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# SCIENCEFRICTION: OF THE POSTHUMAN SUBJECT, ABJECTION, AND THE BREACH IN MIND/BODY DUALISM

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SCIENCE*FRIC*TION: OF THE POSTHUMAN SUBJECT, ABJECTION, AND  
THE BREACH IN MIND/BODY DUALISM

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A Thesis  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
in  
English Composition:  
English Composition and English Literature

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by  
John Perham  
March 2016

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March 2016  
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the multiple readings that arise when the division between the biological and technological is interrupted--here abjection is key because the binary between abjection and gadgetry gives multiple meanings to other binaries, including male/female. Using David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ*, I argue that multiple readings arise because of people's participation with electronically mediated technology. Indeed, abjection is salient because Cronenberg's films present an ambivalent relationship between people and technology; this relationship is often an uneasy one because technology changes people on both a somatic and cognitive level.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### A BREACH IN MIND/BODY DUALISM

At the recent consumer electronics and gadgets conference (CES 2015) in Las Vegas, innovations included belts that notify wearers when they are gaining weight and adjust to their standing and sitting positions; "smart" versions of baby bottles, hair dryers, microwave ovens, and cameras; a virtual mirror that analyzes facial features and makes recommendations for make-up and hairstyles. There is a smart coffee pot and a smart coffee mug that indicates the amount of caffeine per serving. Additionally, wearable technology, such as a personal drone that is controlled by a device on the wrist, brings new meaning to taking a "selfie." Gadgets such as these create a symbiotic relationship between people's bodies and machines. In film narratives, however, this relationship has not always been so peaceful. Films such as Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* and Cammell's *Demon Seed* delineate a stark and even hostile separation between people and technology.

Moreover, David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* further explore the division between the biological and technological. This thesis investigates the multiple readings that arise when the division between the biological and technological is interrupted--here abjection is key because the binary between abjection and gadgetry gives multiple meanings to other binaries, including male/female power dynamics. Specifically, I argue that Cronenberg's films



present an ambivalent relationship between people and technology; this relationship is often an uneasy one because technology changes people on both a somatic and cognitive level.

In these narratives, is the science fiction genre itself merely a showcase for abjection where excesses of ennui, gore, sex, and violence are displayed? Also, do these narratives glorify the reinscription of stereotypes and inequalities by making them "scientific?" On the other hand, does science fiction offer worlds of fantasy and creativity with the opportunity to critically examine the post-human condition? In order to answer these questions, the work of Donna Haraway and Julia Kristeva needs to be investigated. These writers deal extensively with the subjects of cyborgs and abjection. By using cyborg technology and abjection as a lens for the analysis of Cronenberg's *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ*, single readings of science fiction texts as cautionary tales of the abuse of technology are problematized. It is the instability of boundaries separating subjects and objects that Haraway and Kristeva explore; the disruption of boundaries is important because it is here that notions of posthuman embodiment, including the disappearing body, are challenged.

In Cronenberg's films, the focus on abjection makes clear that the boundaries between human and machine stem from advances in information technology and virtual reality. As a genre, science fiction narratives address these advances through the binary between the body and technology. The posthuman subjects featured in these films have altered bodies that are the

product of changes in technology, yet as *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* show, their post-human bodies are defined by their differences so that the divisions between human and machine are destabilized. Consequently, within this context of difference, the posthuman subject is liberated from the binary of technology and the body, self, and other. Furthermore, in order to understand the impact of Cronenberg's films on posthuman studies and what it means to be human in a critical time of new human conditions, it is important to see how *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* build upon the tropes of the science fiction genre--a genre where there is no one meaning since it involves work that was written before the term "science fiction" was used. Before examining science fiction as a genre, however, it is important to look at Haraway's cyborg and Kristeva's abjection.

### Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto

According to Donna Haraway, science and technology are parts of cultural construction. In "Cyborgs and Daughters," author Sharona Bentov points out that Haraway views even nature as part of a cultural construction since it is "invented, not found, by sciences and technologies that are permeated with cultural wishes, lies, conceptions, and prejudices" (139). Accordingly, social relations, including gender, race, and class that are predicated on the "objectivity" of scientific representation need to be questioned (139). Haraway's questioning of the ways in which human knowledge is derived, Bentov explains, "makes room for some unsettling possibilities" (140). Here abjection in the films

of Cronenberg also makes room for unsettling possibilities because *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* are films that use horror and science fiction to engage viewers with the traditional view that nature is "dead matter, manipulated by technological power" (Bentov 140). Indeed, Haraway "views our involvement with machines as a lively way of engaging with a living world" (Bentov 140). This view, Bentov adds, is a view in which there is "liberatory potential in technology" (Bentov 140). For Cronenberg, what is liberating also entails a breaking down of the body, gore, and violence-- a world reduced to its most basic functions against a culture defined by its technology. In this way, both Haraway and Cronenberg contemplate forces of "myth-making" as a process among the body, science, and technology. For Bentov, however, the cyborg does not "solve the problem of mind-body dualism as Haraway claims" (140). Bentov describes the cyborg as "fabricated hybrids of machine and organism...part human and part machine" (141). Additionally, anyone who wears a pacemaker, Bentov argues, including those who work with machines--programmers, phone operators, assembly line workers--is "literally a cyborg" (141).

For Haraway, however, one vision of the cyborg represents much more--it equals utopia, for dualism between nature and culture has been reorganized so that people become many different subjects with different points of view since the cyborg is not defined by its role or job title (143). Instead of defining a cyborg by its function, Haraway points out its social and political constructions. Indeed, in "A Cyborg Manifesto," Haraway defines the cyborg as "a cybernetic organism,"

meaning it is both machine and organism (291). Here Haraway not only combines technology with biology but points out the cyborg's "social reality" as well as its being a "creature of fiction" (291). Consequently, Haraway connects the myriad ways in which the cyborg is a social and political construction in fiction (291). As a result, because the concept of the cyborg is social, applying its political construction to fiction points to the fact that people in the late twentieth century are also cyborgs, or, as Haraway terms it, chimeras--creatures of "imagination and material reality" joined by "Western" science and politics (292). Ostensibly, the Cronenberg films dwell with the science and politics of being a cyborg but go no further than upholding or reinscribing the power structures of male-dominant capitalism and heterosexism.

#### Kristeva's Abjection

Julia Kristeva also examines the material reality of people and their social and political constructions. With Kristeva however, the focus is on the body itself--specifically, its decay. As explained in *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva notes that "abjection is a resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego). It is an alchemy that transforms death drive into start of life, of new significance" (15). For Kristeva, the power of horror is rooted, "on the fragile border where identities (subject/object) do not exist or only barely so--double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject" (207). This rupturing of borders includes the distinction of bodies ending with the skin and the mind ending with the brain.

In "The Artificial Paradise," Bentov points out that technology has given way to the transcendence of a new consciousness--a hybridization affecting gender, sexuality, and embodiment (144). Accordingly, cyborg discourse and abjection resist mind-body dualism because human technology does not "try to replace life with something better than life: it is, itself, magically alive; not discontinuous with nature but, instead, a part of nature's constantly flowing pattern" (Bentov 174). Indeed, it is this flowing pattern of natural forces and processes that is at the heart of abjection.

In *Powers of Horror*, for Kristeva, the abject is all that is unclean and improper: a piece of filth, waste, decay, body fluids, defilement, infection, disease, shit, and dung (2). Moreover, abjection includes the corpse, moral crimes, and all that is "cesspool, and death" (Kristeva 3). When people encounter the abject, Kristeva explains, they experience a physical reaction: "I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire," leading to nausea, which "separates me from the mother and father who proffer it" (3). Indeed, the abject forces the viewer to stand "at the border of" her "condition as a living being" (Kristeva 3). For this reason, the abject is threatening because it disturbs one's sense of self as an entity that is solid and coherent so that people are reminded of their materiality. When the body leaks, borders are crossed--order is disturbed and identity systems are ruptured. Importantly, when abjection occurs, the masculine

is "threatened by an asymmetrical, irrational, wily, uncontrollable power" (Kristeva 70). Accordingly, the abject interrupts identity--social or sexual--because it threatens the relationship between the sexes, Kristeva stresses (71).

Abjection affects identity systems in another way. Drawing on Lacan, Kristeva points out that as children grow, they separate from the mother (messy) for the symbolic order of the father (clean). Here abjection is critical because it explodes the male/female binary: when people are faced with abjection, Kristeva explains, they experience "a process of becoming" (3). This process involves first a death of the self; then the self gives birth to the self (3). This rebirth is accompanied by what Kristeva calls *jouissance*, or pleasure. It is in this zone of abject/pleasure that there is found purification, for art and religion purify the abject. In this way, the abject in movies starts a process where "abjection becomes the requisite for a reconciliation, in the mind, between the flesh and the law" (Kristeva 128). Here mind and body, as well as mind and technology coalesce so that through abjection, power is demystified--religious, moral, political--all its structures laid bare (Kristeva 210).

Consequently, when viewers approach abjection in film--whether it be food, filth, waste, murder, sex, gore--they separate from themselves from the otherness of the improper and unclean in order to establish who they are in order to answer to it. Kristeva argues that turning away from the perverse distances people from the abject--in doing so, this is a way to see themselves as "the most precious non-object" (5). As the precious, people are able to face their fears and

confront the otherness. Moreover, this otherness is upheld in our relation to the object since it has the power to "transform death into a start of life" (Kristeva 15).

In the Cronenberg's films, the preoccupation with abjection brings attention to the fact that the boundaries between human and machine are due to advances in technology. Cronenberg's science fiction/horror narratives address these advances through the binary of the body and technology. The post-human subjects featured in these films have altered bodies that are the product of changes in technology, yet their post-human bodies are still defined by their differences. The posthuman subject, however, as Haraway and Kristeva argue, should be liberated from the binary of technology and the body, self and other. For this reason, the post-human subjects in the Cronenberg films are not given a new "start."

### What is the Posthuman?

For author Cary Wolfe, the place of people needs to be viewed in what he terms a "green" continuum that takes into account what is "human" as one life in addition to others. From the introduction of *What is Posthumanism?*, Wolfe argues that an understanding of this continuum must include both theoretical and philosophical discussions that take into account the place of the self in context to the world (i). Posthumanism, Wolfe stresses, is an examination into the "paradox" of people "becoming who they are" only by "being constituted by something--many 'somethings'," that they are not (ii). Furthermore, Wolfe posits

that there are ethical and ecological consequences for not recognizing this paradox. Cronenberg's films address such consequences in terms of bioethics, cognitive science, gender, and even animal ethics. Accordingly, posthumanist thought centers on the endeavor to develop technology that is safe and ethical in order to forward the exploration of all the ways of "being" (Wolfe 35).

