

Voices from the Periphery: *Videodrome* and the (pre)Postmodern Vision of Marshall McLuhan¹

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Introduction: Mapping the Terrain

To define postmodernism, in my experience, has only lead to further confusion. It appears that part of the postmodern debate is to deconstruct the principles of primary tautological debates. I put forward here that one cannot actually define postmodernism satisfactorily; one can only describe the *condition* of postmodernity.

For example, Frederic Jameson was most succinct in his summarizing description of postmodernism as "not a style but ... a cultural dominant" (4). Furthermore, James Collins sees the postmodern project as desiring to "recover the morphological continuity of a specific culture," and further as a method of defining ourselves and our culture as products of previous cultural experiences (22). Andreas Huyssen, meanwhile, approaches postmodernism as being a retrospective on modernism. As Huyssen says,

Rather than offering a *theory of postmodernity* and developing an analysis of contemporary culture, French theory provides us primarily with an *archaeology of modernity*, a theory of modernism at the stage of its

fully aware of modernism's limitation and failed political ambitions. (209)

The media theories of Marshall McLuhan, although not part of the postmodern debate proper, do point toward the later development of the discourse. McLuhan's paradigm of the media environment, made literal in David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983, Canada), approaches the postmodern debate insofar as McLuhan's ideas are antecedent to the discourse. In this way I

propose to examine McLuhan's theories of media culture, and Cronenberg's appropriation of it, as (pre)postmodern.

Videodrome is a complicated film either to discuss or define. Ostensibly, the film is about an independent cable executive Max Renn (James Woods), who stumbles upon a pirate video signal of a television show called "Videodrome,"² an underground cable station specializing in violent pornography. The television signal causes a brain tumor, which in turn induces violent hallucinations in the spectator. While Max endeavors to gain control of his "Videodrome" hallucinations, he attempts to thwart an international plot to release the "Videodrome" signal on the public. Diegetic descriptors, however, are insufficient to engage the film, for Cronenberg is more interested in the issues the film raises: what are the effects of television on spectatorship, specifically violent and sexually explicit texts?; given the increase of public access to technological advancement, in what ways will this impact on human evolution?; and most importantly asks a question Marshall McLuhan asked back in 1964, who controls this technology?

McLuhan and Postmodernism

Marshall McLuhan is not a postmodern theorist; however, many of his ideas antecede the postmodern debate. Postmodern theorists, like Jean Baudrillard, identify McLuhan as having had an influence on their own views of postmodernity and media (Kroker 1984, 440). Derrida's grammatology, of the recognition that language is not a medium of communication, has been linked to McLuhan's "the medium is the message," and both have been highly criticized for it (Kroker 1984, 440). Much of McLuhan's media age paradigm, as an environment, have been picked up by later theorists, working primarily within the postmodern debate. "McLuhan is an apostle of despair, declaring that our nervous systems are wholly entangled in a mosaic mesh which is essentially beyond our control" (Murphy 1971, 213).

McLuhan's theory consists mainly of slogans, slogans which are applicable to the postmodern debate. One such slogan is "the medium is the message":

"The medium is the message" means, in terms of the electronic age, that a totally new environment has been created. The "content" of this new environment is the old mechanized environment of the industrial age. The new environment reprocesses the old one as radically as TV is reprocessing the film. For the "content" of TV is the movie. TV is environmental and imperceptible, like all environments. We are aware only of the "content" or the old environment. (ix)

The essence of McLuhan's slogan is aligned with Cultural Studies' interest in ideology: that the choice of medium, of presentation and representation, is essential to meaning. McLuhan seems to desire that dynamic to be understood, perhaps consciously calling itself into question; a postmodern sensibility: "technologies begin to perform the function of art in making us aware of the psychic and social consequences of technology" (ix). McLuhan demonstrates that the function of the media environment demands analysis of the medium itself, and not just of its content, much like Huyssen's argument that modernity is the content of postmodernity. To discuss the medium, in this case postmodernism, is not just to discuss the content.

The other major slogan McLuhan coined, and another one applicable to the postmodern debate, is "media hot and cold." McLuhan identifies the difference in the amount of data that either a hot or a cold medium can present.

