in a general language style imbued with those values and realized through the genre of horror, must be understood in terms of the vicissitudes of institutionalized masculine subjectivity in late twentieth-century North American culture—a form of subjectivity involving quite romantic, narcissistic, and phallic attitudes to other subjects and their embodied being. What I will demonstrate in the pages ahead, and from the point of view of a feminist

audience, is that the situation in which Cronenberg lives, and the speech genre of horror in which he chooses to work, can be fruitfully examined, and a dialogic sociological poetics on his art begun, that no longer reifies him as a genius standing outside his culture and social life, or blindly valorizes his images of masculine withdrawal in the face of others, but rather contextualizes him as a gendered speaking subject who is answerable and responsible for communicating and promulgating aesthetic and ethical values in life and art.

Cronenberg and a feminist dialogics

Questions of the “aesthetic value” of authoring in Cronenberg and of “quality” in his work, we will recall, have haunted critics like William Beard, who lament contemporary forms of theorizing that have dismissed these bases of inquiry as antiquated, regressive, illegitimate—forms such as postmodernism and post-structuralism. In these “post,” or better, “posthumous” days of the dead author, Patricia Yaeger concurs, it has become “sexy” to “talk about silence:”

We like to celebrate the unspoken, the unsaid, the unsayable. To cozy up to the abyss, the lacuna, the rupture, the mise en abyme. We are in love with the aporia, the differand, the unknowable, the nonsymbolizable: these phantasms, these negativities, these slim deliriums have become our textual goddesses, our political deities.”¹

Authoring and subjectivity have been deconstructed, becoming, in a word, devalued.

Nevertheless, as Holquist remarks, the “issue of value” remains central to dialogic thinking as an increasingly influential contemporary paradigm countering our seduction by the abyss, and as such it “requires us to invoke two terms that Post-structuralism has rendered notoriously suspect: ‘human subject’ and ‘intention.’”² As we have seen in chapters two and three, dialogism—with its emphasis on the author as a conscious speaking subject who performs an activity of perception that frames the self-other relation, who performs the consummative activity of answerability and responsiveness in a world dominated by the self-other distinction—is able to challenge the absences dominating “post” thinking, filling them up with the aesthetic and ethical value of authoring and intersubjectivity. As Yaeger puts it, the dialogic

stands apart: it refuses to celebrate the arcane and unspeakable. The word’s roots make this plain: “dia-” with its connotation of togetherness, and “legesthai,” meaning to tell, to talk. To talk with one another, to argue, to exchange information—these activities assume the importance of voice, of presence, of deliberate intersubjectivity, and urge us to re-investigate our commitment to the critically fashionable sounds of silence.³

With dialogism, we pragmatically fill our once-occurent place in being with the help of others as our partners in being.

Moreover, in Barry Rutland’s estimation, dialogism has truly remarkable explanatory power compared to the fragmented insights of post-structuralism. It is able to include all of the latter’s key concepts—namely, the triad of subject, truth, and power—but in “a more coherent

form than their appearance piecemeal in the writings of the maître penseurs of the formation.” He explains that while

Bakhtin has much to say about intentionality, meaning is not the projection of the utterer as Transcendental Ego, but the effect of the relationship among utterances in a temporal chain of responsiveness or answerability. The community, the culture, now at once and through time, make utterance and meaning; the individual is precipitated as a subject within this ongoing process. Thus the Bakhtinian subject is consonant although not wholly identical with the poststructuralist subject. Likewise the Bakhtinian conceptions of truth and of power. Truth (as value) is not anterior to discourse but is continuously constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed in discursive interchange. The ground of truth is desire for empowerment among subjects—the need to be a subject, a recognized participant in the collectivity, speaking and acting within and from a specific position or complex of positions relative to other subjects and their positions. Desire, discourse and power fold over upon one another. But power is not reified in the Bakhtinian scheme (as it tends to be in the Foucaultian): it is a matter of ratios of dominance and resistance, of monologic contest and resolution within the encompassing ongoing dialogic process, situated within and between subjects, individual and collective.⁴

The need to be a subject, to participate with others deliberately and with intention in giving boundaries to ongoing consciousness, to be recognized and to recognize others in social reality: these are the values dialogism

promulgates. Thus, Holquist writes, it is important to emphasize that the terms “human subject” and “intention” as they are put forward by dialogism, “are neither monologic nor dialectic.” The ‘subject,’ always stratified by the other, does not “imply a consciousness in itself.” And ‘intention’ does not “signify a direct correlation between inner plan and outer act directed toward a specific telos: for all deeds are connected to the deeds of others, so their meanings can never be grasped in themselves or from the point of view of a supra-situational end.”⁵

For my purposes, it is here, where dialogism reintroduces the individual subject and intention to social and political theorizing in contemporary culture, that it intersects in important ways with the interests of feminism in the gendered voice, agency and “the other.” Of course, as Maroussia Hajdukowski-Ahmed points out, Bakhtin himself would not have seen the connections—obviously, because he himself prefigures the core feminist theorizing that has developed over the last three decades, but also because of a certain patriarchally-based obliviousness: “It is a paradox indeed,” she writes, “that the great thinker of alterity, whose whole philosophical project argues for respect for the Other, seems to have removed from sight (and mind) the Other par excellence: woman and the feminine.”⁶ While “woman” does figure in important ways in Bakhtin’s work on the emotional-volitional tone in the self-other relation, and on Rabelais, for example, we women nonetheless remain a “blind spot” in his thinking in terms of overt recognition of our status as patriarchy’s devalued “other”⁷ and our relegation to the culturally feminized realm of the body, affect, and connectedness. There is a “male-centeredness” in

Bakhtin criticism, Yaeger agrees, that clearly demands redress in the form of “resistance from the margins that Bakhtin applauded but refused to gender.”⁸

Yet while Bakhtin himself may have excluded women as full subjects, Myriam Diaz-Diocaretz argues, “the foundations of the dialogic do not exclude a feminist position as a legitimate focus.”⁹ In “rejecting the gender deterministic notion of woman as the other, and changing it to ‘woman and the other,’” she writes,

a new field of inquiry lies ahead to study this “other” in discourse, and the “voices,” forms, correlations and contexts of this “other” when the speaking and writing subject is a woman. Bakhtin has offered a rethinking of what constitutes discourse, the social, the political, the individual, the community, in the relation of the self to the other.¹⁰

Indeed, as active subjects participating with intention in the dialogue, we can and are mobilizing a gendered resistance in opposition to the ways patriarchy interprets the world and communicates, such that, according to Diaz-Diocaretz, “one of the central feminist axioms proposed and amply demonstrated to-date is that gender plays a crucial role in the modes of apprehending and assigning value in the production and reception of different forms of communication.”¹¹

In appropriating and reworking Bakhtin’s emphasis on intention in his philosophy of the act and on the speaking subject in his philosophy of the utterance to include an analysis of gender and the androcentric structures of culture and the values these structures communicate, it is my

belief that feminists can speak to, critique and counter in rich and original ways the various cultural forms of what Yaeger has called “language as phallocracy, as a system too-stultified, too-replete with patriarchal intent.”¹² As Hajdukowski-Ahmed goes on to say, dialogism speaks with feminism not only in exposing authoritarian monologisms and the phallogocentric laws of the Father, but they are also compatible as “anthropologies of alterity” that share the common aim of “achieving an ethics of otherness”¹³ where the “I” does not objectify the other or reduce her or him to a mere object but recognizes the other as an other subject. With a feminist dialogism, women can cast off our status as mere objects to actively enter the ongoing struggle between all socio-linguistic points of view in the logosphere, presenting our intentions, our voices, our subjectivities in contestation of the normative “forms and desires of a dominant culture”¹⁴ that have historically privileged the atomistic, isolated and disembodied rational masculine subject. Finally, I argue, there is a clear compatibility between feminism and dialogism in terms of the original feminist goal of uniting the personal with the political in order to overcome “the public-private split which has become part of the rationalization of daily life.”¹⁵ It speaks in concert with Bakhtin’s goal of uniting what Boguslaw Zylko has called “the particular with the general;”¹⁶ or what Diaz-Diocaretz has called the “created” with the “given;”¹⁷ or what the Bakhtin Circle has called the unique authorial subject and his individual language style with his larger culture and its general language styles.

So, in terms of my specific interest in David Cronenberg and the relationship of his utterances to the normative forms and desires of a hegemonic patriarchal culture, I see feminism and dialogism collaborating around three key concerns: 1) in enabling us to think about authoring in Cronenberg as a gendered, value-laden, discursively produced agency in an androcentric culture that is historically replete with patriarchal intent but that is now subject to intense critical public scrutiny; 2) in enabling us to think about subjectivity in Cronenberg and the forms of subjective relations he communicates in his films in terms of an anthropological alterity or intersubjectivity involving a fundamental ethical and aesthetic interdependence between self and other; and 3) in enabling us to understand Cronenberg as answerable to both his own unique personal creative consciousness and his embeddedness in his culture—as an artist like any other who, straddling Being/life and content/sense, brings the private and the public, his own mind and the reality of the world, together in the form of his stylized utterances.

Focusing on the first of these concerns in this chapter, my goal is to elaborate Cronenberg's utterances in terms of their debt to their dialogic context in the heteroglot world of culture, which will entail looking (as Volosinov suggested we must look in his dialogic contextualization of the utterance) at the discursive situation in which they have arisen and the generic style they take, from the point of view of a feminist audience. The second and third of these concerns will then be taken up in chapter five through detailed analysis of the films themselves.

Audience

Framed by the social convictions of feminism and dialogism, David Cronenberg's artistic utterances must be understood in the context of the "given"—in terms of the way in which they answer the requirements of heteroglossia which, as Diaz-Diocaretz points out, involves official public discourse and the general language style as well as those discourses which challenge and contest them:

To the realm of the given belongs the conventional system of signs accessible and understandable to everyone within a given community (e.g. a specific language, such as that of "poetry"). It is also the domain of everything existing outside the text which is being reproduced, which is reproducible; everything which is circulating as part of the texts of culture, as "social discourse." Rather than referring to language itself, it concerns the discursive practices in a given society; it encompasses the arguments, the implicit rules organizing what is being said; it also includes "what can be said about the existing instituted discourses, and what is assigned acceptability at a moment in history in a given society." Acceptability concerns the virtual transformations of the different types of discourse (political, scientific, literary, and so on), and its limits, as well as the margins being challenged, contested and transgressed.¹⁸

For Zylko this means that despite the claims of romantic theories, art "does not create a completely new reality; 'it sings about, adorns and recollects pre-existing cognitive reality and events in nature and society; it enriches and completes them.'"¹⁹ Art is not somehow outside culture but can only

be located in discursive heteroglossia—in the ideological or cognitive reality that pre-exists it and in which it is embedded as utterance.

From my position here, representing the interests of a feminist point of view or audience, this means that Cronenberg and his utterances must be located in the discursive practices and implicit rules and values characteristic of the androcentric culture in which he lives and works, but which, from the specific historical moment of the 1980s to the present with which we are dealing, also necessarily includes the feminist discursive practices and women's voices that have critiqued, challenged and contested those existing instituted discourses and generic practices, publicly questioning their assigned acceptability. The discursive scenario of Cronenberg's utterances as artistic communication refracts this entire social-ideological complex. Therefore, while I am interested to carry on and hopefully advance the work of earlier feminists on masculinity in Cronenberg who have challenged the director in terms of the hegemonic androcentric values in which he and his work are embedded and which they represent, I am also interested to ask how the ongoing feminist challenges to these values, which reflect on and complicate them for the whole culture, have themselves affected Cronenberg's way of presenting male heroes and masculine ways of knowing and being and communicating in his films. That is, as part of the entire social-ideological complex of the last three decades, feminist discourse on gender must be understood as dialogized with Cronenberg's utterances: it, too, is present in the ideological ground or dialogic situation against which he figures and which informs his world, his consciousness and his personal and artistic speech

styles.²⁰ Thus, as ideal phallic masculinity is prodded and begins to teeter in the culture itself, we must ask how this reality is being filtered through David Cronenberg and answered by his art.

Situation

From a feminist dialogic perspective, then, what I want to do is use gender analysis to, as Diaz-Diocaretz puts it, apprehend and assign value in the production and reception of Cronenberg's work as a group of communicative utterances culturally situated within the vicissitudes of masculine subjectivity. With the rise of feminist and gay studies since the early 1970s, masculinity has become an important area of investigation in the fields of film studies, sociology, and, more recently, in the relatively new field of men's studies. Where idealized forms of masculine subjectivity have operated implicitly in the realm of the given as the "natural," "normal" order of things, feminist and gay discourses have spoken from the margins of this order, enabling us, as Michael Bach puts it, to begin to see, explicitly, how androcentric culture's "institutionalized masculine" constructs itself by excluding others and other ways of being.

Bach argues that it is this "institutionalized standpoint of masculinity" (what Bakhtin would call the official discourses of masculinity) that has historically defined masculinity in terms of "reason and rationality," determined "who gets to even count as a person," and denigrated and violated "those who don't meet up to this universalized standard of male experience."²¹ It is a standard, Stephen Frosh adds, that inculcates and inaugurates a concomitant fear of emotion in men as its standard-bearers—

an extreme “emotional illiteracy”²² based in the misrecognition of others as mere objects and in the denial of our mutual interdependence and our fundamental need for relationship as human beings. The impulse of the modern, scientific man of reason—the universal masculine “I”—underlying this standard is to dichotomize, differentiate, contrast, and objectify, he continues, and it has established a cultural system of binaries in which the abstract masculine has become associated with the individual mind as rational, law-giving, and culture-creating²³ in opposition to the embodied feminine as irrational and dangerous to the order of civilization. Bach concurs:

Ever since the Enlightenment, men have sought to silence the voices of others in the name of reason. Men have taken control of the public world and sought to define the very meaning of humanity in terms of the possession of reason. The experiences of women, children and animals have been closely identified as lacking reason, and being closer to nature. Women were forced to subordinate themselves to men to anchor themselves in the new world of reason and science. The very notion of civilization came to be identified with reason, and any questioning of the place of reason in our lives was tantamount to a challenge to the basic values of civilization.²⁴

What we have as a discursively produced historical ideal, then, is a sense of the human self equated with a masculine standpoint from which the subject grasps himself directly, im-mediately, as an atomistic, isolated, autonomous whole consciousness-in-itself set off from—set against—others as feminized objects. And what this produces, from the point of view of a

feminist dialogism, is an official monologic masculine subjectivity that is seen to exist as a singular, reasonable, rational, disembodied, abstract, transcendental consciousness outside concrete social relations, and that conceives others as objects, lacking subjectivity altogether.

Indeed, what the ideal masculine subject does not allow, according to Bach, is the extent to which consciousness is co-consciousness, the subject is inter-subjective, and the self can appear to others and to itself only through social experience. From an existential, philosophical, and ethical point of view, as we have seen in Bakhtin, the self is mediated by the other, and Bach invokes George Herbert Mead's thinking on the self, consciousness, and reason to critique the institutionalized masculine subject as supreme self-presence who is never in the position of object to others or to himself. As Holquist observes, Mead and Bakhtin share a sense of the conscious thinking self as a developmental process founded in language, and so share the recognition not only that "[i]n the process of communication the individual is an other before he is a self," but also that "out of this process thought arises, i.e., conversation with oneself, in the role of the specific other and then in the role of the generalized other.' That is, the individual recognizes not only that thought is inner speech ('conversation with one's self') but that it is inner dialogue."²⁵ The self, that is, is first "an object to itself"; it is reflexive and literally talks to itself, indicating "that which can be both subject and object [my emphasis]," and for Mead it is this ability to become objects to ourselves that distinguishes humans from animals and, in fact, gives rise to consciousness²⁶—a consciousness that has at once, necessarily, both reason and emotional intelligence.

“How,” Mead asks, “can an individual get outside himself (experientially) in such a way as to become an object to himself?” He sees this question as

the essential psychological problem of selfhood or of self-consciousness; and its solution is to be found by referring to the process of social conduct or activity in which the given person or individual is implicated. The apparatus of reason would not be complete unless it swept itself into its own analysis of the field of experience; or unless the individual brought himself into the same experiential field as that of the other individual selves in relation to whom he acts in any given social situation. Reason cannot become impersonal unless it takes an objective, non-affective attitude toward itself; otherwise we have just consciousness, not self-consciousness.²⁷

Indeed, “self-consciousness” or reason does not well up automatically from within the (gendered) biological organism; rather, it is exactly that social experience of becoming an object to oneself through the other by taking oneself as an other, by taking the attitude of others toward oneself, by seeing oneself, as Bakhtin puts it, through the screen of the other’s consciousness, words, emotional-volitional tone. Mead writes:

The individual experiences himself as such, not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of other individual members of the same social group, or from the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he belongs. For he enters his own experience as a self or individual, not directly or immediately, not by becoming a subject to himself, but only in so far

as he first becomes an object to himself just as other individuals are objects to him or in his experience; and he becomes an object to himself only by taking the attitudes of other individuals toward himself within a social environment or context of experience and behavior in which both he and they are involved.²⁸

I cannot truly become a subject before I become an object to myself, before (pace Bakhtin and Vygotsky) I learn to communicate in language through others, and internalize that language as thought in inner dialogue (speech that is always addressed to another). For Mead, the self is fundamentally a social structure because it arises out of social experience—out of its own ability to be an object to itself. “After a self has arisen,” he suggests, “it in a certain sense provides for itself its social experiences, and so we can conceive of an absolutely solitary self [Bakhtin’s I-for-myself]. But it is impossible to conceive of a self arising outside social experience.”²⁹ The self arises by making itself an object to itself, as it experiences itself as an object to others and others as objects to it (Bakhtin’s I-for-the-other and the-other-for-me). It puts itself in the place of others, taking on roles, reacting to and addressing, responding to and answering, dialogically, itself and others. Thus, intelligence, reason, rationality are not properties of the isolated individual (masculine) consciousness-in-itself; rather, they are social to the very core. Without taking objective yet relative account of oneself—without taking oneself from the point of view of the other—without, as Bakhtin would say, venturing out on the boundary, acting emotionally-volitionally toward the other, struggling to give the gift of form and make the distinction between consciousnesses through

transgression and sympathetic co-experiencing—the individual simply cannot begin to act intelligently, rationally, reasonably, or morally.

In her work on moral psychology, Carol Gilligan has distinguished what Bach calls the institutionalized standpoint of masculine reason from a different standpoint, that of the voice of feminine ethical behavior. And while Bach disagrees (rightly, I think) with “the assumption that approaches to moral reasoning fall neatly along the boundary of sex difference”³⁰ (i.e., that only men manifest the institutionalized behavior gendered masculine, and that only women manifest the different, feminine, type) he finds her analysis revealing and useful in exposing ideal masculinity’s tendency to abstraction and disregard of the concrete other in conceiving the self. In her work, he writes, Gilligan found that while women reason out how to act in a moral dilemma by taking up the viewpoint of the actual, concrete others involved, men do so by taking up the viewpoint of Mead’s “generalized other,” or the viewpoint of abstract principles of justice. However,

[a]pplying abstract principles of justice to moral dilemmas is much more difficult when taking up the standpoint of the concrete other. The flesh and breath and soul of a living being who is connected to oneself through friendship, intimacy, and history is not easily dispensed with when applying abstract principles of justice. [Recall here Bakhtin’s thinking on decimation.] Taking up the standpoint of the concrete other is in continual tension with taking up the standpoint of the generalized other, the standpoint necessary for collective action. The tension is reflected in the fact that a

generalized “women’s” standpoint loses its apparent solidity the moment it is spoken. No particular women’s standpoint can serve as a generalized women’s standpoint. The attempt to do so structures a system of differences across which experiences of class, race and sexuality get marginalized.³¹

Bach’s point, of course, is that we need both of these standpoints, the generalized and the concrete, but that, developmentally, one cannot achieve the former except by first being socialized by, with, and toward the concrete, animated, bodied other as the basic source of our ethical insight that we are all, however different, selves, and as selves, we are 1) subjects, 2) objects-for-ourselves, and 3) objects-for-other-subjects.

The important point for an investigation of the social discursive situation in which Cronenberg is placed and in which he finds himself struggling, however, is that this generalized, abstract, solipsistic, masculinist subject—the Enlightenment’s version of the modern man of reason—is the assumed model of the self. It is a model which, Frosh argues, perpetuates the official myth of masculinity in Western culture: “that power is destined by anatomy, and that this power takes its form from the ‘oneness’ of male sexual display—the upswelling, integrated, wholeness of being.” Thinking, associated with phallic mastery, is thus “made into an aspect of domination, with the centrality of the distinction between subject and object (connoting masculine and feminine) being used as a further boost to masculine defence against loss of control”³²—against dependence—against recognizing the subjectivity of the other as fundamental to the “wholeness” of being. Institutionalized masculinity, that

is, is erected on a series of denials. It denies the extent to which reasoned, rational, ethical behavior depends on the ability to take oneself as another; it denies the existence of the (feminized) other as an other embodied consciousness; and it denies the reality of its own bodily vulnerability by abstracting the penis into the fantastic symbol of absolute being and power: the phallus.

Through Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, Jessica Benjamin traces this kind of monologic phallic thinking, or “sexual phallic monism” to Freud and his theory of the castrated woman. What Freud’s masculinist thinking does is that it “denies the difference between the sexes, or rather it reduces difference to absence, to lack.” In this scenario, difference then comes to mean “plus-or-minus the penis. There is no range of qualitative divergence; only presence or absence, rich or poor, the haves and the have-nots. There is no such thing as woman: woman is merely that which is not man.”³³ Standing in place of any sense of real difference, any acknowledgment of real embodied others, and, in effect, taking up every place to stand, is the masculine subject’s “mirror image.”³⁴ Ideal masculinity, says Benjamin, suffers from “blocked identification” where identification “no longer functions as a bridge to the experience of an other; now it can only confirm likeness.”³⁵ From a critical feminist perspective, then, institutionalized masculinity is revealed as fundamentally narcissistic, a hall of mirrors idealizing the form of the male body, abstracting it into phallic omnipresence and omnipotence, appropriating to its own image all powers of reason, rationality and ethics, and so devaluing, repudiating, and refusing to recognize the other. In the actual

relations of intersubjective reality, the phallus operates to divide people into masculine subjects and feminine objects, encouraging a masculine fantasy of oneness, singularity, full self-presence. In this way, the phallus becomes the primary value, the supreme symbol of a man's authority as the "masculine ideal"—as an autonomous, atomistic individual subject.³⁶

But, as Frosh points out, like any symbol, it is an idea or abstraction. The mere possession of three inches of unpredictable flesh and a pair of testicles, as most men know from harsh experience, is no guarantee of mastery—no guarantee that one will emerge potent and victorious from all power struggles. In fact, the mythic phallus can only really operate at all "as veiled." It is larger than life and so "cannot be taken literally, as something to be grabbed and pulled upon. It only works if it is not seen"³⁷ Frosh elaborates that "having" the phallus "attached to" oneself cannot guarantee a stable empowered identity; in fact, it creates "a terror of loss which must seem comic to the penis-free woman. So much is made of it that the phallus becomes a burden to the man; living up to it becomes the necessary condition of masculinity, which is therefore always in danger of being betrayed and undermined." What does it mean, he asks, to "have an identity as a man?"

Much of the excess of masculine sexuality seems to derive from the desperate struggle to retain a conviction of phallic mastery—of potency—when what is being experienced is the impossibility of measuring up to the fantasy of the full phallus "The clenched fist, the bulging muscles, the hardened jaws, the proliferation of

phallic symbols—they are all straining after what can hardly ever be achieved, the embodiment of the phallic mystique.”³⁸

So the hard body, like the man of reason, perpetuates the androcentric illusion of self-sustaining atomistic individuality by isolating himself and warding off others—often violently.³⁹ Masculine identity, born in “phallic uncertainty”⁴⁰ and so clinging to the fantasy of wholeness, and desperately believing itself to be whole, makes “devaluation of the need for the other” its “touchstone.”⁴¹ Suffering a highly precarious sense of self based in isolation from others and a feeling of terror in intimate relationships, masculinity recoils and narcissism comes to feed the institutionalized fantasy that phallic oneness is somehow possible to achieve.⁴²

Weaving these feminist insights together with Bakhtin’s dialogic thinking, the phallic subject officially instituted in androcentric culture is revealed as decidedly monologic. He is a solitary consciousness trying to utter his own immanent relationship to himself—trying to be pure self-utterance, a whole unto himself, a self-completing image. In striving to live as a man of reason, as abstract consciousness-in-itself, as I-for-myself, phallic masculinity short-circuits the fundamental dialogic principle of I and the other. By devaluing, repudiating and refusing to recognize the other in its drive to be the one and only, phallic masculinity loses access to ethical and aesthetic form-giving activity. By dismissing the value of the body from significance (whether, at one extreme, by abstracting consciousness from it, or, at the other extreme, by turning it into a cold, hard, impassive surface) the ideal masculine subject is himself dismissed from the human field of intersubjectivity, affect, caring, and love.

Indeed, as we have seen in Bakhtin, only through the screen of the other's emotional-volitional attitude to me can my consciousness gain awareness of myself as a "something"—as a whole plastic object in the world, as others are for me. Only the activity of the other can unite my cold inner sensation of myself to my whole outward body. But, as feminist analysis reminds us, this loving act of suturing the inner body to the outward body to produce the other human being as a relatively integral whole in body, mind, and soul has historically been relegated to the province of "the feminine." The phallic subject can neither give the gift of form to the other's once-occurrent ongoing consciousness, or inner body, through a loving attitude to the outward boundaries of their body, nor can he openly acknowledge his own need of the other's reciprocal gift of form to him. From a feminist dialogic perspective, this has left the masculine subject, through the pretense of phallic omnipotence, attempting to be whole-in-himself—to make his outward boundaries and appearance a category of his own "I"—to single-handedly unite his consciousness and his outward body without the mediation of the other.

Withdrawn from need, reaction, recognition and relationship to others, ideal masculinity is truly the reflection of Narcissus, he who can only confirm likeness. The narcissist—full of an impossible self-love, in love with the idea of his whole self as a being unto itself, straining to caress his own outward body in a world in which I can never embrace myself the way I can embrace the other—is doomed, according to Bakhtin, to a cold emptiness, a ghostliness, a frightening solitariness. In love with the illusion of his atomistic image, the narcissist cannot face the fact that, without the

warm, loving, form-giving gestures of the other, his experience of himself is destined to remain cold and cruel. Blocked in his identification with the other by the image of himself as whole, he cannot understand that love is a relational gift that one can never bestow on oneself—that any value “I” accrue is borrowed from the other and depends on recognition by the other—that, as Bakhtin puts it, it is the other, not me, who is a beautiful whole in this world. Quite simply, what institutionalized narcissistic masculinity cannot face is that the other, not the “I,” is the real hero of this world. “I-for-myself” have only a horizon, a fragmented body, and a cold and indigent ongoing conscious spirit, while the other, because of my recognition of her or him, and my active responsiveness and answerability, has an environment, a history, and a beloved soul.

Now, from a feminist dialogic perspective, this tendency to blocked identification in the institutionalized masculine subject of androcentric culture can have serious consequences, namely the pathology of doubling. As Bakhtin has shown, while there is great potential value involved in the boundary-making intersubjective activity of I-for-myself, I-for-the-other and the other-for-me, there is also, potentially, great risk, which he characterizes in terms of the fearful double. Indeed, we will recall that the aesthetic seeing involved in such activity requires “the concrete and axiologically intuitive experience of myself as another.” In order to see aesthetically I must assume “an authoritative axiological position outside myself, for it is only in a life perceived in the category of the other that my body can become aesthetically valid, and not in the context of my own life

as lived for myself, that is, not in the context of my self-consciousness.”

However, Bakhtin warns, if

an authoritative position for such concrete axiological seeing—for perceiving myself as another—is absent, then my exterior—my being-for-others—strives to connect itself with my self-consciousness, and a return into myself occurs, a return for the purpose of selfishly exploiting my being-for-others for my own sake. In this case, the reflection of myself in the other, i.e., that which I am for the other, becomes a double of myself. This double irrupts into my self-consciousness, clouds its purity, and deflects my self-consciousness from its direct axiological relationship to itself.

Fear of the double.⁴³

To avoid this risk of doubling in intersubjective relations, what I am really called upon to achieve is a kind of aesthetic and ethical self-effacement.

The external image of myself, my own face, has to become a transparent screen to me where the face of the other is installed—a screen whereby I see myself as another without “becoming” the other or without turning the attitude of consummating and giving the gift of form back on myself. In order to give form, to avoid the confusion of consciousnesses on the boundary between I and the other, to perform the activity of locating selves in space and time, I must maintain transgression.⁴⁴ For only from an active position outside the other can I identify with the other, take myself as another, sympathetically co-experience with the other. In effect, identification is my act, not a state of possession.

However, pining after his own reflected image, seeing himself everywhere and in every place, possessed by himself, confused and confusing himself with the position of the other—with the other's unique and once-occurrent event of Being—who is the institutionalized narcissistic masculine subject but the king of the double, in love with his own like, infinitely doubled?

From a feminist dialogic perspective, narcissistic masculinity is the fearful double, irrupting into itself, blocking the screen of identification with its own image, reflecting itself to itself instead of reflecting and consummating the outward boundaries of the other. Confusing I and the other, narcissistic masculinity is unable to function in the boundary-making complex of I-for-myself, I-for-the-other, the-other-for-me. It is solipsistic, wanting to live atomistically in solitude, as if it could be the hero of its own life, usurping the category of the other for its own I-for-myself consciousness. It wants to live, not as an object for others (as an other subject), but as the only subject or abstract "I." In effect, the institutionalized man of "reason" tries to be an absolute consciousness outside the aesthetic and ethical principle of I and the other as two non-coinciding co-consciousnesses: "a consciousness that has nothing transgredient to itself, nothing situated outside itself and capable of delimiting it from outside"45 For Bakhtin, one can, as he says, "commune there," as a solitary self in the loophole of absolute consciousness, but there one can never be consummated as a formal whole in body and soul. To live as idealized institutional masculinity struggles to live, then, is to live in the realm of the cold, indigent spirit of ongoing

once-occurrent I-for-myself consciousness where “the world’s mortal body disintegrates [my emphasis].”⁴⁶

So, to live in I-for-myself consciousness is not really to live in a “sophic” realm of abstract thought, pure reason, or ultimate wisdom at all; rather, it is to live in the solipsistic realm of insanity—of not coinciding with myself— “of not coinciding—of not coinciding in principle—with me myself as a given.”⁴⁷ By denying the body and so the category of the other, by not recognizing others and his need of them to give him the gift of an embodied consciousness, the idealized phallic man of reason lives in an impossible place—in a dark and insane chaos with no sure boundaries or limits. I-for-myself absolute consciousness, that is, without the form-giving aesthetic and ethical activity of the other, can only ever be a place of horror where there is no warmth, no love, no emotional-volitional tone because there the human body has collapsed into and along with the devalued other. Underlying the social discursive situation of the institutionalized masculine subject, then, a feminist dialogic analysis uncovers, not reason founded in phallic wholeness but the inner body fragmentation characteristic of I-for-myself consciousness and the experience of horror.

Genre

For Linda Badley it is interesting to observe how the emotion of horror, and the genre named after it, have become ubiquitous in late twentieth century North American culture. Horror is present in a range of art forms and media, from film, literature, painting and theatre, through

television, rock and punk music, and music video, to video games, comics and toys. Indeed, she argues, the genre that from the 1950s to the 1970s was associated primarily with Hollywood movies and seen as “‘low’ or marginal entertainment and then a cult phenomenon” had become so prevalent by 1986 that it had colonized most popular forms. More than a minor film genre, horror is now a “widespread mythology” informing and constructing mass culture.