For others, Wolfe adds, posthumanism refers to a critique of "humanism," a focus on the self and its place in the natural world (35). Posthuman studies, Wolfe notes, do not push for a rethinking of how people think of themselves; rather, it questions how people use technology to change what they are in order to become more than they currently are (35). In both *Videodrome* and *ExistenZ*, characters are endowed with posthuman capacities through the use of technologies that highlight the fact that though "advanced," the machines showcase the limits of human wisdom and empathy so that the cyborgs grapple with both practical and moral understandings of technology that is not always designed to better the quality of life of people. Indeed, most science fiction/horror films seem not to be concerned with technology that is created and used to aid the human condition. The development of human enhancement technology and tools is more often than not abused. Thus in addition to an examination of the cyborg and abjection an understanding of science fiction itself is necessary in order to see how Cronenberg's films build on the tropes and sensibilities of the genre.



## What is Science Fiction?

From *Women and Utopia*, editors Barr and Smith point out that science fiction deals with "the institutions and interactions" of people (1). Science fiction offers criticism, speculation, and prescriptions. Ultimately, this process of representation results in the reconstruction of human culture (1). In this reconstruction can be found hopes, frustrations, goals, fantasies, and conceptions of self, the editors note (1). Importantly, these institutions also present sexual difference that is based on social conventions which bring with them "social, political, and moral consequences," Barr and Smith explain (1). For this reason, the ways in which sex roles are displayed in science fiction reflect both culture and consciousness (1).

In *Women and Utopia*, author Lyman Sargent argues that in a system of patriarchy, men are afforded power and authority so that the criticism, speculation, and prescriptions of human culture represented in science fiction tend to follow the same models of prejudice and inequality of the "real" world (3). In another chapter of the same collection, author Verlyn Flieger posits that the imaginary worlds of science fiction are "neither better nor worse than things as they are" since they are only "a yardstick, a measure, a standard of comparison" in which characters face "real conflicts" and deal with "real problems" albeit not always successfully (96). Accordingly, the "dilemmas of the human race" and condition are not solved but presented to reflect society (Flieger 96). In this broad definition, science fiction can thus be defined as a recognition--an awareness of

the problems in society. Within this definition, Flieger adds, women's struggle for equality and identity can be highlighted or downplayed "as mere adjuncts to men" (96). Flieger argues that the differences between men and women define but need not hamper the roles each plays within culture since there are "no easy answers" and "no world is perfect" (97). Despite there being no easy answers to issues of prejudice and inequality between the sexes in imperfect worlds, early science fiction narratives function like a mirror, reflecting the sensibilities of a mostly male-dominated society.

#### The Origins of Science Fiction

Understanding that science fiction can be seen as a mirror of patriarchal society, the next question that arises is when the genre had its start. In the introduction to *Some Kind of Paradise*, author Thomas D. Clareson explains that 1947's *Through Space and Time* surveyed the field of science fiction; a year later, Clareson notes, *The Checklist of Fantastic Literature* added fantasy to science fiction (xi). Earlier works, dating back to 1917, focus on the "supernatural" aspects of science (Clareson xi). With World War II, however, a gloomier view of the future prevailed (xi). With the Vietnam War, even more pessimistic visions of the future influenced the work of science fiction (xi). According to Clareson, the science fiction of the 1960s portrays "man as degraded and indecent animal, doomed to failure," introducing "a pessimistic literary naturalism into the field" (xi). This bleak picture of man as degraded and an indecent animal doomed to failure is evident in Kubrick's *2001: a Space*

*Odyssey* and *A Clockwork Orange* where in the first film, the origin of man as an inventor is juxtaposed with his being a murderous ape. In the second, Alex is animalistic, driven by violence to rape and plunder. However, acceptance of science fiction as a genre by academic critics, Clareson points out, did not come until the work of Ray Bradbury (xi).

Leading up to Bradbury, Clareson notes, science fiction dealt with lunar voyages, future wars, and "tales of terror," which can be traced to the work of Brockden Brown and Edgar Allan Poe (xii). Clareson argues that early science fiction reflects "the impact of scientific discoveries and theories" of the nineteenth century, ushering readers "into the modern world" (xii). This modernity, Clareson suggests, is a response to the impact of old science with new technology. Also, because modernity is predicated on the events of its past, establishing a "precise beginning to science fiction fails to take into account" the fact that "literature forms a continuum which the writers of each generation manipulate in their own idiom and manner to reflect those ideas and focus upon those areas of human experience which most concern them" (Clareson xii). Clareson adds, however, that though he recognizes science fiction in America as having its beginnings in the 1930s, there is no "rigid definition of science fiction" (xiii). Clareson prefers to call science fiction a response to the "awe and wonder" of "science during the last two centuries" though he cautions that there is no "definitive" definition to either its roots or its place as a genre (xiii). Here Cronenberg's *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* occupy similar complications since both films can be seen as horror

and fantasy, not purely science fiction though each deals with the awe and wonder of science in different ways.

In *Videodrome*, technology is literally consumed--a VHS video cassette is placed directly into the abdomen of its protagonist, Max Renn. With *eXistenZ*, technology is tethered to the user via a fleshy pod that is attached to the base of the spine. In these ways of experience and being, the characters learn that the division between the biological and technological is complicated. This complication in Cronenberg's films offers discourses of technology and the posthuman condition where tropes of the android, virtuality, and bioengineering are explored. In these films, Clareson calls the experience of main characters Renn and Allegra Geller as exemplifying the "reluctance to accept the traditional, the dominant, the accepted values" of society so that promiscuity and violence become ways to understand the world (15). Here, a "grotesque" and "distorted" world is rooted in both Freud--the unconscious and Behaviorism--what is observable and measurable (Clareson 16).

Culling Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and the work of Asimov, Clareson notes that the tradition of horror and scientific content form a continuum where old power and new technology give characters the ability to "become greater than his nature will allow" and offer a "plea for tolerance toward the individual" (17). This ambivalence is evident in Cronenberg's films because the protagonists not only grapple with their own natures and responses to technology but shadowy corporate forces.

Indeed, Clareson insists that instead of focusing on when science fiction began, it is more apropos to examine the relationship and impact between science and technology on society and individual behavior (104). In this way, a bleak tableau of the future built around science, technology, and social hierarchies point to "the fate of mankind" as being left to "the working of nature" and not just the "nihilism" of class, race, and sex conflicts (Clareson 105). Here, the "poverty, filth, and wretchedness" of industrial America reflect "the newness" of not just industrialization but people's reaction to such radical economic and social changes (Clareson 105). This focus on the social effects of technology is not new, however. According to Brian Stableford, author of the book *Outside the Human Aquarium*, 1940s science fiction was primarily concerned with the social effects of technology, casting "a rather more critical eye upon the implications of technological advance" (49). Moreover, science fiction as a genre is distinctly American in both "origin and inspiration," Stableford explains (50). In the 1950s, Stableford notes, science fiction centered around political issues such as civil rights and the space program instead of socioeconomic change due to "allergic" reactions to the theories of Karl Marx (49).

Avoiding Marx's theory on social change, American science fiction eschews the "possible contribution of social science" so that there is still room to speculate about changes to society (Stableford 50). It is through the interrogation of these changes that science fiction writing is conscious, as Stableford points out, "of the cruelty which lurked beneath the masks of civilization, and the ways in which the

taboos of conventional morality...could pervert even healthy and benevolent sentiments into anxieties and phobias" (118). These anxieties concerning civilization and morality would extend into the science fiction of the 1980s.

#### Science Fiction in Film (1960-1970)

Before the 1980s, however, the science fiction films of the late 1960s and 1970s, including *2001*, *Demonseed*, *Futureworld*, *The Stepford Wives*, and *Alien*, centered around technology and the body. In these films, technology is a threat to the body; in most cases, the machine/android wants to replace the body or serves the interests of corporations and not individuals, who are expendable in the name of science. In contrast, on television, technology and the body had a more symbiotic relationship: *The Six Million Dollar Man* and *The Bionic Woman* series featured some of the first cyborgs. While Steve Austin used his prosthetic limbs and eye to catch villains, Jamie Sommers, who also captured antagonists during weekly hour long episodes, grappled with her body's rejection of the technology that replaced her ear, arm, and legs. Drawing from the films that came before them, *The Six Million Dollar Man* and *The Bionic Woman* are examples of how the science fiction of the 1980s was inspired by the science fiction that preceded it. In the 1980s, the influence of directors Kubrick and Scott create a sense of history from which the themes of films such as *Blade Runner* and *Aliens* harken back to 1940s film noir and 1950s war epics. This simultaneous looking back and forward is what author Darren Harris-Fain, from the book *Understanding Contemporary American Science Fiction*, explains is

science fiction's building upon science fiction (1).

### Science Fiction: the 1980s--Cyberpunk

In the 1980s, according to Harris-Fain, this building upon itself results in a new movement in science fiction, called cyberpunk (1). Cyberpunk is a subgenre in science fiction that features a preoccupation with future societies dominated by technology. *Blade Runner* is the quintessential cyberpunk film because it represents high technology juxtaposed against the low-life denizens of a future Los Angeles where rogue androids cause a breakdown in the social order when they seek to kill the man who designed them. This coupling of advanced technology with threats to the social order is characteristic of cyberpunk. Another characteristic of cyberpunk is the tension between artificial intelligences and large corporations. In *Blade Runner*, artificial intelligence and the Tyrell Corporation, along with the loner protagonist, Deckard and femme fatale Rachael, come together in a dystopic vision of the future set not in some distant galaxy but Los Angeles. Centering action on Earth rather than other planets is also a trope found in cyberpunk narratives. Drawing on 1940s film noir, dazzling special effects, mercenary corporations, the loner hero, and the femme fatale are also seen in Cronenberg's *Videodrome*.

Because science fiction borrows from other genres, subgenres such as cyberpunk are, Harris-Fain notes, "continually evolving and changing...complicated by the fact that works that could be considered science fiction were published long before the term 'science fiction' came into general

use" (2). For this reason, Harris-Fain argues, it is impossible to define science fiction (2). Science fiction can cover diverse themes, including space travel, invisibility, the scientific and technological (3). However, the author points out, science fiction can also depict the Martian invasion of Victorian England so that time travel presents alternate representations of history (3). Another subgenre of science fiction features aliens and space ships, but what makes science fiction different from other genres is its departure from the realistic into the fantastic, Harris-Fain adds (4).

