

Uncomfortable in the New Flesh: Adapting Body Horror in the Cinema of David Cronenberg

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore how body horror as a filmic genre exploits the anxiety of embodiment for unsettling considerations of what “being a body” means in an age of continual proliferation of new technology. Confronted with machinery that continually aspires beyond machine through technological advancement, we tend to defend our own humanity as something not-machine, privileged within the confines of the human body. But as the distinction dulls, it is important to visually evaluate through body horror films what embodied anxiety about bodies looks like, from the bloody and gutsy to the metallic and plastic. Therefore, using major entries from the filmography of this grisly genre’s most literate director, David Cronenberg, I argue that what so viscerally shocks audiences about filmic representations of body horror is a meta-discomfort with the narrowing relationship between mediated and media. Cronenberg’s investigations into what bodies “are” look well ahead into our current considerations of posthumanism and augmentation as theories that should redefine our relationship to ourselves, not threaten them. In fact, the notion that body horror should not disturb us is what his works play out so disturbingly. Cronenberg instead invites viewers to imagine marks, mutilations, and mutations as not simply uninvited intruders on a perfectly functioning body, but more compellingly rather as augmentations. He introduced “the New Flesh”—the body literally extended into media—in his landmark film *Videodrome* (1983), and I now take up the mess it creates as a starting point into resolving embodied anxiety amid encroaching technology.

Cronenberg’s thematic fascination with augmentation can even be traced within his own filmmaking procedure, as his “body” of work is marked by adaptations, in directions from both page to screen and the less critically considered vice versa. Beginning with *Scanners* (1981) and concluding with *Cosmopolis* (2012), I draw upon Daniel Punday’s corporeal narratology to discuss both the film adaptations he scripted and the novelizations of his original screenplays

as narratively augmented bodies. First of all, Cronenberg's adapted works span a range of cultural strata, leveling hierarchies of literary embodiment. These films come from lesser known sources like *The Fly* (1986), *Dead Ringers* (1988), and *A History of Violence* (2005), as well as highly literary, such as *Naked Lunch* (1991), *Crash* (1996), and *Cosmopolis* (2012). Furthermore venturing into the more unsettling augmentation of what is often regarded as "reverse adaptation," Cronenberg's original screenplays have been the subjects of novelizations varying in success. *Scanners* as written by Leon Whiteson does little new, but *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* (1999) penned under pennames Jack Martin (Dennis Etchison) and John Luther Novak (Christopher Priest) function as compelling companions to their film counterparts. Likened to the body horror of Cronenberg's films, adaptation can be a violent process in either direction, but the critical ideas that emerge from these extended bodies ask us to see mediated embodiment as positive mutation. Finally, the reverse adaptation is complete in film director David Cronenberg's first novel *Consumed*, published in 2014, a story that explores where body horror can go within the imaginative expression of print, unimpeded by visual media. For Cronenberg, the unsettling trespasses of the body are not just ideas, but practices channeled through his textual processes embodied in the technologies of film and print.

I analyze Cronenberg's adaptation processes as versions of body horror to literalize the uneasiness of how we write about our own bodies as sites of uncomfortable extension, from messily mediated to messy media. Through critical interactions with Donna Haraway's "cyborg," Neil Badmington's "alien," and Kim Toffoletti's "Barbie doll," I propose that his works upset our identities as viewing subjects of viewed objects, questioning both categories via Bruno Latour's concept of actancy: the combinational relationship between extension and extende. In the meta-discomfort between mediated and media, Cronenberg's works break down notions of the "other" that privilege old models of Cartesian dualism and humanist essentialism. Seeing the body trespassed through his body horror films implicates the witness in the technological processes that craft these violent augmentations. Reading about it through his novel draws the reader into representation that cannot be represented, a corporeal implication of just how embodied "going beyond the body" must remain. I suggest then that his works, by violently morphing the potentiality of what a body can be through prosthetics, visual effects, and thematic criticisms, imagine possibilities that, while they may never be physically realized, realize where the physical is extended through the technological. As Haraway's cyborgs confronting how scary becoming a cyborg can be, we can look to David Cronenberg's body of work to tell us that living inside bodies means we must proclaim, "Long Live the New Flesh!"

Keywords: cinema, body horror, posthumanism, adaptation, mutation