Moreover, she continues, between the 1950s and the 1990s horror has clearly changed from a genre that had the goal of affirming official norms and values to one that now affirms anxiety itself and, more “nauseating” than “scary,” simply aims to “revulse” or “disturb.”⁴⁸ Thus, she writes,

I began to see horror as one of several discourses of the body that use the fantastic—the iconography of the monstrous—to articulate the anxieties of the 1980s and to re-project the self.

In my view, horror has become a fantastic “body language” for our culture in which a person’s self-concept has been increasingly constituted in images of the body. In the ongoing crisis of identity in which the gendered, binary subject of Eurocentric bourgeois patriarchy (in particular, the Freudian psychoanalytic model of the self) is under-going deconstruction, horror joined with other discourses of the body to provide a language for imagining the self in transformation, re-gendered, ungendered, and regenerated, or even as an absence or a lack.⁴⁹

But the important point for me is that this appearance of horror as a central “generic emotion” in popular entertainment in androcentric North American culture since the mid 1980s is a clear corollary to the appearance of feminist and gay discourses that have begun to challenge the masculine concept of the person or self (and the person or self as a masculine concept) with the critical discourses of alterity, otherness, and the gendered body. As disembodied masculinity’s embodied others have increasingly begun to speak, that is, it is the institutionalized masculine subject who has been forced to undergo a fundamental transformation.

As Badley puts it, there has been a paradigm shift in which the Freudian “bourgeois-patriarchal ego” as a source of reasoned conscious control over the irrational sexual forces of the unconscious has been ousted by a new conception of the self: “the self imagined in or in relation to a body,”⁵⁰ which she calls the “body fantastic”:

Today, as the ego is challenged and altered, a comparable shift has occurred from the Freudian psyche to a post-Freudian body fantastic, the product of a materialist, post-literate, electronic, image based culture. Horror announced the crisis in the 1970’s and 1980’s through its images—its bodies in pieces and organic machines, its sexual mutations and re-genderations. Horror also provided the crisis with an iconography, a fantastic body language for re-imagining the self. It has contributed to our current concept of an embodied self, proposing popular metaphors for the unconscious, existential dread, Foucauldian discourse theory, postmodern Marxist analysis and “panic” theory, Jungian psychology, and French

Feminism. What Twitchell calls “preposterous violence” and Sartre “the fantastic” provides an iconography for a model of the “self” that is, above all, changing.⁵¹

However, in contemplating this new model of the embodied self and its fantastic range of permutations, what I do not want to lose focus on is the extent to which the old self in question or at stake is decidedly masculine, and how ideal masculine subjectivity is highly significant to the key role the affect of horror plays in imagining this new self. Why this sensational and widespread masculine association of the body with horror, I want to ask, and why now?

What Badley glosses over, in my estimation, is the crucial fact that the materialist, post-literate, electronic, image based culture that she sees producing the newly embodied self in the fantastic language of horror is nevertheless still an androcentric culture. Thus, while the genre of horror has clearly been used to “announce” or, better, utter the escalating crisis of identity of institutionalized masculinity in the past three decades, it is feminist and gay discourses that have instigated the crisis with their public criticism of and disrespect to androcentricity, its phallic standards of identity, and its fear of the body, and with their increasing social and political pressure on ideal masculinity to recognize others. In my view, institutionalized masculinity then reacts with the arsenal of imaging technologies available to and indeed controlled by it, providing its experience of identity crisis with a ubiquitous iconography of horror,⁵² moving in to respond—clearly hyper defensively—with its preposterously violent, fantastic images of the embodied self.

It is as the body becomes an issue to our collective thinking about selfhood and subjectivity—as the atomistic masculine mind can no longer continue to absolutely dominate the social discourse on what it means to be a self, abstract itself from the body, and deny the other voices that speak in the body’s interests—that gendered hysteria begins to overtly color our image-based culture, and the affect of horror begins to reign on a grand scale through horror as a generic language. Abstract I-for-myself masculine consciousness, horrified by the body’s (and the other’s) new purchase on identity claims, experiences, and has the economic, political and social power to represent so ubiquitously, the body as a site of and for horror. Thus we now find ourselves as a culture in “a state of hyperconsciousness, confusion and terror,”⁵³ not merely or only around sexual images but around the body generally. This is borne out, for example, in Hollywood cinema, where bodies are not only ravaged, mangled, cannibalized, and “blown away” in horror films themselves, but are now fodder in unprecedentedly graphic (and ironic, distancing) ways in various other popular genres (from the action adventure movies such as Face/Off (John Woo, 1997) which are now casting dramatic actors such as Nicholas Cage and John Travolta in he-man roles previously reserved for icons such as Schwarzenegger, Stallone, and VanDamme; through postmodern gangster and crime films such as Pulp Fiction (Quentin Tarantino, 1994) and Fargo (Joel and Ethan Coen, 1996); to the new genre of the 1990s, the serial killer film: Silence of the Lambs (Jonathan Demme, 1991), Seven (David Fincher 1995), Natural Born Killers (Oliver Stone, 1994)). It seems that horror is now the cross-fertilizing genre or style par

excellence imbued with the social anxieties of white heterosexual masculinity, as film noir was five decades ago.

Clearly a new ethos of mutilation is at work as a hyper conscious I-for-myself binarist masculine ideal feels itself thrown into what it perceives as a contest between mind or body as the site of the self. For an institutionalized masculine self that has been struggling for the last few centuries to, as Walter Kendrick puts it, “tidy up” the subject by abstracting it from the body, the other, and death itself,⁵⁴ being confronted with the body it has historically condemned merely heightens the already existing alienation effect. The cold and indigent I-for-myself becomes hysterically so, images of the fragmented inner body and tortured outer body proliferate, and, as Andrew Kimbrell suggests, we emerge as a self-destructing techno-culture insanely expanding “our aggression toward our bodies” and “alienated from them as never before.”⁵⁵

Indeed, as Badley observes, there is now a profound “confusion about the self as it relates to the body”⁵⁶—but again, I would insist, it is predominantly a confusion about the specifically masculine self as abstract conscious mind in an androcentric culture in which the body has always been othered and devalued. Thus, fragmentation and loss of the bourgeois-patriarchal ego as the standard for the masculine self leads to compulsive manipulations of the flesh⁵⁷—manipulations marking a hubristic reaction that attempts to steel the flesh and render it an impenetrable fortress on the one hand, or marking an hysterical reaction that attempts to reduce it to mush on the other hand.

In popular cinema we can see such compulsive manipulations, as Barbara Ehrenreich suggests, in “fantasies of physical invulnerability”⁵⁸ (such as the cyborg and the hyper masculine hardbody in the Schwarzenegger and Stallone vehicles or the robocop series), and in the fantastic horrors of physical vulnerability (such as the exploded head of the adolescent in Pulp Fiction, the chipped body in Fargo, or the mutilated trophy-corpses of this or that month’s star serial killer), or, as Badley observes, sometimes fused in both:

The cyborg transcends the human condition in a fantasy of replication “in whom all soft, unreliable tissue has been replaced by metal alloys.” The hyper masculine “hardbody” ideal of the 1980s is the brighter side, paradoxically, of our fascination with serial killers and their “work.” In body building, we share mythologies with Thomas Harris’s Francis Dolarhyde (Red Dragon, 1981, adapted to film as Manhunter, 1986), who works out with weights in front of mirrors when he is not making movies of himself glorying in front of his victims’ corpses, and Jame Gumb (The Silence of the Lambs, 1988, film 1991), who constructs a new skin for himself from his victims’ bodies.⁵⁹

But we can also see them, Badley adds, in our postmodern fixation on designer bodies, morphing, and the embodied self as a Baudrillardian video screen where the subject is understood as

the “switching centre for all the networks of influence,” a sort of “human screen,” and a “state of terror,” of “too great a proximity of everything, the unclean promiscuity of everything which touches,

invests, and penetrates without resistance, with no halo of private protection, not even his own body to protect him anymore [my emphasis].”⁶⁰

So, as institutionalized masculinity tries to negotiate between the abstracted conscious I-for-myself with its halo of private protection—with its transpicuous body that historically served to isolate the atomistic subject from others, like a scientist’s glass bell-jar housing the reasoning mind as if it were some precious other-worldly substance—and the now all-too-dirty touch of the all-too-proximate body, anxiety, nausea, and horror reign. In its popular imaginings, one’s self is both matter to be technologically mastered and controlled and a gruesome site of loss of control (as Badley suggests. Cronenberg’s Videodrome and The Fly provide excellent examples), but virtually never an embodied consciousness living in a relationship of need and responsiveness to other embodied consciousnesses.⁶¹

With the newly embodied subject as a postmodern bio-screen, then, it seems that I-for-myself masculinity, brought face to face with the body and the other and the other’s body, now proceeds to abstract the living flesh itself into a kind of fantastic technological self-reflecting mirror, just as it historically tried to abstract consciousness into pure reason. To the ‘objective man of reason,’ the body is a machine that “I” control or that controls me. In this sense, the body fantastic that Badley describes is merely new skin for the old ceremony of narcissistically, if now perhaps more desperately, negating the crucial function of the other as one’s screen in being and confirming phallic likeness for the increasingly hysterical

male (i.e., confirming, in the image of the bio-screen, what is really his own projected experience of alienation from the lived human body and others while disavowing the disintegration of the mortal body and the denigration of others in which he is actually indulging).

Badley quotes Jean-Paul Sartre on the function of the fantastic as a language for the modern “human condition” that mirrors “our” alienation from the body and from the other-as-object, but again I think the passage from Sartre, and she herself, must be read with a more probing analysis of the gendered significance of that function. In my view, the “(body) fantastic” functions in the last decades of the twentieth century more as the expression of a decidedly masculine condition or androcentric point of view on the self, the body, and the other than either person is acknowledging. Badley writes:

In 1947, in an essay review of Maurice Blanchot’s Aminadab and several works by Franz Kafka, Jean-Paul Sartre proposed “The Fantastic as a Language” for the modern human condition. In contrast to fantasy in the past, which presumed with religion and metaphysics a “human power to transcend the human,” Sartre argued, there was nothing supernatural about the modern fantastic. It was “one of a hundred ways” we have of “mirroring [our] own image.” “We recognize the footprint on the shore as our own.” In existentialist ontology, as conscious (transcendent) subjects that are simultaneously embodied within the world of objects, alienated from that world and from ourselves as bodies, we produce the fantastic. The fantastic expresses a problem of language peculiar to modern

discourse. It consists of states of being we cannot articulate in “clear, distinct ideas We are forced to resort to blurred thoughts which are in themselves fantastic [images, metonyms, and half-formed metaphors] to indulge, though wide awake and fully mature and in the midst of civilization, in the magical “mentality” of the dreamer, the primitive and the child.”⁶²

Indeed, at the core of the fantastic for Sartre there is a mirroring effect which he conceives as an expression of blurred, primitive states of being—states that wide-awake and civilized transcendent consciousness cannot articulate clearly but that involve alienation from ourselves as bodies and from others-as-objects.

However, while Sartre claims the fantastic mirror image or the footprint that results to be generically “human,” I think he is misrecognizing its fundamentally gendered origins. Ironically, but unsurprisingly from a feminist viewpoint, the ‘civilized’ masculine thinking subject does not recognize the footprint on the shore as his own. Clearly, as the following paragraph in which Badley again quotes Sartre illustrates, it is the binarist, mind-over-matter, atomistic, institutionalized masculine subject that Sartre and, I would argue, Badley, too, are universalizing as “human” and for whom they ultimately, but, in my opinion, misguidedly speak:

As an expression of the human condition, the fantastic tends toward anti-language or embodiment. It is “an entire world in which things manifest a captive, tormented thought . . . both whimsical and enchained” that never manages to “express itself” purely:

[Matter] is never entirely matter, since it offers only a constantly frustrated attempt at determinism, and mind is never completely mind, because it has fallen into slavery and has been impregnated and dulled by matter. All is woe. Things suffer and tend toward inertia, without ever attaining it; the debased, enslaved mind unsuccessfully strives towards consciousness and freedom. The fantastic is based in somatic consciousness—in sensational existence that is tragically conscious of its material finitude and the presence of Otherness, in the torture, challenge, and horror-comedy of incessant change.⁶³

In my view, the mirror, the footprint, the alienation from the body, the transcendent consciousness, and the fantastic product that expresses them being described here have less the “human” condition than institutionalized, narcissistic, phallic masculinity written all over them. Here the body and embodiment are conceived as an anti-language—beyond the pale, outside the (masculine) province of purity of (romantic) (self) expression in the clear and distinct form of (disembodied) free consciousness⁶⁴ or transcendental ego. They are forces that dull, impregnate, and seemingly contaminate, debase and enslave mind-in-itself, mind as completely mind, mind as rational masculine self-presence. It is a solipsistic and extremely abstract way of understanding the subject in which the presence of the body and otherness is always “tragic,” in which the self and others are not recognized as other ongoing intersubjective animated embodied consciousnesses but are devalued as mere finite bodily objects.

However, from a feminist dialogic perspective, “sensational existence” is only tragic and tortuously cold if you withdraw into I-for-myself consciousness and begin to perceive the other, whom you need to give you the gift of whole embodied consciousness, as an object of and for horror. Rather than an abject or abyssal humiliation, to be embodied is an existential, ethical, and aesthetic necessity, and what the genre of horror repeatedly dramatizes is disrespect to and loss of the body as this essential value for conscious human beings. In my thought, what the horrifying body fantastic is ubiquitously mirroring, then, is not so much the generalized experience of the human condition in late twentieth century North American culture but the affective experience of gendered “somatic consciousness”—of phallic, narcissistic I-for-myself inner body consciousness—and its truly paranoid hysteria in reaction to embodiment, the other, and the other’s body as part of a changing model of the self instigated by feminist, gay, and dialogic discourses on intersubjectivity.

Cronenberg and the horror genre

Turning to the details of a feminist dialogic study of masculinity and processes of intersubjectivity in the films of David Cronenberg, it becomes apparent that Cronenberg’s utterances cannot be understood as the private property of his individual psyche or creative genius but must be rethought in terms of their social dialogic context and generic style—in terms of the ubiquity of the body fantastic in contemporary androcentric popular culture and their debt to horror as the genre now being used so widely and

so graphically to communicate the hysterical experience of institutionalized masculine somatic consciousness in a changing social world.

As Holquist suggests, the assumption in dialogism is that the ongoing and unique “I” of each individual creative consciousness is a function of the “we” that makes up the social group to which they belong. In this light, utterance is a “border phenomenon” that is “drenched” in social factors and social values,⁶⁵ and genre is a “sub-topic” of “point of view”—a particular way of looking at the world—an event in the “history of perception” in which particular values are sculpted out of historical space-time existence and particular forms react and adapt to, or resist adapting to, or fail to adapt to, changing social environments.⁶⁶

Thus, the plan of any individual speaker can only be realized in the choice of one or another speech genre. “The speaker,” Bakhtin writes, “is not the biblical Adam, dealing only with virgin and still unnamed objects, giving them names for the first time.”⁶⁷ Rather, the speaker is saturated in and organized by generic forms:

To learn to speak means to learn to construct utterances We learn to cast our speech in generic forms and, when hearing others’ speech, we guess its genre from the very first words; we predict a certain length (that is, the approximate length of the speech whole) and a certain compositional structure; we foresee the end; that is, from the very beginning we have a sense of the speech whole If speech genres did not exist and we had not mastered them, if we had to originate them during the speech process and construct each

utterance at will for the first time, speech communication would be almost impossible.⁶⁸

For Bakhtin, the key to understanding the relationship between utterances and genres involves seeing how they are structurally linked together in language as the social activity of speech communication. “Utterances and their types, that is, speech genres, are the drive belts from the history of society to the history of language.”⁶⁹ In each sphere where language is used, he writes, genres develop as “relatively stable types”⁷⁰ of utterances. Thus, Cronenberg, as an individual (gendered) speaker, and his (androcentric yet changing) social milieu can be said to meet in the stylized generic utterance (the horror film and its body fantastic) as the “node” where “language enters life” and “life enters language.”⁷¹ Accordingly, individual speech and speech genres interpenetrate such that there is

not a single new phenomenon (phonetic, lexical, or grammatical) that can enter the system of language without having traversed the long and complicated path of generic-stylistic testing and modification.

In each epoch certain speech genres set the tone for the development of literary language [or cinematic language in the case of Cronenberg]. And these speech genres are not only secondary (literary, commentarial, and scientific), but also primary (certain types of oral dialogue—of the salon, of one’s own circle, and other types as well, such as familiar, family-everyday, sociopolitical, philosophical, and so on). Any expansion of the literary language that results from drawing on various extraliterary strata of the national language inevitably entails some degree of penetration into

all genres . . . to a greater or lesser degree, and entails new generic devices for the construction of the speech whole, its finalization, the accommodation of the listener or partner, and so forth. This leads to a more or less fundamental restructuring and renewal of speech genres.”⁷²

Clearly, as we have seen, the horror genre in cinema has been restructured and renewed since the 1950’s in exactly this way, moving, in utterances such as Cronenberg’s, from a norm-affirming to an anxiety-affirming genre as it accommodates feminist and gay discourses that are critical of the atomistic masculine self.

Undeniably, for Bakhtin, genres depend on the unique speech acts of individuals for their vitality. “Each separate utterance is individual, of course,”⁷³ and we must appreciate and account for this fact; however, we must first recognize that individuals are social beings through and through, so that where there is individual style there is necessarily genre.⁷⁴ This means that any language as a communicative act (literary, commentarial, scientific, or cinematic) can only be realized

in the form of individual concrete utterances (oral and written) by participants in the various areas of human activity. These utterances reflect the specific conditions and goals of each such area not only through their content (thematic) and linguistic style, that is, the selection of the lexical, phraseological, and grammatical resources of the language, but above all through their compositional structure. All three of these aspects—thematic content, style, and compositional structure—are inseparably linked to the whole of the utterance and

are equally determined by the specific nature of the particular sphere of communication.⁷⁵

As part of the ubiquitous speech genre or general language style of horror, what I want to argue is that Cronenberg's utterances, like all utterances, are socially saturated—that they clearly reflect the specific conditions, the goals, and the fears of institutionalized, narcissistic, phallic masculine subjectivity in crisis and in transition, and that their generic themes, content, and formal structure are clearly determined by and typical of the nature of this particular sphere of communication characteristic of late twentieth century androcentric North American culture.

Indeed, for Badley herself the work of David Cronenberg is to be counted at the centre of her argument about the horror film in the 1980s as “an agonistic ‘body language’ for a culture that perceived itself as grotesquely embodied and in transformation.”⁷⁶ She observes that in his early films of this period, such as The Brood (1979), “the ‘metamorphosing’ or maternal body became a metaphor for a monstrous future and for the death of the ego in the ‘New Flesh.’”⁷⁷ Videodrome, she argues, with its “‘video Word made Flesh,’” epitomizes the bio-screen of the body fantastic. It is part of the contemporary discourse of horror which articulates a “‘peculiarly ‘postmodern’ dread of depersonalization in visions of the self disseminated as plugged-in ‘bio-power.’”⁷⁸ And The Fly she discusses as exemplary of “‘biological process’” taking the place of “‘action and characterization, remapping ‘inner space’ in terms of the body fantastic.”⁷⁹

Now, to the extent that Badley recognizes the “body fantastic” in Cronenberg’s films, and so places him as a social being squarely in the context of his culture and the general language style of contemporary horror as a discourse on the self as alienated from others, grotesquely embodied and in transformation, I am in agreement with her analysis. However, I am more critical of her ideas on the deeper meaning and significance of this discourse for feminism. For it seems to me that there is a disturbing and unacknowledged tension in her assessment having to do, again, with her all-too-shallow critique of the horror discourse as gendered, her embrace of the slippery and histrionic postmodern monologue on identity that ascribes value to ceaseless change and fragmentation, and her ultimately uncritical acceptance of androcentric definitions of “the feminine” as “monstrous.” The result is a confused and confusing interpretation of the social and gender dynamics at work in horror generally and Cronenberg specifically.

For example, after Donna Haraway’s notion of “cyborg vision,” Badley suggests that such transformations of the newly embodied self as we see in Cronenberg’s “New Flesh” are not merely signs of alienation; morphing, she claims, “is becoming—the subject choosing [my emphasis] identity in change.”⁸⁰ But in her more analytic feminist chapter dedicated to Cronenberg she writes that in Cronenberg’s films from Videodrome to M. Butterfly, “the male subject is hystericized, positioned as female and forced [my emphasis] to give expression to the Other. By the end of the 1980s, the male hysteric is at the center of the transformation film,

simultaneously usurping the mother's function and recovering the feminine within himself." She elaborates on how

Videodrome thoroughly anatomized the male gaze In one memorable scene the picture tube bulges out, shaping into screen-sized lips that murmur "come to Nikki." Nikki, played by former punk rock singer Blondie (Deborah Harry), represents the co-option of the female body in the seduction and construction of the male viewer. The world of the "New Flesh" is the world hystericized, hysteria having become virtual reality and regime. The gaze is notably female, flesh, and a mouth rather than an eye.

In the next major transformation, Max is explicitly raped by the (female) medium as a videocassette is inserted into the vaginal slit that seems to have replaced his penis (gaze), rendering him passive and receptive. The mass media thus "feminizes" the viewer/consumer, turning him into a medium (hence female) for its message. Max is implanted with the video Word (male gaze), made New Flesh and finally his own assassin. Thus the gender battle is revealed to be part of a larger issue of power. The film explores the interface of gender, politics, and medium.

Several of the later films go beyond this diagnostic level to postulate a female gaze. The male hysteric is in a sense becoming a woman—metamorphosing, giving birth to a new body and a new subject.⁸¹

In these films, she then concludes, "[m]en experience what it is like to be 'the sex,' to be embodied and to be constructed as monstrous."⁸²

However, it is my position that, in Badley's enthusiasm for the postmodern vocabulary of process and transformation, of undecidability and excess in deconstructing the subject, she falls into the same trap as earlier feminist critics whose postmodernism, as we have seen, is at loggerheads with important feminist and human values. That is, she gets caught in validating androcentric experience of the body and the other by applauding Cronenberg's dramatizations of masculine experience of the "feminized" male as monstrously embodied and by omitting to deal critically with the concomitant withdrawal of the masculine subject in these narratives into violence, nihilism, madness, and suicide. In these films, I would argue, men experience, not "what it is like" to be embodied, but what institutionalized masculinity thinks it is like to be embodied from the androcentric, phallic, narcissistic perspective of I-for-myself consciousness.⁸³ In this kind of criticism, as I have suggested, feminists themselves unwittingly continue to think from that hegemonic perspective, confusing nihilistic dramatizations of the withdrawal and suicidal despair of white heterosexual masculinity in the face of embodiment and others as somehow radically meaningful in terms of a progressive critique of masculine identity and subjectivity.

In Badley's case, for example, to what extent, I want to ask her, does the morphing or transforming masculine subject really choose identity in change, especially change that is so clearly self-destructive as to make its association with any reasonable notion of ongoing lived identity a complete non sequitur? In fact, in Cronenberg's films, as Badley herself later acknowledges, the transformation to a new "identity in change" (if we can

call the mortified states in which Max Renn and Brundlefly, the Mantles, Bill Lee, and Rene Gallimard are left a living “identity” at all) is not invited, blithely “chosen” nor ultimately welcomed as a liberating transformation; rather, it is forced on them, as I have argued, by the social struggle instigated by discourses that are now challenging institutionalized masculinity, and it is coded by the latter as feminizing and horrible. The change, that is, is happening to them; it is beyond their control or consent; it is highly traumatic; and it is a subject that Cronenberg, significantly, chooses to treat through the iconography of horror, and, I would add, revealingly associates with the pervasive mood of melancholy.⁸⁴ In my thought, the “mother’s function usurped” or the “feminine recovered within himself” by the changing masculine subject are undeniably represented here, not as a viable identity—a “new birth” in a “new body” as a “new subject”—but as an embodied monstrosity equated with the feminine other that leads to the paralysis and death of the masculine subject! In short, the feminine recovered in the masculine self remains coded as monstrous; in becoming a woman, the man of reason actually becomes, in body and soul, the stereotype of institutionalized masculinity’s denigrated and devalued, abject other, so that in the end, I am hard-pressed to see much of a feminist social intelligibility in this approach to Cronenberg and postmodern horror’s body fantastic. In my estimation, the “new body” and the “new self” in his films are not sites of a transition of humanity to some new and supposedly desirable mode of radically embodied and cathartic subjectivity that many forms of postmodern criticism—and Cronenberg himself⁸⁵—would claim they are; rather, they

are sites of the complete loss of humanity on the part of institutionalized masculinity—of nihilism, insanity, suicide, and death spoken through the unprecedentedly popular speech genre of horror at a key historical juncture in which faith in institutionalized masculinity as the ‘civilized, reasoning and reasonable guardian of humanity’ is being challenged and threatened.

Rethinking the postmodern ethos of mutilation as an androcentric general language style

To briefly recapitulate, speech genres, Bakhtin and Badley would agree, clearly reflect the changes taking place in social life. But, working from a feminist dialogic perspective, what we do not want to gloss over is the androcentric nature of that social life and the fundamental principles of intersubjectivity, answerability, and responsiveness from which it has historically recoiled. Thus, I suggest that the discursive situation that the speech genre of horror reflects as it manifests itself across late twentieth century forms of North American popular culture is the vicissitudes of institutionalized masculine subjectivity which entails a shift in the conceptualization of the self from an isolated, narcissistic, phallic, I-for-myself masculine consciousness to a monstrous body.

As institutionalized masculinity tries to negotiate between conflicting models of the self (on the one hand, the self as an atomistic and abstract reasoning mind, and, on the other hand, the self as all-too-proximate with the body and the other), the experience of horror escalates for I-for-myself consciousness into a cultural ethos of mutilation. What we have underlying

the present cultural ubiquity of horror, I would argue, is a struggle for institutionalized masculinity between what Bakhtin has called the centrifugal and centripetal forces of language and culture. As the atomistic I-for-myself masculine subject is opened up to the existence of the lived body and the other, and so questioned and challenged by the forces of feminist and gay inquiry, the discursive forces of an increasingly paranoid institutionalized masculinity react hysterically, struggling desperately to disavow the death of the phallic, narcissistic self by heightening representations that reject the body and the other, denigrating and devaluing them as sites of abject horror, and, in the case of David Cronenberg, trying to pass off the mangled carnage that results as somehow the embodiment of a desirable transcendent subjectivity.

However, notwithstanding these misguided postmodern enthusiasms for the radically fragmented subject and the breakdown of boundaries, it must be acknowledged that Cronenberg's utterances in the genre do demonstrate an unusual and unique artistic perspective—what Bakhtin would call an individual language style—that is also highly significant and which, as dialogism insists, must be taken as seriously as the general language style in any analysis of his utterances. As Rodley suggested, there is an original “Cronenberguesqueness” at work here that intentionally strives to push the boundaries of the popular stylistic forms of horror toward a more sophisticated artistic aesthetic⁸⁶—toward what I have called a kind of ‘thinking man’s’ existential splatter. Moreover, it is an aesthetic which does attempt to confront serious and difficult questions of human life, such as consciousness, embodiment, and death, albeit from the binarist,

isolationist, and disembodied perspective of institutionalized masculinity that typically and problematically separates mind and matter, consciousness and body, self and other, masculine and feminine, subject and object, rational and irrational, science and the monstrous. As Cronenberg himself so characteristically puts it,

We've all got the disease—the disease of being finite. And consciousness is the original sin; consciousness of the inevitability of our death.

Part of my cinematic voyage has been to try and discover the connection between the physical and the spiritual: what are we physically; what is the essence of physical life and existence. It's still a conundrum that drives me mad: the old Bertrand Russell riddle.

What's mind? No matter. What's matter? Never mind.⁸⁷

Searching for the connection between the categories that institutionalized masculinity has historically kept apart, a wide-eyed Cronenberg conceives of himself as bravely, if not heroically, entering the no-man's land of pathology and disease—the chaotic space where life meets death, consciousness meets the body, and abstract institutionalized masculinity is called into question. In response to David Breskin's observation that the Cronenberg hero is passive, defensive, ineffective, fragile—in a word, emasculated—Cronenberg himself enthusiastically agrees:

I think that's true. I'm not actually presenting these guys as the embodiment of masculinity But if you want to reduce everything to sexual politics, I'd say, yes, my vision of masculinity as

revealed in the movies is not at all the sort of macho-insensitive-rapist that all those feminist critiques present

That's true. I like this, I like this line of reasoning. It's so obvious, I've never quite talked about it this way before. I think I find that kind of character a very good basis for a film in which one explores human nature. Rather than a guy who's very opinionated, very secure, very strong, very aggressive, very focused, very active . . . it works best for me to have a character much more like the ones we've been talking about.⁸⁸

At first glance Cronenberg's films since the 1980s do indeed seem more self-reflexive than most other examples of the horror genre as he "deliberately" puts his male protagonists in "difficult," "passive" positions from the start⁸⁹ and turns institutionalized masculinity's sense of reason and order on its head by deconstructing masculinity—by collapsing "the distinction between the scientist and the monster."⁹⁰ or between the masculine mind and the (feminized) body (fantastic). As Lianne McLarty remarks, we can see a clear division in Cronenberg's work between the films of the 1970s that locate the horror in the female body and the films of the 1980s that locate it in the male mind, "which is alienated from and which attempts to transcend/control that body. This shift in Cronenberg's films from a horror of the (female) body to one of the male mind avoids the tendency of his early work to couple the monstrous and the feminine."⁹¹ However, she continues.

While these films succeed in uncoupling the monstrous and the feminine, they are less successful in disrupting the binary thought

that characterizes the body as feminine in the first place. Ultimately, The Fly and Dead Ringers, like all of Cronenberg's films, exhibit a rather traditional opposition between male/mind and female/body. Despite this uncoupling, therefore, the figure of the feminine as body persists, even in those films that are primarily about the horrors of the scientific male mind and its attempts to constrain the feminine within its discourses. The centrality of the feminine body (whether predatory or not) in Cronenberg's films indicates that his politics are not adequately accounted for by postmodernism alone.⁹²

Certainly not. For underlying the postmodern ethos of mutilation and its generalized hysteria and paranoia—underlying the politics of lauding fragmentation, loss of boundaries, and a monstrously deconstructed (i.e., feminized) masculinity—there is hardly male transcendence, human liberation or even very much real insight on the inescapably social basis of the human condition. This is why, as McLarty insists and I have earlier argued, human and/or feminist interests are not ultimately advanced by buying into the 'politics' of Cronenberg's postmodern horror, applauding figures of vulnerable masculinity splattered across the screen, coupling the monstrous with the masculine, and calling it the path to a potentially progressive understanding of masculine subjectivity; rather, such a stance merely condones further institutionalized masculine withdrawal from the feminine, the other, and the body.

In order to truly make valuable revelations about the conditions under which we live in late twentieth century North American culture, McLarty writes, horror

need not abandon the body as a site of the horrific. It does, however, need to suggest that the body is monstrous not because of what it is but because of what is done to it The postmodern assertion that a breakdown in boundaries has led to an abandonment of “them-and-us” thinking does not make it so in our cultural representations, even within the very texts that ostensibly make such an assertion! Otherness remains a central feature of the horror film, and the embodiment of it in the feminine throws the politics of paranoia into question.⁹³

Radical opposition, progressiveness, and potential liberation in the genre of horror, she argues, really depend “on a construction of a monstrous that is not the feminine body but the body politic [my emphasis]”⁹⁴—i.e., that focuses, from a feminist point of view, on what I am elaborating in these pages as the monstrous unreasonableness and inhumanity of the politics of atomistic, phallic, narcissistic, I-for-myself institutionalized masculinity and its disgust with, denigration of, and withdrawal from the body as a category of the devalued feminine other.