#### Cyberpunk, the Fantastic, and the Thriller

The fantastic, Harris-Fain warns, is not to be confused with fantasy because "fantasy literature includes elements that never have existed in the world as we know and, because of the laws of nature, never can" (4). Science fiction is not realistic either, Harris-Fain stresses, for "it includes elements that neither exist in the present nor have existed in the known past" (3). This neither in the present nor in the known past quality is evident in *Videodrome*: there has never been a video feed that can alter a person's sense of reality. In *eXistenZ*, there is no such game that a person can disappear into, leaving the body behind. These films draw on existing technology in order to present what Harris-Fain describes as both "plausible and nonrealistic" (4).

Scientific and technological developments center around changes, industrial, economic, and social. Cronenberg's films deal with the booming home cable industry and VHS technology of the 1980s and advances in virtual reality of the



1990s. Both films highlight the complex psychological and physical relationship people have with technology. "A key facet of dealing with such change," Harris-Fain notes, "is the fact that SF writers are able to both posit radical changes in their stories and extrapolate the possibilities that might result" (6). In this way, *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* are science fiction narratives since Cronenberg not only adheres to "not only the standard conventions of fiction" but also the "conventions of science fiction," including "the ability to employ scientific fact, extrapolation, and imagination" (Harris-Fain 6). Cronenberg goes a step further, adding the abject. This addition of the abject to science fiction is vital to the genre because in dealing with change, the narratives provide "multiple possibilities for the ways things can become and, in alternate history, of the ways things could have happened in the past" (Harris-Fain 7). For Cronenberg, the window into alternative history and multiple possibilities is the abject because through the intrusion of horror, a literature of "satire, critique, social commentary, or warning" is presented (Harris-Fain 7). This window, or cyberspace, is the world where Cronenberg's characters, including Max Renn, Nicki Brand, and Allegra Geller find escape.

In giving multiple possibilities to structures of political power and social institutions, Cronenberg's films do not offer better alternatives. Indeed, according to Harris-Fain, "the traditional subjects of science fiction," including artificial intelligence, corporate culture/global economies, and social change are drawn from the conventions of the thriller (104). Harris-Fain points out that Cronenberg's

juxtaposition of science fiction tropes with emerging technology makes evident the fact that cyberpunk "was the logical development of science fiction in the information age and in the era of urban sprawl and multinational corporations" (105). Harris-Fain explains that cyberpunk "seemed to be saying that humanity was essentially corrupt and that individuals were largely powerless in the face of forces beyond their control" (105). Yet, characters such as Max Renn and Allegra Geller manage to assume a sense of agency because they are able to maneuver around powerful corporate forces. Rather than a division between systems of power, other writers, such as Donna Haraway, describe boundaries as "permeable."

#### Science Fiction Today: Cronenberg, the Cyborg, and Abjection

In *Videodrome*, Max Renn, the producer of a small cable company, taps into a video signal that alters his perception of reality. For Allegra Geller in *eXistenZ*, players of her virtual reality video game are connected via body ports to the technology. Cronenberg's films also highlight the extensive amount of time people spend watching television and playing electronic games. In "Cyborgs and Daughters," the key definition of cyborg, Bentov stresses, is that "the cyborg is our ontology, the essence of our being," making people who they are (141). According to Bentov, "this is true science fiction, in which the *raison d'être* of all phenomena is the man-made world" (141). Haraway suggests that we live science fiction. We are cyborgs because we are the instruments of a powerful

technological capitalist system (141). Here abjection in the Cronenberg films is critical because it disrupts the technological system by showing that people are behind the technology so that there can be no perfect machine without its relationship to the body. "We are cyborgs," Bentov continues, because this powerful technological-capitalist system "appropriates and reshapes the world at an ever-increasing rate" (141). Consequently, the exploitative labor practices of high-technology industries and their appropriation of both people and the environment are rife with "spiritual and philosophical processes," Bentov argues (141). Because technology allows for the end of the body as we know it, the idea of who we are must change. Hence science fiction and films such as *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* illustrate how quickly these changes can come. In the article "The Ridicule of Time," author Jay Clayton points out that "the boundary between science fiction and fact is often at issue in contemporary debates over the posthuman" since research and technology--including genetic enhancement--have implications on what it means to be human (318).

For Clayton, science fiction narratives do not warn against biotechnology and its consequences (319). Films, however, rely "on thriller conventions of conspiracy and disaster far more than written forms of SF" (Clayton 319). The "take-home" lesson, as Clayton puts it, of films tends to be "wholly negative" (319). Science fiction itself, Clayton argues, remains "overwhelmingly positive about the possibility of transforming the human" since the focus is not on delineating lessons derived via "aesthetics" but showing the "reach of

technology" and what/how historical contexts and cultural attitudes produced it (319). While the Cronenberg films do tend to highlight conspiracy and disaster, there is no take-home lesson, as Clayton suggests. Instead, Cronenberg leaves the ethical discourses surrounding technological and genetic enhancement ambiguous so that despite his framing of the narratives, the "what if" question, which is a hallmark of science fiction, remains open.

#### Science Fiction, Film, Posthuman Theory, and Cultural Analysis

According to Clayton, "the ethical and policy discourse on posthumanism differs from the critical reflection on biopower and biopolitics that dominates literary studies of the topic" (320). The distinction, Clayton argues, is because posthuman theory is based on the work of Foucault, Haraway, and Hayles, writers who "want to break down the boundaries between science fiction and cultural analysis" (320). With bioethics, on the other hand, Clayton explains that "before we can come to terms with the posthuman, the nature of thought itself must change if it is to be posthumanist" (321). The Cronenberg films do allow for a discussion on the boundaries between science fiction and cultural analysis since cinema is a visual medium conducive to examining discourses of governmental policy, human-subjects research, corporations, and historical moments by making them accessible. The films do not, as Clayton notes, touch on issues of human dignity, freedom of choice, personal autonomy, or the deconstruction of the subject to any great extent (321). Moreover, the films do not highlight the posthumanist preoccupation with how "human nature entitles

every member of the species to a higher moral status than the rest of the natural world" (Clayton 321). Rather, this sense of entitlement is upheld in *eXistenZ* when technology for the game is discovered to be manufactured from small amphibians.

The stakes are high, Clayton stresses, because any relationship between the posthuman and science fiction needs to show "responses to their different historical moments and what they reveal about attitudes toward transforming the human" (321). Here the Cronenberg films do convey the attitude toward transforming the human as being both an economic and political process at the cost of the individual. According to Clayton, science fiction as a genre follows important trends in science. For example, when the description of the double helix structure of DNA was published in 1953, it caused science fiction as a genre to shift when writing about evolution (322). In the 1970s, recombinant DNA "reignited interest" in DNA technology (Clayton 328). Indeed, editors and publishers, Clayton adds, "encouraged writers who speculated about a posthuman species to ground their work in current understandings of evolution" (323). Here Cronenberg's films also follow current trends, but rather than grapple with philosophical issues of posthuman genetic engineering and research, the films focus on current trends in technology: for *Videodrome*, it was home cable and VHS technology; for *eXistenZ*, Cronenberg focused on virtual reality and gaming.

While science fiction writers see technological and evolutionary change as

"teleological," Clayton explains, "a progressive movement toward ever higher stages of life," the Cronenberg films do not have such aspirations, for they focus on transformation of the human in response to technology (324). However, the films do earn a place in posthuman studies because they touch on, as Clayton explains, "transformation and species diversity" as survival characteristics where "continuous adaptation and flexibility about the boundaries of the acceptable" are presented if not analyzed (329). From advances in DNA research of the 1950s-1970s, Clayton points out that the cyberpunk fiction of the 1990s brought new models of transgender, transsexual, and prosthetic choices (329). While hybridity as both a form of somatic and psychic existence are touched upon, the Cronenberg films do not embrace diversity in terms of advocacy of equal rights or tolerance. Rather, the films are, as Clayton argues, "scientific thrillers" where "humanity is doomed because of its deadly combination of intelligence and the instinct for hierarchy" (331). Indeed, it is not clear whether *Videodrome* or *eXistenZ* accept or advocate "of a posthuman future" as being the "norm, not the exception in SF about the posthuman" (Clayton 331). What is clear is that the Cronenberg films' appeal is their foundation in technical information. Also, Clayton notes, "gratuitous sex scenes, point-of-view shifts to facilitate speed of narration, and quick cuts" to other scenes allow the films to be better viewed as "thought experiments" than "most of the nonfiction about posthumanism that aims to influence public policy" (332).

While the films are effective thought experiments on the future of technology

and its consequences to the body and one's sense of identity, they do not add to the discussion on posthuman concerns over genetic technology since the relationship of science fiction and film to concepts of the posthuman is not explored in terms of bioethics and medical humanities. Indeed, with all the possibilities regarding posthuman diversity and advancement available, the Cronenberg films focus almost entirely on the intensification and pursuit of pleasure as the primary concern for the posthuman.

#### New Definitions of Existence: the Posthuman and Power Relations

Although *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* challenge accepted ideas about what it means to be human, the films do not engage with the new definitions of existence they offer. According to Debra Benita Shaw, author of the article "Strange Zones," new definitions of life include life that comes from biological science (778). These new forms of life, Shaw notes, draw "on theories of posthumanism" and "expose the imaginative potential of monsters and magic for developing new and resistant metropolitan mythologies" (778). Since Cronenberg's films tend to reinscribe power dynamics, it is not clear how new or resistant his mythologies are in dealing with the role of the body in a world ruled by both corporate and gender capitalism. Shaw argues that narratives about the posthuman and posthuman cities need to address the social relation of science and technology so that "accepted cartographies of bodies" are questioned (778). Further, Shaw stresses that the political possibilities of conceiving of ourselves as posthuman need to be examined (779). This examination is important

because it brings to light "processes under capitalism" as an expression of "power relations under specific historical conditions" (Shaw 779). Moreover, since power relations are often tacit, "it is not enough to understand the internal disciplines, procedures and arrangements of institutions but how these function in the circulation of power which regulates populations, produces and constrains subjectivisation" (Shaw 781). Here *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* are effective in illustrating that power relations exist; however, the films do very little to discuss how posthuman thought is at play in terms of bodily inscription of gender binaries.