A hot medium is one that extends one single sense in 'high definition.' High definition is that state of being well filled with data.... On the other hand, hot media do not leave so much to be filled in or completed by the audience. Hot media are, therefore, low in participation, and cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience. (36)

Television is, for McLuhan, a cool medium; it requires data to be filled in by the audience, not necessarily at the level of content, for as McLuhan stated, the content is cinema, a hot medium. Because of the technology involved, whereby the complete picture is not given, due to the television images' pixilation, as opposed to cinema's (and photography's) high degree of verisimilitude, TV is "cool." Understanding the construction of the television picture, of the television medium, demands a re-evaluation of the content, of the masking of reality in the, now obscured, photographic image.

Postmodern discourse also has a great deal to say about television as a postmodern institution, and these elements are evident in *Videodrome*. Jameson identifies television and "videography" as postmodern texts, but the way one watches television is essential to one's understanding its postmodern-ness; ways that *Videodrome* faithfully reproduces.

To select—even as an "example"—a single videotext, and to discuss it in isolation, is fatally to regenerate the illusion of the masterpiece or the canonical text and to reify the experience of total flow from which it was momentarily extracted. Video viewing indeed involves immersion in the total flow of the thing itself, preferably a kind of random succession of three or four hours of tapes at regular intervals. (78)

Just so do Max Renn and his assistant, Harlan, discover "Videodrome," by randomly tapping into satellite broadcasts. Meaning for Max no longer comes from packages of pre-existing texts he can purchase *en masse*, but from accessing the "random flow" of television broadcasting. Max is dissatisfied with his textual agent, Masha, and her latest packages of video texts, the classically themed "Apollo and Dionysus" or Hiroshima Video's offer of a series titled "Samurai Dreams." In fact, when Max comes to sample "Samurai Dreams," he rejects the "plot" tapes, one and two, and instead desires to see episode thirteen. Neither Masha nor Hiroshima's sales representatives can understand how plot can be so unimportant to Max, for they still hold to the "hot" notion of closure that modernism advocated. Max has forsaken this for the seemingly arbitrary "Videodrome" signal.

Lawrence Grossberg also identifies the institution of television as postmodern. He sees television as "an inter-textuality that requires no elite knowledge or even actual viewing history. It is history inscribed upon the screen, history as and within its own images" (35). *Videodrome* is not only about the postmodern discourse of television, but that television itself is a postmodern discourse.

Combining the two slogans creates an antecedent to the postmodern discourse: television demands a higher degree of audience participation in the construction of meaning, due to its being a cool medium. The medium itself, in this case television, should not be confused with the content of the medium, but needs to be studied as its own message.

McLuhan, Cronenberg, and Canada

Canadian filmmaker David Cronenberg picks up on McLuhan's theories of a media environment, and extends it into "reality." If one were to accept McLuhan's prophecies literally, the world would look very much like the world of *Videodrome*. As McLuhan himself notes:

Radio will serve as background-sound or as noise-level control, as when the ingenious teenager employs it as a means of privacy. TV will not work as background. It engages you. You have to be *with* it. (271)

"Videodrome" does indeed grab the spectator, in this case Max, and engages him beyond what "normal" television would, i.e., by controlling his hallucinations in his "reality" state. In the film, media "guru" Professor Brian O'Blivion observes,

The television screen is the retina of the mind's eye. Therefore the television screen is part of the physical structure of the brain. Therefore whatever appears on the television screen emerges as raw experience for those who watch it. Therefore television is reality, and reality is less than television.

The character of O'Blivion was inspired by McLuhan himself. Compare O'Blivion's statement with McLuhan's own introduction to *Understanding Media*, virtually the first words of McLuhan's we read.

Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man—the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as we have already extended our senses and our nerves by the various media. (19)

Cronenberg picks up on McLuhan's vision of the technological future, and runs with it.