Moving from the gendered critique of Cronenberg’s general language style that I have elaborated in this chapter—moving from the kind of feminist dialogic analysis of the “given” in Cronenberg’s utterances that Myriam Diaz-Diocaretz called for—what I want to argue in the chapter that follows is that there is a strong suggestion of modernity’s phallic narcissism in David Cronenberg as a creative author, in his “postmodern,” “deconstructed” male protagonists, and in his relationship to them. A close examination of his individual language style will reveal, less a brave and

radical opposition to normative forms of subjectivity than an ultimately conservative residual immersion in the self-preservatory “body politic” of phallic, narcissistic institutionalized masculinity and its withdrawal from embodiment, the feminine, and the other, evidenced in his predilection for the motif, and sometimes the overt theme, of the monstrous double in his construction of his male heroes, in his relationship to them, and, by extension, in the films themselves as his personal utterances.

Notes

- 1 Patricia Yaeger, afterword to Feminism, Bakhtin and the Dialogic, ed. Dale M. Bauer and Susan Jaret McKinstry (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), 239.
- 2 Michael Holquist, Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World (London and New York: Routledge, 1990) 154.
- 3 Yaeger, afterword to Feminism, 240.
- 4 Barry Rutland, "Bakhtinian Categories and the Discourse of Postmodernism," in Mikhail Bakhtin and the Epistemology of Discourse, Critical Studies, ed. Clive Thomson, 2:1-2 (Amsterdam-Atlanta: Rodopi, 1990), 128.
- 5 Holquist, Dialogism, 154-155.
- 6 Maroussia Hajdukowski-Ahmed, "Bakhtin and Feminism: Two Solitudes?" in Mikhail Bakhtin and the Epistemology of Discourse, Critical Studies, ed. Clive Thomson, 2:1-2 (Amsterdam-Atlanta: Rodopi, 1990), 153.
- 7 Ibid., 153.
- 8 Yaeger, afterword to Feminism, 240.
- 9 Myriam Diaz-Diocaretz, "Bakhtin, Discourse, and Feminist Theories," in The Bakhtin Circle Today, Critical Studies, ed. Myriam Diaz-Diocaretz, 1:2 (Amsterdam-Atlanta: Rodopi, 1989), 129.
- 10 Ibid., 136.
- 11 Ibid., 122.
- 12 Yaeger, afterword to Feminism, 240.
- 13 Hajdukowski-Ahmed, "Bakhtin and Feminism," 157, 161.

14 Yaeger, afterword to Feminism, 241.

15 Dale M. Bauer and Susan Jaret McKinstry, introduction to Feminism, Bakhtin and the Dialogic, ed. Dale M. Bauer and Susan Jaret McKinstry (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), 1.

16 Boguslaw Zylko, "The Author-Hero Relation in Bakhtin's Dialogic Poetics," in Mikhail Bakhtin and the Epistemology of Discourse, Critical Studies, ed. Clive Thomson, 2:1-2 (Amsterdam-Atlanta: Rodopi, 1990), 66.

17 Diaz-Diocaretz, "Bakhtin," 133.

18 Ibid., 133.

19 Zylko, "The Author-Hero Relation," 72.

20 A glance at the numerous interviews Cronenberg has given over the years will confirm the extent to which feminist discourse and gender issues are part of the discourse circulating around him and his work. See, for example, Chris Rodley's Cronenberg on Cronenberg (Toronto: Knopf, 1992) and David Breskin's "David Cronenberg: The Rolling Stone Interview," Rolling Stone 632 (February 1992).

21 Michael Bach, "Uncovering the Institutionalized Masculine," in Men and Masculinities: A Critical Anthology, ed. Tony Haddad (Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, 1993), 41.

22 Stephen Frosh, Sexual Difference: Masculinity and Psychoanalysis (London and New York: Routledge 1994), 3. On the need for our increased awareness of the place of human emotions in human nature and the importance of emotional literacy, see Daniel Goleman's Emotional Intelligence (New York: Bantam, 1995). Also interesting on the

connections between emotional literacy and masculinity is Terrence Real's I Don't Want to Talk About It: Overcoming the Secret Legacy of Male Depression (New York: Scribner, 1997).

23 Frosh, Sexual Difference, 13.

24 Bach, "Uncovering," 51.

25 Holquist, Dialogism, 56.

26 George H. Mead, Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist, ed. Charles W. Morris (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1934) 136-137.

27 Ibid., 138.

28 Ibid., 138.

29 Ibid., 140.

30 Bach, "Uncovering," 47.

31 Ibid., 47.

32 Frosh, Sexual Difference, 99.

33 Jessica Benjamin, The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination, (New York: Pantheon, 1988) 166.

34 Ibid., 167.

35 Ibid., 171.

36 Ibid., 171.

37 Frosh, Sexual Difference, 75.

38 Ibid., 77-78.

39 Whether embodied in the "egg-head" of abstract reason or the "cojones" of phallic posing, the ideal forms of masculinity have this in common: fear

and devaluation of the other. A good example of the dovetailing of phallic masculinity and men's reason in absolute violence against the other can be found in Carol Cohn's feminist account of the discourse of nuclear scientists, "Slick 'ems, glick 'ems, Christmas trees, cookie cutters: Nuclear language and how we learned to pat the bomb," Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists 43:5 (June 1987).

40 Frosh, Sexual Difference, 88.

41 Benjamin, Bonds of Love, 171.

42 Frosh, Sexual Difference, 83.

43 Bakhtin, Art and Answerability, 59.

44 As Holquist puts it, after Bakhtin, we must reformulate the question haunting the masculine subject "'How can I know myself?' into another question with quite different implications: 'How can I know if it is I or another who is talking?'" (Dialogism 13).

45 Bakhtin, Art and Answerability, 22.

46 Ibid., 134.

47 Ibid., 127.

48 Linda Badley, Film, Horror, and the Body Fantastic (Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 1995), 2-3, 9.

49 Ibid., 3.

50 Ibid., 29.

51 Ibid., 21.

52 After all, as regards the issue of the ubiquity of horror and given the fact that men control production, distribution and exhibition of the lion's

share of popular images circulating in androcentric Western culture, the all-pervasiveness of horror as an affect and a genre across all media is undeniably linked to masculine experience and must be understood in that context.

53 Badley, Film, 13.

54 Quoted in Badley, Film, 22.

55 *Ibid.*, 27.

56 Badley, Film, 27.

57 *Ibid.*, 29.

58 Quoted in Badley, Film, 29.

59 Badley, Film, 29.

60 *Ibid.*, 30.

61 The independent film Dead Man Walking (1995) is interesting on this score. It is a film by Tim Robbins about masculinity, double murder, and capital punishment that has elements of horror but which tells its tale from a very different perspective than institutionalized masculinity's body fantastic. We are not blocked out from the male protagonist Matthew Poncelet/Sean Penn as an embodied consciousness but are instead invited to witness his growth as a subject through his dialogic, intersubjective relationship with Sister Prejean/Susan Sarandon, his confessor, and, ultimately, his friend.

62 Badley, Film, 35.

63 *Ibid.*, 35.

⁶⁴ This Sartrean conception of free consciousness as freedom from others is in stark contrast to the dialogic understanding of freedom as socially and therefore ethically determined. “The better a person understands the degree to which he is externally determined (his substantiality),” writes Bakhtin, “the closer he comes to understanding and exercising his real freedom” (“From Notes Made in 1970-71,” in Speech Genres & Other Late Essays,” trans. Vern W. McGee, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 139). See also Myriam Diaz-Diocaretz who suggests that the “dominant idea” in Bakhtin “is the belief in freedom as the core of the human subject.” However, individual freedom in his philosophy is not solipsistic but intimately linked to alterity, and she quotes David Carroll on Bakhtin’s demand that ““the alterity of the other be respected and that the conflictual diversity of the social space itself ... be maintained”” (Diaz-Diocaretz, “Bakhtin,” 136) in any consideration of the individual’s free will.

⁶⁵ Holquist, Dialogism, 61.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁶⁷ Bakhtin, “The Problem of Speech Genres,” in Speech Genres & Other Late Essays, trans. Vern W. McGee, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 93.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 78-79.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

72 Ibid., 65-66.

73 Ibid., 60.

74 Ibid., 66.

75 Ibid., 60.

76 Badley, Film, 7.

77 Ibid., 23.

78 Ibid., 30.

79 Ibid., 31.

80 Ibid., 31.

81 Ibid., 126.

82 Ibid., 127.

83 In Violence in the Arts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 125, John Fraser explains such carnage against the human body as we see in art like Cronenberg's in terms of "the sensed presence of thought behind violence; of violences as manifestations of thought" to which I would add thought, of course, that is decidedly masculine—thought that originates in androcentric I-for-myself consciousness and does violence to the embodied self.

84 Clearly, Cronenberg's fellows are not jumping for joy at the transformations that are wrought on them; rather, they are steeped in a dark melancholia. On this note of the melancholy tone pervading Cronenberg's films and informing his interpretation of his male protagonists' plights, see Peter Morris' biography David Cronenberg: A

Delicate Balance (Toronto: ECW Press, 1994), 102-107. Morris argues that

Cronenberg has always been aware, since his early films, that death is at the centre of his work.... Recently he has been more explicit about how this element relates to melancholia. In rejecting the view that The Fly was a metaphor for AIDS, he said: 'I see it as talking about mortality, about our vulnerability, and the tragedy of human loss. The difficulty in accepting it, and the difficulty of coming to terms with it when you've got it.... We've all got the disease—the disease of being finite. And consciousness is the original sin: consciousness of the inevitability of our death'" (104).

Indeed, I would agree that death (rather than some evasive and ultimately rather puerile notion about life in the "New Flesh") is really at the centre of Cronenberg's work, but I would add that it is clearly the mortality of the masculine subject and the dying fantasy of his unlimited abstract consciousness—not the tragedy of a generalized human loss—that is underlying these films.

⁸⁵ Cronenberg's belief that the transformations in his films are cathartic and lead to painful but desirable metamorphoses are well-documented in The Shape of Rage, in Cronenberg on Cronenberg, and in various other interviews. But, for a thoughtful and critical examination of Cronenberg's position, see David Sanjek's "Dr. Hobbes's Parasites: Victims, Victimization, and Gender in David Cronenberg's Shivers," Cinema Journal 36:1 (Fall 1996). For example, after Steven Shaviro, Sanjek

questions whether such highblown transformation/transgression is really transcendence, particularly since it occurs at the expense of women, and, I would add, “the feminine” (61). However liberated from the ‘negative’ constraints of embodiment and conventional morality Cronenberg claims the characters in Shivers might be, Sanjek suggests that “we must consider who suffers in this glorious destabilization of society. Is their agony worth the supposed reward?” (61). Seeing Cronenberg’s insistence that “everyone illicitly identifies with crazed or aberrant behavior”(59) as disingenuous because many women clearly reject these narratives in which such (typically masculine) behavior typically victimizes them, and many feminists now argue forcefully against them, Sanjek points out Cronenberg’s blind arrogance from a gender perspective. Indeed, when Cronenberg “states that The Brood makes us uncomfortable ‘precisely because it makes us confront why we experience disgust in looking at the body’” (60) he is clearly oblivious that he speaks, less for “everyone” than for institutionalized forms of masculinity that experience disembodiment, alienation from the body, and disgust in the body as “normal.” As Sanjek observes of Max Renn, “His acquisition of the ‘new flesh’ renders him other than human and hypothetically superior to his own species, but at what cost? His transformation further suggests that for Cronenberg resolution of our torment and confusion occurs only when we leave the shell of our humanity behind” (63).

86 “Most people,” says Cronenberg,

have a certain understanding of what a horror film is, namely, that it is emotionally juvenile, ignorant, supremely non- intellectual and dumb. Basically stupid. But I think of horror films as art, as films of confrontation. Films that make you confront aspects of your own life that are different [sic] to face. Just because you're making a horror film doesn't mean you can't make an artful film" (Rodley, Cronenberg on Cronenberg, 59).

87 Ibid., 128-129.

88 Breskin, "David Cronenberg," 96.

89 Ibid., 96.

90 Lianne McLarty, "'Beyond the Veil of the Flesh': Cronenberg and the Disembodiment of Horror," in The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 241.

91 Ibid., 247.

92 Ibid., 247.

93 Ibid., 248.

94 Ibid., 248.

Chapter 5

The Monstrous Double and the Male Hero in the Films of David Cronenberg

What becomes increasingly clear when we approach David Cronenberg from this feminist dialogic position on authorship, subjectivity, masculinity and genre that I have outlined is the extent to which his work is suffused with monologism. Monologism, we will recall, is the concept Bakhtin uses to describe “all claims to oneness.”¹ Subjectivity is monologic when it denies the “fatedness of alterity” and the simultaneity of co-beings in co-consciousness² with egotistic claims that it is naturally self-motivated, self-contained, and the only “I” of value among others as mere objects. And this is exactly the kind of subjectivity Cronenberg demonstrates in his relationship to his heroes, and in the relationships he stages between them. As we will see, an investigation of his individual language style reveals an ultimately destructive romanticism at the core of the director’s creativity—an obsession with phallic and narcissistic I-for-myself consciousness such that consummative form-giving activity is compromised and in some cases blocked; the body is denigrated and mutilated; the boundary between I and the other becomes unstable; consciousness becomes disembodied and abstracted from itself as once-occurrent-event-in-Being and so bereft of its answerability; and the figure of the monstrous double pervades his utterances. Both in his capacity as author-person (in which he reflects on his work as a genius auteur and its expression of his private unconscious) and in his capacity as author-creator (in which he demonstrates through the

form embedded in his films themselves his attitude to his heroes as embodied others) these values of phallic and narcissistic institutionalized masculinity are borne out. It is to a detailed description of how these values are manifest in Cronenberg's life and art that I will now turn.

Cronenberg's individual language style

If David Cronenberg's artistic utterances must be understood in the context of the socially "given" (in terms of the way in which they answer the requirements of the general language style, involving institutionalized masculinity's horror at embodiment and the other), they must also be understood in the context of the "created" (in terms of the way in which they answer the requirements of the individual language style, involving the form of Cronenberg's personal speech acts produced with intentionality out of his unique and once-occurrent lived life as an actor/author in aesthetic activity). As Bakhtin insists, "both individual and general language styles govern speech genres"³ as types of utterances, and for Myriam Diaz-Diocaretz, these two poles are crucial to a feminist dialogic analysis of any utterance or text. "From the given," she writes, "we reach the second pole of the text, the created, which refers to the individual's text in its uniqueness, its intention, the author's world vision." And, since language is intersubjective,

the utterance is in itself a kind of crossroads between discourses as manifestations of collective phenomena and the individual verbal acts, both of which are comprised in Bakhtin's term of the dialogic. The speaking subject, as author, creates a non-repeatable, non

reiterable context, and not simply a reflection of something which preexisted it. The speaking subject is, by definition, a deictic sociality, an interplay of movements and interactions and adjustments being reshaped in the aesthetic composition of the text.⁴

Moreover, she insists that any “feminist critical vision” must work at this crossroads that characterizes the utterance—at the dialogic site where the speaking or writing subject is grounded and interacts discursively, whether the discourse in question is suffused with patriarchal values or not. Texts, taken from this Bakhtinian perspective, are then “no longer seen as the static dichotomy between non-dominant (the social realm of women) and dominant (patriarchy) material forces, but in a new, fully dynamic field in which all situations of the word become equally contested and challenged.”⁵

In order, then, to understand Cronenberg's utterances as aesthetic compositions in terms of his unique individual language style, it is essential for us as feminists to enter the dynamic dialogic field which they inhabit; to focus on the nature of his word both as author-person and as author-creator and, from our perspective, to question, challenge and contest it; to observe and describe the formal quality and value underlying the created aspect of his work, which, from a dialogic perspective, as we have seen, has less to do with traditional notions of rarefied artistic genius or aesthetic beauty than with the author and hero in aesthetic activity—with how the author perceives his hero, with aesthetic seeing, with consummation and the gift of form extended between the I and the other; and to identify and

critically analyze the site where he is grounded and how he grounds himself as a speaking subject.

Apropos this investigation of Cronenberg's individual language style, David Breskin makes what I think is a very interesting and pointed observation of the director in the context of their discussion of the issue of the latter's withdrawn, receding, deficient heroes. "You have an oddly romantic disposition," he remarks, to which Cronenberg replies, "Yeah. I've never denied that there's a romanticism in any of my films. I haven't talked about it much, in fact."⁶ While Breskin and Cronenberg themselves do not pursue this question of romanticism in Cronenberg and his films beyond superficial banter over whether it is best described as "astringent" or "acerbic," it is one, I argue, that begs to be examined with more seriousness and in greater detail as fundamental to the created in his work—to the form of his artistic world vision—to the way in which, as an author in aesthetic activity in life and in art, he consummates "the unsigned world into an utterance."⁷

Cronenberg the romantic

Romanticism is a term that has historically been used to designate the spirit of an immense sphere of cultural activity, embracing not only literature and the arts, but politics and philosophy as well.⁸ It represents a wide-ranging and complex tendency or sensibility that characterized late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century Western culture and which many argue continues to exert its influence on twentieth century symbolic and expressionistic modernism and on postmodernism.⁹

As part of a general revolt against Enlightenment mechanism, rationalism, and neo-classical formalism, romanticism in art was characterized by the idea that human value is linked primarily to 'man' in his 'natural' state—to the individual perceiver and his experience, his unleashed ego, his unique emotional reality, his private imagination, his expressive soul, his mind as a transcendent or sublime spiritual force, his mysterious creative genius—and that the artist, in his willingness to play, can express something altogether original and create whole universes that scientists and politicians and philosophers cannot. Thus associated with the traditions of romance (i.e., of the fanciful and fantastic, the dream-like and mystical, the picaresque, the Gothic), the romantic artist and the romantic hero demonstrate an intense, exalted subjectivity in rapturous relationship to itself which manifests, in its extremes, in solipsism and lonely melancholia. Typically a seeker who wanders in search of the absolute spirit of the world within himself, the romantic character's passion for self-analysis bordering on self-obsession frequently leads to ultimate distrust of and withdrawal from the 'philistinism' of the everyday world, dejection, dereliction, nihilism, and suicide (i.e., the Byronic hero, Faust, etc.). Indeed, the romantic style and sensibility in art, relying as it does on the quest of the atomistic (masculine) subject for sublime personal transcendence over the rational, the practical, and the demands of the social, has been seen by many as the precursor to the dark unconscious of the atomistic Freudian ego that comes to characterize early twentieth century modernism.

Along with his work on Freudianism during that period, Bakhtin also gave extended thought to the question of romanticism, and in his assessment the romantic author and the romantic hero would clearly share with the Freudian ego a decidedly monologic character. For Bakhtin, romantic aesthetics, like Freudian thinking, is premised not in the living dialogic principle of I and the other but in abstraction—in “the value constituted by ‘the idea’” of the subject as “solitary and utterly active” in his cognitive, ethical, and aesthetic position in the world.¹⁰ In romanticism, the self is an archetype of the supreme individual subject (“the idea of the whole or integral human being,”¹¹ complete in himself), who acts only from within (i.e., as I-for-myself) and not from an intersubjective boundary position of answerability and responsiveness, of relative activity and passivity toward others (i.e., as I-for-the-other and the-other-for-me). It is therefore not surprising that the romantic, in revolt against form because form is that which defines and confines and demarcates one from another and challenges the idea of the absolute world spirit, Being-for-itself, or the theme of full self-presence, strives at all costs toward the abstract, sublime transcendence of the lived reality of ‘mundane’ limits. He creates characters, says Bakhtin, in the “form of the infinite hero”¹²—the hero as ongoing I-for-myself consciousness—the hero, I argue, typical of modernity’s phallic and narcissistic institutionalized masculinity who lives in abstraction, alienation, inner body fragmentation, and the horror of disembodied consciousness, and so fails to recognize, answer, and consummate the other.

Moreover, Bakhtin elaborates, this romantic kind of hero is himself

not capable of being consummated. He

surpasses within himself any comprehensive determination of himself from outside as inadequate to himself; he experiences consummated wholeness as a limitation of himself and opposes to it an inexpressible inner mystery of some kind. “You think that all of me is here?”—he seems to say— “You think that you see all of me there is to see? On the contrary! What is most vital in me you can neither see, nor hear, nor know.” A hero of this kind is, for the author, infinite, i.e., he is reborn again and again, requiring ever again new forms of consummation which he himself then destroys through his own self-consciousness. Such is the hero in Romanticism: the Romantic is afraid to give himself away in his own hero and leaves some inner loophole in the hero through which he could slip away and rise above his own consummatedness.¹³

In his refusal to consummate the other and be consummated by the other, the romantic in effect self-destructs through his own self-consciousness—through his insane, phallic, narcissistic drive to be the source of all being and exclude the other as his co-being in co-consciousness. Hence the melancholy fascination for the romantic with those absolute states where boundaries, form, and the mortal body disintegrate—with suicide and death, and with the task of making his death become an event in his own life. However, according to dialogism that task is impossible because, as we have seen, “[m]y birth, my axiological abiding in the world, and finally, my death, are events that occur neither in me nor for me. The emotional weight of my life taken as a whole does not exist for me myself.”¹⁴ My

birth and death—my beginning and ending—cannot be part of my own consciousness because I cannot experience within myself the fact of my nonexistence. Indeed, my death is ultimately not mine to behold but is given to me by the other who authors me as a whole human being, an embodied consciousness, among others.

Obsessed with I-for-myself consciousness, the romantic has difficulty achieving the degree of outsidedness or transgression or live-entering necessary to human existence in life and in art, where the other, not the I, is the centre and hero of the world. In Bakhtin's estimation, the romantic author, hard pressed to achieve even minimal transgression, cannot get beyond merger with the hero, cannot manage to create the hero as another consciousness—as a new and distinct human being on a new plane of existence. Rather, he “takes possession of the hero,”¹⁵ becoming the hero of his own work, attempting to “create without answering for life”¹⁶—without acknowledging intersubjective need and his fundamental aesthetic and ethical answerability in giving the gift of consummative form to the otherwise chaotic existence of the ongoing consciousness of the other-hero.

“Authors,” Holquist reminds us, “are somehow both inside and outside their work.”¹⁷ In dialogism the author is constituted, as we have seen, on the boundary between life and art and so exists in both realms: outside, in social life as author-person with a “real, concrete, historical existence” or ongoing biographical life; and inside, in the form of the art as author-creator with “a unique kind of creative energy.”¹⁸ In the case of David Cronenberg, I will argue, we can clearly see his constitution as an author or discursive speaking subject at the crossroads between the

collective phenomenon of genre, or the general language style of horror, on the one hand, and the individual aspect of the phenomenon of the uttered word, or personal sensibility, or the individual language style of the romantic, on the other hand. Having shown in the preceding chapter how Cronenberg is, despite his claims, not beyond influence by the times he lives in but rather is culturally grounded in the values of late twentieth century institutionalized masculinity and its horror at embodiment, the feminine, and the other, I will now turn to the evidence provided by interviews, the films themselves, and their withdrawn, receding, deficient male protagonists in order to demonstrate how that grounding manifests in his art in what Bakhtin has called the infinite form of the romantic hero. What will emerge is a new understanding of his utterances as marking, not the fantastic dregs of his private unconscious as artistic genius, but the meeting point of the (gendered) reality of the world and his own (romantic, phallic, narcissistic) mind in the shifting androcentric values underlying subjectivity in general, and masculine subjectivity in particular, in late twentieth century cultural life.

Cronenberg as author-person

“My films,” says David Cronenberg, “are sui generis. It would be nice if they could form their own genre, or subgenre. My films really do exist on their own.”¹⁹ Imagining himself to be so autonomous and transcendent as an artist as to be beyond his social, historical, and cultural context (his head, as he has said, cleared of all considerations of the times he lives in when he works), and imagining his art to be so unique as to be

beyond categorization and comparison (his films, as he hopes here, recognized as a genre unto themselves), Cronenberg the auteur claims to stand alone. Moreover, in his estimation, his genius seems to be such that he progenates through his forehead, like a postmodern Zeus:

It's part of my nervous system up there. People say, "What are you trying to do with your movies?" I say, "Imagine you've drilled a hole in your forehead and that what you dream is projected directly on to a screen." Then they say, "Gee, but you're weird. How come you do that strange stuff?" I can then say, "You would do the same if you had access, if you allowed yourself access." Everybody would have weird stuff up there that an audience might think antisocial, perverse, whatever. It might even look that way to the person who created it.

That's not just your imagination up there; it's a huge synthesis of things. "He's got a weird imagination" trivializes it and says it's just a little arabesque. Nothing serious. Not the real person. Not the essence. But I think it is the essence of the person. Maybe the exercise is to deliver an essential part of you that cannot be delivered in any other way. Most people have too exalted an idea of what art must be to connect their own impulses to create with delivering themselves.²⁰

Indeed, while Cronenberg, as I have shown in the previous chapter, must clearly be understood in the context of the ubiquity of the horror genre in late twentieth-century androcentric North American culture as a category or subordinate of its general language style, he himself would seem to see

the whole social concept of genre as subordinate to his individual creativity or individual language style. “Sui generis” rather than “sui genre,” he considers his art as, ultimately, springing fully formed from the dregs of his personal unconscious. Obsessed with “delivering himself,” he cannot seem to begin to recognize the fundamental dialogic principle of human existence: the self is delivered by the other. Moreover, what Cronenberg himself does not seem to see as he delivers himself to the world, is how abstract, exalted and self-aggrandizing his own ideas about art really are. As I will argue from a feminist dialogic perspective regarding the romantic individual language style of this ‘self-styled’ genius, not only does he tend, narcissistically, phallically to see himself as the hero of the world, he also sees himself, romantically, as the hero of his own art.

Cronenberg is actually very ambivalent and clearly confused when he discusses aesthetics, unable to face what is really the dialogic problem of individual and general language styles and their combined effect on the utterance. On the one hand, he sees a film as revealing the “essence” of its maker, and on the other hand he says “[b]ecause of the People magazine cult, audiences might think that consumption of human beings—of their personalities, their essences—is what art is all about. I think it’s possible to be a great artist and not be very self-revealing at all.”²¹ On the one hand he is decidedly “sui generis,” and on the other hand “I’m not saying that I’m unique among film-makers and have no predecessors, because obviously I do.”²²

Obviously; Cronenberg exists dialogically and intersubjectively in his social, historical, and cultural context as we all do. However, he seems to

struggle against the implications of this social reality at every turn, dichotomizing art and life; preferring to emphasize his belief in the complete freedom of his atomistic, isolated, heroic romantic unconscious; indifferent if not oblivious to his effect on the other, or to the significance of the other's response to him. For example, he says that

as an artist the responsibility is to allow yourself complete freedom You don't have to be a Freudian to see that. The pressure in the unconscious, the voltage, is to be heard, to express. It's irrepressible. It will come out some way. When I write, I must not censor my own imagery or connections. I must not worry about what critics will say, what leftists will say, what environmentalists will say. I must ignore all that. If I listen to all those voices I will be paralyzed, because none of this can be resolved. I have to go back to the voice that spoke before all these structures were imposed on it [my emphasis], and let it speak these terrible truths. By being irresponsible I will be responsible If you're trying to consider something pure and innate, as opposed to just culturally relative, you have to dive deep inside yourself, and that can be very perilous."²³

And further to his comments quoted earlier regarding these "terrible truths," such as his predilection for using women as objects of bondage and torture in expressing the "darkest" and "most amoral" aspects of his sexuality, he suggests that

To say that's sexist is politicizing something that is not political. It's sexual, not sexist—that's just my sexual orientation. I have no reason to think that I have to give equal time to all sexual fantasies

whether they're my own or not. Let those people make their own movies—leave me alone to make mine. I feel censored in a strange way. I feel that meanings are being twisted and imposed on me. And more than meanings—value judgments

To me politics does not mean sexual politics. Politics has to do with power struggles, and parties and revolutions. People use the term sexual revolution in a metaphorical way. It's a semantic thing.²⁴

Obsessed with the idea that critics are interested only in censoring him, seeing himself as above feminist 'semantic' quibbles involving the connections between sexuality and power, free from social value judgments, and outside discursive struggles for meaning, Cronenberg apparently just wants to be left to play alone so he can access his private unconscious fantasies, sound the voice he insists existed fully formed before semantics, social structures, and social demands were imposed on it, and make his art. Thus, the 'pure' and 'innate' voice of the I-for-myself institutionalized masculine subject that a feminist dialogic perspective wants to debunk would ultimately seem to be exactly the form of narcissistic, phallic, solipsistic, apolitical subjectivity that David Cronenberg embraces in his artistic persona and in his creative work. "I really just do," he says to David Breskin, "what I fucking well want."²⁵

Apropos this attitude, as Martyn Steenbeck has observed, Cronenberg's is a persona and his films represent a body of cinematic work that are intimately connected with "the nature of pure scientific endeavor." "The films are experiments," he says, "conducted in a 'pure' sense, with

little or no regard for the consequences. The point is to follow the experiment or hypothesis through to the end, unrestrained by social or political considerations.”²⁶ The observation is apt. In interviews Cronenberg himself has talked extensively about science and its importance to him in his formative years and later to his art.²⁷ As a boy he was drawn to both science and literature, particularly “underground novels,” and when he was sixteen he submitted a short-story to a science-fiction magazine that came close to being accepted for publication. Then, as a student at the University of Toronto, he first enrolled in the faculty of science to pursue a degree in biochemistry and later switched majors to graduate with a degree in arts; but as a practicing artist he has clearly remained strongly identified with the ‘scientific mind’:

I think the best scientists are as mad, creative and eccentric as writers and artists of any kind. I feel a lot of empathy for doctors and scientists. I often feel that they are my persona in my films. Although they may be tragic and demented, I don’t subscribe to the view that they are playing with things that shouldn’t be played with. You have to believe in God before you can say there are things that man was not meant to know. I don’t think there’s anything man wasn’t meant to know. There are just some stupid things that people shouldn’t do. In another way, everybody’s a mad scientist, and life is their lab. We’re all trying to experiment to find a way to live, to solve problems, to fend off madness and chaos.²⁸

Indeed, there does seem to be a kind of sublime fusion of the scientific and the romantic in Cronenberg’s individual language style that manifests in his

life and in his work. “I think it was natural,” he says, “that I should try to draw these parts of myself together and integrate them, finally, in film-making.”²⁹

However, in enacting this marriage of romantic aesthetics on the one hand and scientific inquiry on the other, David Cronenberg is not nearly as unique and original as he would like to believe. For the gesture is decidedly quite modern, and underlying it we find what Susan Buck-Morss has described as “surely one of the most persistent myths in the whole history of modernity”: the (phallic, narcissistic, institutionalized masculine) myth of autogenesis—the myth of the one who delivers himself. “Doing one better than Virgin birth,” she writes,

modern man, homo autotelus, literally produces himself, generating himself, to cite Eagleton, ‘miraculously out of [his] own substance.’

What seems to fascinate modern “man” about this myth is the narcissistic illusion of total control. The fact that one can imagine something that is not, is extrapolated in the fantasy that one can (re)create the world according to plan The truly autogenetic being is entirely self-contained. If it has any body at all, it must be one impervious to the senses, hence safe from external control. Its potency is in its lack of corporeal response. In abandoning its senses, it, of course, gives up sex. Curiously, it is precisely in this castrated form that the being is gendered male—as if, having nothing so embarrassingly unpredictable or rationally uncontrollable as the sense-sensitive penis, it can then confidently claim to be the phallus.