Hence, Nikki Brand is hyper-sexualized, and to a lesser degree, so is Allegra Geller. *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* as the "reconstruction of the world" do not "address the imbrication of bodies in networked and cyberspatial economic and social systems, and the confusion of boundaries" (Shaw 784). The films leave it to the viewer to decide if the social effects of scientific ideas are discussed effectively or developed at all. The viewer has to decide whether the films merely adhere to the conventions of science fiction without, as Shaw argues, reading the films as science fiction texts where the dystopic visions of the future "document social change" or do they "establish a link between capitalist science's bullshit about itself and its damaging social effects?" (785). Perhaps this link between capitalism and its social effects is the strongest argument the films have regarding traditional human values in a world of sophisticated machines with new forms of intelligences promising heightened experiences.



## The Human, the Non-human, and the Posthuman

Indeed, in this posthuman model, the very definition of the human is complicated due to the interplay of science, literature, and film. In the article "Human Without Qualities," author Yves Abrioux discusses how the computer age has "ushered in a model of the posthuman" where machine intelligence clashes with traditional human values (135). In this computer age, Abrioux explains, a positive definition of the human against the non-human and the posthuman is difficult to measure (136). For writers such as Philip K. Dick, Abrioux argues, there is no positive definition of the human (136). Unlike Dick, Abrioux feels that the interplay of science and literature holds many possibilities for the posthuman (139). Drawing on Hayles, Abrioux points out that people become posthuman the day they are "unable to tell the intelligent machine from the intelligent human" (140). Further, Abrioux stresses that Hayles' vision on becoming posthuman centers on this "dynamic relationship between humans and intelligent machines" since this partnership employs the posthuman as a way to "avoid resinscribing, and thus repeating, some of the mistakes of the past" (140). The Cronenberg films, unfortunately, do reinscribe heteronormative definitions/structures of power and gender.

According to Abrioux, the posthuman provides a way for "rethinking the 'essence' of human identity" in ways that allow for the "full expression of human capability" through more accurate depictions of people (140). *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* render characters as objects caught up in masculinist notions of gender

and power performance. Indeed, the films do little to counter the "pitting of the somatic against the discursive," Abrioux notes (148). The complex connections between the human, the posthuman, and the inhuman are made ambiguous due to the films' narrative reliance on special effects and lack of critique of the representation of itself, Abrioux adds (149). Here the representation includes the "context of late-capitalist society, which imposes on the individual a logic of stereotypes, reproductions and depersonalization" so that the machine/human issue is established in fantasy rather than factual knowledge (Abrioux 149).

#### Cronenberg on Cronenberg

For Cronenberg, the project is not to examine/analyze the individual logic of stereotypes and reproductions. Cronenberg's preoccupations focus on paranoia and technological obsession. In the article "Grotesque Normals," authors Dunlap and Delpech-Ramey posit that Cronenberg's films suspend reality rather than analyze its social constructions. According to the authors, the hallmark of Cronenberg's oeuvre during the period leading up to *eXistenZ* centers on "when a fantastic or impossible aberration, abnormality, or alien presence invades human life" (321). In *Videodrome*, this invasion deals with how viewing a cable program and the VHS cassette recording of this program infects the human brain. The alien presence in *eXistenZ* is the virtual reality world of the game "eXistenZ," where players are so drawn to the varying levels of reality that they prefer it to real life.

Moreover, *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* feature characters firmly defined by gender difference (321). In most Cronenberg films, the protagonists are males "tinged with a scientific or capitalistic tragic fascination," Dunlap and Delphech-Ramey point out (322). According to the authors, "a kind of specifically feminine agency and subjectivity seem to emerge as decisive forces," but Cronenberg endeavors to "understand things from the disease's point of view" (322). Here the disease includes hallucinations in *Videodrome* which drive Max Renn to murder; in *eXistenZ*, the theme of disease deals with the fear of infection in both computer programs and the bioports. Further, Dunlap and Delphech-Ramey stress, the disease in Cronenberg's films is not just physical but the conflict between the male and female characters, nature and machine, science and society (322). These conflicts serve to expose the "limits of human willing, knowing, and desiring in the context of technological capacities for the invasion and transmutation of material existence," Dunlap and Delphech-Ramey explain (322).

In *Videodrome*, for instance, technology allows for Max Renn to experience sexual pleasure without women: Nicki Brand seduces him long after her death. Furthermore, he develops his own "vagina" when he discovers a wound in his abdomen. In *eXistenZ*, Allegra Geller designs a virtual world where her pleasure is derived through virtual reality, a realm where she does not need men. This control over the body, or the soma, the authors point out, is a masculine fantasy where a person is "able to produce a representation free from affect" (323). Max

Renn and Allegra Geller protect themselves from the otherness of the feminine. Indeed, Max Renn is "reborn" crawling into the TV set; he has his own feminine sex organ. Additionally, Allegra Geller has external sexual organs--she fondles her game pod; she inserts the game into Ted Pikul's bioport, an act that can be viewed as rape. In both films, Dunlap and Delpech-Ramey argue, the connection between sexual necessity of the machine renders human relationships technological, an experience mediated by gadgets (327). Importantly, the biological role of the woman is effaced by the masculine role of technology so that masculinist structures of power are intertwined with scientific and capitalistic discourses.

#### Horror is not Frivolous: Fears in the Collective Unconscious

Apart from these discourses, however, when viewed strictly as films dealing with the macabre, *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* can be seen simply as Cronenberg's vision for showcasing provocative work. Indeed, in an interview with George Hickenlooper, titled "The Primal Energies of the Horror Film," Cronenberg states, "Horror is not frivolous. It seems to cut away all the extraneous material and get right down to the basics" (4). For Cronenberg, the basics involve "fears found in the collective unconscious" (Hickenlooper 4). Furthermore, Cronenberg endeavors to expose these fears, to "uncover what is covered up" (Hickenlooper 4). Part of this uncovering entails identity and the continuity of personality (4). Cronenberg's films focus on the question of whether there is "an absolute form of self from the beginning to the end of a person's life

(Hickenlooper 4). Additionally, Cronenberg's films are preoccupied with free will and predestination (5). According to Cronenberg, "genetic predestination holds 80 percent and environment has 20 percent" (5). Adding to the issues of identity, free will, and predestination is sexual politics (5). Hickenlooper points out that many critics see a repeating theme of dominant patriarchal ideology in Cronenberg's films. For Cronenberg, this kind of analysis is a political response to his films; accordingly, such a response is too rigid (5). In response to feminist objections to *Videodrome*, Cronenberg defends his work: "I want to discuss sexual politics and make the audience uneasy" (6). Indeed, the uneasiness here extends beyond Cronenberg's signature use of abjection.

Oddly, Cronenberg considers himself a feminist, "I consider myself a feminist" (6). Several moments later, Cronenberg adds, "I believe men and women should be considered the same with respect to job opportunities...to me, however, it's obvious that women and men are very different" (6). The director qualifies this statement by adding, "if you're heavily into semiotics, there's always the danger of becoming an image policeman or policewoman. Then the idea of the image itself, of a woman burning her own breast with a cigarette, is forbidden" (6). This ambivalent stance on semiotics, feminism, and the relationship between men and women underscores Cronenberg's relationship with the audience.

#### Identity--Independence and Independent Action

According to Cronenberg, he is not a manipulator. Rather, Cronenberg states that he feels like he is "sharing" experiences with the audience (6). Ultimately,

Hickenlooper explains, Cronenberg's films center on the issue of identity-- independence and independent action are revered by the director (7). This independence of action extends to the director's use of narratives to display excesses of gore, violence, and sex. In such narratives, the reinscription of stereotypes and inequalities are most evident when characters are given traditionally male attributes of agency and detachment from affect, a quality generally held to be feminine. However, the importance of independence and independent action also allows for a reading of the films as fictional worlds where fantasy and creativity allow for the analysis of the posthuman condition and enjoyment of spectacle.

A multiple and varied exploration of the Cronenberg films is needed in order to appreciate the instability of boundaries separating subjects and objects. In giving *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* myriad ways of being looked at and discussed, it makes possible a conversation regarding the boundaries between human and machine that stem from advances in information technology and virtual reality. Indeed, in times of radical technological advances, notions of posthuman embodiment need to be examined even if the narratives are ambiguous and ambivalent. Part of this ambiguity lies in Cronenberg's films' representations of home video and the anxiety regarding technology's potential for surveillance, psychic violence, and espionage. From the book *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens*, Benson-Allot points out that films such as *Videodrome* and *The Ring* illustrate how technology has the power to "consume lives and identities" (70).

This consumption of lives and identities stands in contradiction to Cronenberg's endeavor to support independence and independent action.

According to Benson-Allot, "few of the movies about video address the machines of exhibition themselves, much less our embodied encounters with them" (70). Indeed, the focus on videocassettes, Benson-Allot argues, points to them as material objects people manipulate and are manipulated by, for videocassettes are metaphors for larger media takeovers, including the threat of digital piracy (70). Cronenberg's self-reflexive filmmaking, Benson-Allot stresses, turns the camera on the VCR; in doing so, the Cronenberg films "reconstruct the film spectator" as she struggles to deal with the physical and psychic demands that the home video interface imposes on the cinematic subject (203). Films such as *Videodrome* and then later *eXistenZ* show how video and virtual reality penetration affect not just the body but the body of national media cultures as well, Benson-Allot points out (203). In this way, Cronenberg's films construct new forms of movie spectatorship since non-theatrical settings--phone, Netflix, laptop, tablet--have redefined the industry (203). This redefinition of the body, culture, technology, and the industry, as manifest in abjection, point to a breach in mind/body dualism.

While chapter one focused on the redefinition of the body, culture, technology, and the origins of science fiction as a genre through the discourse of the cyborg and abjection, chapter two will delve deeper into *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ*. Stereotypes based on gender and power dynamics will be examined to

show how abjection and Cronenberg's films destabilize both binaries and the boundaries of what is considered human. This examination starts with the television and the VCR and continues with Kristeva and embodiment to show that what it means to be human in times of technological change must keep pace with that technology. Rather than disparate entities, the body and technology form an embodied experience.