Even prior to *Videodrome*, in *Scanners* (1980, Canada) Cronenberg is playing with this idea. In this earlier film, Cronenberg demonstrates the influence McLuhan's writings has on his cultural development. Dr. Ruth tells Cameron Vale that "a computer has a central nervous system. You have a central nervous system. A 'scanner' can connect two nervous systems across space." Ruth's demonstration of the power of the "scanners" is an extension of McLuhan's philosophy that all technology is an extension of the human; the wheel is an extension of the foot, the club is an extension of the fist, so the computer, and television, in fact all "cool" media are, therefore, extensions of the central nervous system (*passim*).

Videodrome makes McLuhan's philosophy literal by programming Max as one would a VCR, by the insertion of a video cassette into a gaping hole in his abdomen. Max is so much a victim of the video age, that his wake-up call, his daily agenda, are preprogrammed video cassettes from his secretary. The literal extension of humanity, by technology, is preceded by McLuhan himself: "and the Psalmist insists that the *beholding* of idols, or the use of technology, conforms men to them" (55). McLuhan seems to have little doubt that humanity is becoming an extension of media technology, and this is, according to McLuhan, a point of great concern: "once we have surrendered our senses and nervous systems to the private manipulation of those who would try to benefit from taking a lease on our eyes and ears and nerves, we don't really have any

rights left" (73). In *Videodrome*, the flesh becomes video (via the medium of Max's body) and video becomes flesh (via Max's eroticised television set which develops a flesh-like shell, complete with veins).

There are very explicit connections between *Videodrome* and McLuhan. McLuhan taught, for example, at the same university and at the same time that Cronenberg was a student, the University of Toronto (although there is no evidence that the two ever met). There is something about the Canadian character that lends itself particularly well to the postmodernist debate. Due to the country's proximity to the empires of both Britain and the United States, Canadian academic voices are required to scream twice as loud to be heard from the periphery. Cronenberg's Canadianisms are nicely outlined in Piers Handling's essay, "A Canadian Cronenberg," but can be summarized as a problematising of identity; as Max questions his own identity in relationship to the "Videodrome" hallucinations, Canadians question their own identity. This is not to say that *Videodrome* is an allegory about Canadian identity, but that one's own identity is not a given in Canadian literature or film.

McLuhan too is very Canadian in his outlook, although in a more subtle way than Cronenberg. Arthur Kroker identifies McLuhan's Canadian tendencies in his concerns about who holds the reins to the media (a concern also voiced by McLuhan's predecessor, and mentor at the University of Toronto, Harold Innis).

Now, to be sure, the theme of anxiety runs deep through the liberal side of the Canadian mind. This is the world of Margaret Atwood's "intolerable anxiety" and of Northrop Frye's "anxiety structure." But McLuhan is the Canadian thinker who undertook a phenomenology of anxiety, or more precisely a historically relative study of the sources of anxiety and stress in technological society. (Kroker 1984, 437)

Kroker sees, *a priori*, McLuhan in this light: anxiety is the overwhelming emotion of Canadian academia. Cronenberg also fits into this category in his concern about who controls any technological or medical power. And perhaps the argument could also be constructed that Atwood's "compromise complex" in Canadian literature is the result of Canada's "intolerable anxiety" *vis à vis* its environment. But what is significant is that Canada, specifically the Canadian intellegensia, by being on the periphery of two modern empires, caught between both America and Britain, by having anxiety as a creative and intellectual determinant, leads one towards postmodernism as the preferred discourse, the best method to give voice from the periphery.

The voice of McLuhan in *Videodrome* is Professor Brian O'Blivion. First of all, the names are similar; both are Irish [-Canadian], and both repeat the capital