Such an asensual, anaesthetic protuberance is this artifact: modern man.³⁰

Thus we have the series of male protagonists in Cronenberg's films from the early short Transfer (1966) to Dead Ringers (1988)—heroes who are modern men of reason (experimenters, medical doctors, and psychiatrists) but who transcend the normal parameters of science and the 'philistinism' of the everyday world to enter, with their creator, the realm of romantic play, the fantastic, the sublime, and who, in their 'radical transcendent freedom,' (but clearly sense-dead), typically reach the very limits of embodied life itself in the chaotic horror of madness, nihilism, murder, and suicide. This whole range of characters can, perhaps, best be summed up in Seth Brundle/Jeff Goldblum's opening line in The Fly (1986): "What am I working on? I'm working on something that will change the world and human life as we know it." Self-contained, arrogant, hubristic in the extreme, Cronenberg's scientist-heroes seem, like their creator, to do "just what they fucking well want." As the romantic hero of the world and of his own art, Cronenberg takes the romantic scientist's prerogative, through his characters, to "(re)create the world according to plan," or, as Bakhtin would put it, to decide the world's fate.

But it is this attitude of narcissistic and phallic institutionalized masculinity underlying Cronenberg's life, aesthetic activity, and art, I think, that conditions the very madness and chaos that he sees as coming from without and which he claims to be trying to fend off.³¹ Talking to Rodley about his early experiences playing with science as a child, and about how the twins in Dead Ringers were modeled after himself,

Cronenberg says: “What you saw through the microscope was fantastic. But when you looked up from the microscope, you were lost. So in a way I completely identify with those two little monsters.”³² Lost on the level of lived intersubjective social reality, or our sensate life together—desperately, hopelessly trying to fend off madness and chaos from the mad and chaotic position of I-for-myself consciousness, of ostensibly ‘pure’ scientific objectivity, of abstract institutionalized masculine reason and romantic withdrawal from the world of embodied others as co-consciousnesses—there, I argue, and not hidden in the depths of an atomistic private unconscious, we will find this author and his heroes in aesthetic activity.

Fusing the scientific and the romantic in his individual language style, Cronenberg as author-person tries to put his ‘theory’ (i.e., his claim that the monstrous transformations his heroes are forced to undergo are cathartic and lead to a new and positive form of transcendent subjectivity) to the test through his films as lab experiments, or, as he also puts it, as sites for creative play.³³ Perhaps, he speculates, the horror that results from this kind of play indicates an admission on his part that

what might be potentially positive in theory is maybe quite difficult to manipulate to the point where it’s positive in practice. I’m trying to say: Well, what happens when we put this theory into practice? That’s the extent to which my films are my little lab experiments. I say: Let’s try it out. Here’s a guy who’s transforming into this, and uh-oh, I see a problem, it’s not turning out so nice, what’s he going

to do? In a way, it's play. It's the way children play to try things out.³⁴

Manipulating his heroes as a scientist's disposable lab rats on the one hand, and as a romantic's sublime play-things on the other, Cronenberg struggles to realize in artistic practice the ultimate 'positive' from the point of view of phallic and narcissistic institutionalized masculinity: the abstract idea of atomistic, transcendent, I-for-myself, sense-dead masculine subjectivity. Of course his experiments, unrestrained by social or political considerations, lead inescapably to romantic melancholy and the chaotic horror of human life lost to others because it is trapped in I-for-myself consciousness.

However, he stubbornly persists in attempting to put his theory into practice in film after film, vainly hoping to "manipulate" lived social reality to the point where his idea of transcendent I-for-myself subjectivity is positive in practice. He thereby emerges as the quintessential romantic author according to Bakhtin: he who "begins to expect revelations" from his hero—he who attempts to "force an admission" from within the self-consciousness of his hero rather than giving him the aesthetic and ethical gift of consummated form as a relatively whole, forward-looking other—he who "takes possession of the hero" so that "the author's reflection is put into the soul or mouth of the hero,"³⁵ and we enter the province of autobiography, narcissistic mirroring, and the monstrous double which leads, not to new life, but to the infinitely repeated staging of death. As Cronenberg himself knows intuitively, "whenever I'm having a character

in my films die, I'm rehearsing my own death."³⁶ What he needs art for, he claims, is his struggle, not with the other, but with himself.³⁷

Thus, from a feminist dialogic perspective, Cronenberg as author-person is fundamentally blocked in his consummative powers and in his capacity for transgression. His aesthetic (and ethical) activity is monologic: a series of staged experiments, with himself at the centre, playing at fantastic ways to get around his own mortality and the debt that a life's—and a death's—meaning owes to the other. "Because death is inevitable," he says to Breskin,

we are free to invent our own reality. We are part of a culture, we are part of an ethical and moral system, but all we have to do is take one step outside it and we see that none of that is absolute. Nothing is true. It's not an absolute. It's only a human construct, very definitely able to change and susceptible to change and rethinking. And you can then be free. Free to be unethical, immoral, out of society and agent for some other power, never belonging. Ultimately, if you are an existentialist and you don't believe in God and the judgment after death, then you can do anything you want: You can kill, you can do whatever society considers the most taboo thing Including suicide Yeah. It's probably the only way we can give our death a meaning. Because otherwise it's completely arbitrary. It comes because of some small bodily malfunction or some accident—a safe falls on your head. You're Krazy Kat and a safe falls on your head and it doesn't mean anything! It means fuck-all. And so you say, I don't like this, I

don't like the fact that death, which is a pretty important moment in my life, I don't like this to have no meaning. The only way you can do anything about that is to control the moment and the means of your death. And that means suicide, basically.³⁸

In my opinion Cronenberg is correct in insisting that nothing is absolute: everything is relational, responsive, answerable, constructed in the struggle of human dialogue. Yet, conditioned by the values of institutionalized masculinity where existence and its meanings are not shared with the other but are the property of the atomistic "I," he cannot but see himself as the exception to this insight, a free agent, out of society, never belonging to that dialogue. Hence the form of adolescent 'freedom' he subscribes to that shuts dialogue and others out: the freedom to kill; the freedom of the one and only "I"; the freedom of the disembodied transcendental ego that denigrates and destroys the body and the feminized other; the freedom of I-for-myself consciousness that can only end in melancholic paralysis and death. Clearly, what Cronenberg is trying to do through his art and its obsession with suicide is to gain absolute individual control over meanings and important events in life that are fundamentally social—meanings and events that are not the property of the abstract, disembodied, atomistic "I" but that properly belong to I and the other—to faith in the consummative powers and grace of the other.

As a result, and given what McLarty has identified as his persistent tendency to the binarist, oppositional thinking that characterizes monologism, David Cronenberg as author-person is led to abstract himself out of dialogic relationship and responsibility to the other/society/culture

and so, in effect, to double himself: On the one hand, he sees himself as an artist lifted off social life whose vaunted imagination serves some other power; on the other hand, he recognizes himself as a citizen who takes social responsibilities seriously. Yet in his estimation, never the twain shall meet. "As an artist," he says,

one is not a citizen of society You have, in fact, no social responsibility whatsoever I could say in the same breath that I am a citizen and I do have social responsibilities, and I do take that seriously. But as an artist the responsibility is to allow yourself complete freedom. That's your function, what you're there for. Society and art exist uneasily together³⁹

Indeed society and art exist uneasily together; but nevertheless, exist together they do. For Cronenberg-the-artist, as he himself cannot help but admit, is at the same time, in the same breath, in word and deed a citizen, a husband, a father, a part of social reality who would himself shrink in extreme fear and abhorrence from the kinds of experiments and games his characters are made to undergo: "I don't like fantasy in my life," he says. "I have an incredible abhorrence of that, and a real drive into reality."⁴⁰

In this light it is difficult to see him as anything but naively self-deceptive on the one hand or brazenly disingenuous on the other hand when he considers the value of his art as working toward a positive transcendent masculine subjectivity. His belief in a parallel world of fantasy/ imagination/art that is totally disconnected from lived social values, like his theory that a transcendent masculine subjectivity which breaks all boundaries and limits and is exempt from the dialogue could have positive

social value, is simply not achievable in living practice. This is because the author, as we have seen, is a dialogic force in both art and life. If it's in art, it's in life. Cronenberg as an author/actor in aesthetic activity is not doubled into two separate beings, the artist and the man. Rather, he necessarily looks in two directions: toward the domain of culture/sense/content/social values, and toward the domain of his individual, unique, creative once-occurrent life as an ongoing event of Being. From the dialogic point of view of the philosophy of the act, he mediates the unity of the once-occurrent event of Being and its representation—life and art—as an answerable consciousness in the process of emotionally and volitionally acting a deed through his utterances. Thus, he is accountable, responsible, answerable for the thoughts he authors in life and the representations he makes in culture, and it is this inescapable answerability that prevents his total conditioning by culture and at the same time determines the moral and social accountability of his unique self-activity.⁴¹ Art is not an abstract world unto itself; rather, it is in communion with life, and with life's fundamental principle of the relationship of self and other, through the relationship of author and hero. In the authoritative act of creating his art, Cronenberg has no alibi in being: he cannot claim to be abstracted out of lived life; he cannot claim to be anywhere else but in the event of the answerable act toward others. As Zylko puts it, “the hero is intuitively found by the author in the depths of the social reality surrounding the author; the hero is always to some degree historical and always has a historical genealogy.” But, he continues, this ““possible hero”” changes in a

fundamental way in the creative act. “The author’s outsidedness creates him as a new person in a new plan[e] of existence.”⁴²

As an author in aesthetic and ethical activity then, David Cronenberg can indeed be said to function in Diaz-Diocaretz’s terms as a deictic sociality in the creative act of composing his texts or utterances. Speaking at one and the same time from the point of view of the socially given and the point of view of the individually created, he acts as a mediator or filter, if you will, between life and art. As author-person he is clearly grounded in patriarchal notions—in phallic and narcissistic institutionalized masculinity and its horror at embodiment, the feminine, and the other—and his heroes are found by him in the depths of this androcentric social reality surrounding him. Moreover, as institutionalized masculinity is challenged and disrupted by feminist and gay discourses in the past three decades, Cronenberg and his art, as Volosinov would say, have clearly “enter[ed] into close association with the changing behavioral ideology, become penetrated with it, and draw[n] new sustenance from it.”⁴³

Thus, as the terms of identity and subjectivity shift away from focus on the abstract, atomistic, reasoning masculine mind toward a focus on intersubjectivity, the other, the body, and the relationship between mind and body, Cronenberg is clearly affected by and speaks that shift. As we have seen, his utterances demonstrate a definite sensitivity to the temper of his times—to a collapsing and increasingly hysterical institutionalized masculine—and a markedly sheepish suspicion that, “uh-oh,” the theory of a positive masculine subjectivity that transcends all social bounds and values does not work in practice; rather, as the films categorically attest, that

fantastic theory results in the most haunting images of melancholy, dereliction, and despair.⁴⁴ This, I would argue, is the Cronenberg that earlier feminists have justifiably lauded: he who creates a new and unique context through his art and not simply a reflection of the earlier norm-affirming manifestations of the horror genre which preexisted it; he who lets the pain of I-for-myself masculinity show; he who dramatizes what happens in practice when institutionalized masculinity takes its complete 'freedom' to the limits; he who demonstrates a liberating "perversity" in relation to phallic norms of identity and standards of behaviour.⁴⁵

However, I would argue that, unlike the cinema of R.W. Fassbinder, for example, Cronenberg's never reaches the level of liberation to which it strives, or which earlier feminists have all-too-enthusiastically claimed for it. Where, as Kaja Silverman demonstrates,⁴⁶ Fassbinder's heroes are clearly and productively perverse in relation to the phallus, it seems to me that Cronenberg never manages to create his heroes on such a new plane of existence relative to institutionalized phallic and narcissistic masculinity. What I will show is that his emasculated heroes, while demonstrating a seeming perversity in relation to phallic norms and standards, ultimately sputter and choke, revealing themselves to be, when the dust finally settles, rather conventionally phallic in relation to the perverse. From a dialogic feminist perspective, this is because of Cronenberg's failure to achieve the transgression necessary to enable his heroes to live in that 'perverse' space—in that new plane of existence where they could be consummated and so refuse atomistic I-for-myself consciousness and begin to recognize the other, the body, the feminine, the homoerotic, and the truly existential

inescapability of their own embodied consciousness as co-beings in co-consciousness.

So grounded in horror of the body by the androcentric culture that surrounds him, and, despite his protests, so personally and theoretically invested in the phallic and narcissistic, homophobic and misogynist values of institutionalized masculinity, Cronenberg is unable to consummate his heroes as relatively whole others—to support them in taking on their own axiological position on a new plane of existence. Instead, he takes possession of them; uses them to try to control the meaning of his own death: repeatedly if not obsessively orchestrates the mutilation of their bodies; terminates them and so prevents their grounding on a new level of existence that could actually overtly challenge these values and lead to a very real and very threatening transcendence of hegemonic cultural norms and standards.

In effect, Cronenberg's self-described antisocial, transgressive, and transcendent 'perversions' really represent business as usual for institutionalized masculinity. In film after film Cronenberg flirts with 'ultimate perversity' from the perspective of institutionalized heterosexual masculinity—with the feminine other, and, by association, with homosexuality—while claiming to be seriously exploring these matters. But, significantly, not even one of his many heroes really survives on that plane, consummating and being consummated by women and gay men. Protesting against any underlying fears of the feminine and homosexuality on his part, and against what Breskin insists is his clear attraction to images of sexual violence, Cronenberg suggests that his goal of 'exploring'

homosexuality and the relations between men is as sincere and productive as his goal of 'exploring' heterosexuality and the relations between men and women; but in both cases, his grounding in an institutionalized masculine will to control, rather than explore, remains painfully obvious. He describes to Breskin a conversation with a journalist

who was making a very cogent point of the gayness that goes through all my work. And I say, "Well, you know, I'm interested in sexuality, and in my normal fashion I don't want to limit myself to what I might live out of." One of the reasons you do art is to live other people's lives and to plug into other modalities. One of the reasons actors act is to be other people. So I'm not afraid of homosexuality, and I'm not afraid of exploring those things. And I have explored those things in the films. There are a few men I sort of whip and torture in the movies, too.⁴⁷

In what I would argue is more his "normal fashion" of hero of the world or absolute master than of one who truly explores the worlds of others or challenges his own limits, Cronenberg as author-person seems to enjoy watching his heroes squirm, lost in what is for him and them the torturous horror, madness and chaos of the abyss masculinity experiences between the atomistic self and others. His limits due to his grounding in institutionalized masculinity become the limits of their world. Through their lives that categorically end in death or in the limbo of living death, the romantic mad scientist plays at his own fears of women, gay men, the mortal body and death, always leaving a loophole for himself and his sense-dead heroes to rise above consummatedness by the (feminized) other. But,

atomistic and abstracted out of all lived reality, what really happens is that Cronenberg and his heroes self-destruct through excessive self-consciousness—through obsessive I-for-myself consciousness: Cronenberg does so metaphorically, through the repeated staging of his own death in his art; his heroes do so literally, through the narrative trajectories of the films which always end in black melancholia, insanity, mutilation, murder, suicide, and death.

In my estimation, it is this fundamentally conservative, phallic, narcissistic, nihilistic force of masculine I-for-myself consciousness, more than a transgressive drive to profoundly explore and transcend personal and/or social limits, that is really the defining energy of Cronenberg as author-person. of Cronenberg's art as aesthetic activity, and, as we will see, of Cronenberg as author-creator in his films.

Cronenberg as author-creator

As Zylko observes, Bakhtin understands the author-creator as “a ‘functional’ existence with a twofold meaning.”⁴⁸ On the one hand, the author-creator is a function of the author-person, or the living, biographical, creative individual in their socio-cultural context. “In this meaning the author-creator can be conceived as a special social function of the real author, that is, of the individual who possesses the artistic skills that allow for the creation of a given work.”⁴⁹ On the other hand, the author-creator is a function of the created object. In this sense, the author-creator “appears as some kind of creative energy that is immanently manifested in the work itself,”⁵⁰ shaping and consummating the hero as an

other on a new plane of existence, in art. As such, what we have in this twofold nature of the author-creator is an active point of synthesis—a kind of momentous creative force that mediates life and art, filtering general and individual language styles, bringing them together in the unique form of the utterance. And, according to dialogism, that form is shaped not only in the attitude of the author-creator to the heroes of his utterances as others; it is also shaped in the attitudes of the heroes within those utterances to the others they themselves encounter.

In the case of David Cronenberg as author-creator, it is interesting to observe that since the early 1980s his films as individual utterances have demonstrated a striking formal commonality: there is a decided preoccupation with doubles and doubling which begins with Scanners in 1980, finds its apotheosis thematically in the Mantle twins of Dead Ringers in 1988, and remains in evidence as recently as 1996's Crash. Before turning now to trace how the form of the double inhabits Cronenberg's films of the 1980s and 1990s, I will briefly recapitulate.

We will recall that according to a feminist dialogism, the phenomenon of doubling occurs when the energy of being-for-others, and the ability to take oneself as another, is narcissistically and phallically blocked and so is turned back onto one's own self-consciousness. Turning the attitude of consummating the other back onto myself, the necessary reflection of myself in the other becomes a double of myself. I see myself everywhere. I can no longer locate myself and others as unique and distinct once-occurrent beings in space and time. We seem to merge. Identification becomes a state of possession of the other rather than an

aesthetic and ethical transgredient act toward the other as another unique and once-occurrent consciousness. Given the fundamental dialogic principle that others, too, exist, if I do not participate in consummative activity with the other—if I do not recognize the fact of my not being whole in and for myself and my need of the other to give my life form and rhythm and meaning—I come to inhabit the realm of insanity, of isolated I-for-myself consciousness: That is, I try to live monologically, as the only subject or abstract “I.”⁵¹ As Holquist puts it, such madness is nothing other than “the result of a self’s not being able to work out a treaty governing ratios of authority between itself and the other.”⁵² Without the consummative activity of I-for-the-other and the-other-for-me, I either turn the consummative energy of form-giving activity back on myself or mistakenly fuse with the other and so suffer the pathology of doubling.

Accordingly, what I want to argue is that Cronenberg and his heroes are haunted by the figure of the fearsome double, by boundary confusion and shivering paralysis, by suicidal madness, insanity, and death which originate in the kind of creative form-giving energy he brings to and manifests in his work: the energy of an ultimately romantic, phallic, and narcissistic I-for-myself consciousness in withdrawal from embodiment, the feminine, and the consummative, form-giving potential of the self-other relation. In Cronenberg, the author-hero relation is such that the heroes become, less forward-looking and free agents in the fantastic worlds of the transgressive and the ‘perverse’ that the author sets up for them, than possessions, experiments in death, terminated by Cronenberg in his struggle to give his own death a ‘meaning’ by controlling the moment and

means of the deaths of his heroes. In interviews with Rodley, Cronenberg repeatedly draws parallels between himself and his heroes, as if, indeed, they are his “persona” in his films, and so suggests that they are, perhaps, more than that—that they are, in fact, at the level of creative energy, merged with him, his doubles.

For example, recall his comment about drilling a hole in his forehead to project his dreams directly onto the screen when he creates,⁵³ which is exactly mirrored in the character of Darryl Revok in Scanners, who literally drills a hole in his forehead to let “the voices” out; he describes Max Renn in Videodrome as a “projection” of himself on screen in that in his opinion the character ultimately manages to positively manipulate the theory of the “new reality” of transformed and transcendent masculine subjectivity through the “New Flesh” and find an equilibrium in the carnage that results, much like Cronenberg claims he himself does through his art;⁵⁴ and, as we have seen, he fully acknowledges that the Mantle twins in Dead Ringers are modeled after himself.⁵⁵ From a dialogic perspective, what seems to be happening is that Cronenberg as author-creator identifies with his heroes in creating them, as any author must, but then fails to achieve transgression, loses his valuational point of support outside his heroes, and so ends up romantically and monologically expressing himself in them rather than achieving a consummative relation to his heroes as others—as other distinct and unique consciousnesses on a new plane of reality, in art.

Thus, relatively unconsummated as whole others who are distinct from himself by Cronenberg’s form of creative energy or aesthetic

activity, these heroes also remain relatively unconsummated in relation to the others with whom they inhabit the films as texts or utterances.

Narcissistic and phallic in the extreme, Cronenberg's heroes since the early 1980s take on the infinite form of the romantic hero: they live in abstraction, alienation, and inner body fragmentation; lost in the cold and chaotic horror of disembodied I-for-myself consciousness; paralyzed on the social level of the form-giving relation between I and the other; shivering in fear on the boundary between co-beings in co-consciousness; infinitely doubled. It is to an examination of the figure of the double that clearly comes to preoccupy Cronenberg and so comes to haunt the heroes of his artistic utterances which I will now turn.

Scanners, Videodrome, and The Fly

Scanners (1980) and Videodrome (1982) share what can best be described as cartoonish or comic-book forms of masculine I-for-myself consciousness (Cronenberg's tendency to adolescent or pre-adolescent characterizations and themes here is perhaps explicable as a hold-over from the aesthetic tone of his earlier low-budget horror films such as Shivers (1975), Rabid (1976) and The Brood (1979)). Their plots involve hubristic male scientists who want to control the world's fate by controlling and possessing others—who exist in rapturous relation to themselves as heroes of the world—who seem to see themselves romantically, as the source and the end of all being. Because the films are so conceptually convoluted, I will briefly recapitulate their stories before comparing them

on the basis of what is their much clearer and more obvious predilection for the double.

In Scanners we have the story of Dr. Paul Ruth/Patrick McGoohan, inventor of the drug ephemerol which induces incredible telekinetic powers: the ability to “scan” the minds of others. However, such scanning significantly also entails disturbing visceral effects: nose bleeds, headaches, and nausea on the part of the scanner; and the mutilation of the body of the scannee. (In the film’s most infamous sequence, the head of an anonymous scan-tester (played by Louis del Grande) explodes, the result of his having unknowingly accepted another, more powerful scanner as his volunteer test subject.) Ruth originally invented the drug in the late 1940s (the film is set in the near future) as a tranquilizer for pregnant women. But when it is revealed that one of its side-effects is the creation of scanners, Ruth sells the product to Consec (a company in the business of “international security,” “weaponry,” and “private armies”) in exchange for the funding of future experiments. Ruth tries it on his own wife, and so his sons Darryl Revok/Michael Ironside and Cameron Vale/Stephen Lack become his first and most powerful scanners.

As the narrative unfolds we discover what becomes a battle of good and evil between the brothers. Now adults, they have been separated since childhood: the younger (more ‘sensitive,’ ‘feminine’) brother, Vale, has been living as a wandering, schizoid, amnesiac derelict; the older brother, Revok, has formed a scanner underground to infiltrate Consec, ruin his father, and “destroy the society that created him.” Revok has been searching for Vale all his life to aid him in this cause, but Ruth finds him

first—in fact, Ruth has been monitoring his derelict son’s whereabouts all along, and uses him in Consec’s battle with Revok without, of course, revealing their filial relation. Ruth wants Vale to help him stop Revok and save the scanners, through which Ruth claims he has brought “a glory and brilliance to society that’s never been seen before.” But Revok succeeds in infiltrating Consec through the “Ripe” program (in which pregnant women are being unknowingly injected with ephemerol to create an army of scanners for Revok’s war), and in killing Dr. Ruth. Revok abducts Vale (who has been circulating in a group of scanners who have defected from Revok and, lead by Kim Obrist/Jennifer O’Neill, are attempting to use scanning in a meditative way for the forces of good, like a benevolent club of aging hippies) and disabuses him of his idealization of Dr. Ruth as a “great man.” Revok reveals the truth to Vale: that they are brothers whom their father has used in the service of his mad experiment. “He knew who you were,” says Revok. “But it wasn’t until he needed you that he reached down and hauled you out of the slime.” Now Revok’s goal is to build an “empire” of scanner soldiers to control the world— “We’ll bring the world of normals to their knees. We’ll build an empire so brilliant, so glorious, we’ll be the envy of the whole planet”—and, like Dr. Ruth, he wants to use Cameron Vale to do so. Vale refuses, and in the film’s final minutes, Revok performs the ‘ultimate scan’ on his brother. Vale’s face erupts and bleeds, his eyes explode, and, eventually, he spontaneously combusts. In the end he is reduced to a charred carcass which burns at the feet of Revok whose eyes are now white and rolled fully back in their sockets. We assume, with Obrist, that Vale is dead. Suddenly, however, we hear his

voice emanating from behind a couch. The camera cuts to a figure hiding in the corner. He pulls his trench coat away from his face to reveal the body of Darryl Revok, now housing the mind and voice of Cameron Vale: “It’s me, Kim. Cameron,” says Vale. “I’m here. We’ve won. We’ve won.”

From a feminist dialogic perspective, of course, what we have in the fate of Darryl Revok and Cameron Vale is nothing less than the horror of I-for-myself masculinity expressed in the form of the monstrous double. Dr. Ruth’s (and ‘Dr. Cronenberg’s’) experiment in mind reading is a quite phallic and narcissistic insanity that manifests in ultimate disrespect to the outward body and its boundaries that living subjects need to demarcate ourselves as minds at all—as unique and once-occurrent consciousnesses in the field of dialogic intersubjectivity. Revok, ultimately, is the energy of institutionalized phallic consciousness that aims to control the other’s being by (literally) taking possession of the other—by overwhelming the other with his ego as the source of all being. When Cameron accuses Darryl of sounding just like Dr. Ruth in his bid to be the emperor and envy of the whole planet, the latter screams hysterically “No. Not like him. Like Revok. Like Darryl Revok You’re going to be with me Cameron, no matter what. After all, brothers should be close, don’t you think?” Destroying the body boundaries of Cameron Vale by “scanning” him, Revok internalizes him, devours him, forming a frightening and horrific merger or doubling between the self and other, annihilating difference.

Cronenberg’s conceit that such carnage leads to a transcendent and positive masculine subjectivity for Vale is represented in the fact that Vale

is himself physically destroyed yet moves his mind into Revok's body. But the melancholy feeling of loss and confusion and isolation in Vale/Revok's glassy-eyed stare into infinity—his clearly broken and paralyzed condition as I-for-myself ongoing consciousness—belies the conceit. Vale has seemingly “won” the battle and transcends according to Cronenberg as author-person, but he has “lost” his body at the level of the real energy and mood of the text. Instead of being given to him as a necessary ethical and aesthetic gift of form by others, his body is denigrated and mutilated. The body as that which identifies and distinguishes him in the field of intersubjectivity is no more. As an embodied consciousness, Cronenberg's hero no longer exists. What Vale/Revok really represents, then, is a ‘victorious’ disembodied consciousness; a consciousness invading and controlling the body of the other, or, conversely, a body being invaded and controlled by the consciousness of another; an idealized fantasy of institutionalized masculinity's atomistic mind which transcends the limits of the physical body; a breach of the fundamental principle of the distinction between self and other; a monstrous double.

An analysis of the creative energy underlying Videodrome reveals a similar kind of form pervading the utterance. Here the adolescent comic-book battle for mind control between good and evil is staged between the mad scientist Professor Brian O'Blivion/Jeck Creley, who has invented “Videodrome,” and Barry Convex/Les Carlson, O'Blivion's former partner and owner of Spectacular Optical (which manufactures “glasses for the Third World,” “missile guidance systems for Nato,” and, now, “Videodrome”). According to O'Blivion, Videodrome is the arena where

“the battle for the mind of North America” is to be fought. It involves a televisual signal that induces a brain tumour in those who watch it, such that “whatever appears on the television screen emerges as raw experience,” confusing reality and television. This transformation of the viewer’s reality into video hallucination is seen by O’Blivion as “the next phase in the evolution of man as a technological animal.” The old body dies and is transcended, becoming the “New Flesh,” “the video word made flesh,” as the tumour develops into a new organic part of the brain.

However, Barry Convex (a kind of mock evangelical fundamentalist) has O’Blivion murdered using satellite TV hacker Harlan/Peter Dvorsky and radio personality Nicki Brand/Deborah Harry in a bid to shut down TV producer Max Renn/James Woods’ softcore Channel 83 and take it over. It is Convex and Harlan’s intention to stop the video “rot” invading North America by weeding out anyone (like Max) who would willingly watch “a scum show like Videodrome,” and eventually using the signal for mind control. Together, they set Max up, staging the violent/pornographic/snuff content of Videodrome with which they seduce him, invading his body with a videotape recorder that plays Videodrome cassettes inserted through a slit in his abdomen. Through the tapes they induce him to kill his partners at Civic TV, and they also attempt to program him to destroy Bianca O’Blivion/Sonja Smits, the loyal daughter who has been preserving her father’s genius through his library of tapes at the Cathode Ray Mission. But Bianca intervenes, revealing to Max that Convex and Harlan killed Nicki on Videodrome, using her image to make him believe Videodrome is “for real”—an actual signal originating in

Pittsburgh—when, in fact, it has never been transmitted publicly. Bianca manages to turn Max against Videodrome. With the pistol he has been storing in his abdominal slit now permanently fused to his hand, he kills Harlan and Convex. The mutilations of Scanners—the spontaneous human combustion and the exploding head—are reprised in the deaths of Harlan and Convex, respectively. But, interestingly enough, so is the doubling that ends the film.

Max, now on the run and holed up in a condemned tug-boat at a desolate harbourfront, is confronted by the image of Nicki Brand on a television set surrounded by garbage. She suggests to him that he's only at the beginning of his journey: "The beginning of the New Flesh. You have to go all the way now. Total transformation To become the New Flesh you first have to kill the old flesh. Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid to let your body die. Just come to me Max. Come to Nicki. Watch. I'll show you how. It's easy." A reaction shot of Renn is followed by a cut to what he now sees on television: himself! In a series of reverse shots these doubles dolly up to each other, separated by the TV screen as the boundary demarcating them. Televisual/Videodrome Max kneels down with a flame flickering in front of him (again reprising the final images of Scanners), lifts the flesh pistol to his head, and, looking directly at the camera/screen/Max, murmurs "Long live the New Flesh" and shoots himself in the head. The TV itself explodes, gushing blood. At the end of a series of reaction shots of the smoking television, Max mimics the suicide scene exactly. But on the last beat of the words "Long live the New Flesh" he closes his eyes, and we cut to black as the gun sounds.

The climactic doubling in the case of Videodrome seems to have two dimensions. It represents a (con)fusion of self and other between Nicki and Max, as it did between Revok and Vale. In the final sequence she seduces him from within the television screen (within Videodrome) as we have seen her do earlier in the film, her huge and pulsating lips devouring the hero head first through the screen. In this later instance, Max is again drawn to merge with her in the world of the “New Flesh,” but in order to do so he must permanently give up the “old flesh,” and, in effect, enter the realm of insanity and death where boundaries collapse and the mortal body disintegrates. Across Renn’s reaction shot, Nicki becomes the image of himself killing himself within the Videodrome world. Thus, the doubling here also comes to represent both the confusion between self and other and the hero turned back on himself, lost in the chaos of I-for-myself consciousness, losing his identity—his very life—which depends, as dialogism suggests, on the distinction between co-consciousnesses and the transredient form-giving potential of the other.

In Videodrome, as in Scanners, we have utterances seeped in an atmosphere of cartoonish, comic-book style omnipotent masculinity involving complete paranoia in regard to the body, the other, and the feminine—an atmosphere where the work of mutual consummation between the self and others becomes a subject of and for horror. Indeed, these narratives, resonating with the emotional-volitional tone of I-for-myself consciousness imbued with the stylistic residues of the low-budget schlock horror genre in which Cronenberg worked throughout the 1970s, often seem more driven by the desire to stage a series of special effects that

mutilate the body (i.e., exploding heads and eye balls, charred or eviscerated human carcasses, hands fused with guns or melted off, etc.) than by any concern with the lived lives of their ‘transcendent’ heroes. In a world where the outward boundaries of the body are experienced as completely porous and open to invasion and mutilation by a host of monstrous others, Max Renn seems more paralyzed than transcendent, lost in the abyss of I-for-myself consciousness that, once again, Cronenberg would try to convince us holds the promise of “new life” in the “New Flesh.”