## CHAPTER TWO

### SCIENCE FICTION, HORROR, AND OPPOSITIONAL BINARIES

In chapter one, the tenets of science fiction were surveyed to see how Cronenberg's films build upon the tropes of the genre. Indeed, science fiction offers discourses where there are multiple uses for technology; the possibilities for such uses center around binary oppositions that organize the films. This organization is built upon utopian models of posthumanism where changing perceptions of the Western self are constructed on technologies in which new conditions are structured against boundaries of what is considered human. Chapter two will unpack the binary oppositions to investigate how the binaries are problematized through abjection--the abject interrupts the binary opposition between mind/body and mind/technology because it makes messy what is otherwise accepted as a clean delineation. Here abjection is a critical moment of excess, for it allows spaces to re-examine stereotypes of gender and power dynamics. In the destabilization of these dynamics, opportunities for different ways of being arise despite the grim visions for the abuse of technology Cronenberg's films provide.

#### Television and the VCR

In the 1950s, the proliferation of television sets in the home worried many producers of motion pictures. With the television sets came programs made

specifically for the small screen, which further worried movie executives who feared that movie goers would stay home rather than go to movie theatres. In response, while TV shows were constrained by the dimensions of the television screen, movies became epic productions, featuring VistaVision and Technicolor. Viewers were given the option of staying home and watching small productions or head to the drive-in to be awestricken by spectacles on the big screen. Over time, a balance was met: those who craved new features went to the theatre; those who preferred to stay in were able to watch not only made-for-television programming but runs of older films. Thirty years later, a similar conflict would arise. In the 1980s, the proliferation of the VCR worried producers of motion pictures who sold their movies on VHS cassette because the consumer could copy and distribute the films thus undercut profits. Only after attempts to hinder the re-recording of films on VHS and the plunge of prices on both cassettes and VCR players did critics and consumers have time to notice how movie genres, such as horror, had changed in response to technology.

As author Caetlin Benson-Allott, in the book *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens*, explains, horror films, including *Friday the 13th*, "portended the influence video distribution would have on motion picture aesthetics" (1). By the end of the decade, Benson-Allott notes, the "videocassette would mount such a challenge to the cinema-centric traditions of motion picture spectatorship" since the majority of movies watched by the public were on a video platform (1). Thus prerecorded video continues to structure motion picture production, distribution,

and consumption, the author adds (1).

This structuring is important since it does not merely indicate a history of video technology but offers an analysis of how filmmakers understand the discursive construction of movies from drive-ins to a plethora of platforms today, including DVD, Blu-ray, Video On Demand, and streaming media (70).

Accordingly, "representations of VCRs and videotapes direct the spectator's responses to home video apparatuses," Benson-Allott argues (70). This video revolution is exemplified in David Cronenberg's film *Videodrome* (1983), in which "anxieties about the technology's capacity for surveillance, psychic violence, and espionage" are embedded (Benson-Allot 70). According to Benson-Allot, in this way, videocassettes are presented as "material objects we manipulate--and are manipulated by," highlighting "unsettling narrative and formal techniques" that reconstruct the viewer as much as characters (Benson- Allot 70). With *Videodrome*, the first human-video hybrid, or cyborg, is introduced. Here the home video interface places demands so that the imposition on the viewer is both somatic and psychic (70).

Importantly, *Videodrome* shows, as Benson-Allot stresses, how home video exhibition suggests a "video penetration [that ] affects how the spectator understood not only her body but the body of national media cultures as well" (203). Consequently, as spectatorship has moved from the public space of the theatre and into the private realms of home and personal devices, more movies have been consumed on video than in theatres, Benson-Allot points out (203). As

movie spectatorship and culture have moved from film to video, the spectator has likewise been part of the journey (203). While *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* have responded to changes in viewer participation based on technology, part of this journey also includes French feminism.

### Technology--a Masculine Discourse

As Robert Dale Parker in *How to Interpret Literature* explains, French feminists, including Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva "try to imagine feminine alternatives to phallogocentric language" (161). The convergence of video/technology penetration and French feminism highlight how the discourse of technology is predominantly a masculine one. In film, this alternative to the phallogocentric is manifest in Kristeva's discussion of the abject. Here abjection is key because any given technology, Parker explains, "produces a predictable result" since it "produces a predictable cultural change" so that change is valuable or dangerous (173). Looking at *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* through Kristeva's lens of abjection is worthwhile because the films' preoccupation on bodily gore and hypersexuality ruptures the structures of patriarchy and capitalist, consumerist culture.

### Abjection and the Cartesian Theatre

Additionally, abjection also has the power to disrupt the dichotomy of self/other and what is considered rational and irrational. In the article "Philip K. Dick: Authenticity and Insincerity," author John Huntington argues that from "the

ambiguous, authoritarian father figures who most often appear as corporation executives; to the harried every-man figures trapped in compromises, people or things...are not what they seem" (155). Through abjection, a "rebirth into true knowledge and faith can commence" (Huntington 158). Without abjection as a lens, it would be easy to view *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* as texts promulgating a Cartesian view of the world. As explained by authors Hobson and Friston, "the Cartesian theatre as a metaphor for the virtual reality models that the brain uses to make inferences about the world" is not sufficient (6).

Indeed, their article, "Consciousness, Dreams, and Inference" argues that "our understanding of the brain--mind as a theatre is not Cartesian--in that we renounce dualism" since consciousness is best seen as a bridge between the Cartesian divide of thought and matter (Hobson and Friston 7). Hobson and Friston endeavor to transcend the "homunculus concept inherent in Cartesian dualism" to prove that experience is embodied by the brain (Hobson and Friston 7). In this way, the authors contend, consciousness is related to and not separate from altered states of consciousness so that virtual reality itself is a model of the world which prepares people for interaction in the real world. Indeed, Cartesian dualism ignores the embodied nature of the viewer's response to sensory inputs (11). The interaction of consciousness, unconsciousness, body, and the environment are "motoric" so that virtual realities and the experiences experienced are embodied by changes in representational material states (Hobson and Friston 22).

### Disrupting Mind/Body Dualism

In addition to disrupting mind/body dualism, abjection problematizes the application of theories in the discussion of the appeal of horror in films. In the article "The Naked and the Undead," Cynthia Freeland explains that the appeal of horror is its "orientation to film techniques and its feminism" (433).

Furthermore, Freeland rejects both Marxist ideology and psychoanalysis though she borrows their terminology (433). For Freeland, emotional and cognitive responses to horror are fused to prompt viewers to consider good and evil in the context of "traditional values and gender roles associated with patriarchal institutions" and to examine the "gendered characteristics of heroes and heroines, of victims and victors" (Freeland 434). Freeland's focus is more on horror as a genre--social systems are examined as narrative institutions that remain intact.

For Kristeva, however, feminism in films is not merely an orientation but through abjection, offers a radical departure from patriarchal and gender institutions. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva explains that in film, this departure is important because abjection points out how our "animal, metamorphosed, altered" consciousness and signifiable sense of identity helps people to deal with not only the real horrors of wars but "morality, or politics, or religion, or esthetics...subjectivity or language...nihilism" (208). Here Kristeva shows that objectivity is universal--a horror of fascination that is based on the power of our participation in society, literature, and our most "intimate and most serious

apocalypses" (Kristeva 208). This articulation of people's fascination/aversion to abjection is redolent in the films of Cronenberg.

#### Abjection--Disrupting Class, Gender, and Identity

Drawing on Kristeva and the powers of horror in film, Tina Chanter, author of *The Picture of Abjection* also discusses how the abject in film has the power to disrupt the identification of class, gender and identity--a process that opens alternative views of an otherwise gendered middle-class structure. According to Chanter, the parallel fear and fascination of the abject break dominant and normative representations and assumptions of gender, desire, and the body so that boundaries between object and subject are rendered problematic (3).

Further, because abjection is neither morally good nor bad, "the stability between the self and other, passive and active, private and public, or inside and outside are put into crisis" (Chanter 3). Indeed, Chanter explains that "abjection can be understood as a defense mechanism that protects...against difference, loss, or absence in an attempt to keep outside all that is bad--while keeping inside all that is good" (55). Cronenberg's films, particularly *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ*, share this fascination with the outside and inside of the human body while they ostensibly delineate futures where technology is supposed to distance people from the body.

#### Abjection: Escaping Categorization Through Ambiguity

Although Nicki Brand is murdered, her material death affords her a rebirth as a person who lives on, her image a siren's call made from technology--a

construction that though gendered no longer serves a biological function. Here birth and rebirth are seen when her lips appear on the TV screen in Max Renn's flat: she lures him into the screen, now permeable. Similarly, despite being hunted by penumbral corporate forces, Allegra Geller-- through bioports and technology--is able to find escape in a world of her own design. As explained by Chanter, when beings "approach abjection," the subject gives birth to itself so that "meaning collapses--and has to be reconstructed" (135). It can be argued that since the director of *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* is male, the degree of meaning collapsing and reconstruction taking place remains ambiguous; however, the space for collapse and reconstruction is there since "how viewers position themselves in relation" to characters "will depend in part on how critically they reflect on the heteronormative, binary fantasies that fuel social order," Chanter notes (273).

Indeed, Chanter stresses, even "the director who has organized the framing of the film is not in control of the meaning it takes on for its viewers, even if that director provides for ambiguous readings" (273). In this way, even if Cronenberg acquiesces "to available forms of marginalization, sustained by racist, homophobic, sexist, or classist fantasies," abjection in the films can "intervene in ways that disrupt and reorganize the social fantasies that fuel identifications legitimated by the symbolic order" (Chanter 275). In this way, Chanter argues, "abjection can thus help to reconstitute us, and we can help to reconstitute abjection, in a process that is ongoing--in a process that should remain



contestable, available for scrutiny, and subject to revision" (295). From the VHS video cassette entering the "vagina" in Max Renn's abdomen in *Videodrome*, to the bioports that are attached to the base of the spine in *eXistenZ*, what is evident is that bodies are pliable. Pliability/plasticity is important because it allows for bodies to escape categorization.

In "Staying with the Body," Wolmark explains that the posthuman subjects' cyborg body can be free from categorization because "difference makes them" other than "their nature, their functions and identities" (77). In this way, the posthuman is not defined in terms of fixed characteristics but as a cyborg with a material body that is "inscribed by the historical, social, and cultural practices and representations within which and by which it is constituted" (Wolmark 77). Indeed, whether self giving birth to self as Kristeva and Chanter describe it, or self remaking self, Wolmark explains that the posthuman subject is no longer "sustained by the idea of a fixed and unified self" (78). This is a time of instability so that even with gender, there is a matrix of relations that point to the performative nature of boundaries themselves (79). Accordingly, Wolmark notes, the relationship between the body and cultural identity must be denaturalized (85). Film has the power to "affirm gendered identities at the same time as it mobilizes identifications and desires which undermine the stabilities of such categories" (Wolmark 85). Characters such as Nicki Brand, Max Renn, and Allegra Geller are transgressive, for they exist "in opposition to, and at the margins of, hegemonic cultural constructions of gendered humans" (Wolmark

85). As hybrids/cyborgs, these characters are threatening, Wolmark adds, because "they are embodied subjects that cross boundaries and borders and inhabit a fluid rather than a fixed space" (85). Further, as cyborgs, these characters represent the fusion rather than the separation among technology, science, power, and materiality.