letter from the given name to the surname. Both died of a brain tumor, and if the film was made in 1982 (released 1983) and O'Blivion has been diegetically dead for "eleven months," it is not too far fetched to equate him with McLuhan who died 31 December 1980. Both are referred to, in the appropriate literature, as "media prophets," although O'Blivion is slightly more hyperbolic in his refusal to "appear on television except on television," as an image on a television set, to be then televised. Masha tells Max that "Videodrome" is dangerous, "because it has something you do not have: a philosophy." When Max asks "who's philosophy?" the only name Masha can give is O'Blivion's. O'Blivion's philosophy is to seek "the next stage in the development of man as a technological animal," and this is to be achieved through the "Videodrome" signal. Rather than a "searcher," McLuhan was more an "observer" who concluded that man was developing further as a technological animal. O'Blivion warns Max he is going to "have to learn to live in a very strange new world," the world of the media environment. This environment, as visualized by the film, is a world of TV junkies on the street panhandling to finance the batteries for their portable television sets: "You have to pay if you want to see the monkey dance," says one poor TV junkie, referring to his set. O'Blivion's final testimonial, sensitive to the changing demands of society, was the creation of the "Cathode Ray Mission," a Salvation Army-type hostel whose cubicles do not bestow food and shelter, but access to a television set. Toronto's derelicts, experiencing "prolonged withdrawal from the cathode ray tube," become even more alienated and out of touch with reality. Bianca O'Blivion, the professor's daughter who carries on the "great man's" work, refers to the mission as "patching them back into the world's mixing board." *Videodrome* is concerned with McLuhan who appears throughout the film as O'Blivion, and then is as postmodern as McLuhan's theories are.

***Videodrome* as Postmodern Text**

Videodrome approaches the postmodern text partially because it was made when many of the postmodern arguments were being developed, 1983; that both the French and the Canadian theorists, in speaking from the periphery of the dominant cultural empires, shared a similar environment. "[*Videodrome's*] narrative, by raising more question than it answers, and by challenging prevailing notions of what constitutes a good story, announces its origins in artifice and (in theory) consumption of the text" (Pevere 1983, 137). Umberto Eco defines the postmodern text as being "open" (226), whereas McLuhan would define it as "cold." The textual "reader" must bring along a certain amount of extra-textual material in order to understand the art in question. The basis of Eco's definition is his much quoted paradigm that it is impossible to say "I love

you, madly," because romance novelist Barbara Cartland did. One can only say, "As Barbara Cartland said, ..." (243). For Eco, this "metalinguistic play" is central to postmodernism; one must be a willing participant to the ironic discourse (243-244). Unlike Eco's definition of the "closed" sensibility of modernism, the "open" sensibility of postmodernism enables one to reject, or miss, certain parts of the discourse without rejecting the entire text. "It is possible to misunderstand the game, by taking things seriously" (244).

One does not need to know McLuhan for a full understanding of the dynamics working in the film, but it does enhance the enjoyment of the film. Both Peter Brooker and Frederic Jameson see that postmodernism "splices high with low culture" (Brooker 1992, 3; Jameson 1991, 2), and in *Videodrome*, Cronenberg splices McLuhan's philosophy about the future of media technology, cultural questions about the effects of sex and violence on television (arguably "high" cultural concerns) with the low of the science fiction/horror genre (arguably the "lowest" cultural referent).

Videodrome has two postmodern signposts working for it beyond what McLuhan hints at: a distinct self-reflectivity and the simulacrum, and these ideas I shall discuss in sequence. To a lesser degree there is some self-reflectivity in modernism, that is the content of postmodernism, of how the text can call into question its own construction and the action of watching. But in postmodernism, there is an even greater awareness (Jameson 1991, 37). *Videodrome* is predicated upon the act of watching, and the dangers of exposure to violent and sexually explicit texts. But furthermore, as "Videodrome" owner Barry Convex asks Max in the film, "why would anyone watch a scum show like 'Videodrome'?" It is also a question most Cronenberg detractors ask, when criticizing the filmmaker's own vision of explicit violence, sexuality and gore. Convex's question is self-reflective insofar as Cronenberg seems to be allowing his critics a voice; that the unspoken question is "why would anyone watch a scum film like *Videodrome*, or any of Cronenberg's films"? And of course, we receive this question as we are experiencing this "scum show." Postmodern texts, not content with referring to acts of watching in general, call into question the act of what you are specifically watching at the moment. *Videodrome* is not only a Cronenberg film, but also something that is watched within the Cronenberg film. There is more to a sense of self-reflectivity than just calling into question the content. The difference between how modernism and postmodernism call itself into question is by degree. It seems that the basis of postmodernism is awareness; not only being aware of the content, but also aware of the medium.