In the act of suicide, Cronenberg’s hero tries narcissistically, phallically, romantically to control the meaning of his death by making it become an event in his transcendent life in the “New Flesh.” But Max Renn is hardly wholly transformed by this act (accompanied as it is by the most melancholy music and mise-en-scene, and followed as it is by a jarring and abrupt cut to black). Rather than a victor embodying the “New Flesh,” he seems to be, like Vale before him, a victim of institutionalized masculinity and its values—a victim of the paranoid fantasies of the mad scientist, the sheer madness of corporate masculinity (Consec and Spectacular Optical are both, significantly, connected with the economies of Western militarism and obsessed with controlling the world), and the maddening insistence on Cronenberg’s part as author-person that his ‘transformed’ heroes are meaningfully ‘free.’

This discourse in Scanners and Videodrome suggesting that grotesque immolations of the body or sense-dead flesh of the male hero will lead to new or transcendent life is once again taken up in The Fly

(1986). In fact, Seth Brundle/Jeff Goldblum's transformation into Brundlefly also reprises the comic-book sensibility of the earlier films, but with the notable exceptions that 1) the hero is no longer an unwitting victim of the mad scientist; rather, Seth Brundle himself has become the scientist and the victim at one and the same time; and 2) the story is not originally Cronenberg's and so begins to require more emphasis on character development that challenges the director's earlier emphasis on tableaux of special effects.

Brundle is a brilliant yet sexually inexperienced scientific experimenter who meets journalist Veronica/Geena Davis at a convention. Clearly attracted to her, he invites her back to his lab for cappuccino and to witness his latest invention: a computer system that is capable of disintegrating inanimate matter in one pod and reintegrating it in another, hence teleporting it through space. Suitably impressed, Veronica agrees not to report the story until Brundle achieves his goal of breaking the borders of human time and space by teleporting living matter: himself. As they become sexually involved, her musings about "how crazy the flesh can make you" inspires Brundle's work, and he succeeds in teleporting a baboon by reprogramming the computer "to be made crazy by the flesh."

However, their romance is interrupted by the manipulateness of Veronica's editor and jealous ex-lover Stathis Borans/John Getz. He has been spying on the couple and tries to ruin their relationship and scoop the story from Veronica by mailing Brundle a copy of Particle magazine with the latter's invention already reported on the cover. Intending to confront Borans, Veronica leaves Brundle, cryptically telling him she has to scrape

the residue of her old life off her shoe once and for all. Drunk and confused—inexperienced with relationships, women and “the flesh;” unsure about what kind of “game” Veronica is playing; jealous of Borans—Brundle decides to teleport himself. What he doesn’t realize is that a fly is trapped in the pod with him. Thus his experiment leads to a horrible transformation in which he has been genetically spliced with a housefly and so mutates into the monstrous Brundlefly. Veronica, realizing what has happened but now pregnant with the fly’s baby, enlists Borans’ help in securing an abortion. However, now himself made literally “crazy by the flesh,” Brundlefly kidnaps her from the clinic, intending to survive by fusing himself with Veronica and the fetus. Borans, in attempting to rescue Veronica, has his hand and foot melted off by the rapacious Brundlefly’s acidic saliva, yet manages to stop the fusion process by shooting at the telepod. Brundlefly is accidentally fused with the pod, and an hysterical Veronica reluctantly obliges his pathetic request to put him out of his misery. She shoots him with Borans’ rifle.

The comic-book sensibility in The Fly is less the manifestation of masculine battles between good and evil for control of the world or the minds of others as it is in Scanners and Videodrome than of the masculine fantasy of being exceptional—of leaving others behind in the dirt—of having super-human strength, both mentally and physically. What he has achieved through his work, Brundle suggests to Veronica after his first and seemingly successful self-teleportation, “is to say to the world, ‘Let’s go. Catch me if you can.’” Moreover, Brundle’s transformation into Brundlefly significantly entails marathon sexual energy and an insatiable

appetite for violence to the bodies of others (as the narrative unfolds he will literally break a man's hand from his wrist, threaten a woman with rape, threaten to "hurt" Veronica if she stays with him, and reduce two of his rival Borans' limbs to mangled and oozing nubs). When Brundlefly tries to insist that Veronica go through teleportation so that they can be the perfect comic-book couple, the "dynamic duo," she resists, realizing that something has gone terribly wrong. Obsessed with himself and his newly empowered "flesh," (the return of Cronenberg's thematic refrain in Videodrome which, in effect, reduces the body to sense-dead meat), he scoffs at her: "If you're too chicken-shit to be a member of the dynamic duo, I'll find somebody else You're afraid to dive into the plasma pool—you're afraid to be destroyed and recreated. I bet you think you woke me about the flesh, don't you? But you only know society's straight line about the flesh. You can't penetrate beyond society's sick, grave fear of the flesh. Drink deep or taste not the plasma spring. I'm not just talking about sex and penetration. I'm talking about penetration beyond the veil of the flesh. The deep, penetrating dive into the plasma pool"

Cronenberg's conflation of the energy of the new masculine flesh in The Fly with sex and the feminine-as-other is highly significant. Whereas the birth of the "New Flesh" in Videodrome was associated with the institutionalized masculine stereotype of the 'devouring' feminine body, the birth of the new flesh in The Fly is associated with the inverse stereotype of its 'monstrous' birth-giving potential. Exasperated by Veronica's fear of the new flesh, Brundlefly seeks out Tawny/Joy Boushel, a bar-fly he "wins" from Marky/George Chuvalo in what is at once an 'amusing' show

of super-human masculine bravado within the narrative and a show of typical Cronenbergesque horror at the body of the other within the utterance: the arm-wrestling scene in which Brundlefly snaps Marky's hand from his wrist. In awe of Brundlefly's ability to un-man Marky, and then to man-handle her up the stairs to his lab, Tawny asks "Are you a body-builder?" to which Brundlefly replies, "Yeah. I build bodies. I take 'em apart and then I put 'em back together again." Indeed, running throughout The Fly as utterance is the hero's 'fearless' I-for-myself masculine fantasy of the empowered male body—of autogenesis through the technologized flesh that degenerates and regenerates, giving birth to itself—symbolized in the film, of course, as power appropriated from the 'abyss' of the feminine body. For, a marked association is created by Cronenberg's editing, which cuts directly from the naive Tawny's splayed-open legs to Brundlefly's emergence from the telepod, the hero's self-birthing machine. He straddles her open lap with aggressive lasciviousness. "Are you some sort of magician?" a wide-eyed Tawny says to the strongman who is beginning to behave more like a rapist. When he attempts to force her through the pod, she refuses, and Veronica arrives in time to save her. "Be afraid," she says to Tawny. "Be very afraid." Tawny escapes, and Brundlefly accuses Veronica of being jealous because he has been "released" beyond the veil of the flesh. "Does this look like a sick man to you? I don't need you anymore," he screams as he punches a hole in the wall and kicks Veronica out.

Significantly, it is at this point that the motif of the double appears for the first time in The Fly—the moment of need, the moment at which

the feminine other is dismissed by the hero, the moment where the fear of the monstrous-body-as-new-flesh reaches a fever pitch. It is a fear, I would argue, that rightly belongs, not projected onto the feminine other (after all, in the film's finale it is Veronica who still clearly loves the fly, who is able to hug him—to give him form and affection—in all his monstrousness, and who is ultimately reluctant to kill him) but to the cold and cruel energy of masculine I-for-myself consciousness and its fear of the “old flesh” inhabiting this text. The mirror scene where Brundlefly watches himself begin to come apart represents nothing if not the sense of inner body fragmentation suffered by the I-for-myself hero as a disembodied consciousness and the loss of the gift of form that can only be bestowed by the other. Alone, he cannot hope to vivify himself, give form to himself, make himself empowered and whole. The mirror mocks him as it mocks all of us who look, narcissistically, to our own reflection rather than to our image reflected in the other in order to experience ourselves as (always relatively) unitary and whole. As Bakhtin has suggested, we cannot author our own exterior: “a human being experiencing life in the category of his own I is incapable of gathering himself into an outward whole that would be even relatively finished.”⁵⁶ What is expressed when ‘I, Brundlefly’ looks in the mirror, then, “is not a unitary and unique soul” who can answer for his own death—who can make his death have meaning by living a life “beyond the veil of the flesh;” rather, “a second participant is implicated in the event of self-contemplation, a fictitious other, a nonauthoritative and unfounded author”⁵⁷ who possesses his soul.

Indeed, looking to himself rather than the other to give him form and meaning, Brundle is possessed by his own double. “Oh no,” he says to his mirror image, “What’s happening to me? Am I dying?” What is happening to him, in effect, is the disintegration of I-for-myself masculinity’s “integral image” of himself.⁵⁸ Where only his fingernails have begun to peel off in this first mirror sequence, a later mirror sequence reveals the degree of his increasing disintegration and inner body fragmentation: his medicine cabinet has become a reliquary for the fragments of his supposedly ‘empowered’ new flesh: the fingernails are now joined by rotting teeth and an ear that he stores in formaldehyde in a glass cup. As in Scanners and Videodrome, the theme of (con)fusion of the self with others is reprised as the desperate hero struggles yet fails to fuse himself with his lover and their fetus: “We’ll be the ultimate family. A family of three joined together in one body. More human than I am alone.”

With The Fly Lianne McLarty is indeed correct in that the hero in Cronenberg has himself become the mad scientist, and a new level of pathos and irony regarding the masculine predicament as champion of humanity’s ‘reasoning,’ abstract, isolated, disembodied I-for-myself consciousness begins to creep into the director’s utterances. Perhaps as budgets, the quality of the acting and scripts, and character development increase, so does the emotional and intellectual sophistication and insight of the Cronenberg enterprise, suggested in the story’s insistence that the autonomous man of reason is bereft of humanity without others. But, for all this, the body (the value through which humans communicate)

nevertheless remains othered—a fleshy site of disgust and denigration in Cronenberg’s work throughout the early 1980s which is intimately connected to monstrous doubling of the heroes. In effect, I would argue that the repeatedly restaged mutilations of the body in Scanners, Videodrome, and The Fly (the variously exploding heads and eyes of Vale, Convex and Brundle; the flames engulfing Vale and Renn; the melted-down and/or transformed limbs of Harlan, Renn, and Borans; the bodies of Convex and Brundle turned inside-out, etc.) are themselves manifestations of the doubling invading these utterances. That is, they are part of an ongoing serial form (the infinite form of romantic I-for-myself consciousness) in which the various heroes would seem to serve as mere hangers for the wardrobe of horror-effects flung on the mortal body by Cronenberg as an author in aesthetic and ethical activity—an author who, it seems, tends to expect the same revelations from his heroes. Not only do the male heroes suffer the pathology of doubling within each of these narratives, but the mutilations they undergo are also doubled across these melancholy narratives of loss in which, as Bart Testa has suggested, society has been completely “evacuated” in “technology’s body.”⁵⁹

Testa makes the argument that it is technique or technology (the drug in Scanners, television in Videodrome, teleportation in The Fly), not the body per se, that is the origin of the monstrous horrors in these films:⁶⁰ “The narrative design of Cronenberg’s films arrives inevitably at these disclosures of the origins of all that has been visualized so extremely, the body as sign of the radical freedom and newness that have arisen out of technology, a literal sign that ‘technique is ourselves.’”⁶¹ But, as Bakhtin

has suggested, we must be careful in abandoning ourselves to abstraction and the abyss that has formed between our living lives and our ways of representing ourselves—between the motives of our deeds and their products—due to our increasing belief that theory, objectivity, and technology can author life. We must be careful, that is, to recognize that it is not technology that authors life, but life that authors technology; it is not theory and objective technology that becomes us or magically overtakes us, but we who have abandoned ourselves and our bodies and others to such frightening representations in an institutionalized masculine culture which believes in the autotelic and autogenetic “I,” not the relation between “I and the other”—which delights in absurdist games and experiments that empower the “sense-dead” phallic body over the boundary acts necessary to produce embodied co-consciousnesses.⁶² Thus, for Cronenberg, telling tales of the fantastic technologies of modernity and postmodernity, “the body always opens on to a void-like indifference, and spills out indifferently, grotesquely. It has nowhere to go, except to the equally grotesque freedom of newness that Max Renn and Seth Brundle claim for themselves—just before they die.”⁶³ For a feminist dialogism, however, what we have here is nothing more or less than what Buck-Morss would call a “solopsistic—and often truly silly—fantasy of the phallus”— a “tale of all-male reproduction, the magic art of creation ex nihilo”⁶⁴—a refusal to recognize that the embodied self always opens, dialogically, on to an other embodied consciousness. Cronenberg’s repeated and obsessive gesture of trying to force or manipulate a positive freedom or newness out of the axiologically slim pickings of the clearly very destructive force of I-

for-myself masculinity leaves him, in deed and inevitably, nowhere to go as author-creator except toward Dead Ringers, more mutilation, and more death.

Dead Ringers

In one important sense Dead Ringers can be seen as a departure for Cronenberg. The adolescent comic-book tone of his work in the first half of the 1980s, and the schlock horror aesthetics which accompany that emotional-volitional tone in his creative activity, no longer seem to be in such obvious competition with the shaping of the narrative; rather, they seem more fully integrated into the plot as a compelling human story, and much more motivated by its heroes as psychologically and emotionally developed characters (i.e., horror images appear only twice in Dead Ringers: first as Beverly Mantle's nightmare dream sequence of fusion with his brother, Elliot; then later, at the film's conclusion, where Beverly tries to separate himself once and for all from his beloved "Siamese twin"). As Cronenberg himself has observed, "I knew there would be critics who'd say I'd almost made a naturalistic movie (whatever that is), but couldn't resist falling back on special effects and having to do some schlocky stuff. On the other hand, I felt they were crucial to the movie; they would get into Beverly's inner life in a way you can't do with dialogue."⁶⁵

However, in other important ways, the film is of a piece with those that came before it and with the repeated motif of mutilated flesh that informs them all. For example, the Mantle twins are scientists who, like Seth Brundle, become victims of their own experiments with technology:

where the telepod heralds Brundle's horrific demise, the Mantle retractor heralds the twins'—the major difference is that the Mantle retractor has not been designed, like the telepod (or Videodrome, or ephemerol), to change the world and human life as we know it, but as an ostensibly practical instrument that figures in what is, indeed, a much more naturalistic narrative of their life (and death) in gynecological practice. Beverly's descent into madness is precipitated by jealousy and a mistaken belief in Claire Niveau's infidelity—by blocked communication between the self and the feminine other—as it is by Brundle's mistaken belief in Veronica's infidelity in The Fly. Moreover, the very relationship between Beverly and Elliot reprises rather closely that between Cameron and Darryl in Scanners. In both cases we have the younger, feminized, 'good' brothers, overcome and ultimately destroyed by their dominating, masculine, 'evil' older siblings and the latter's desire for fusion with and so control over the other. Indeed, where Dead Ringers is particularly resonant with the earlier films is on this issue of (con)fused identities and doubling; however, the double has now become more than a ritually repeated motif: it has become the overt theme of the narrative.

Dead Ringers is a film that tells a contemporary story about a crisis of identity of monstrous proportions. It is based on the novel Twins by Bari Wood and Jack Geasland, a "fictionalized account of the case of the Marcus twins," a pair of "highly successful New York gynecologists" with a "compulsive, lifelong need" to "'share' their experiences," who, "on July 17, 1975 were found dead in one brother's garbage-strewn Upper East Side apartment."⁶⁶ In Cronenberg's adaptation, actress Claire Niveau/

Genevieve Bujold, who is both patient and love interest, threatens to come between her twin gynecologists Beverly and Elliot Mantle/Jeremy Irons who, resisting her influence, descend together in a nightmarish dance of confused identity, drugs, murder, and suicide.

Claire initially meets Beverly and Elliot as a fertility patient at their clinic who turns out to have the rare condition of a “trifurcated womb.” As is his pattern with the women he treats, Elliot seduces her, then, unbeknownst to her, passes her on to his “baby brother” Beverly, who, according to Elliot, would “still be a virgin” if he didn’t supply him with partners. They carry on sharing her, and feeding her addiction to prescription drugs, until a friend apprises her of the fact that there is not one Mantle, but two. She confronts them in a chic restaurant, and while Elliot is smug and amused at her humiliation, Beverly is devastated, for he has fallen in love with her. Claire leaves them to each other, scoffing at Elliot as she storms out “What is it with you, chum? You can’t get it up unless little brother’s watching?”

But Beverly ultimately chooses Claire, and begins to be haunted, literally, by the nightmare that, she knows, separation from his twin represents. “I don’t think,” she says to Beverly, “you two have ever come to terms with the way it really does work between you.” He becomes addicted to the drugs she takes, and when Claire leaves to go on location, he descends into melancholy and madness, mistakenly believing that she is having an affair with her secretary. As Elliot the ‘front-man’ carries on promoting their research, Beverly begins to unravel, attempting to operate on a patient with instruments he designed and had sculpted by Anders

Wolleck/Stephen Lack for use on “mutant women.” The Mantles’ suspension by the hospital results in Elliot’s attempt to rescue Beverly from himself (and to rescue his own career) by trying to “resynchronize their nervous systems” through an extended regime of pharmaceutical cocktails; but he only ends up falling into lock-step with his drug-addled twin. Unable to kick the drugs, they tacitly agree that Beverly will attempt to surgically separate them using Wolleck’s gynecological artefacts; Beverly eviscerates his brother and tries to escape with a telephone call to Claire. When she answers, he cannot speak, returns to the corpse, and kills himself with a drug overdose.

According to Owen Gleiberman, Cronenberg claims that in making the film

he was interested in going far beyond the mythical good-twin/bad-twin models of the past. What attracted him to the story, he says, “was the sense of it being about a relationship in which personalities and identities and even experiences become confused with each other, and that little shell of identity is melted down. At the start, I didn’t really know why being twins would be anything but interesting, or even entertaining. And yet I knew intuitively that it was a very dangerous thing to be. Now I think I know why.”⁶⁷

I also think I know why, but my explanation again has more to do with feminist dialogic notions of identity as a question of intersubjectivity, the gift of form given through the outward boundaries of the body, and masculine withdrawal from that aesthetic and ethical activity than with

popular Freudian notions of identity as a question of the individual autotelic masculine subject's egoic or phallic shell.

It is interesting that two contemporaneous reviews of Dead Ringers read the film exactly in terms of the two opposing views of identity and subjectivity with which we are concerned here. On the one hand is Pam Cook's review in Monthly Film Bulletin which interprets the film by subscribing, with Cronenberg, to what she calls the unpalatable Freudian truth that "all (political) idealists must face—individual psychology defines the limits of human endeavour."⁶⁸ Using the Freudian paradigm of the pathologies of the individual unconscious (such as melancholia, the death drive, and narcissism), she writes that the Cronenberg hero in general "is an incurable psychotic for whom the world is a theatre in which he acts out his death drive, striving to return to the intra-uterine haven he has longed for since birth." Thus, "mentally unstable." "crippled by narcissistic obsessions which alienate them from normal society" and leave them "perversely," homosexually identified with each other, the twins uncannily fuse, become "like two sides of the same personality" such that Bev murders Elly, overdoses, then curls up in the fetal position on top of his brother and dies.⁶⁹

On the other hand is Stuart Klawans' review in The Nation which interprets the film such that the social, not the individual's isolated psyche, is definitive. He focuses on the relationship between Beverly, Elliot, and Claire, reading the Mantle's pathology of identity in terms of the confusion of boundaries between the self and other, and in terms of the boundaries within the individual as both inner- and outer-dimensional. "Bev," says

Klawans, “is the inside man—the one who performs the surgeries and stays bent over the microscope. Elliot is the outside man—the one who makes speeches and sweet-talks the grant-givers.”⁷⁰ Indeed, Beverly is all tremulous emotion—all “inside,” defined from within, an I-for-myself longing for Claire and Elliot to give him form, if you will—while Elliot is all cold and hard edges—all “outside,” defined from without, an I-for-the-other whose calculated image leaves him with no authentic emotional depth. According to Klawans, identity reaches a state of crisis for them when, and this is highly significant for a feminist dialogic reading, Claire recognizes the difference between them. “When she learns she’s been sleeping with two men and not one, she makes sure that both get a piece of her mind, including the revelation that they are not identical. Apparently, Mr. Inside and Mr. Outside can be separated. In fact, the inner man wants his autonomy. So begins the process of disintegration”⁷¹

Bev, as the twin more in touch with the energy of his unique I-for-myself and yet aware of the value of the other, is the one who acts: he tries to separate, to escape the doubling and confusion of identities between himself and Elliot with Claire’s help. This is dramatized most clearly in Beverly’s nightmare sequence as Claire bites into a fleshy and grotesque mass of tissue joining the brothers at the abdomen and Beverly awakes, brushing frantically at his side—at what McLarty calls the monstrous “site of sameness” out of which Beverly will later attempt to “carve a separate identity for himself.”⁷² However, it is not that identities need to be separated in Dead Ringers so much as body boundaries need to be installed between unique and once-occurrent consciousnesses, and in the film’s

diegetic “reality” Beverly ultimately fails to free himself from the danger of entanglement in his brother’s consciousness. The result is pathological infection by the other, a dangerous loss of boundary-making activity toward each other, total breakdown of their outer body boundaries, and, hence, of their separate conscious embodied selves.

With Cook’s Freudian reading of the monstrous double in Dead Ringers we are trapped in a world of monologic, singular, autotelic subjectivity. Freud explains the double as originally connected to the primary stage of narcissism as an “insurance against the destruction of the ego;” when this stage has been surmounted, the double becomes isolated and dissociated from the ego and so takes on the quality of “the uncanny harbinger of death.” The double haunts us because it involves the death of the solitary ego— “regression to a time when the ego had not yet marked itself off sharply from the external world and other people.”⁷³ Beverly and Elliot, as twins, feed each other’s primary narcissism, barely repressing their ‘narcissistic homosexual’ attraction, desiring to fuse, unable to mark themselves off from the world and each other. Their egos dissociate and become entranced, hypnotized, pathologically other. With Freud the consciousnesses of two different persons, because abstracted from any connection to the tangible physical body, are seen as capable of becoming one, or, as Cronenberg puts it, susceptible to a dangerous meltdown. They fuse, becoming, as Cook claims, like two sides of the same personality. Hence, the double is described as uncomfortably strange and unfamiliar, dreadful, horrible, “uncanny” primarily because of its “invasion” of the atomistic ego which must always and properly remain

sharply marked off from the external world and other people. It seems that from the perspective of the naturalized autotelic, isolated masculine mind, the only way to understand narcissistic doubling is to relegate it, as uncanny, to the realm of the supernatural.

But the problem with this reading from a dialogic feminist position, of course, is that it falls into the trap of monologic abstraction of the social reality of self and other actually arising from the condition of human beings who exist together in the natural world, such that consciousness “denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and equal responsibilities, another I Monologue manages without the other It closes down the represented world and represented persons.”⁷⁴ In contrast to Cook’s Freudian reading, I want to use the film to question the very idea that identity is based in the ego’s need to categorically mark itself off from the world and others. As subjects we all exist in the world of other subjects or persons, and, I would argue, so do the Mantle twins in the represented world of Dead Ringers. After all, they are not two sides of the same personality but distinct individuals; they are brothers caught in a narcissistic and phallic masculine world of “unrequited life”⁷⁵ and therefore of monstrous doubling.

For Bakhtin, the key to narcissistic doubling as pathology is not excessive self-love (we have seen how my I-for-myself is cold and chaotic and unbounded, making me, in fact, unable to love myself the way the other loves me) but an inability to be requited, if you will—to let the other function as the transparent screen who reflects my outward boundaries to me through their loving gift of form. The narcissist gets trapped in his

own image in striving to complete his own image for himself, in trying, monologically, to dispense with the other and connect his own exterior—his outward body, his being-for-others—with his own self-consciousness. As we have seen, the narcissist reflects himself to himself instead of reflecting and consummating the outer body of the other for the other and letting the other do the same for him. Without benefit of the boundaries that can only be given by the other, a narcissistic double of oneself irrupts into one's consciousness, clouding its fundamental being-for-others.

And this is exactly what happens to Beverly and Elliot Mantle. Looking at each other they cease to see and actively create an other embodied consciousness and begin to see only their own mirror image.⁷⁶ In the continual sideways glances of their consciousnesses at each other they become lost on the boundary between themselves and are unable to give each other the gift of outward form that keeps them separate and marks their difference. Claire, however, as Gleiberman emphasizes, knows that they are not identical, not the same: they are two different people in the world of the film, two different characters, and Jeremy Irons' performance makes this brilliantly clear.⁷⁷ As the love interest and the feminine marker of emotional implications and difference, Claire has the capacity to separate them. Beverly, Mr. Inside, the 'feminine' brother who lives in greater awareness of his emotional needs and his being-for-others is able to recognize the social reality and potential love Claire represents and to try to initiate separation from his twin. "Don't you have a will of your own?" he finally asks Elliot. "Why don't you just go on with your very own life?" Elliot, Mr. Outside, the 'masculine' brother who is most

narcissistically trapped in his own image and struggles to complete his own image for himself by using his identical twin as his mirror is therefore unable to let the fusion, or confusion, with Beverly go. Elliot, in reminding Beverly of the story of Chang and Eng, the “original Siamese twins,” makes it painfully clear that, without Beverly, he, Elliot, will die of fright. Significantly, it is Elliot who cannot let Beverly “have Claire to himself”; who again tries to manipulate Claire into sleeping with them both in his visit to her trailer to ostensibly try to forge a friendship with her for Beverly’s sake; who tries to drive a wedge between the couple by convincing Beverly that Claire is a flake, a promiscuous “show-biz lady” scamming them for pills, and that in hiding from him, Elliot, at Claire’s apartment, Beverly has really been hiding from the wrong person; who tries to bed his brother in the dance scene by using Cary as a go-between. And Beverly, of course, ultimately succumbs to his older brother’s seductive power and his narcissistic, phallic desire for fusion and monologic sameness.

His horrific gesture of dissecting Elliot’s body while the latter is still alive, if sedated, points out the crucial importance of the outward boundaries of the body and mutual boundary-making activity to identity, and the extent to which the increasingly sense-dead Mantle brothers have lost this essential capacity. But, at the same time, it also makes obvious the emotional-volitional attitude to his heroes that runs throughout Cronenberg’s work. “I am being this clinician, this surgeon,” says Cronenberg, “and trying to examine the nature of sexuality. I’m doing it by creating characters I then dissect with my cinematic scalpels I’m

driven to look at it and want to see what it means because it keeps provoking me.”⁷⁸ Indeed Cronenberg is clearly and repeatedly “provoked” by the animated, sexual, desiring other; but what he seems to forget in his cinematic experiments that fuse art with science in ‘examining’ sexuality is the lesson he claims to have learned about the limitations of science and the institutionalized masculine mind during his university days when he switched majors: He left, he claims, because science “was like having to murder an amazing creature in order to dissect it.

Unfortunately, when you’ve dissected it, it’s dead. All its colours fade. All the things that attracted you to it in the first place are gone.”⁷⁹ But this is exactly what Cronenberg and Beverly do in Dead Ringers: in the literal dissection of Elliot they abandon the value of the outward boundaries of the body and transgression in creating the other as a whole embodied consciousness; they, indeed, pass beyond the “veil of the flesh,” but in so doing they necessarily also pass into the realm of chaos, insanity, and death.

For, beyond the veil of the flesh, the mortal body disintegrates. The “beauty contest for the insides of bodies—best spleen—most perfectly developed kidneys” that Elliot jokes about to Claire Niveau on the examining table is a most ironic comment in light of his fate on that same table. The dialogic response to Elliot’s wryly humorous question “Why don’t we have standards of beauty for the entire human body, inside and out?” is obvious: because the inner body or I-for-myself consciousness has no social value; because to “get into another’s inner life without dialogue,” as Cronenberg attempts to do, is to attempt to exempt oneself from a key human limit—namely, the outward boundaries of the other’s body; because

to penetrate to the inner body of the other is to enter the realm of the cold and chaotic, alienated, fragmented self where there can be no value, no warmth, no gift of external form because the value of outsidedness relative to the other has been monstrously transgressed; because, as Cronenberg at some level claims to know very well but is unable to fully emotionally comprehend, once you've dissected it, it's dead.

For McLarty, “in eventually turning the surgical instruments designed for mutant women back onto the twins, Dead Ringers suggests that it is monstrous sameness—the inability to accept differences—that is in need of correction.”⁸⁰ I might agree if Beverly was, in fact, able to speak to Claire, to choose her and the difference she represents. As it stands, the energy of monstrous sameness—of phallic and narcissistic institutionalized masculinity and its dread of difference/the body/the feminine other—simply casts its pall, once again, over Cronenberg's utterance. Beverly's life-or-death struggle to retreat from the confusion of boundaries on which he dances with Elliot—to return to his I-for-myself where he can act autonomously in his being toward Claire and toward Elliot by withdrawing from the latter and giving his brother his proper form as a whole other embodied consciousness, fails. He dies a monstrous double in which the existential gift of form is twisted into violent sacrilege. In the end, I think that what is so dangerous and disturbing about the doubles in Cronenberg's Dead Ringers is not, as the director claims, a meltdown of that little shell of identity, the solipsistic Freudian self, but an absolute breakdown of the crucial, indispensable boundary-making activity between the self and other selves in the social field of intersubjectivity.

Naked Lunch, M. Butterfly, and Crash

If the figure of the double haunting Cronenberg's sci-fi/horror utterances from the beginning of the 1980s has become, by the end of that decade, with Dead Ringers, the overt theme of a more naturalistic narrative, then by 1991, with Naked Lunch, it has become something else again. It has multiplied, becoming formally and stylistically omnipresent in a fantastic narrative that, as we will see, traces a full circle. In Bill Lee/Peter Weller's hallucinatory world of *Interzone*, the double is everywhere. In fact, *Interzone* itself (not unlike *Videodrome*) represents a parallel world where the characters from its hero's "reality" are doubled. But, where Max Renn finds only Nicki Brand in the lived present of the narrative and in *Videodrome*, Bill Lee finds virtually the entire cast of characters in his lived present of 1953 New York and in *Interzone*: his wife Joan Lee/Judy Davis as Joan Frost; his writer cronies Hank/Nicholas Campbell and Martin/Michael Zelniker as themselves; his physician Dr. Benway/Roy Scheider as the dominatrix Fabela/Monique Mercure; and Edward/Peter Boretski, his colleague in the extermination business, as the voices of the creatures (talking bug-writers and Mugwumps) that come to haunt him. Then, double-doublings occur as it becomes apparent that these characters are in turn composites of or stand-ins for characters who have figured in William Burroughs' life and work: Bill Lee (the pseudonym under which Junkie was published in 1953) is Burroughs is the Mugwump; Joan Lee/Joan Frost is Burroughs' wife Joan and writer Jane Bowles, and her husband Tom Frost/Ian Holm is Bowles' writer husband Paul Bowles;

Hank is king of the Beat writers, Jack Kerouac; and Martin, in turn, is writer Allen Ginsberg, also part of that famous literary circle.

However, the similarities between or doublings across Naked Lunch and Cronenberg's earlier films do not stop there. In effect, it's as if the isolated images and themes from those films (the telepathy from Scanners, the hallucinations from Videodrome, the transformation from human to insect in The Fly, and the drugs and burgeoning homosexual subtext from Dead Ringers) are all finally brought together to culminate in Cronenberg's cinematic adaptation of Burroughs' novel Naked Lunch. But, as Rodley suggests, it is interesting to note, as Mitch Tuchman has done, that Cronenberg's debt to Burroughs is in evidence well before Scanners, leading us to further question the 'absolute originality' of Cronenberg's own voice, and his insistence that his images emerge fully formed from the dregs of his personal unconscious. Rodley writes:

Not only had Burroughs (along with Nabokov) possessed Cronenberg's early writing to such an extent that he found it difficult to locate his own "voice", but his first commercial feature—Shivers—was already infected with Burroughsian imagery. In Naked Lunch Burroughs's lecherous candiru are described thus: "small eel-like fish or worm . . . long patronizing certain rivers of ill repute". These little creatures bear a remarkable likeness to the venereal/faecal parasites of Shivers. Both gain access to their victims through their genitalia.