### Identity is Performative

Performance as part of the construction of identity is also discussed in "Performance as Critical Posthuman Pedagogy." According to author Shauna M. MacDonald, "the persona is a site of performance" and the performative constitution of identity (176). As such, rather than reinscribing stereotypes, performance can allow for the "exploration of alternative, imaginary, even mythic selves" (MacDonald 177). When films present complex issues, such as technoscientific bodies and environments, MacDonald explains, posthuman issues such as the embodied nature of science and technology are made "local and relevant" (178). Indeed, the discourse of embodiment and materiality as it questions structures of identity and power will lead to a reshaping of posthuman pedagogy so that as changes occur, the formations of technology, science, and power can be mapped in order to afford everyone equal opportunities (179).

### Embodiment, Materiality, and Technology--Transforming Sexuality and Borders

Embodiment, materiality, and technology are critical because posthumanists see a future where not only the body is transformed but sexuality as well. In "Transcending the Human-Machine Boundary," author Alexander Ornella points

out how posthuman pleasure and sexuality will be affected by technology (321). The blurring of gender roles and sexes suggests that "sexuality is intrinsic to technology and the human-machine relation" so that as people connect their bodies to machines, "they transcend bodily boundaries" (Ornella 321). Ornella states that "posthumanism attempts to improve on a deficient human body" (321). However, the body is still an integral part of technology, sexuality, and human self-understanding (324).

Posthuman sex, as seen in *Videodrome*, is reliant on the brain, device, and body. After Nicki Brand's death, there is no more physical sex though she continues to lure Max Renn into the lurid world of Videodrome. For Allegra Geller, the sex she experiences is in the game world of eXistenZ. While both films offer a posthuman sex that is sterile and "clean," the attendant scenes of gore and violence point to the messiness and physical exploration of a partner's body that are missing with virtual sex. Cronenberg calls this "metaphorical sex," but Ornella argues that this is actual sex since it involves "sexual arousal and the experience of pleasure" (320). Whether metaphorical or actual, the virtual sex in Cronenberg's films, as framed by scenes of bodily gore and violence, show how "the post/human body is a body that erodes the binary and patriarchal understandings of normal-abnormal, natural-artificial and natural-perverted and is shaped, but not identical with, the technological and socio-cultural context it emerges in" (Ornella 325). Accordingly, Ornella notes, the posthuman body is comprised of technology, a screen, a projected image," but it is also "a

contaminated body, a deadly body, a technobody" (325). Once again, rather than a divide, the body and technology work together in order to undermine "existing binaries and power structures" (Ornella 325). However, the danger still exists that technology can be used to "reinforce and reinscribe a binary sex and gender system and contribute to a repressive socio-political system" (Ornella 325). Ornella concludes that bodiless sex may not give the experience of pleasure posthumanists hope for, but what remains important, regardless of the latest form of technology are values such as "trust, spontaneity and freedom which are existential for living together and relating with each other" (327). Indeed, at issue is not just the boundary between the human body and the machine but the body in relation to its environment and other bodies as well.

#### Bodies and Technology--A Physical Relationship

The connection between the body and environment is further discussed in Timo Siivonen's "Cyborgs and Generic Oxymorons." As explained by Siivonen, the relation of bodies and technology involves a tension between the "undecidability" among body, machine, nature, and culture since human experience is defined in terms of people's relationship to technology (228). With technology such as virtual reality and cyberspace, connectivity means being physically attached to the technology. "Modern technology," Siivonen points out, "is no longer an entity discrete from the user, but rather an environment in mutual interaction with human beings" so that being connected means the boundary between human and machine dissolves (228). The tension here is exemplified by

the cyborg body and articulated in science fiction and horror films (228).

Indeed, the cyborg is a hybrid with parts comprised of the mechanical world and the natural world (229). Moreover, the cyborg figure problematizes opposing concepts of human and machine, culture and nature, subject and object (229). However, when the cyborg figure is not enough to interrupt conventional meanings, abjection offers what Siivonen calls a "gothic sensibility" that is marked by paranoia, uncertainty, horror, otherness, alienation, decay, the uncanny, and taboos (232). Here horror in film manipulates the viewer so that the experience is both physical and cognitive (232). While Kristeva and Chanter consider abjection as part of literature, art, religion, and film, Siivonen delineates a difference between science fiction and horror.

#### Science Fiction and Horror--Communities in Disorder

According to Siivonen, both genres deal with individuals and communities in disorder, but science fiction focuses more on the disturbance of civil and social order as a threat to society (233). In contrast, horror is centered more on the individual, in terms of moral questions and threats to nature and home (233). Indeed, the Cronenberg films center on individual experience but in the context of both social and private realms. The mixing of civil with individual creates a space where other characters are frightened and disgusted so that "the mixture of genres brings about new semantic levels" (Siivonen 233). This mixing of genres is salient because technology no longer serves as a sign of the legitimacy of science; instead, technology is characterized as something that results in or

comes in tandem with the abject, plunging characters into experiences fraught with hallucinogenic and uncanny properties. For instance, Max Renn is never quite sure if he is dreaming or awake, even when he kills someone. Further, in *eXistenZ*, Ted Pikul seems to be perpetually confused since he finds it difficult to discern whether his actions are his own or part of the virtual reality game.

#### Leaking Bodies--A Breach in Mind/Body Dualism

With *Videodrome*, Max Renn enters Videodrome by following Nicki Brand's voice into the television set. Later, he inserts and removes a pistol from a fissure in his abdomen. Similarly, Allegra Geller and Ted Pikul are connected to *eXistenZ* via bioports. These examples show how technology is supposed to provide experiences where characters transcend the body, giving them new abilities and capacities. According to Siivonen, however, this situation results in a contradiction because it renders what is unnatural natural, "reducing the body to the Cartesian tradition of rational thinking" (235). Here abjection represents a breach in mind/body and body/technology dualism because without the body, there would be no way to access technology. Further, the leaking body points to the breakdown of the masculine attempt to "replace feminine biological reproduction with technological reproduction" (Siivonen 235). With abjection, the borders between the "rational," as represented by the male and the biological (female) are broken (Siivonen 235).

Accordingly, when borders between gender and technology are disrupted, the individual's sense of identity is likewise redefined so that information and codes

regarding roles and manners of behavior, produced by technology are questioned, Siivonen explains (237). Furthermore, in horror films, the relationship between the body and technology form what Siivonen terms a "dark rhetoric of gothic horror" (237). Here abjection is proof that the body is "natural" (237). Moreover, when "gothic horror," is included with science fiction, the author notes, it problematizes "the culturalist discourse of" technology's being able to solve "culture's problems" (Siivonen 237). In this way, abjection explodes the "harmony of the masculine" because the body (nature) threatens the masculine and its reliance on science and "vagueness," resulting in a feminine autonomy (Siivonen 238).

#### Cartesian Corporeality--A Fissure

A significant component of the male/female and body/technology binary is hinged on Cartesian corporeality, which "abides by the logic of traditional masculine rationality" (Siivonen 238). Abjection causes a fissure in Cartesian corporeality because it brings attention back to the body. Abjection allows for "new meanings to the system of sexual difference embedded in the body," Siivonen argues, since the body "is a representation which may be molded, if necessary, into any form--also into a form with no more gender" (238). Here abjection and the cyborg are critical; even if *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* reinscribe gender inequities and stereotypes, abjection in the films changes the structuring of the masculine subject position. According to Siivonen, abjection "questions the determinism and the self-evident nature of rational and masculine culture by

incorporating into the narrative elements referring to the irrational vagueness" (238). Because abjection is not gendered, it has the power to make vague--gender systems and power relations--dominant culture, making it "impure or dirty" (Siivonen 239). Consequently, abjection in films complicates power dynamics because it presents the subject in a new way (241).

Additionally, Siivonen explains that there needs to be an awareness of the biological body and technology because the danger of reducing the body to "living material abstracted" to its organs and functions erases the body (241). According to Siivonen, "masculinist, anti-essentialist technology effaces the concrete body and the sexual difference associated with it as an unhistorical, industrial product" (241). In contrast, feminists such as Kristeva argue that abjection allows for new interpretations of the concept of nature (240).

Accordingly, abjection in films questions gender dynamics because it forces the reconceptualization of the human/technology discourse (241). Importantly, Siivonen stresses, abjection disrupts power dynamics and raises questions regarding their construction, but abjection and the trope of the cyborg are not about giving solutions (241). Rather, Siivonen notes, "it is important to note that undecideability is not just powerlessness--it is also the knowledge that all solutions are without foundation. Thus it is also the awareness that there is no foundation for the solutions brought about by the cyborg body" (241). This awareness can only happen when the disappearing body/technology binary is interrupted. Moreover, the way people think about the body, technology, and



computer-mediated communication must move away from Cartesian mind-body dualism in order to conceptualize posthuman experiences with technology as being embodied.

### Revaluing Embodied Experiences

In his review of N. Katherine Hayles' *How We Became Posthuman*, Thomas Foster lauds Hayles for delineating the "potential that postmodern technocultures possess for revaluing embodied experiences rather than just fantasizing about their obsolescence" (618). According to Foster, the concept of the posthuman centers on Hayles' definition of embodiment as being part of social interaction that is mediated technologically (618). In other words, subjectivity is predicated on a subject's relation to self--at the same time, this experience is mediated by technology (618). Foster points out that Hayles views the tension between the abstract concept of "the body" as a site for cultural identities and the "rejection of 'the body' as ground to shade into a rejection of the determining power and meaning of embodiment" as a discourse on determining power and meaning of embodiment that requires new ways of talking about the body so that the discussion is responsive to its construction "as discourse" while not being "trapped in it" (619). Accordingly, abjection in *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* are such moments because the bodies of the characters leak and ooze; their lovemaking clumsy and messy; the violence, likewise, is biological and redolent with fluids that threaten both disease and death.