Much of the postmodern theory bases itself within that sense of awareness. Again, Convex's refrain, about who would want to watch something like *Videodrome*, comes back. Cronenberg himself has had his share of controversy

over the graphic content of his films, and his seeming lack of any moral absolute. Max himself argues that Civic TV fulfills a specific societal function, by being an outlet for cathartic release (which another character refers to as being an agonizingly superficial conclusion). Max's argument is Cronenberg's, as he has made elsewhere. In fact, Cronenberg's rebuttal has become as tiresome as the same attacks on him, which cause his rebuttal in the first place. By calling attention to the modes of representation, of addressing the issue of sado-masochism, of vicarious viewing of horror and sexually violent texts, Cronenberg demonstrates his postmodern sensibility by being "above reproach by contemporary discourse" (Lyotard 1992, 149). The postmodern artist is "not governed by pre-established rules" of representation, for his project is specifically to find new ways of representation of the unrepresentable (Lyotard 1992, 149). The representation of the unrepresentable is the back bone for the postmodern horror cinema, of which *Videodrome* finds itself well suited to. Cronenberg's film uses special make-up effects to create something which has never existed before, an aesthetic counter to other contemporary horror films which used make-up (gore) effects for shock value alone. Images like the "flesh gun," the television set which puffs itself out in moments of erotic passion, Barry Convex's death by rapid tumor growth, all function diegetically in a metaphoric sense, metaphors that McLuhan himself moves toward. McLuhan sees the metaphoric extensions of humanity into a fusion of the media/video and human. As I said above, in the film, flesh becomes video, and video becomes flesh.

Cronenberg invents a couple of slogans of his own, which echo those of McLuhan: references to "the video word made flesh," and "Long live the new flesh," all underline that interrelationship between the human and the technological. Cronenberg visually makes literal McLuhan's metaphors; if one is to move toward someone's vision of a technological society, like McLuhan's, than one should be aware of what it has the potential to become, like *Videodrome*.

The concept of the simulacrum is the territory of Jean Baudrillard, and is easiest summarized as a copy of something that has no original, a representation of that which has no reality outside of its own image. Television is specifically prone to the simulacra, for as Lawrence Grossberg argues: "TV becomes our representative; we do not identify with the position of the camera, so much as 'delegate' our look to it. It is this lack of voyeurism that explains why everything becomes fictionalized by the cinematic apparatus while everything appears real in the TV apparatuses" (Grossberg 1987, 36). Television's appropriation of the standards for reality are also, quite consciously the concern of *Videodrome*. That "Videodrome" is "Snuff TV" (as Masha calls it); it is real, rather than simulated, which is its draw. That is its philosophy, which, as Masha phrases it, "makes it

dangerous." What makes Cronenberg's film disturbing, is its reliance upon hallucinatory experience as narrative flow, as, in O'Blivion's words, "raw experience for those who watch it." "O'Blivion's primary idea is that television images are so widespread and penetrating that they have become indistinguishable from reality and indeed have begun to replace it" (Beard 1983, 52).

Not everyone appreciates Cronenberg's hallucinatory vision. David Hogan argues:

The film stumbles because of Cronenberg's insistence that we be as confused and victimized as the central character. As Max's adventures increase in frequency and intensity, we do not know if we are looking at fantasy or reality. Of course, a major part of Cronenberg's premise is that television blurs such distinctions, but this conundrum-like narrative approach is ill suited to film, and is especially inappropriate for a film-maker like Cronenberg, who gives equal weight to all his images. (283)