As Tuchman points out, in Rabid the "morphologically neutral" skin graft that transforms Rose's armpit into a blood-sucking

phallic syringe is Burroughs's "undifferentiated tissue, that can grow into any kind of flesh . . . sex organs sprout everywhere". Scanners also shares Burroughs's obsessions with telepathy, Senders and control. Tuchman concluded that Cronenberg's homage to Burroughs was "largely iconographic. Their principle difference [was] Burroughs's impassioned moralism and Cronenberg's bloodless agnosticism Without Burroughs, Cronenberg may be without imagery."⁸¹

Indeed, there does seem to be a clear doubling going on outside the narrative of Naked Lunch itself as well as inside, in which Cronenberg's form of creative energy fuses with Burroughs' original material. "It's like Burroughs and myself fusing in the telepod of The Fly," the director says, and Rodley carries on the metaphor in explaining the collaboration: "Their nervous systems had been connected for years; both men shared the same nightmares and visions; both evinced a puritan disgust of the flesh (though at least one of them would deny this); both had been criticized and censored for their extreme imaginings."⁸²

Yet, Cronenberg insists, "What I do is very different from Burroughs. There are influences and there are connections. One of the reasons you find a writer so compelling is that they crystallize for you stuff that's in you already. Images of addiction and body-consciousness, say." However, he continues,

I didn't know how, but I knew I was going to be absolutely ruthless when it came to using Burroughs's material. I did go to him, and we talked several times. One of the things I said to him was "You know,

I'm not gay and so my sensibility, when it comes to the sexuality of this film, is going to be something else. I'm not afraid of the homosexuality, but it's not innate in me and I probably want women in the film." So, I got my blessing from the Pope and he said that was fine; he's the last person to try and censor you.⁸³

Indeed, Cronenberg's version of Naked Lunch is motivated in key ways by the presence of women, since its circular narrative turns on the 'accidental' murder of Joan Lee by her husband Bill. But so, we might argue, is Burroughs' original novel motivated, throwing into question the extent of Cronenberg's "ruthless" re-writing of the material, and the actual extent of the difference between the two men's "sensibilities" regarding women as denigrated embodied other, and the level of disgust they both clearly experience at the "flesh." For the incident, of course, is taken from the real life of the novelist, who, in 1951, actually shot his wife, also named Joan, by 'accident' during a friendly game of "William Tell" and escaped criminal prosecution by hiding out in Mexico and Tangiers for seven years until the Statute of Limitations ran out. He eventually returned to the United States a free man, becoming lauded as one of the most brilliant literary voices of his generation.

Bill Lee is a junkie working as an exterminator who, along with his wife Joan, becomes hooked on the yellow powder he uses to kill insects. It induces, as she says, a "very literary high . . . a Kafka high. You feel like a bug." In Bill's case, though, he merely seems to hallucinate about them. Known to police, he is arrested by two narcotics agents and left in a detention room with a huge beetle, who talks out of an anus-like opening

on his back, claims to be Lee's "case officer," and asks him to rub some of the yellow powder on his lips, a clearly homosexually charged invitation. The beetle is part of a bizarre spy ring that aims to use Lee as an agent to infiltrate "Interzone Incorporated," a "haven for the mongrel scum of the earth" on the North African coast. Lee's assignment is to kill "his little woman," Joan, who the case officer claims is herself an agent of Interzone. Lee, increasingly paranoid, escapes the detention room by smashing the beetle with his shoe; but his fate is nevertheless sealed. His friend Edward gives him the name of a doctor who can help him and Joan kick, but Dr. Benway's "black centipede meat" (which the latter mixes with the yellow powder) proves more addictive than the yellow powder itself. Returning home, Bill finds Joan and his friend Hank having sex while his friend Martin reads them his poetry. When Martin suggests that he and Bill join them, Bill is numbly oblivious, retiring to the bedroom to shoot more of Benway's drug. He responds to Joan's apology that the sex between her and Hank "wasn't serious" with complete indifference: "I didn't take it seriously." But it is immediately after this exchange that Bill suggests a game of "William Tell" and 'accidentally' kills Joan with a shot to the forehead.

Hiding out in a gay bar, he meets the "faggot" Kiki and the latter's friend Mugwump, a huge exoskeletal creature who specializes in "sexual ambivalence" and slurps viscous, sperm-like liquid from a glass with his penis-like tongue. Mugwump gives him a ticket to Interzone and his first assignment, a report on Joan's death, in which he advises Bill not to leave out "any of the tasty details," like "the small red hole in the forehead," and

“the look of astonishment on her face.” Later saying good-bye to Martin and promising him a “report,” Bill leaves for Interzone with a Clark Nova typewriter. Once there, he becomes an operative for that machine, which has transformed into another talking beetle. He proceeds to have a series of strange sexual encounters with Joan Frost, who then disappears with her housekeeper, the dominatrix Fadela. Joan’s husband Tom, who himself prefers Interzone boys to his wife, admits to Bill through telepathic communication that he has been slowly murdering Joan for years—hiring Fadela to poison her with witchcraft; drugging her; nibbling away at her self-esteem and sanity. When Tom asks Bill about the rumour that he also murdered his wife, Bill denies it: “It wasn’t murder. It was an accident.” But Tom is not convinced, because, he insists, “there are no accidents.”

Losing all sense of ‘reality’ as he continues to write and inject drugs, Bill is found collapsed on the sand by Hank and Martin, who have come to Interzone to help him put his book together—the book he has been sending them fragments of and calling “Naked Lunch.” Bill has no clue what they are talking about, and sends them home with a supply of “black meat.” After a string of bad luck with typewriters borrowed from Tom Frost, Lee is befriended by Kiki, who supplies him with a new writing machine in the form of a Mugwump head, and becomes his lover. The mugwriter assigns Bill the task of uncovering Dr. Benway’s drug operation in Interzone by seducing the dandy Yves Cloquet/Julian Sands, an insider who knows the ropes. Bill gets the information— “find Fadela and you find Benway”— but cruelly sacrifices Kiki for it, who is raped and devoured by Cloquet,

now transformed into a monstrous homosexual predator, half-man/half-insect.

Lee eventually finds Fadela by finding Joan, imprisoned in a factory in which Mugwumps are chained and drained for their narcotic secretions. Fadela then reveals the truth, peeling back her rubber mask to expose Benway's masquerade. Benway, now affecting the mannerisms of a flaming queen, is at the centre of an operation that exports "Mugwump jism," and admits that Lee's whole trip to Interzone has been a ruse to recruit him for further work in Annexia. But Bill only agrees to go if he can take Joan with him. "That prurient little cunt," says Benway. "What for?" Because, Lee answers, "I can't write without her." Bill and Joan leave. But asked by the border guards at Annexia to prove his claim that he is in fact a writer by "writing something," he turns to Joan in the back of the van, re-enacts the "William Tell" routine, and shoots her in the head. The guards are suitably impressed. Characteristically numb, Bill Lee squeezes a cold tear over Joan's limp body, and the film cuts to black.

In this veritable hall of mirrors that is Interzone, what we have, says Cronenberg, "is, of course, a state of mind"⁸⁴—the "pure" place of infinite and uncensored creativity. With Naked Lunch Cronenberg asserts that

[i]n a way, in coming to grips with writing, with being creative, I think I'm coming closer to the basics. And coming closer to the flame by dealing directly with it. Because what is writing but trying to order reality? Trying to make order out of chaos? To come to understand phenomena that are not really susceptible to

understanding. To creating your own reality. To coming to terms with your own reality.”⁸⁵

As he sees it, Naked Lunch is a successful experiment in structure where “it’s the character’s point-of-view fantasy that is now controlling the reality.”⁸⁶ In this way, as Breskin puts it, Naked Lunch is like Videodrome, “a relentlessly first-person movie.”⁸⁷

From a feminist dialogic position, however, I think that Naked Lunch and Interzone can be much more fruitfully interpreted, not as “a” state of mind, but as the state of mind of I-for-myself institutionalized masculine consciousness. More than simply the result of Cronenberg’s personal creativity that attempts, idiosyncratically, to order chaos, what we have here is bloodless, sense-dead, atomistic (post)modern masculinity’s ongoing chaotic experience of life without boundaries or limits or form, where everything transforms into something else, monologic fusion of self and other overrides difference, doubles proliferate ad infinitum, outsidedness has no value, and the embodied other is feminized, denigrated, mutilated, and murdered. In Naked Lunch, the abstract first-person masculine fantasy, indeed, controls the entire diegetic reality, eliding the reality or social context of all others in the narrative so that the figure of the double is now projected well beyond the hero, becoming, in effect, the emotional-volitional tone saturating the entire utterance.

But, in my opinion, two instances of doubling in Cronenberg’s film in which he tries to “make order out of chaos” through “writing” and “creating [his] own reality” are particularly significant and so demand closer analysis. They are the doublings that occur with regard to Joan and

Kiki, and they are important because their deaths—the deaths of the woman and the active, “out,” homosexual—are clearly required by I-for-myself masculinity as it writes itself—its form of ‘reality’—into existence.

In the case of Joan, her death, in Cronenberg as in Burroughs, is clearly the event that enables if not inspires Bill Lee to begin to write the modern ‘masterpiece’ Naked Lunch. For David Sanjek, “this episode provides a fictional illustration of the argument made by Ted Morgan in his biography of Burroughs that it was only after his wife’s death (or should one say murder?) that he could intently pursue his literary vocation. It required, one might infer, the death of a woman before this man could write.”⁸⁸ Sanjek is correct; one should say “murder,” for, as Griselda Pollock would suggest, in the treatment of Joan we see, yet again, “women’s bodies as the territory across which men artists claim their modernity and compete for leadership of the avant-garde”⁸⁹ The striking difference is that in Cronenberg, the murder is doubled, enacted twice: first on Joan Lee when Bill escapes to Interzone and begins to type; then on Joan Frost when he leaves for Annexia, the manuscript complete. This doubling gives Sanjek pause as well, and I will quote him at length because it leads him to an important question regarding David Cronenberg and the nature of his aesthetic activity. He writes that Morgan, in validating his point,

quotes a passage from Burroughs’s novel Queer that reads:

I am forced to the appalling conclusion that I would never have become a writer but for Joan’s death, and the realization of the extent to which this event has motivated and formulated

my writing. I live with the constant threat of possession, and a constant need to escape from possession, from Control. So the death of Joan brought me in contact with the invader, the Ugly Spirit, and maneuvered me into a lifelong struggle, in which I had no choice except to write my way out.

Cronenberg has stated, “I had to fuse myself with Burroughs in order to bring something of Naked Lunch to the screen.” When one sees photographs taken of the two men together on the set of the film, they bear an uncanny resemblance to each other, but I might ask what was fused between Burroughs and Cronenberg and influenced the inclusion of the reenactment of Joan’s death not once but twice. Is it a statement on Cronenberg’s part that, like Burroughs, his work has required the victimization of women? Or is it a less complex matter that the director recognizes in himself and his films a parallel between Burroughs’s “Ugly Spirit” and his own “demon in the corner”?^[90] What is the “constant threat of possession” that Cronenberg might share with Burroughs, and what manner of effort has he had to make to exorcise “Control”?⁹¹

From my point of view, the “constant threat of possession” that these romantic modernists live with, and the “constant need to escape from possession” that they share is a manifestation of their experience of others as categorically threatening—a manifestation of their absolute paranoia of ‘control’ or influence by the embodied other—a manifestation of the chronic shivering fear they suffer that comes with the territory of I-for-myself consciousness as it rejects delimitation by the other as co-

consciousness, refuses mutual answerability, poses as the source and meaning of all being, and stakes its creative catharsis on mutilation and death of the mortal body. I think the death of Joan is doubled by Cronenberg for the same reason he doubles the death of Kiki at the hands of Cloquet (recall the little miniature of the man-insect raping the boy from behind that replaces the typewriter Lee buys before leaving for Interzone, foreshadowing Kiki's fate): to emphatically if not ironically 'bookend' the central importance of the male hero's romantic creativity—his right to write, "explore," and "experiment," no matter where it takes him and no matter who it kills.

However, for all his bravado about coming to terms with his own reality through his art, for all his rhetoric about exploring heterosexuality and women, and for all his protests that he is not afraid of homosexuality, what the double-deaths in Naked Lunch clearly demonstrate, as Sanjek suggests, is the extreme manner of effort Cronenberg increasingly has to make to exorcise forces that he only seems to be able to experience as "controlling"—to exorcise the influence of the form-giving other on his atomistic, I-for-myself hero. In my opinion, what Cronenberg never really comes to terms with is the misogyny and homophobia underlying "his own reality" and his art, and the implications of the fact that his creative energy repeatedly enacts a sustained withdrawal from social reality, requiring in ever more hysterical form the double-death of the sexually active embodied other, whether women or gay men.⁹² The demise of the "prurient cunt" Joan, like that of the "faggot" Kiki, ring less of brave explorations of the hero's sexuality than of exercises in denial on

the hero's part. For Joan is murdered, significantly, just after Bill has denied any interest in or jealousy of her relationship to Hank; and Kiki is murdered, equally significantly, just after Bill has finally admitted his homosexual desire and slept with him. Direct emotional-volitional contact with an other human being—straight or gay—is clearly more than Cronenberg's numb, sense-dead hero can handle.

And, it might well be more than Cronenberg-as-author-creator can handle as well. Asked by Breskin "Why make the typewriters embody the characters' strange sexuality instead of the characters' embodying their strange sexuality themselves?" Cronenberg frankly replies:

Because I'm probably giving you the same sort of avoidance, the same sort of avoidance-denial level cinematically that I'm saying Lee is doing psycho-emotionally. That's what's happening. I'm saying Lee is denying and avoiding certain realities about himself. And to the extent that he is controlling his fantasies, they are also avoiding, denying fantasies. So that as he is squeezing mugwump jism into a glass, he is not allowing himself to see that he is really sucking a boy's cock.⁹³

But, significantly, in Cronenberg's cinematic narrative, that avoidance or denial is not in any way radically critiqued but merely reproduced, for after the homosexual encounter with Cronenberg's hero, the boy Kiki (incidentally the only really emotionally attentive and open character in the entire film) dies a gruesome death in Interzone (significantly the film's horror centrepiece) while Lee, of course, escapes alone with his manuscript—his art. Thus, what I'm saying, is that Cronenberg, as

actor/author in aesthetic activity in Naked Lunch, is himself probably also denying and avoiding certain realities about himself, his fears of embodied others, and the values underlying his art.

This 'brave' foray into homosexuality that was hinted at in Dead Ringers and manifested outright in Naked Lunch remains an important focus of Cronenberg's last two films as well. In M. Butterfly the subject is inspired, not by literary fiction, but, as the opening credits suggest, by "a true story," and it marks a return for Cronenberg to the more "naturalistic" style of Dead Ringers. Scripted by Henry David Hwang and based on his play of the same name, M. Butterfly tells the story of the relationship between the French diplomat M. Boursicot and the transvestite Chinese opera singer and spy, Mr. Shi. As the New York Times reported in May of 1986, Boursicot and Shi had been "sentenced to six years in jail for spying for China after a two-day trial that traced a story of clandestine love and mistaken sexual identity M. Boursicot was accused of passing information to China after he fell in love with Mr. Shi, whom he believed for twenty years to be a woman."⁹⁴ Hwang's screenplay, of course, draws some critical parallels between this bizarre story of repressed homosexuality and Western imperialism, racism and sexism. Marjorie Garber observes that, in writing the play, Hwang

concluded that Boursicot had fallen in love with a stereotype, the image of the "Oriental woman as demure and submissive" (the word "Oriental" itself, he explains, is an imperialistic term imposed by Western discourse; "in general . . . we prefer the term 'Asian.'") Hwang had never seen or heard Puccini's opera, but he was familiar

with the derogatory remark frequently made about Asian women who deliberately presented themselves to men as obedient and submissive: “She’s pulling a butterfly.” He was also familiar with the personal ads that run in magazines and on cable TV advertising “traditional Oriental women” as mail-order brides, and with the gay stereotype of the “Rice Queen,” a gay Caucasian man primarily attracted to Asians, who always plays the “man” in cultural and sexual terms, while the Asian partner plays the “woman.”⁹⁵

While Hwang’s sensibility and overt critique has definitely penetrated Cronenberg’s film, it is interesting to note the extent to which Cronenberg’s preoccupation with the double remains in view in his adaptation of Hwang’s work, and to speculate on the appeal of that work as a source for adaptation to the director.

Cronenberg’s version opens with the first meeting between Rene Gallimard/Jeremy Irons, a new accountant at the French Embassy, and Chinese opera singer Song Liling/John Lone at the Swedish Embassy in Beijing in 1964. A bored Gallimard wonders aloud to his colleague what the Chinese are “planning to inflict” on them tonight. “Not those Chinese acrobats again I hope,” he says smugly. “There’s a limit to the number of times I can watch a man trying to get his leg around the back of his neck.” Frau Baden/Annabel Leventon, a member of the Western diplomatic community in China, explains to Gallimard that a local singer is to perform *Madame Butterfly*, and when he further reveals his cultural ignorance—he has apparently never seen Puccini’s famous opera—the womanly German fills him in on the plot: A young Japanese girl falls in love with an

American sailor who seduces her, but is ultimately “not serious” and abandons her. Gallimard becomes increasingly engrossed in the story, his interest acutely piqued when Frau Baden murmurs “He’s not going back”

At the reception after the performance Gallimard introduces himself to Song Liling and becomes hopelessly infatuated with her. He lies about his knowledge of opera, telling her he has “never seen a performance as convincing” as hers, oblivious to the fact that in Chinese opera men play women’s roles and so to the fact that he is talking to a man, and to the imperialist overtones of the story of Madame Butterfly. “What I meant,” he says, “was you made me see the beauty of the story . . . of her death. It’s pure sacrifice. He’s not worthy of it but what can she do? She loves him so much. It’s very beautiful.” Song Liling, however, challenges the Westerner on his sexist and imperialist values: “It’s one of your favorite fantasies, isn’t it? The submissive Oriental woman. The cruel white man” and she suggests that if he wishes to see some really great theatre he should come to the Beijing Opera sometime and “further his education.” He eventually takes her up on her invitation, and they continue their conversation backstage after her performance. Asked again by the mysterious diva about his inability to challenge his own values, the “adventurous imperialist” stammers “I think it’s possible to achieve a little distance.” Of course, that is exactly what he cannot do.

Gallimard, lying to his wife Jeanne/Barbara Sukowa about his whereabouts, enters into an affair with Song Liling, which, for him, becomes an egotistic acting out of the power and cruelty of the American

sailor in Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*. Emasculated by the intelligence officers he works with as "worse than nobody—an accountant," and as intimidated as they are by the voluptuous Frau Baden ("Don't waste your time even thinking about Frau Baden," one advises the others sententiously. "That woman is built like the Forbidden City. Everyone can look but no one gets inside"), the milquetoast Gallimard begins to build himself up by exerting power over Song Liling and manipulating her vulnerability to him. She writes him a series of letters declaring her love, asking him why he has not come in six weeks, offering up her "shame," and Gallimard reads them all voraciously, flattered by her submissiveness, savoring her humiliation, erotically charged by her pain.

It is not until he is promoted to Vice Consul by Ambassador Toulon/Ian Richardson, who has noticed an appealing new "aggressiveness" and "confidence" in the accountant's demeanor, that Gallimard returns to Song Liling. Uninvited and unannounced, he literally breaks into her house as if he owns the place, and, gently mocking her letters, demands that she call herself his "Butterfly." She reluctantly complies, and her servant, significantly, witnesses their first sexual tryst in which Butterfly refuses to disrobe, claiming it is the customary way for Chinese women to preserve their "modesty." However, the ambiguity of Gallimard's position regarding Song Liling's ruse is marked by Cronenberg as Gallimard leaves in the morning, not elated as one would expect, but oddly ponderous and straight-faced, clearly confused by the nature of their interaction.

As the affair deepens, Song Liling is called upon to work as a spy for the Chinese government, passing on information about American troop

movements in Vietnam gleaned from Gallimard to Comrade Chin/Shizuko Hoshi. Thus the adventurous Western imperialist becomes the unknowing pawn of his transvestite Butterfly, her Maoist servant, and the manly Chin. Increasingly inflated by his new position and his 'dominance' over his Chinese mistress (he tells a sex joke about "the Oriental woman" at an Embassy party: "When she's good she's very very very good. But when she's bad she's Christian") Gallimard finally feels virile enough to take up Frau Baden's challenge and take her to bed. But he is clearly nonplused by her buxom, "forbidden city" body and her frankly obvious sexual power: "So," she says matter-of-factly as Gallimard cowers in the shadows, "come and get it." The incident provokes him to break in on Song Liling again, and he demands to see her unclothed. Song Liling protects her cover at the last moment by telling Gallimard she is pregnant.

She retires to her parents' village in the country to have the baby—another "Chinese custom," she explains, to an increasingly gullible Gallimard. Meanwhile, the fanatical communist Red Guard student movement breaks out in Beijing. When Song Liling returns they arrest her and sentence her to forced labor as a decadent bourgeois artist, and Gallimard is returned to Paris by the French Embassy and demoted for his harebrained analysis that suggested China would open up to the West. "But you know," Gallimard had told the Ambassador, clearly projecting his relationship with Song Liling onto the Chinese people, "in their hearts the Chinese don't even like Ho Chi Minh. Deep down, they're attracted to us. They find our ways . . . exciting. Of course, they would never admit it. But the Oriental will always submit to the greater force. So . . . if the

Americans demonstrate their will to win, the Vietnamese, mark my words, will welcome them into a mutually beneficial union.” However, against the backdrop of the student riots of 1968 in Paris, the “slave” does return to her “master.” She tells Gallimard that their son is being held by the Chinese, and that they are willing to exchange the boy for diplomatic secrets. At her suggestion he gets a job as a motorcycle courier for the diplomatic corps so he can access the required information, and they live together as spies for the Chinese until French domestic intelligence arrests them.

At the trial, Song Liling’s identity is finally exposed to Gallimard and he is publicly humiliated for having been duped into thinking his male lover was really a woman. They are forced to confront each other in the paddy wagon that takes them off to prison, but Gallimard cannot face the music with his Butterfly. Song Liling undresses, wanting to help Gallimard finally see through his “act.” Gallimard hides his face, but Song Liling is determined to show his lover the body he had always longed to see. “Look at me,” he insists, and Gallimard glances quickly at his face, at his penis, and then away. “I just think it’s ridiculously funny,” he laughs, and then, becoming very serious, laments “that I’ve wasted all this time . . . on just a man.” Song Liling, clearly still in love with Rene, caresses his hand, insisting that, beneath the mask, “it was always me I am your Butterfly.” But Gallimard now half-suspects the truth—about his own capacity for (self)deception: “You show me your true self,” he says. “But what I loved was the lie. The perfect lie. It’s been destroyed I’m a

man. I loved a woman . . . created by a man. Everything else simply falls short.”

The film ends as Gallimard performs his version of Madame Butterfly for the male prison population. In front of them on a small stage, accompanied by a tape of Puccini’s music and using a small rectangular mirror, he dons the costume, make-up, and wig of the character Madame Butterfly. Cronenberg cross-cuts Gallimard’s swan-song with Song Liling’s sad departure back to China on an airplane. To the applause of the gallery of men, Gallimard cries “I have a vision of the Orient. That deep within her almond eyes there are still women—women willing to sacrifice themselves for the love of a man. Even a man whose love is completely without worth At last, in a prison far from China, I have found her.” “My name is Rene Gallimard,” he says, “also known as Madame Butterfly,” and bending forward gracefully, he cuts his throat with the mirror as the music swells. There is a cut to the airplane door closing and the film fades to black.

As Sanjek observes of Rene Gallimard, “Few characters in all of Cronenberg’s films are as evidently self-deluded as this man, who blithely states early in the film, ‘I think it’s possible to achieve a little distance.’”⁹⁶ In my opinion, it is his absolute phallic narcissism, his I-for-myself consciousness, however, that prevents him from achieving any critical distance at all from his values and blind ideals, and leads the Cronenberg hero, once again, into the dangerous realm of the monstrous double.

The values and ideals of Rene Gallimard are clearly those of an I-for-myself masculinity that lives in a world of complete abstraction—

where anything valuable must be a creation of the mind of man—where the other is seen, not as an other animated subject or consciousness, but as a perfectly submissive object or slave. In M. Butterfly, transvestite doubling, which occurs twice—once as the Chinese spy becomes the beautiful Butterfly slave, and again as the French diplomat does—turns on the sentiment that, as Butterfly says to Comrade Chin, cutting off Chin’s analysis of the patriarchal social values underlying the phenomenon, “only a man knows how a woman is supposed to act.” While in Asia that sentiment is the assumption underlying the tradition of transvestitism in theatre, in the West it is the assumption underlying the tradition of woman as “masquerade”⁹⁷—as the artefact or mirror used to reflect the phallus back to institutionalized narcissistic masculinity. And as Marjorie Garber observes, it should be noted that

David Hwang himself is far from immune to this kind of sentiment. “What interested me most from the start,” he reflected in an interview, was the idea of the perfect woman. A real woman can only be herself, but a man, because he is presenting an idealization, can aspire to the idea of the perfect woman. I never had the least doubt that a man could play a woman convincingly on the stage.” And he added, “I also knew it would not hurt in commercial or career terms to be able to create a great part for a white male.” As for “real” women, Hwang is less interested in their “perfection,” or, indeed, in their subjectivity: “Pleasure in giving pain to a woman is not that far removed, I think, from a lot of male experiences,” he

says. “As an Asian, I identify with Song,” but “as a man, I identify with Gallimard.”⁹⁸

But what I would suggest we also note is that, as we have seen, the sentiment of woman or the feminine as perfect object—as perfect receptacle for pain, even torture—is not that far removed from the aesthetic experience and activity of David Cronenberg as well.

Cronenberg’s M. Butterfly, like Hwang’s play, is a form of art “that writes out women and replaces them with men.”⁹⁹ Where the tradition of Chinese transvestite theatre “presents ‘woman’ as a cultural artifact of male stagecraft,” Garber writes, the tradition of Western female impersonation “defiantly inverts the criteria for assertive individual ‘masculinity,’”¹⁰⁰ often turning the image of woman into a butt for jokes about phallic inadequacy and so suggesting that the deflated phallus is, in the end, not masculine at all but decidedly feminine (Garber gives the example of the Hasty Pudding Show, or the chorus line of sailors in hula-skirts in South Pacific, to which I would add the gallery of prisoners who jeer and at the same time cheer at Gallimard in drag). Of course, Gallimard’s emasculation is no joke when he is dressed as a man. Song Liling’s whole raison d’être for the accountant is to build and reassure his questionable phallic dominance and omnipotence. The more he neglects and misrecognizes the woman, the more potent he feels.¹⁰¹ However, in front of a “real woman”—for example, in front of the animated female other that androcentric masculinity can only interpret as the “forbidding” naked body of Frau Baden—he is lost in the shadows, completely deflated. Escaping from her all-too-masculine appropriation of the phallus as the

foundation of desire, he runs straight to the submissive Butterfly he knows he can control. But when the phallic narcissist is then confronted by the fact that his ideal woman is a gay man, he simply cannot process it. He cannot give up the perfect lie he himself created. So, if M. Butterfly writes women out of existence, replacing them with men, it also writes feminized gay men out of existence. The naked body of the man he has come to love—the “skin,” the “curve of the cheek,” the “softness of the mouth” that he caresses longingly, eyes closed, in the paddy wagon—is as threatening to Gallimard’s romantic I-for-myself consciousness as the robust naked body of the womanly German frau. Recognizing the other—whether female or male—as an other desiring being or animated consciousness is impossible for Rene Gallimard. As Sanjek writes, when his infatuation with Song Liling is finally understood and taken in by Gallimard, “it leads to his full-fledged impersonation of the role she played, Madame Butterfly, and ritual suicide. The character remains an abstraction for him, and he cannot assimilate his infatuation with a man in any way other than ending his life.”¹⁰²

Abstracting himself and others out of the fundamental principle of I and the other, Gallimard falls into the realm of the double, turning back on himself, reflecting himself to himself, fused and confused with his ideal woman, an imprisoned Butterfly. In adopting the robe, make-up and wig, he becomes the ideal he refuses to give up. Completely atomistic he chooses to die instead of face and recognize the embodied other. For Gallimard women must remain the passive receptacle of “whatever punishment we give them.” What Cronenberg’s hero does is to ritually kill

the feminized other, offering a pure sacrifice to his notion of love, which, as Sanjek suggests, “could never be satisfied by a single specific body as it was predicated on an abstract ideal”¹⁰³—his own atomistic ego.

With its climactic doubling and suicide, Garber suggests, what Hwang and Cronenberg’s art does is to focus on “male pathos and male self-pity,” such that M. Butterfly is

intermittently antifeminist and homophobic, ridiculing the female cross dresser, Miss Chin, while it elevates Gallimard’s plight to the plane of high drama This is a critique frequently made of contemporary male transvestite theatre, that it occludes or erases women, implying that a man may be (or rather, make) a more successful “woman” than a woman can. In Hwang’s play cross-dressed men are emblematic of cultural crisis (or even of the “human condition”), but the cross-dressed woman is a risible sign of failed “femininity What is really at stake here, it seems to me, is a subconscious recognition that “woman” in patriarchal society is conceived of as an artifact—and that the logical next step is the recognition that “man” is likewise not fact but artifact, himself constructed, made of detachable parts.”¹⁰⁴

It seems to me, however, that there is nothing “sub”conscious about it at all. For the erasure of the embodied feminized other as artifact in this art that makes the atomistic male subject and his I-for-myself consciousness the source and meaning of all being is wholly on the social surface—there to be read in the relation between the atomistic male self and the denigrated other in this text. Indeed, the logical next step is exactly what the heroes in

Cronenberg's films cannot seem to face: recognition of the social existence of other animated consciousnesses, female or male, straight or gay, and truly radical examination of and self-reflection on the questionable 'fact' of masculine phallic omnipotence.

It is rather unsurprising, then, that this problematic treatment of the self-other relation that has characterized Cronenberg's artistic utterances, their creative energy, and the lives of their male heroes since Scanners remains in evidence in his most recent work, Crash, along with the predilection for doubling. Based on the science-fiction novel of the same name written by the British author J.G. Ballard in 1973, it is a film about the fascination with technology, violence and sex in late twentieth century Western culture, told through the obsessions of a group of car crash survivors who find themselves erotically drawn to and aroused by traffic accidents. Apparently disturbed and frightened by his observation that "[s]ocial relationships are no longer as important as the individual's relationship with the technological landscape,"¹⁰⁵ Ballard claims to have used the car throughout his novel

not only as a sexual image but also as a "total metaphor for man's life in today's society." "Will modern technology provide us with hitherto undreamed-of means for tapping our own psychopathologies?," the author asks, and "Is the harnessing of our innate perversity conceivably of benefit to us? Is there some deviant logic unfolding more powerful than that provided by reason?"¹⁰⁶

What I am driven to ask about this art which uses the car crash as a total metaphor for man's life in today's society, however, is how "reason" itself

and the I-for-myself institutionalized masculine consciousness underlying it and the technological world it has created, and not some 'other' more powerful and deviant logic, can be seen to be at the root of the psychopathologies of disaffection, emotional derailment, and alienation that suffuse it.