This focused attention on the body in tandem with discourses/structures of

power, both private and political, is a response to the construction of power and meaning so that embodiment is comprised of the somatic and technological. Consequently, abjection brings back into existence the erasure of embodiment, which Foster explains cybernetics has the potential to "blur the boundaries between bodies and technology" (620). For instance, when Max Renn places a VHS cassette into a gaping fissure in his abdomen, this is a moment of embodiment, not erasure. Abjection reminds the viewer that "embodiment is back in the picture without returning the body to its ideological function as a secure ontological ground" (Foster 620). Further, when Ted Pikul is fitted for a bioport in his spine, there is fetishistic detail to how the body looks and responds to the procedure--references are made to how such a port can be both infected and the agent of infection. Here body and technology work together--without the body there can be no port; in contrast, without technology, there would be no heightened experience.

Moreover, in *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ*, embodiment is salient because it also points to gender relations--Nicki Brand's face and body are hypersexualized on the TV screen, yet her function as a biological woman no longer exists. With *eXistenZ*, however, Allegra Geller renaturalizes her body and subjectivity. As designer of the game, she has the power to push both cultural representations and scientific/political paradigms, yet she chooses to reinscribe male/female binaries by making herself a seductive figure. Does this reinscription restore, as Foster notes, "the complexity of the relationship between pattern and presence,

inscription and incorporation, denaturalization or erasure of embodiment" or does it disrupt dualism by "mapping more complex relationships between materiality and information?" (626). Indeed, either way, Foster argues, the potential is there for viewers to "reimagine and redefine both embodiment and information" so that the relationship is tangled with and not free from materiality (627). Drawing on both Hayles and Haraway, Foster stresses that posthumans must embrace possibility over fantasy--rather than picturing technology as an unlimited power granting disembodied immortality--there needs to be an interplay among information patterns, material objects, reality, and virtuality as an embodied process that resists division (628).

#### Embodiment and Information--A Contextual Discourse

In this way, embodiment and information are at their best when they are part of a discourse that is contextual "and enmeshed within the specifics of place, time, physiology, and culture, which together compose enactment" so that even sex and gender become part of embodiment (Foster 630). Here abjection is key because moments of gratuitous sex, violence, and gore are gender free--the body is reduced to mechanical parts that leak, breakdown, explode, and spew liquids. Viewed this way, abjection in Cronenberg's films can be seen as a way to understand the interplay between the body and its technological mediation (631). As a rhetorical device, abjection allows for the grotesque to shock viewers back into consciousness. With the shock comes awareness followed by responsiveness.

Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., author of the article "On the Grotesque in Science Fiction," calls this response to the grotesque "an acute responsiveness to the objects of the world, the testing (often involuntary) of the categories conventionally used to interpret the world, and the desire to articulate what consciousness finds inarticulable" (71). Csicsery-Ronay, Jr.'s discussion of people's fascination/repulsion/attraction with the grotesque is precisely what Kristeva terms abjection's *jouissance*--a pleasure found in the rupture of the sense of the rational and natural categorization of the world. This rupture, Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. explains, "suspends one's confidence in knowledge about the world, and to attempt to redefine the real in thought's relation to nature" (71). Indeed, with the interjection of abjection in texts, the boundaries among the body/experience, subjectivity, advances in technology and engineering and digitization collapse since each is part of "a complex of events" including concepts of "the body-politic, the nation, the state, race, gender, the family, the ego, the organism, and the real," Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. argues (74).

Importantly, Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., warns, the figure of the cyborg can carry with it "the disembodied conception of 'the body'" which can lead to the "construction of new bodies" turned into "fetish objects" (76). Alternatively, the grotesque--abjection--"arises with the perception that something is illegitimately in something else" (Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. 77). When the body bleeds or bodily fluids ooze, the cyborg is no longer perfect, no longer stable--its orientation and relationship to the world is problematized (76). For instance, when a character is

shot and his head explodes, sending blood and brain matter across the screen, this is a moment where the unconscious "pierces into consciousness," Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., explains (77).

#### Abjection--Disordering Order

Accordingly, scenes of abjection force the viewer into moments "at the margin of consciousness between the known and the unknown, the perceived and the unperceived, calling into question the adequacy of our ways of organizing the world" (Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. 77). Feminists such as Kristeva revel in such moments--what has been structured and orderly is rendered "a jumble of disparate elements" so that the abnormal, unformed, degenerate, and low mix, threatening "categorical containments" regarding scientific truth, aesthetic concepts, and systems of power (Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. 81). The abject makes unstable notions of sex and gender because despite the assumptions regarding men and women, they all die--with this similarity as a moment of resistance, the attention given to the body and its falling apart serves as a mirror for the chaos that can result in the world (81). According to Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., "the grotesque impales us on the present moment, emptying the past and forestalling the future" (78). The focus on the moment allows the self to remake the self, as Kristeva and Chanter argue, since what is real is rendered fluid rather than fixed (80).

#### Rebirth--Self Giving Birth to Self

The self remaking the self is evident in *Videodrome* when Nicki Brand dies

and is "reborn" in *Videodrome*, the cable feed program which depicts her torture. For Max Renn, he is reborn when he crawls into the television set, into Nicki Brand's lips--a graphic reordering of the birth process. In addition, Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., explains that often, in the films of David Cronenberg "the assumption at the outset is that the flesh is furious at its containment and will somehow, sometime, find a means for releasing itself even from the body's tyranny" (82). This containment of self and body can be extended to the body and the tyranny of technology. According to Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., "the organic imposes on the contemplating subject, with its associations of messy birth, uncontrollable body functions, inevitable openness to disease, and the dim awareness of a complex, unconscious interiority that can only be imagined tactilely" because the abject is free from laws (84). This tactile understanding of the interior is a reading that lifts both *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* from being read as films directed by a male director who merely reinscribes stereotypes and gender inequalities. "The guiding principle of David Cronenberg's films," Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., argues, is that corporeal metamorphosis is linked to vulnerability caused by the penetration of technology on the human subject (86).

Like Kristeva, Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., traces the grotesque to dark spaces, uncontrollable and "juicy exchanges that occur in the female body in menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth," juxtaposing the messy and "natural" with the "phallographic" male's sense of order and consistency so that when abjection is introduced, there is "changeability" and "undependability" (Csicsery-

Ronay, Jr. 87). Consequently, Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., adds, because abjection causes "interiors to flow out onto others," it disorients both male characters and power dynamics because "male science fiction bodies are made vulnerable to penetration and contamination" (87). This penetration and contamination include Max Renn and Ted Pikul. Also, this process of the interior becoming tactile through penetration points to the cyborg's need to abandon an inferior body. As seen in *Videodrome* and *The Fly*, this decomposition of the body, "by analogy," Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., notes, is a nod to the "decomposition of the solid bourgeois scientific sense of the separation of mind from embodiment" (88). According to Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., Kristeva's theories on abjection and horror stem from psychoanalytic theories of patriarchal indoctrination that structures the world to serve phallographic interests (95). Consequently, the degree to which *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* serve to disrupt traditional representations of systems of power is contestable. Further, the extent to which the films mirror Cronenberg's unconscious fantasies regarding said representations remains ambiguous.

#### Abjection--Phallographic Interest or Merely Violence?

Because Kristeva's theories on abjection focus on horror and the leaking body as moments to examine the blurring of borders between self/other, male/female, and body/technology, it can be argued that the violence and gore in *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* are no more than just examples of excess intended to attract phallographic interests. In *The Economist's* article "Videodrome," violence in movies has increased steadily for more than 30 years (73). For example, Japan

is "famous for its nasty pornographic films and comics and gory cartoons, yet it suffers less than other rich countries from violence" ("*Videodrome*" 73). The violence depicted in these films is seldom discussed in terms of being a catalyst for analysis of patriarchal indoctrination. Indeed, is violence, the grotesque, and abjection just what they appear and nothing else--media violence linked to real violence with the potential to increase aggressive behavior in viewers? (74). The link between media violence and the representation of reality is a hallmark of Cronenberg's films. As explained by Robert Fiander, author of the article "At the Movies," films such as *eXistenZ* delineate how technology is an extension of the human body (43). Here Fiander defines "media" as "a blanket term referring to all extensions of the human body via technology and invention" (43). For example, while some characters are fitted with bioborts, others don head gear.

Additionally, Fiander references *Videodrome* by quoting the character Brian Oblivion, a media theorist--"TV is reality and reality is less than TV" (43). Both *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* deal with virtual reality, raising the question of what exactly is "reality" (43). Additionally, what is real and virtual are intertwined with media since media "are extensions of experience," Fiander notes (44). In this way, reality and technology are mediated, becoming bodily extensions because how people think and act are conditioned. According to Fiander, hardware and software media comprise "material self-extensions, from clothes to books to television" (44). Moreover, software includes people's "ideological, social, and intellectual ways of interpreting the world" (Fiander 44). Taking into consideration



this mediation of self, materiality, and ways of interpreting the world, *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* raise the question of the difference between life and virtual when the transition from one to the other is indiscernable. Indeed, can even the experience of death itself be mediated? (45). For this reason, Fiander notes, Cronenberg chose "eXistenZ" as the title for his 1999 film because "the discovery that one will not live forever is the basis of all existential thought" (45). Accordingly, the scenes of abjection in the film bring attention to social, ideological, and personal influences.

#### Technology--Bodily and Mental Capabilities

As explained by Fiander, abjection in film forces the viewer to recognize that technology is "an image of bodily and mental capabilities. Refusing to acknowledge precisely how technology conditions the way we do things creates the danger of losing whatever control we think we have over our own hardware and software media" (44). Technology as an image of bodily and mental capabilities is exemplified in *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* through Cronenberg's fusion of the two: Max Renn enters a TV set; he places a VHS cassette into his body; Allegra Geller's virtual reality technology is made from animal organs; to play *eXistenZ*, players must be fitted with a bioport at the base of their spines. Viewers are made aware that Max Renn, Nicki Brand, Allegra Geller, and Ted Pikul are plunged into adventures where terror and pleasure, life and virtual are mediated by technology, but it is not always clear if the action is present or pre-programmed (45). Consequently, what is reality is rendered "bogus" and

"authentic" at the same time, Fiander adds (45). For instance, viewers are conscious of the fact that they are supposed to react to scenes of horror--these are achieved through special effects, music, camera shots (51). Abjection, Fiander explains, "taps into our hard-wired instinctive fears" (51). However, "there is no achievement of a 'real' presence" since the audience has only the horrified reactions of characters, marketing, lighting, and "supposed plausibility of the events" as they unfold, Fiander notes (51).