Hogan fails to realize that the subjectivity Cronenberg brings to *Videodrome* is that equal weight to the hallucinatory and "real," which is postmodern. Cronenberg uses the simulacrum elsewhere in his film. The film is based on copies and replacements which have no real referent; they are, in Jameson's words, "a random play of signifiers" (95-96). Television is one such example. The diegetic time of *Videodrome* is after O'Blivion's death, he appears on videotape (for interviews and whatnot), and as his daughter says, "it is better to live on television, than to die in the flesh." O'Blivion himself, "refuses to appear on television, except on television." Nicki Brand, Max's love interest, who may or may not have any existence beyond the character's hallucinations, first appears on a television monitor. For Max, "the idea of her becomes for him a token of seductive warmth, of approval for the part of him that is restrained by fear and denial, of courage and strength and finally of feeling itself and even love" (Beard 1983, 58). Nicki need not exist in (external, diegetic) reality, for her function for Max is not predicated upon her external existence. The question of whether Nicki is entirely part of Max's hallucinations or not, derives from Max's first exposure to the "Videodrome" signal immediately prior to being introduced to Nicki on the "Rena King Show." Nicki is a radio personality on C-RAM whose show, "The Emotional Rescue Show," has a later echo in the function of the Cathode Ray Mission. To remove the single vowel from the radio station's call letters, and to anachronise the mission, results in both institutions being "CRM." To be sure the significance may be that as Nicki "crams" her advice down her listeners throats, and so too does the Mission "cram" O'Blivion's philosophy

down the throats of the derelicts; this therefore would be Cronenberg's satirical jab at both the "self-help" psychology market, and the pseudo-altruistic religion market, and akin to his refusal of "moral absolutes." Or, Cronenberg's echo of C-RAM at the CRM may work in reverse: as CRM is an O'Blivion institution, so too is C-RAM, by association, and therefore calls into question the existence of the station, and of Nicki.

Sex is also a simulation for Max, the only sexuality he can participate in is mediated through video. Max even has sex (sort of) with his television set. The one time he has actual physical contact with someone, in this case Nicki who may not even exist except as video hallucination, is projected as hallucination-fantasy onto the "Videodrome" set. Even their foreplay is watching a tape of "Videodrome"; Nicki asks if he has any "porno" videotapes, for they "turn her on." The image of the two of them, sitting on his couch, watching televised sex is the epitome of postmodern foreplay. They are so alienated from one another, they are absorbed by the electronic images on screen. McLuhan, although he does not discuss the effects of media on sexuality, alludes to this kind of participatory involvement with the televised medium.

The simulacra of *Videodrome* acts in two ways, one on top of the other: at the bottom is Max, who as "just another victim" (as Bianca calls him) of postmodernity cannot respond to people as "real," only as replacements for something else, which possibly does not exist; at the same time the film itself, by being about television and the televised medium, calls into question its own textual existence.

Conclusion

Rather than reifying the tautological debates which have marred such ontological study as I noted at the outset, if both McLuhan and Cronenberg are working within discourses which can be identified as having echoes of postmodernity, as I call it, a (pre)postmodernism, then perhaps a more phenomenological methodology is required. Rather than trying to define what are the cultural characteristics of "late Capitalism," perhaps the experience of existing within a culture which is beginning to challenge the preconceived notions of an outdated modernism, need be applied. Cultures which exist outside of the political border of dominant hegemony, and yet subsumed by them, frequently adopt counter-hegemonic analytical tools in order to deal with their feeling of alienation.

The media theories of Marshall McLuhan are not postmodern, nor is David Cronenberg's film *Videodrome*. Both McLuhan (and by extension Cronenberg) and the postmodernists are concerned with the "cooling" off of media, of

increased audience participation in the construction of meaning, of calling into question the codes of communication, of pastiche, and of self-reflectivity. Cronenberg's film is in fact so highly dependent on McLuhan, who in turn influenced much of postmodern theory, that by extension, they approach the postmodern debate through their position on the border of cultural hegemony. The issues postmodern theorists are concerned with—effects of violence on television spectatorship, ontological evolution, and control of the media—are also issues which concerned McLuhan and Cronenberg's reading of McLuhan. This debate is central to questions about identity, about who controls meaning, and therefore is highly attractive to both French and Canadian academics. It is through postmodernism that their voices can be heard from the periphery.

Notes

1. The author wishes to acknowledge and thank both Charlotte Brunson and Jose Arroyo of the University of Warwick, whose comments and feedback were greatly appreciated in the formation of this paper.
2. *Videodrome*, in italics, refers to the 1983 David Cronenberg film, and "Videodrome," in quotation marks, refers to the diegetic television show discussed within *Videodrome*.

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