Cronenberg's Crash tells the story of film producer James Ballard/James Spader and his wife Catherine/Deborah Kara Unger, who are drawn into the twilight world of Vaughan/Elias Koteas, a former medical photographer who leads what Roy Grundmann has called "a secret menagerie of zombie-like people, who might best be described (with a nod to cartoonist Gary Larson) as a bunch of 'crash fest mummies.' They survive crashes; they reenact them; they get their erotic booty from them; and they've become addicted to them."¹⁰⁷

The Ballards are a terminally bored yuppie couple whose erotic relationship is sustained by their various orgasmless, not to mention emotionless, sexual exploits (hers, rather cold and passionless, from behind against the fuselage of an airplane with her flying instructor; his, slightly more energetic, on a desk in a camera room with a set-assistant, eventually face-to-face), which they then blandly report to each other as they themselves have sex, standing up, on the balcony of their high-rise overlooking the freeway, carefully avoiding all eye-contact and any sense of intimacy. When James is involved in a head-on collision with Dr. Helen Remington/Holly Hunter (which he himself caused while reading pornography at the wheel, and which, in turn, causes the death of her husband) his whole world begins to transform. Recovering in the airport

hospital, he meets Dr. Remington, with whom he has felt a strange connection since the crash, and an odd, heavily scarred character in a white lab coat who seems to know Remington and who seems to be a medical photographer, but who takes a decidedly prurient interest in Ballard's injuries.

A few weeks later Ballard and Remington, collecting what's left of their cars at the police garage, are drawn to each other and end up having sex in his car in the airport parking garage. She introduces him to Vaughan, her companion at the hospital, who stages re-enactments of fatal car accidents of the rich and famous (such as James Dean and Jayne Mansfield) with his mechanic and aide-de-camp Collin Seagrave/Peter MacNeil, and who roams the highways looking for accidents and broken bodies to photograph for his portfolio. "When I first met Vaughan he was a specialist in internal medicine," Remington says. "I don't know what he is now."

With the help of his girlfriend Gabrielle/Rosanna Arquette, also a crash fetishist who hobbles around in leg braces, black leather, and fishnet stockings, Vaughan piques Ballard's interest in his "project"—"something," he says, "we are all intimately involved in. It's a reshaping of the human body by modern technology." When Vaughan later tries to demonstrate his case by running Catherine's car off the road, James is clearly unnerved, protectively pulling his car up between Catherine and Vaughan and so preempting the latter's contact with his wife. But the couple is nevertheless aroused and seduced by Vaughan's perverse appeal, and in the next scene (again involving rear-entry sex in which they avoid looking at each other),

Catherine brings them both to climax by asking James to describe to her in pornographic detail how he, James, would “sodomize” Vaughan. But while he remains silent, she, significantly, does all the talking.

James passes his nights with Remington and Vaughan and the latter’s white trash friends, watching videotapes of Swedish crash-test dummies, looking at Vaughan’s portfolio of car crash photos, group masturbating, and driving the highways with Vaughan. When Vaughan asks him what he thinks of all this, James smiles weakly. “It’s all very satisfying,” he says, “I’m just not sure I understand why.” But Vaughan proceeds to explain why: “You’re beginning to see that for the first time there’s a benevolent psychopathology that beckons towards us. For example. The car crash is a fertilizing rather than a destructive event, liberating sexual energy, mediating the sexuality of those who have died with an intensity that’s impossible in any other form. To experience that. To live that. That. That’s my project.”

Seeing Ballard as a potential partner in this psychopathology, Vaughan picks up a blonde prostitute. He has sex with her in the back seat as James drives and watches in the rear-view mirror, clearly titillated by Vaughan’s brutality (he repeatedly pushes the woman’s head up and away, as if to snap her neck). When Catherine later comes to pick James up, the couple becomes concerned for their “friend” Vaughan, who is clearly upset after having been questioned by the police about an accident at the airport in which a pedestrian has been run over intentionally. They decide to drive him home in his car, and by chance pass an accident that turns out to have been Seagrave’s sensational swan song. Apparently, he tried the Jayne

Mansfield crash for real, without Vaughan, and the latter is overcome with admiration for his dead friend, moaning orgasmically as he snaps shots for his portfolio. The trio proceeds to enter a car wash, where Vaughan reprises the scenario with the prostitute, and Catherine more-or-less passively, more-or-less masochistically, agrees to be raped as James looks on.

A series of scenes follow in which James has rear-entry sex with the now bruised and battered Catherine at home (placing his hand lovingly over the marks Vaughan has made on her thigh), and then in a car with a wound that opens up in the back of Gabrielle's black-stockinged thigh. Later, after he and Vaughan get car logos tattooed on their chests, they retire to a deserted parking lot in Vaughan's prized '63 Lincoln convertible (the same model that Kennedy was assassinated in), where, repeating the brutal gestures on each other that Vaughan inflicted on the two women, they sexually consummate their relationship. Leaving Vaughan asleep, James wanders over to another wrecked car and proceeds, seemingly, to "have sex" with the steering wheel. But his orgasm is interrupted by Vaughan who, snarling like a mad dog, crashes his car into James' twice, then speeds off.

Lying in wait for James and Catherine some time later, he sees them on the highway and attempts to run them off the road. But he loses control, crashes, and is himself killed. Haunted by Vaughan and his project in which the car crash is understood as the ultimate fertilizing event, they retrieve his Lincoln from the police garage and with their typical passive deliberation they attempt to also retrieve or 'refertilize' their putative love

for each other. Figuratively “becoming” Vaughan, transforming essentially into his double, James now uses the Lincoln to run Catherine off the road. She, however, does not die; rather, she is consoled by James who, murmuring “Maybe the next one, darling, maybe the next one . . . ,” gives her a deep kiss and enters her from behind. The camera cranes back from the couple, almost trapped under the wreckage of Catherine’s car on the grassy slope at the side of the highway, and the film cuts to black.

For Cronenberg, Crash and its ‘benevolent psychopathology’ clearly represents a reprise of the die-hard transcendence-through-technological-transformation theory that motivated his films from the early 1980s, Scanners, Videodrome, and The Fly. Judy Gerstel quotes him as saying:

“Maybe you don’t realize until the end that they really do love each other; but they’ve been incapable of finding a way of expressing it, of connecting with each other . . . and so, in a way, my characters are trying to re-invent sexuality, eroticism, and in a way, love. That’s what I see happening in the film.” . . .

“When you make a film like this,” explains Cronenberg, “you’re trying to create a different world. You need your audience to leave reality behind. I’m trying to create a dream-like state.”¹⁰⁸

But, from a feminist dialogic perspective, what that “dream-like state” entails is hardly the radical and insightful existential commentary on human sexuality in the technological landscape of late twentieth century Western culture that Cronenberg imagines it is, nor a “different world” created in art that somehow leaves “reality behind”; rather, it is clearly of a piece with the cold and chaotic, withdrawn state of I-for-myself institutionalized

masculine consciousness and its typical androcentric values which the director cannot seem to leave behind but ritually repeats in each successive film in the form of the monstrous double.

As Barry Grant observes, while “Ballard’s novel is a brilliant tour-de-force in that his prose works from within the consciousness of the new sexuality which the Spader and Koteas characters explore,” getting “inside that consciousness,” and immersing us “in a perception of technological eroticism that extrapolates, really, only a little from our culture’s present auto-eroticism,” Cronenberg’s film is less than successful in dealing with the implications of that new sexuality and consciousness. Grant suggests that

Cronenberg’s camera . . . despite the alluring metallic surfaces captured by Peter Suschitsky’s cinematography, remains outside this consciousness and never really convinces us of this new sexuality. The metal, vinyl, and plastic surfaces of cars remain cold and hard, never truly sexual. Unlike the novel, there is no implication of the viewer/reader, and as a result the people in the film seem little more than strange, perverse people toward whom we may easily feel superior.¹⁰⁹

William Wees agrees: “Much got lost,” he writes, “in Cronenberg’s adaptation of Ballard’s novel.” On the one hand, Ballard’s “anatomically detailed pornography” is unfortunately missing; on the other hand, so are his obsessive accounts of automobile parts and their integration into the erotic imagery of the book. “Rather than taking his cue from such visual, ‘cinematic’ writing,” says Wees, “Cronenberg falls back on decorously

pantomimed and handsomely photographed sex scenes, some of which are in cars, but not with cars.”¹¹⁰ Indeed, sex in Cronenberg’s Crash is sex between women and men, and, as we will see, what passes for Cronenberg as a transgressive “re-invention” of sexuality and eroticism is, in fact, compared with the old forms of sexuality and eroticism characteristic of institutionalized masculinity, nothing really new.

In my estimation, the profound “dream-like” state Cronenberg thinks he has created in Crash proves to be merely another variation on the cold chaos of I-for-myself masculine consciousness typically pervading his utterances. The reason Cronenberg’s characters are incapable of finding a way of connecting with each other, I argue, is because they are paralyzed from the start by the form of creative energy inhabiting this text. Various described by critics as “zombies” and “robots,”¹¹¹ “somnambulists,”¹¹² and catatonics “in a corpse of a film with no sensation at all,”¹¹³ each actor is, indeed, “perfectly in sync with the bizarre world of the film,”¹¹⁴ thus creating characters which are, in effect, like the characters in Naked Lunch, monstrous doubles of each other. Their obsessive, sense-dead sexual behavior reduces them to monologic sameness, erasing from their being all traces of uniqueness, difference, individuality and the value of transgression. Perpetually open to each other, lost and confused on the boundary-making territory between the self and others, their numbness is epitomized in the chronic vacant stare of the ice-queen Catherine. Repeatedly approached and penetrated from behind by Ballard and then willingly brutalized by his friend, Vaughan, she can hardly be said to be erotically animated or invigorated or reinvented by this activity;

rather, she seems to merely maintain the nonchalant, cold isolation of ongoing I-for-myself consciousness with which she began in the airport hangar at the film's opening.

From a feminist dialogic perspective this failure of Cronenberg's characters to achieve the transformation he envisions for them can perhaps best be explained in terms of Bakhtin's' understanding of the sexual approach to the other, which, by itself,

is incapable of giving form to the body as a determinate external entity that is finished and self-contained. In the sexual approach, the other's outer body disintegrates and becomes merely a constituent in my own inner body, or, in other words, it becomes valuable only in connection with those intracorporeal possibilities (the possibilities of carnal desire, pleasure, gratification) which it promises me, and these inner possibilities submerge and dissolve its resilient outward completeness. In the sexual approach to the other's body, my own body and the other's merge into one flesh, but this unitary flesh can be only an inner flesh. To be sure, this merging into one inner flesh is an ultimate limit toward which my sexual attitude tends in its purest form; in reality it is always complicated by aesthetic moments that derive from my loving admiration of the other's body, and, consequently, by form-giving, constructive energies as well.¹¹⁵

Accordingly, Cronenberg's putative lovers, trapped by a love reduced to mere sex, are therefore trapped in the inner body, and so in the formless and ultimately destructive insanity of I-for-myself consciousness. The final crash, in which Catherine, too, ostensibly comes to experience the

'exhilaration' of Vaughan's project, reduces the couple to monologic pantomimes of each other, vacantly looking for 'new life' under a car wreck in the near-disintegration of the mortal body. But for all their handsomely photographed desire, and for all the love Cronenberg claims they share, what James and Catherine clearly do not have is the transgression, outsiderness, or distance that would be required to generate any real value between them—the fundamental human capacity to give the complicated emotional-volitional, aesthetic, and ethical gift of form to each other as relative wholes.

Liam Lacey reports that in coaching his actors in Crash Cronenberg told them “‘We’re afraid, aren’t we. Yeah. We’re afraid. But we’re not doing anything immoral or illegal. So let’s see where this takes us”¹¹⁶ Still experimenting with his heroes after all these years, and clearly still haunted by and rationalizing the questionable morality of his cinematic project, Cronenberg continues to insist (and, I think, to try to convince himself) that “where his films take us” is into a positive transcendent space. Asked by Amy Taubin about the quality of Crash's closing image, which for her rivaled Dead Ringers in the depths of its despair, Cronenberg responds with his familiar posture of solitary romantic existentialist bravely facing hard truths about the human condition:

But I think it's a happy ending. It's the Liebestod, the acceptance of the inevitability of the death of both lovers. To say that all love ends in death is not to say anything that's untrue, although it might be unbearable at some times. But as a card-carrying existentialist, one accepts this as part of the bargain. And the way he kisses her at the

end—he doesn't do that anywhere else in the movie. For me, this is an existential romance—and I don't mean that in a cute way. They fight very hard and come this whole circuitous route to find their way back to each other in the end.¹¹⁷

“Happy”? So David Cronenberg insists, and it is not in the dialogic spirit of this project to tell him how he or his characters really feel. But such ‘happiness’ accorded to the Ballards, I argue, is clearly disingenuous, rubbing once again against the grain of the melancholy mood of the text, attempting to force a semblance of warmth and value out of the truly cold and atomistic ‘existential’ point of view of phallic and narcissistic I-for-myself consciousness.

For, what is the discourse of the car crash as a “fertilizing rather than a destructive event” undergone by these lovers if not an example, yet again, of Cronenberg's infinite recourse to what Buck-Morss described as the institutionalized masculine myth of autogenesis in which modern man produces himself miraculously out of his own substance through scientific technology and sheer ego, and denies others their humanity and subjectivity in the process? Vaughan's car—a veritable sperm-mobile that smells of semen and motor oil in which he almost breaks the neck of a prostitute and batters and rapes a willing Catherine, and which Cronenberg's hero Ballard ultimately appropriates in order to emulate Vaughan and run his wife off the road, risking her death—is nothing if not a grand metaphor for that shop-worn myth of omnipotent autotelic masculinity attempting to recreate itself through its denigration and mutilation of the mortal body and the feminized other.

Moreover, in Crash that form of masculinity proves to be a rather traditional homosocial one obsessed with penetrating others from behind; as such, it stands on par with the anal references littering the mise-en-scene and its representation of homosexuality in Naked Lunch. “In this context,” Grundmann writes,

the director himself has pointed out that the film’s showcasing of rear-entry and anal sex is meant to express its practitioners’ disconnectedness from and defiance of the world. It is a metaphor for their profoundly antisocial attitudes. They don’t seem to fuck each other so much as they fuck the world from which they’re alienated. As rear-entry sex involves a refusal to face the sex partner and to confront his or her humanity, the film uses it as a close analogy to the cult members’ practice of crashing one another’s cars. This practice, too, involves a calculated refusal to see the crash partner as a human being.¹¹⁸

‘Happily’ finding his way back to Catherine in the end (pun intended) through her near death and yet another tired round of anal sex on the grassy knoll, James Ballard epitomizes Cronenberg’s adolescent if not insipid dime store existential philosophizing that there can be the promise of transcendence for the masculine subject in rape, dehumanization, alienation, and mutilation of the self and the other.

Ultimately, what Crash does according to Grundmann is to flaunt “anal sex in order to express its hipness and legitimize its cutting-edge nature,”¹¹⁹ while for Bart Testa, the rear-entry sex scenes merely serve to “exhibit the director’s boyish pride in their putative outrageousness.”¹²⁰

And putative, I agree, is the operative word here, for the rear-entry/anal sex in the film is indeed far from outré; rather, as Grundmann so well articulates it, it is “still perfectly compatible with a conventional male phallicism that flaunts its frontal assets while hiding its vulnerable behind.”¹²¹ Indeed, what is perhaps more truly outrageous here is the way the ostensibly polymorphously perverse sexual energy pervading this film ends up penetrating everyone except the male hero—ends up embodying, as I suggested earlier, not a transgressive perverseness in relation to the phallus, but a clear phallic panic in relation to the ‘perverse.’

As Grundmann observes of Ballard, he is the only one who doesn't get fucked, neither in the book nor in the film. The book, at least, grants Vaughan the pleasure of being orally serviced by Ballard before having to bare his behind. Yet there is no question that it is Ballard who will do the fucking. Some may consider this observation an act of PC nit-picking, but, clearly, anal sex here comes to reflect the logic by which Crash deals with sexual difference in general. The male protagonist must always be the penetrator, whether in same-sex acts or during sex with women. For all its sexual frenzy and kink factor, Crash clearly suffers from a fear of anal penetration.¹²²

Why, we might well ask, in a film that ostensibly delights in transgressive “sex without limits,”¹²³ are the women not endowed with the (inevitably phallic) technology or paraphernalia that would enable them to penetrate James or Vaughan? Why, when Vaughan is clearly the sexual aggressor in relation to the women in this film, does he suddenly become the passive

“bottom” in relation to James in the sex scene between them? Why, too, must Vaughan, like the Butterfly and Kiki before him, die? Because Crash, for all its radical posturing, must make absolute certain that Cronenberg and his hero Ballard “keep their sphincters fortified;”¹²⁴ because in the form of energy underlying this film there is an essentially atomistic masculine subjectivity which operates by closing down all avenues of relation (sexual, emotional, ethical, aesthetic) to the animated other. As Grundmann concludes, seeing that Cronenberg and J.G. Ballard are popularly considered to be “innovative” and “cutting-edge” artists, this is hard to understand, especially since they wouldn’t have to perform such acts themselves—they merely need to imagine them. With Crash’s agenda in mind, they ought to know that the penetration of the male anus arguably implies one of the more radical attacks on bourgeois sexuality. It would significantly add to Crash’s future world by making it either more promising or more abhorrent, depending on the eye of the beholder. But Crash, upon arriving at the gates of this future, refuses to pry them open and, instead, beats a hasty retreat into the past.¹²⁵

Cronenberg and the energy of I-for-myself consciousness

David Cronenberg, of course, despite the despairing, melancholy, regressive tone of closure in his films and the horrific deaths and near-deaths that they entail, clings tenaciously to his fantastic theory that his art is transgressive and will lead to transcendent change. With Crash our director-as-romantic-scientist claims to be taking

something that we think of as so absolute as sexuality and say[ing], no, it's not absolute at all, here's the scientific proof, you don't even need sex to make babies any more, so you tell me: what is sex good for? And the answer is: well, it's up for grabs, for reinterpretation. In fact, we're forced to reinterpret, we're doing it even when we're unconscious of it. Does sex become art? Does it become performance? Weaponry? What is it? And to change something that basic in our lives means that we are changing what it is to be human in quite a profound way.”¹²⁶

But sex, I would answer, not considered from this atomistic point of view of I-for-myself consciousness but complicated dialogically from a feminist point of view by the aesthetic and ethical moments implied by the existence of the embodied other as co-being, might still be good for something—for performing some small yet integral part of the larger gesture or gift of the loving form-giving activity required of I and the other as co-consciousnesses in the field of intersubjectivity.

Moreover, where David Cronenberg claims to be reinterpreting the world through sex as performance/art/weaponry, I claim he is merely rehashing a quite familiar misogynist and homophobic dynamic involving the penis/phallus as weapon in the name of male dominance of the body and the other—a dynamic that has long been characteristic of romantic institutionalized I-for-myself consciousness in North American androcentric culture, and, as we have seen, characteristic of his own oeuvre as well, since Scanners, if not earlier.

Crash, Cronenberg says, is “about an attempt to transcend what we are, to recreate the world and not accept it as it is. Art is obviously an expression of that urge, but so is technology. When we make metal, it’s an attempt to make a new skin. Much of this, I think, is an attempt to deal with mortality. In my films, I’m trying to come to terms with my own mortality.”¹²⁷ But, I would counter, metal is not skin, and the outward boundaries of our mortal bodies, despite the efforts of masculinist technology and art to harden them into impassive phallic surfaces or blow them to smithereens, nevertheless retain a crucial existential value, especially in the increasingly dehumanizing, horrific environment of late twentieth century North American culture.

If anything, what this examination of the “created” in Cronenberg’s utterances has revealed, I argue, is that what Cronenberg is trying to transcend in his aesthetic activity—in his so-called ‘existential’ meditations¹²⁸—is responsibility and answerability to the world as it is and the embodied others who also exist in it. Indeed, what Cronenberg refuses to accept are the limitations and boundaries of existence dictated by the fundamental dialogic principle of I and the other in which, as Bakhtin has shown, the meaning of death, like the meaning of life, is ultimately not the prerogative of the egoic energy of the ongoing “I” but a gift bestowed by the category of the “other.” The romantic, narcissistic, phallic, institutionalized, abstract I-for-myself consciousness pervading his work means, indeed, that his own mortality has become his obsession in life and in art. So it would seem, as this dialogic feminist analysis of his films of the 1980s and 1990s has attempted to show, David Cronenberg and his art,

given the hubristic position of I-for-myself consciousness he inhabits as an author, are doomed to continue restaging this death ad nauseam through the infinite form of the romantic male hero, infinitely doubled.

Interpreted through what Bakhtin has described as excessive self-consciousness in monologic abstraction from the dialogic reality of human existence, David Cronenberg as late twentieth century romantic destroys himself and the world in his work, leaving himself and his heroes to try to 'live' in the loophole of disembodied I-for-myself consciousness, cut off from the warmth and emotional-volitional tone of the concomitant moments of consciousness that give it value and meaning in the social world: I-for-the-other and the other-for-me. It represents a place in contemporary culture which is, as J.G. Ballard obliquely acknowledges but David Cronenberg cannot seem to bring himself to face, not happy or transcendent but imbued with horror: a hell on earth. "The hells that face us now," Ballard says, "are more abstract, the very dimensions of time and space, the phenomenology of the universe, the fact of our own consciousness [my emphasis]."¹²⁹ Indeed.

Yet, as I have argued in the previous pages, that form of consciousness can be examined and revealed as clearly gendered, androcentric, misogynist, homophobic, and ultimately monologic if we refuse to accept it at face value as the so-called 'fact' of 'generalized human consciousness' and instead place it in its proper historical and social context. The horror it entails in the films of David Cronenberg suggests less a radical and liberating transcendence of the boundaries and limits of subjectivity for the institutionalized masculine "I" than a disturbing

manifestation of the infinite form of the phallic and narcissistic romantic hero—cold, cruel, unconsummated, and infinitely doubled. Moreover, the crucial point to be realized in terms of the goals of this project is that it has been a feminist dialogic method based in the fundamental principle of the recognition of others as other subjects, not the vagaries of post-structuralist and postmodern deconstructions of human relations in terms of subjects and objects, that has enabled us to reveal the energy of I-for-myself consciousness suffusing Cronenberg's life and his work, and to evaluate them as such. Recognition thus becomes a key value for a feminist dialogics, and, as I will show in the following concluding remarks, it is now emerging as the basis of a very insightful 'post postmodern' politics of intersubjectivity.

Notes

- 1 Michael Holquist, introduction to Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M.M. Bakhtin, trans. Vadim Liapunov, ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), xxvi.
- 2 Ibid., xxv.
- 3 M.M. Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres," in Speech Genres & Other Late Essays, trans. Vern W. McGee, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 66.
- 4 Myriam Diaz-Diocaretz, "Bakhtin, Discourse, and Feminist Theories," in The Bakhtin Circle Today, Critical Studies, ed. Myriam Diaz-Diocaretz, 1:2 (Atlanta-Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1989), 135.
- 5 Ibid., 135.
- 6 David Breskin, "David Cronenberg: The Rolling Stone Interview," Rolling Stone 632 (February 1992): 96.
- 7 Michael Holquist, Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 85.
- 8 For the standard accounts of Romanticism, see, for example, M.H. Abrams' classic The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1953) and his Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature (New York: Norton, 1971). See also Northrop Frye, ed., Romanticism Reconsidered (New York: Columbia, 1963) and Harold Bloom, ed., Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism (New York: Norton, 1970).

⁹ For more contemporary critical evaluations of the phenomenon of romanticism, see Kathleen Wheeler, Romanticism, Pragmatism and Deconstruction (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1993); Maurice Cranston, The Romantic Movement (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1994); John Beer, ed., Questioning Romanticism (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Orrin N.C. Wang, Fantastic Modernity: Dialectical Readings in Romanticism and Theory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); and Ira Livingston, Arrow of Chaos: Romanticism and Postmodernity (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). See also John Ralston Saul's Voltaire's Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West (New York: Free Press, 1992) for a contextualization of romanticism as a phenomenon of the Age of Reason.

¹⁰ M.M. Bakhtin, Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M.M. Bakhtin, trans. Vadim Liapunov, ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 180.

¹¹ Ibid., 181.

¹² Ibid., 180.

¹³ Ibid., 21.

¹⁴ Ibid., 105.

¹⁵ Ibid., 20.

¹⁶ Ibid., 2.

¹⁷ Holquist, Dialogism, 30.

- 18 Boguslaw Zylko, "The Author-Hero Relation in Bakhtin's Dialogic Poetics," in Mikhail Bakhtin and the Epistemology of Discourse, Critical Studies, ed. Clive Thomson, 2:2-1 (Amsterdam-Atlanta: Rodopi, 1990), 70.
- 19 Chris Rodley, Cronenberg on Cronenberg (Toronto: Knopf, 1992), 59.
- 20 Ibid., 151-152.
- 21 Ibid., 152.
- 22 Ibid., 152-153.
- 23 Ibid., 158.
- 24 Ibid., 99-100.
- 25 Breskin, "David Cronenberg," 70.
- 26 Rodley, Cronenberg, xiv.
- 27 See Rodley, especially chapter one. See also Peter Morris' David Cronenberg: A Delicate Balance (Toronto, ECW Press, 1994), 23-33.
- 28 Rodley, Cronenberg, 5, 7.
- 29 Ibid., 8.
- 30 Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," October 62 (Fall 1992): 7-8.
- 31 Buck-Morss points toward Terry Eagleton's insight in Ideology of the Aesthetic that "aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body" to describe the importance of cognition and the senses, and so "the surface of the body, the mediating boundary between inner and outer" to the pre-modern understanding of aesthetic activity. With modernity and the retreat from the surface of the body (what Bakhtin would call the outward boundaries of the body) as the site of the aesthetic to the autogenetic masculine mind

(what Bakhtin would call the inner body or I-for-myself consciousness) we see the “‘dense, swarming territory’ outside of the mind that comprises ‘nothing less than the whole of our sensate life together’” being rejected—becoming, in work like Cronenberg’s, a subject of and for horror (6). Indeed, the Mantle boys’ future as gynecologists is motivated by their disgust with the sensate, their fascination with the idea that humans would be better off if they were designed to have sex under water, “so you wouldn’t have to touch each other.”

³² Rodley, Cronenberg, 8.

³³ On this subject of play George Herbert Mead has some insightful observations in Mind, Self, and Society (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1934). Where Cronenberg would seem to see the play subtending his art in terms of private individual fantasy, the right to radical freedom in self-expression, and so, ultimately, as the property of the atomistic self, Mead understands it as fundamentally social—as the prerequisite that establishes the capacity for symbolic communication with the other. And “[w]hat is essential to communication,” he writes,

is that the symbol should arouse in one’s self what it arouses in the other individual. It must have that sort of universality to any person who finds himself in the same situation. There is a possibility of language whenever a stimulus can affect the individual as it affects the other. With a blind person such as Helen Keller, it is a contact experience that could be given to another as it is given to her self. It is out of that sort of language that the mind of Helen Keller was built

up. As she recognized, it was not until she could get into communication with other persons through symbols which could arouse in herself the responses they arouse in other people that she could get what we term a mental content, or a self” (148).

Thus, in play as symbolic communication, we are always in intersubjective relationship. Individual selves are not born with a private store of symbols at their disposal; rather, they develop in play by sharing common responses to symbolic stimuli. For Mead, what is most important about play is not that it acts as a vehicle for the expression of private individual fantasy but that it activates communication between the self and others. “A person who is saying something is saying to himself what he says to others; otherwise he does not know what he is talking about” (Mead 147). Taking oneself as another, internalizing the social-discursive other, is essential to symbolic communication, and so, to play.

In fact, Mead says, we see this blatantly in the play of children as they produce invisible, imaginary companions—doubles of themselves. “They organize in this way the responses which they call out in other persons and call out also in themselves” (150). Indeed, a child at play takes on roles, becomes a mother or a police officer or a cat, for example, and, talking to itself in that role, calls out in himself the other and responds to himself as an other (i.e., addressing himself as a parent would; arresting himself as the officer would, etc.). For Mead, the child at play “has a certain set of stimuli which call out in itself the responses that they would call out in others” (150). Out of these events of stimulus and response, or

this shifting dialogue between the self, the self taken as an other, and actual others in the social world, a self is built over time. Play, although it can appear to be solitary, is profoundly social and impossible to conceive outside what Bakhtin has called the fundamental principle of I and the other.

On one level, David Cronenberg seems able to recognize the importance of the other to human play, and of the shared symbol in play. “When a kid’s turned into a cat,” he observes, “if you try to relate to him as your son—disaster. Emotional psychic disaster. You’ve crossed the line. You’ve done wrong. Don’t underestimate the seriousness of play; the necessity to have that fantasy” (Rodley 19). Yet on another level, Cronenberg the die-hard individualist reduces the social relation and symbolic communication his son is acting out toward himself and toward his father to the necessity of private fantasy. Play, while it is clearly an issue of personal imagination, is nevertheless more fundamentally grounded in the self-other relation and ultimately more revealing of the way one relates to others and to oneself as an other than of one’s ‘pure’ and ‘innate’ genius. To play, whether one is a three-year-old pretending to be a cat or a film-maker trying things out, is to be, inescapably, in activity toward the other.

³⁴ Breskin, “David Cronenberg,” 70.

³⁵ Bakhtin, Art and Answerability, 181, 20.

³⁶ Breskin, “David Cronenberg,” 69. Badley would see this as part of a generalized “giving birth to death” (23) across horror films of the past two

decades. For Evelyn Fox Keller it would represent the “perennial motif” motivating romantic and scientific creativity: “the urge to fathom the secrets of nature, and the collateral hope that we will fathom the ultimate secrets (and hence gain control) of our own mortality.” For masculinity, Fox Keller continues, what is at stake “is the power to arbitrate over life and death not through the generation (or sustenance) of life, but through the capacity to legislate death. Fertility is countered by virility, measured now by its death-dealing prowess.” (“From the Secrets of Life to the Secrets of Death,” in Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science, ed. Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller and Sally Shuttleworth (New York: Routledge, 1990), 177, 184.

37 Breskin, “David Cronenberg,” 68.

38 Ibid., 69.

39 Rodley, Cronenberg, 158.

40 Breskin, “David Cronenberg,” 96.

41 It is clear in interviews that Cronenberg himself is not unconcerned with personal accountability and the ethical implications of his work; he is conscious of himself as a social actor. But when such questions are raised he always seems to deflect them in an odd, if not nervous, kind of defensive posing. For example, he says to Rodley:

People ask me, “Don’t you feel you have a huge responsibility because of the films you make? How can you bear the weight of that responsibility?” To them I say, “I’m carrying the weight of that

responsibility very well. I think these films are good for people.

They're not bad for people" (Rodley, Cronenberg, 159).

And on the subject of Dead Ringers, he repeatedly turns the discussion of misogyny in the film into an issue of censorship and suppression, in the same breath revealing the extent of his monologic thinking as he tries to escape the dialogue by submitting the question to divine arbitration, the abstract authority of institutionalized masculinity par excellence:

But who has the balance, the magisterial cosmic perspective that he or she can look at a script and say, "This is irresponsible and must be suppressed"? What you get are little committees of scared, timid people who are fumbling around. If there was this Godlike person we agreed could arbitrate, OK. If someone would say to me, "David, I know you don't think Dead Ringers is going to enhance misogyny in society but I, God, tell you that in the light of the next 2,000 years it will," then maybe I could submit to that arbitration. But basically, I refuse to be suppressed (Rodley 159).

The issue, of course, is not whether or not Cronenberg should be suppressed or censored—obviously not—but his clear assumption that he answers to no-one—or, at least, no-one human.

42 Zylko, "Author-Hero Relation," 73.

43 V.N. Volosinov, Marxism and the Philosophy of Language, trans.

Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1973), 91.

⁴⁴ Indeed, aesthetic activity is, as Bakhtin said it was, a necessarily live event: the attempt to bring lived life and theory together from the point of view of theory is folly and leads to sheer madness; what the artist must do is bring theory into Being from the point of view of being as ongoing life based in the fundamental principle of I and the other.

⁴⁵ See Kaja Silverman's Male Subjectivity at the Margins (New York and London: Routledge, 1992). In this book Silverman dedicates herself to an exploration of what she calls "deviant" masculinities—masculinities which, in her view, are defined by desires and identifications that are "perverse" in relation to the phallic norms and standards of institutionalized masculinity and so call our whole world (i.e., our androcentric reality) into question (1). She argues that the "dominant fiction" of the representational systems of androcentric reality involves our accommodation to authoritative, empowered, privileged, idealized masculinity, and that the primary signifier of this fiction is phallic omnipotence. Our dominant fiction calls upon the male to see himself through images of "unimpaired" masculinity and to "misrecognize" himself as a whole, complete, autonomous, atomistic ego (42). In Silverman's opinion, one filmmaker who successfully challenges this fiction and its belief in omnipotent or transcendent masculinity is R.W. Fassbinder. With its images that refuse transcendent masculinity by specularizing the male, homoeroticizing relations between men, embracing castration, and politicizing the "murderous logic" of masculine subjectivity that stigmatizes the feminine as other and denigrates the lived body, his work represents a powerful

divestiture of the phallus—a critical perversity in relation to the phallic norms and standards of institutionalized masculinity.

46 See chapter six of Male Subjectivity at the Margins, entitled “Masochistic Ecstasy and the Ruination of Masculinity in Fassbinder.”

47 Breskin, “David Cronenberg,” 70.

48 Zylko, “Author-Hero Relation,” 70.

49 Ibid., 70.

50 Ibid., 70.

51 Bakhtin has this to say about the impossibility of deriving meaning and form from I-for-myself alone: “The form of my life-from-within is conditioned by my rightful folly or insanity of not coinciding—of not coinciding in principle—with me myself as a given” (Art and Answerability (127). From my perspective, the other coincides with herself because I consummate her as a factually given, formal whole; whereas I do not accept my own factually given being. As I-for-myself “I believe insanely and inexpressibly in my own noncoincidence with this inner givennes of myself. I cannot count and add up all of myself, saying: this is all of me—there is nothing more anywhere else or in anything else; I already exist in full” (127). As I-for-myself I am monologic, the source of all being.

52 Holquist, Dialogism, 134.

53 Rodley, Cronenberg, 152.

54 Ibid., 96.

55 Ibid., 8.

56 Bakhtin, Art and Answerability, 35.

57 Ibid., 33.

58 See M.M. Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, trans. and ed. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 293.

59 Bart Testa, "Technology's Body: Cronenberg, Genre and the Canadian Ethos," Post Script 15:1 (Fall 1995): 49.

60 Indeed, technology does invade the bodies of Cronenberg's heroes: ephemerol invades the minds of Vale and Revok; Videodrome invades the abdomen of Renn; the telepod invades the entire being of Brundle.

61 Testa. "Technology's Body." 51.

62 Thus, the "theme of the autonomous, autotelic subject as sense-dead, and for this reason a manly creator, a self-starter, sublimely self-contained" that, according to Buck-Morss ("Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," October 62 (Fall 1992): 10) appears throughout the nineteenth century and manifests in the early twentieth century in the association of artistic creativity with the warrior and war (in Futurism, Facism, and Nazism, for example), can still be seen, by the late twentieth century, in the technological body fantastic, whose alienation has reached such a degree, to quote Walter Benjamin, "that it is capable of experiencing its own destruction as an aesthetic enjoyment of the highest order" (Illuminations, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt, (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 242). Cronenberg, in staging his own destruction in the destruction of his heroes and their transformation into

the “New Flesh,” in effect stages the pyrrhic victory of the sense-dead phallic body. Indeed , there is no representation of physical pain or affect in Cronenberg’s heroes of the early 1980s as they variously explode and burn, only flat , distanced, numbing images of mutilated meat or “flesh.” And, significantly, the display of affect that does appear with The Fly as we move toward the more psychologically developed characters in Dead Ringers is, predictably, projected out, onto the feminine other as Veronica collapses under the emotional burden of Brundle’s transformation, while Brundle’s own reaction to the horror he is undergoing is ironic bemusement in the extreme.

63 Testa, “Technology’s Body.” 51.

64 Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics,” 10.

65 Rodley, Cronenberg. 150.

66 Owen Gleiberman. “Cronenberg’s Double Meanings,” American Film 14:1 (October 1988): 41, 42.

67 Ibid., 41.

68 Pam Cook, “Dead Ringers,” Monthly Film Bulletin 56:660 (January 1989): 3.

69 Ibid., 3, 4.

70 Stuart Klawans, “Dead Ringers,” The Nation 247 (October 1988): 431-432.

71 Ibid., 432.

72 Liane McLarty, “Beyond the Veil of the Flesh: Cronenberg and the Disembodiment of Horror,” in The Dread of Difference: Gender and the

Horror Film, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 247.

⁷³ Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny'," in Art and Literature, ed. and trans. James Strachey, The Pelican Freud Library vol. 14 (London: Penguin, 1985), 357-358.

⁷⁴ M.M. Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, trans. and ed. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 293-294.

⁷⁵ Rodley, Cronenberg, 149. The phrase is Cronenberg's, and he uses it more than once in his conversations with Rodley to describe his interpretation of human existence (see also page 115). It reveals, I think, more than he realizes about his own position on social possibility, the roots of his creative energy, and the worlds and heroes he imagines in terms of the blocked reciprocity, responsiveness, and answerability of I-for-myself consciousness.

⁷⁶ Where Elliot seems to use Beverly as his mirror throughout the film, it is significant that it is Beverly who actually looks into a mirror twice in Dead Ringers, both times as he shaves in preparation for the act of escaping Elliot/his mirror image/his double/his I-for-myself consciousness and meeting Claire.

⁷⁷ Rodley quotes Irons' observation about the twins: "I find their attraction fundamentally homosexual, but Platonic. It allows them the freedom to relate to other bodies—women's in their professional life, their

lovers, or each other's—on an unfettered physical level rather blind to emotional implications" (Cronenberg, 146).

78 Ibid., 151.

79 Ibid., 7.

80 McLarty, "Beyond the Veil," 247.

81 Rodley, Cronenberg. 157.

82 Ibid., 162, 157.

83 Ibid., 162.

84 Ibid., 168.

85 Breskin, "David Cronenberg," 96.

86 Ibid., 96.

87 Ibid., 96.

88 David Sanjek, "Dr. Hobbes's Parasites: Victims, Victimization, and Gender in David Cronenberg's Shivers," Cinema Journal 36:1 (Fall 1996): 71.

89 Griselda Pollock, Vision & Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), 54.

90 The "little demon in the corner" of his films is Cronenberg's phrase for the vicarious pleasure he assumes we all take and the cathartic release we all get in watching "guys [my emphasis] knock down and do whatever they want" to the people around them (See Sanjek, "Dr. Hobbes's Parasites," 61).

91 Ibid., 71.

- 92 It is interesting to note that as the figure of the double becomes an overt theme in Cronenberg with Dead Ringers, so arises, in embryo, the theme of homosexuality, which then becomes central to the films that follow: Naked Lunch, M. Butterfly, and Crash. It would seem that as gay men increasingly assert their rights in social reality in the late 1980s and 1990s, Cronenberg begins to mutilate and kill them in his art.
- 93 Breskin, "David Cronenberg," 96.
- 94 Quoted in Marjorie Garber, "The Occidental Tourist: M. Butterfly and the Scandal of Transvestism," in Nationalisms & Sexualities, ed. Andrew Parker et al. (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 121.
- 95 Ibid., 124.
- 96 Sanjek, "Dr. Hobbes's Parasites," 72.
- 97 See Mary Anne Doane, who began the analysis of the image of woman as masquerade in film studies with "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator," in Film Theory and Criticism, 4th ed. ed. Gerald Mast, et al. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
- 98 Garber, "Occidental Tourist," 134.
- 99 Ibid., 134.
- 100 Ibid., 136.
- 101 Ibid., 137.
- 102 Sanjek, "Dr. Hobbes's Parasites," 72.
- 103 Ibid., 73.
- 104 Garber, "Occidental Tourist," 141.
- 105 Judy Gerstel, "Auto eroticism," Toronto Star 27 September 1996, C1.

- 106 Roy Grundmann, "Plight of the Crash Fest Mummies: David Cronenberg's Crash," Cineaste 22:4 (1997): 24.
- 107 Ibid., 25.
- 108 Gerstel, "Auto Eroticism," C1, C9.
- 109 Barry Grant, "Crash (and burn?): Special section: Cronenberg's auto eroticism," FSAC/ACEQ Newsletter 21:1 (Fall 1996), 16.
- 110 William Wees, "Crash (and burn?): Special section: Cronenberg's auto eroticism," FSAC/ACEQ Newsletter 21:1 (Fall 1996), 18-19.
- 111 Grundmann, "Plight," 24.
- 112 Amy Taubin, "Crash Test: David Cronenberg on Bumps in the Night," Village Voice XLII:12 (25 March 1997), 80.
- 113 Ken Eakin, "Why hate Crash? It's boring!," Globe and Mail (29 November 1996), C3.
- 114 Denis Seguin, "Crash and yearn: Cronenberg doesn't wear a seatbelt," Eye (October 3 1996), 31.
- 115 Bakhtin, Art and Answerability, 51-52.
- 116 Liam Lacey, "Crash and learn," Globe and Mail 4 October 1996, C2.
- 117 Taubin, "Crash Test," 80.
- 118 Grundmann, "Plight," 27.
- 119 Ibid., 27.
- 120 Bart Testa, "Crash (and burn?): Special section: Cronenberg's auto eroticism," FSAC/ACEQ Newsletter 21:1 (Fall 1996), 16.
- 121 Grundmann, "Plight," 27.
- 122 Ibid., 27.

- 123 Ibid., 27.
- 124 Ibid., 27.
- 125 Ibid., 27.
- 126 Seguin, "Crash and Yearn," 31.
- 127 Gerstel, "Auto Eroticism," C9.
- 128 Ibid., C9.
- 129 Quoted in Gerstel, "Auto Eroticism," C9.

Chapter 6

Conclusion: Toward a Feminist Politics of Recognition

“Consciousness,” Bakhtin writes in 1961, “is much more terrifying than any unconscious complexes.”¹ It is an observation made of consciousness in the work of Fyodor Dostoevsky, whose aesthetic activity as an author Bakhtin prized because it “moved aesthetic visualization into the depths, into deep new strata, but not into the depths of the unconscious; rather into the depths of the heights of consciousness. The depths of consciousness are simultaneously its peaks”² The meaning of consciousness in Dostoevsky’s art as in Bakhtin’s dialogic thinking, that is, does not fall into some private unconscious abyss but manifests profoundly in the difficult valleys and peaks of the discursive relations between the self and others as co-consciousnesses on the social surfaces of human existence.

As I have attempted to demonstrate from a feminist dialogic perspective on authorship and creative activity in the work of David Cronenberg, this social understanding of consciousness has a threefold importance, embracing 1) the notion that the author creates, not from the depths of his or her mysterious and unknowable romantic private unconscious, but from the lived social field of intersubjectivity—of co-consciousness. As Robert Stam puts it, the human being as author “is not the sovereign master of an interior domain, but exists in the shadowy region between self and other. Consciousness of self is constantly perceived against the background of others’ consciousness: ‘I for myself’ against the background of ‘I for another’”;³ 2) the notion that that field of

co-consciousness is indeed a shadowy province haunted by the spectre of the double which can be terrifying, hellish, a site of escalating horror in its aesthetic and ethical demands on the subject from the point of view of the autotelic, atomistic, isolated and solipsistic masculine ego in an essentially misogynist and homophobic androcentric culture—a culture whose values are now being questioned and challenged; and 3) the notion that there is a radical freedom at the core of the conscious human subject which means that the self carries immense responsibility and answerability, both to oneself and to others.

So, as Myriam Diaz-Diocaretz puts it, quoting David Carroll, the dialogic subject not only must take a stand, filling up her or his unique place in being as answerable and responsive, but “the alterity of the other must be respected and the conflictual diversity of the social space itself . . . be maintained.”⁴ This aesthetic and ethical choice posed by consciousness to the subject as a unique individual agent and a social actor is embodied in the difference Bakhtin sees between living as a “unitary consciousness”—as a consciousness withdrawn from the other and struggling to exist living in the loophole of I-for-myself, haunted by the spectre of the double; or living as an “aesthetic consciousness”—as a “loving and value-positing consciousness,” a “consciousness of a consciousness: the author’s (the I’s) consciousness of the hero’s (the other’s) consciousness.”⁵ It is at the centre of what Greg Nielsen describes as the “larger anthropological question of how to approach others as coeval partners”⁶ and in the unfinalized dialogue of consciousnesses it is never fully made or finally resolved; rather, it is the source and motive of action and agency in subjectivity as an ongoing

event imbued with the potential of unifying lived once-occurrent Being and content/sense/culture, self and other, author and hero, life and art.

Thus, this choice is not simple or obvious, Indeed, it can be difficult and even terrifying because it involves dire ethical stakes, especially for the atomistic ego of institutionalized masculinity. As Nielsen suggests, it is premised on what Bakhtin's philosophy professor Alexander Vvedensky formulated as the necessary fourth postulate in addition to Kant's three postulates on norms, the categorical imperative, and moral and ethical behavior: "a belief in the existence of other egos, as a morally established faith."⁷ According to Nielsen, Vvedensky's thinking advances the limitations of Kant's too-abstract thinking on ethics. He writes that

Kant's categorical imperative states that we should only ever act on those maxims that we could will to be universal. In other words, the question is not how I should act in a given situation; the question is rather, what is my duty for the sake of duty. The source of my duty is deduced from universal or transcendental categories and not from the subjective negotiations in actions that struggle over norms.⁸

For Kant, ethical acts are understood as duties—prescribed tenets on how the subject should act governed by abstract reason—not lived “aesthetic or creative events”⁹ toward other subjects governed by faith. But, where Vvedensky stops, with Kant, on the atomistic subject's side of the boundary between the self and the other, insisting that, while the other exists, her “inner life is unknowable” and “one can only ever know oneself,”¹⁰ Bakhtin, as we have seen, pushes beyond abstract faith in an unknowable

other toward a “moral privileging of the other”¹¹ built architectonically out of observations of human interaction on the lived, practical, pragmatic level of aesthetic/formal relations, consummation, responsiveness, and answerability. As Wlad Godzich puts it, what Bakhtin found “scandalous” in Kant’s architectonics “is that it could yield no knowledge of another subject except under the guise of an object Bakhtin’s first and foremost aim is to establish cognitive conditions under which the Other would be known as a subject to the subject doing the knowing.”¹² Bakhtin, in thus positing “the animated existence of another I”¹³ through his fundamental philosophical principle of I and the other, situates individual consciousness in terms of the ethical and aesthetic act or deed of consummating another consciousness, another unique and once-occurrent “I,” and sees the author/artist/subject’s fundamental problem as that of how to “represent or create the animate I of the other as a hero” and how to feel in oneself “the body and the soul of another.”¹⁴ The answer he gives, as we have seen, is to be found in the gesture of form-giving activity effected through transgression, where we sympathetically co-experience or “cross-over into each other’s experience without giving up who we are in order to consummate relations aesthetically”¹⁵—without falling into the dangerous pathology of doubling.

Such relations, which Holquist calls the “simultaneity of the self and other,” transpire in a shadowy, difficult, negotiated space, a “contested space” which, he argues, is necessarily mediated by politics.¹⁶ And that politics can perhaps best be described as a politics in which, as Bakhtin puts it, “my legal personality is nothing else but my guaranteed certainty in

being granted recognition by other people—a certainty that I experience as their obligation in relation to myself”¹⁷—a politics of recognition based in the existential fact of the intersubjectivity of social agents.

A body of literature based in such a politics is now emerging, and for Jessica Benjamin, the “need for recognition” has become the crucial concept unifying the various intersubjective theories of the self:¹⁸

A person comes to feel that “I am the doer who does, I am the author of my acts,” by being with another person who recognizes her acts, her feelings, her intentions, her existence, her independence.

Recognition is the essential response, the constant companion of assertion. The subject declares, “I am, I do,” and then waits for the response, “You are, you have done.” Recognition is, thus, reflexive; it includes not only the other’s confirming response, but also how we find ourselves in that response. We recognize ourselves in the other¹⁹

As Benjamin notes, the concept of intersubjectivity is important because it is able to combine both an individual agential “capacity” (which she calls the capacity of recognition) and a “theoretical standpoint” (which she calls the theory of intersubjectivity proper).²⁰ Indeed, it is the platform or underlying principle which enables Bakhtin himself to get at the problem his early philosophical project set out to understand: the unity of the act as a capacity of the unique authorial individual, and its connection to culture/content/ sense/art as abstract theoretical re-presentation of the lived world.

In addition to Benjamin, Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser have also given extensive attention to such a politics of recognition. For Honneth, the integrity of human subjects depends profoundly on the receipt of approval or recognition from other persons. Up to the present day, when individuals who see themselves as victims of moral maltreatment describe themselves, they assign a dominant role to categories that, as with “insult” or “degradation,” are related to forms of disrespect, to the denial of recognition. Negative concepts of this kind are used to characterize a form of behavior that does not represent an injustice solely because it constrains the subjects in their freedom for action or does them harm. Rather, such behavior is injurious because it impairs these persons in their positive understanding of self—an understanding acquired by intersubjective means.”²¹

He identifies three forms of disrespect that can cause the integrity and identity of a person to suffer and collapse: 1) disrespect to physical integrity and the body, leading to an undermining of one’s confidence in autonomously controlling the actions of one’s body as an independent agent; 2) disrespect to one’s normative understanding of oneself and denial of one’s rights as an equal being in and partner to social interaction; and 3) disrespect to the social lifestyles of individuals or groups and downgrading the value of their patterns of self-realization.²²

Moreover, he observes that the consequences of disrespect for individuals are “regularly described with metaphors derived from states of decay of the human body.” Accordingly,

Psychological studies investigating the personal aftereffects of experiencing torture or rape frequently speak of “psychological death.” Research into the collective processing of being denied rights and social ostracism, which takes slavery as its example, now routinely operates with the concept of “social death.” And the category of injury occupies a privileged position in discussions of the kind of disrespect associated with the cultural downgrading of a form of living. These metaphorical allusions to physical suffering and death express the fact that the various forms of disrespect for psychological integrity take on the same negative role that organic diseases play in the context of body processes. The experience of social degradation and humiliation jeopardizes the identity of human beings to the same degree as the suffering of illnesses jeopardizes their physical well-being.²³

In contrast, Honneth argues that there are three forms of recognition which counter disrespect. They function in a framework of intersubjectivity and mutual recognition which found the building of identity and a positive relation to the self through others, and they are: 1) love (self-confidence); 2) rights (self-respect); and 3) solidarity (self-esteem).²⁴

So, what are the implications of a politics of recognition for a feminist dialogic understanding of the work of David Cronenberg? It seems to me that Cronenberg’s work invites a reading in these terms, given its attitude to the mortal body, the moral unaccountability of its characters, and its treatment of women and homosexuality. What I want to argue is that the three forms of disrespect Honneth identifies as expressed in

metaphors of physical death, psychological death, and social death would seem to be exactly the form that the director's aesthetic activity demonstrates as he contemplates existence, consciousness, the body, and others in his life and in his art. In Cronenberg, as we have seen, we clearly suffer fundamental disrespect to the body, to social interaction as mutual partnership, and to the lifestyles and patterns of realization of the non-masculine, feminized other (women and gay men), which disrespect, while it masquerades as meaningful transgression, nevertheless imbues his utterances with a melancholy, nihilistic emotional-volitional tone regarding human life and human being(s).

Cronenberg's own impressions of what his art means are highly revealing in this regard: "We've all got the disease," he says, "the disease of being finite. And consciousness is the original sin: consciousness of the inevitability of our death. Part of my cinematic voyage has been to try and discover the connection between the physical and the spiritual: what we are physically: what is the essence of physical life and existence?"²⁵ But, in seeing the human subject as diseased because we are embodied and not abstractly infinite, and in seeing consciousness as sin because it recognizes our finite, mortal being, Cronenberg, I think, cannot help but miss the crucial "connection" that exists, not between the romantic abstract disembodied "I" and its spirit, but between I and the other, and so misunderstand the fact that meaning and value in life and death are social and relational, belonging to the category of the other, and not the prerogative of the atomistic "I" or solipsistic Freudian male ego.²⁶

As Darko Suvin observes, Freud is the scientist who has “obstinately linked the experience of individuality to death,” and Cronenberg as romantic scientist in his art has clearly followed his lead. For Freud, Suvin continues,

[d]eath is the inexplicable but constant final horizon of a Schopenhauerian painful individuation, where each and every libido is, for all its desperate strife with others over the spoils of pleasure, doomed to a thermodynamic death of its microcosm. In that sense, without denying Freud’s important cognitive contribution as the Columbus of psychoanalysis, he is finally very much a heroic, stoic creative poet of the 19th Century, a kind of disenchanting Wagner of Liebestod psychology.²⁷

Indeed, where Freud and Cronenberg link the experience of individuality to death, and where they fundamentally mistrust consciousness, the body, and the other, Bakhtin, a feminist dialogism, and the politics of recognition would link individuality to the other—to the animatedness of other egos as co-consciousnesses, and to “the open and unfinished [mortal] body that traffics with the entire material world.”²⁸

As we have seen, driven phallically and narcissistically to control the meaning of death, consciousness for Cronenberg and his heroes has less to do with the possibilities of intersubjectivity and recognizing embodied others, whether women or gay men, than with a fundamental disrespect for their existence, leading to self-obsessed images of disease, horror and death for the I-for-myself atomistic masculine ego. Where for Cronenberg such images would represent a ‘meaningful’ transgression through a double

negative (one transcends one's inevitable and uncontrollable death by controlling death through art), for Nancy Fraser they can only be described as "antinomian"—as stereotypically and destructively modernist, and, I would add, naively adolescent, valorizing transgression "irrespective of its content and direction."²⁹ As such, they are characteristic of an individualist institutionalized masculinity which insanely attempts to 'live' on what Suvin describes as an "epistemological and ontological horizon of Death"³⁰ that excludes the values of social collectivity and human survival. Living and creating on that horizon, Cronenberg is severed from the collective historical body—the immortal generations of humankind. Thus, the monadic, immortal masculine ego he repeatedly embraces is, in the end, and unsurprisingly, a dead end.

What David Cronenberg cannot seem to face as an author, or perhaps does not want to, is the truly difficult aesthetic and ethical burden of consciousness: to represent or create the animate I of the other as an autonomous hero on a new plane of reality, or to feel in himself as author the body and the soul of another animated consciousness. Thus he gives us repeatedly, obsessively, the infinite form of the romantic hero. From Scanners through Crash stumble melancholy doubles who are blocked from recognition of and by the other—who attempt to escape consummation and live in the loophole and are thereby doomed to the cold chaos of I-for-myself consciousness where, unable to embrace, give form to, and take form from embodied others, they shiver numbly and embrace death.

The last decades of the twentieth century have proved to be a time of panic, withdrawal, and ideological fatigue for institutionalized masculinity

in which white heterosexual men are no longer being recognized and idealized as supreme subjects; rather, their integrity as autotelic, atomistic individuals, and their privilege, is being called into question by feminist and gay movements in which masculinity's devalued, feminized others are now demanding to be recognized as individual subjects and as interest groups. In assessing masculinity in David Cronenberg, earlier feminists, myself included, accepted as radical and transgressive the director's treatment of his withdrawn, lost, derelict, broken, suicidal heroes, valorizing his art as at once symptomatic and productively deconstructive of institutionalized phallic masculinity. As I have demonstrated, however, valorizing such images of withdrawal is a critical and ethical mistake for us today. This is because the feminist movement, and all of human culture, need masculine subjects and images of masculine subjects that are not seen as dispensable and valued for their disappearance from or seen as ideal subjects and valued for their 'transgressive transcendence' of the horizon of human existence, but recognized as other embodied subjects, and held to be responsible and answerable to others as other subjects, in the ongoing dialogic struggle of co-beings in co-consciousness.

In this thesis it has become clear that gender identity and the self-other relationship are crucial issues for feminist studies of the politics of masculine self-representation and representation of others in contemporary North American culture. I have contributed to this field of inquiry by examining the films of David Cronenberg from a dialogic feminist perspective with a special focus on their narrative and stylistic articulation of institutionalized masculinity and the repeated withdrawal of their heroes

from processes of intersubjectivity. This has meant rethinking Cronenberg's cinema in terms of the broad categories of authorship, intersubjectivity, gender, and genre, and arriving at quite critical conclusions about the radical, progressive nature of his oeuvre. However, if we as feminists cannot continue to applaud authors whose work underwrites the withdrawal and collapse of heterosexual men in the face of others, perhaps we can nevertheless see David Cronenberg's films as a unique, interesting, and decidedly provocative series of gendered utterances that can help us think through, critique, enter into dialogue with, and produce new insights about important aspects of late twentieth century North American cultural life.

Notes

1 M.M. Bakhtin, "Toward a Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book," in Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, trans. and ed. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 288.

2 Ibid., 288.

3 Robert Stam, Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 4-5.

4 Myriam Diaz-Diocaretz, "Bakhtin, Discourse, and Feminist Theories," in The Bakhtin Circle Today. Critical Studies, ed. Myriam Diaz-Diocaretz (Amsterdam-Atlanta: Rodopi, 1989), 136.

5 M.M. Bakhtin, Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M.M. Bakhtin, trans. Vadim Liapunov, ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 89.

6 Greg Nielsen, "The Norms of Answerability: Bakhtin and the Fourth Postulate," Unpublished paper, 19.

7 Ibid., 6. Kant's three postulates hold that a norm for ethical behavior must be universal and true for all people for all time; God must exist if such a universal good is to be possible; and human beings have free choice between good and evil in order that good have meaning. See also Wlad Godzich's "Correcting Kant: Bakhtin and Intercultural Interactions," boundary 2 18:1, (1991).

8 Nielsen, "Norms," 5.

9 Ibid., 5.

10 Ibid., 6.

11 Ibid., 7.

- 12 Godzich, "Correcting Kant," 12.
- 13 Nielsen, "Norms," 8.
- 14 Bakhtin, Art and Answerability, 121.
- 15 Nielsen, "Norms," 21.
- 16 Michael Holquist, Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 135.
- 17 Bakhtin, Art and Answerability, 49.
- 18 For Benjamin these would include those of Hegel, Mead and Habermas, to which I would add Bakhtin.
- 19 Jessica Benjamin, The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Bonds of Love (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 21.
- 20 Ibid., 20.
- 21 Axel Honneth, "Integrity and Disrespect: Principles of a Conception of Morality Based on the Theory of Recognition," Political Theory 20:2 (May 1992): 188-189. See also Honneth's The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts, trans. Joel Anderson, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996) and Nancy Fraser's, "From Redistribution to Recognition?: Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Post-Socialist' Age," New Left Review 212 (July/August 1995).
- 22 Ibid., 190-191.
- 23 Ibid., 192.
- 24 Ibid., 193-196.
- 25 Rodley, Cronenberg, 128.

26 For Bakhtin, the dis-ease and terrifying forms of emptiness Cronenberg is obsessed with come, not from our finitude, but from the chaotic infinitude of I-for-myself consciousness, and only facing the ethical and aesthetic struggle of boundary-making activity can alleviate that existential dis-ease.

27 Darko Suvin, "The Subject as a Limit-Zone of Collective Bodies," Social Discourse 2:1-2 (Spring-Summer 1989): 194.

28 Ibid., 195.

29 Nancy Fraser, Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 162.

30 Suvin, "Subject as a Limit-Zone," 197.

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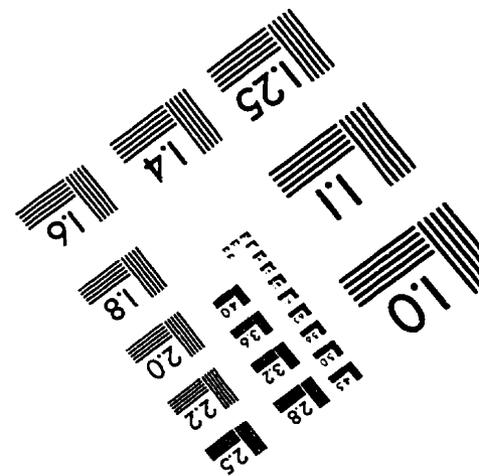
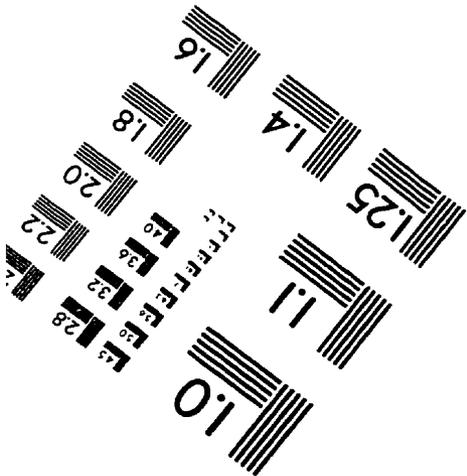
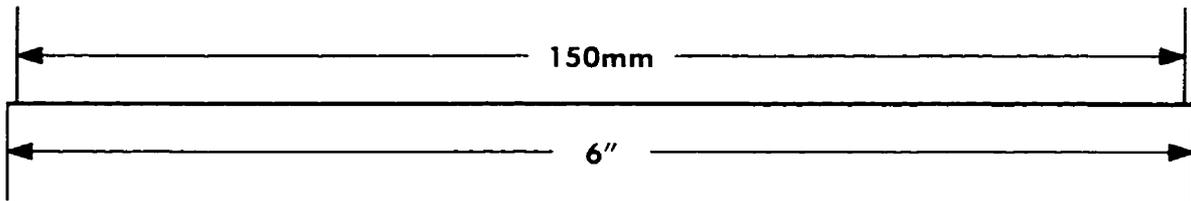
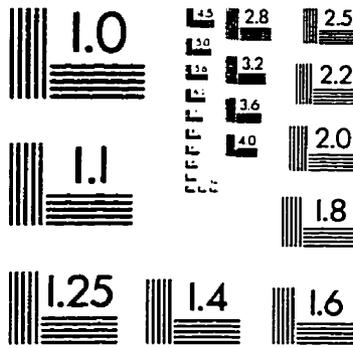
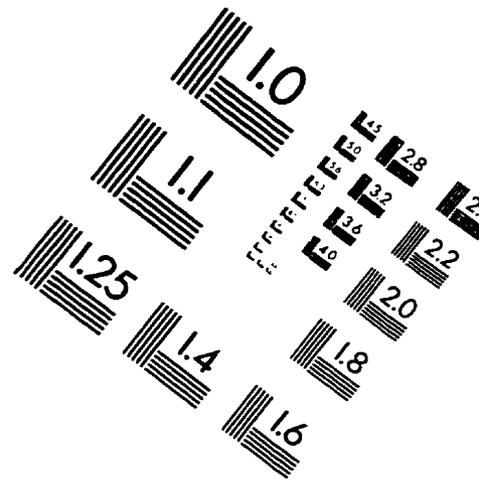
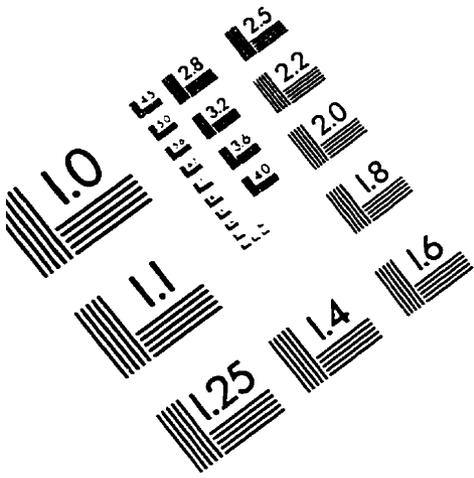
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