With *eXistenZ*, the special effects are especially bogus so that it is ambiguous whether viewers are meant to participate/empathize "with the 'reality' of other people via the illusion that they are watching the 'real' thing" (Fiander 50). Indeed, though abjection in *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* allows for a questioning of gender binaries, other issues arise--"existential resonance," Fiander argues, is coupled with "technological hypnosis" so that viewers become "immunized" to moments of "uncertainty" (52). Ultimately, is abjection lost to viewers as moments of uncertainty since Cronenberg's sensibilities/proclivities for existentialism are at risk of being lost to special effects and his awareness of film in relation to emergent virtual reality technologies? Regardless of Cronenberg's intent, the films illustrate what happens when technology is introduced--there is a direct impact on both the body and the minds of the characters. In the article "Information and Entropy," author Nick Redfern stresses that Cronenberg's films "describe the evolution of a system from a state of order to a state of chaos" (7). Viewed in this way, abjection is apropos in analyzing the nature of a system's

order and resulting chaos.

### Abjection/Technology--Order and Chaos/Inclusion and Exclusion

According to Redfern, *Videodrome* is most concerned with the struggle to gain control of information (8). Virtual reality is used by those in power to "control society by imposing a false and parasitic control mechanism" (Redfern 8). This mechanism is the cable-feed program "Videodrome." Spectacular Optical uses the media of cable television to "get inside" Max Renn; Nicki Brand is also seduced by Videodrome and is used to seduce him. The feelings of paranoia and conspiracy are themes presented in *eXistenZ* as well. In both films, a scientist is at the center of the conspiracy: in *Videodrome*, the scientist is Professor O'Blivion; in *eXistenZ*, the "scientist" is Allegra Geller. Redfern points out that conspiracy to control "is the power to feed information to the receiver" so that technology becomes a biologic mutation based on inclusion and exclusion (10). The host/parasite binary opposition, Redfern notes, "is founded upon the control of the information that allows us to define our position in relation to the medium" (10). As Max Renn is pulled deeper and deeper into the world of Videodrome, he loses his grip on reality. Consequently, viewers are left without a determined position as well since they too must grapple with what is reality versus what is on television. Here the control of information is withheld from both Max Renn and viewers, resulting in chaos, which is a state when people lack information to understand the "underlying order" (Redfern 11).

Abjection in *Videodrome* serves as a "reflection" on basic reality, Redfern

argues. Also, abjection "masks and perverts a basic reality" so that it is its own "simulacrum" bearing no relation to reality (Redfern 13). Moreover, Max Renn's hallucinations further "pervert" reality so that what is real and television become confused. This sense of confusion is exemplified in the sex scene between Max Renn and Nicki Brand--what starts out in his apartment is mixed with Videodrome. Here fantasy/hallucination/reality coalesce and then are explained by the video messages of Professor O'Blivion, who states that reality "is already half video hallucination" (14). Reality as video hallucination is made literal when Max Renn's TV becomes flesh. From the sex scene with Nicki Brand, Max Renn begins a killing spree where he kills several characters and even "sees" himself committing suicide. In one scene, Max is fitted with a helmet similar to the "gastropod" helmets in *eXistenZ*. This helmet is supposed to separate reality from hallucination. However, as the film progresses, the division is disrupted. The reasons why Max Renn kills are not clear. Additionally, Redfern explains, "the sub-plot of television as a cathartic outlet for sex and violence is ignored" (17). Accordingly, abjection as a moment of uncertainty for analysis is likewise suspect since psychological motivation for characters' actions are forgotten (17).

#### Abjection: Subject Matter and Style in Chaos

According to Redfern, *Videodrome* is a film where subject matter and style are structured by chaos (18). Indeed, Redfern explains, "the narrative system of *Videodrome* and the body of Max Renn are simultaneously and symbiotically types of 'biologic theatre'" so that the film can be divided into states of order,

disruption of order, a process of evolution, and "the emergence of something new into the environment" (19). Is this something new a state where returning to the initial state of order is problematized or impossible? Is this destabilization of order what Kristeva hopes for? The answers remain ambiguous as it is up to the viewer to decide. Like *Videodrome*, *eXistenZ* focuses on viewers' ontological relationship to the media and different forms of realism where rules are fuzzy, objectives unclear, and the world in chaos. "I don't know what's going on," Ted Pikul says.

Indeed, *eXistenZ* complicates the notion of reality even more since the film has characters whose roles serve several interests; there are double agents, triple agents, game characters, workers in trout farms, and "real people" (21). By the end of *eXistenZ*, it is revealed that throughout the whole film, Allegra Geller was only playing a part. In fact, she is not the real designer of *eXistenZ* at all. This relationship between a creator and his/her work and the nature of reality juxtaposed with technology is part of Cronenberg's oeuvre. In the article "Thou, the Player of the Game, art God," author Mark Browning explains that Cronenberg prefers protagonists who "shape their own reality" as this adds to "the spectrum of their analysis" (1). With *eXistenZ*, Browning argues, Cronenberg is drawn to the "artificiality of art, not its ability to mimic the world around it" (1). As compared to another film dealing with virtual reality at the time--*The Matrix*--*eXistenZ*'s special effects are not state of the art. This decision, Browning notes, was intentional, for Cronenberg wants to explore "artifice" in art. Accordingly,

viewers are never sure whether the main action is in the game world or not (2).

### Film Characters--Mere Possessions of the Director

Adding to the sense of confusion is Allegra Geller. While Kristeva's theory on abjection can point to Allegra Geller's rescripting of herself from, as Browning explains, "a barely articulate wallflower in real life into a devastatingly sexy action babe in *eXistenZ* life" as disrupting the male/female power binary, by reinscribing herself in the same heteronormative stereotype, it is not Allegra Geller who has "rescripted herself but Cronenberg," Browning argues (3). Indeed, Browning notes that Allegra Geller's "recast in the guise of a cartoonish, games character for a predominantly male adolescent market" is Cronenberg's "foregrounding" as "the creative presence behind the narrative" so that all the characters are "mere possessions" of the director (3). Ultimately, Browning adds, it is clear that Cronenberg is aware of the relationship between film and video since the oblique narrative and its "is it real or the game" confusion push the viewer toward repeat viewings of the film. Cronenberg is not interested in analyzing human nature or systems of power as much as revealing "the mechanisms of storytelling," Browning explains (6). According to Browning, *eXistenZ* "articulates how we willfully indulge in illusion" (6). Regardless of directorial intrusion, Cronenberg's films also articulate how abjection and illusion respond to ruptures in patriarchal structures of roles regarding power and gender in postmodern society.

The attitudes regarding sexual practices and gender are further discussed in Martin Ham's article "Excess and Resistance in Feminised Bodies" (1). Ham

posits that rigid social restrictions regarding traditional, conservative, and normative values have eroded so that patriarchal constructions of the female sexual personality have likewise been challenged (1). Accordingly, challenges to patriarchal systems of power "defy the boundaries that were set for it in the past; sexuality has become part of life," creating a "new climate of sexual uncertainty" (Ham 1). Viewed in this way, Cronenberg's films offer more than directorial intrusion of normative values since abjection/perversion has the power to be offensive, "provoke, captivate, and stimulate" beyond heterosexual copulation (Ham 1). Indeed, though Nicki Brand and Allegra Geller are seductive figures, their sexuality is not based on biological function but as "creative expression, political manoeuvre, and gestures of power," Ham argues (1). With "Videodrome," a cable-feed program, a television signal causes its viewers to develop brain tumors and experience hallucinations where they engage in depraved sex and commit murders. Behind this technology is the Spectacular Optical Corporation, which plans to "infect" the viewing public in order to control people through subliminal messages.

#### Abjection: The Viewer and the Viewed without Mediation

*Videodrome* starts with Max Renn, a co-director of a small cable television, who taps into "Videodrome's" signal and wants to carry the program for his station. Up until this point, Max Renn has provided soft-core pornography. With "Videodrome," he is able to offer not only sex but torture and sadomasochism. According to Ham, pornography is not defined as "graphic depictions of sexual

acts," but a relationship where "the viewer and viewed" become completely "transparent, without mediation" (2). Whereas pornography "conceals its representation" through "raising the visibility of the most powerful images towards the points of maximum proximity and exhaustion," Ham explains, Max Renn endeavors to make the pornographic meditation of images transparent (3). Max Renn feels that with "Videodrome," the "hyperreal" presented by pornography is ruptured because the program offers "snuff films." Snuff films are films where people are tortured and then supposedly killed "for real." Here abjection interrupts and complicates even pornography because what is imaginary and fantasy literally come to an end.

According to Ham, "Videodrome's" power over Max Renn is pivotal because "it hints at the power of the film's character to dictate the version of sexuality that he thinks is most apposite, consequently negating all other models, to the people of his audience" (2). Is this too much power to endow a sleazy television official? Ham stresses that Max Renn is the "ideal" character since he has the power to make "image come to possess the voluminosity and texture of flesh" (3). To make real from the flat image of the television screen, Max Renn delivers not the suspension of reality but the suspension of viewers' "disbelief" (4). Ham calls this suspension a delusion since Max Renn defines transparency via raw experience (5). "Max cannot comprehend this incursion of the real into the sphere of representation, despite the notion that it is his own agenda to initiate this process," Ham explains (5). Here abjection is important because Max Renn's



hallucinations and spasms "intersect" reality, imagination, and representation so that by giving images a corporeal effect on the flat television screen, psychological and physiological experiences are rendered literal.

#### Abjection--Psychological, Physiological, Philosophical

As explained by Ham, "the television screen is the retina of the mind's eye. Therefore, the television screen is part of the physical structure of the brain" and thus technology is an embodied experience (7). With abjection, this experience affects the viewer in a physical and philosophical sense: Ham points out that the binary of production as a masculine enterprise and seduction as feminine is complicated, bringing attention to Freud's claim that "there is but one sexuality, one libido--and it is masculine...with the female being entirely absorbed by the male" (7). Indeed, abjection interrupts the construction of surface appearances and truth, making them unreliable. Nicki Brand is a good example because she is the aggressive one; she initiates sex with Max Renn by asking to view his collection of pornography. When she asks him about "Videodrome," he says, "torture and murder." Nicki Brand's response is "sounds great." Here the sexual power dynamic is remapped so that "boundaries, stratified arrangements, and the impression of precise organisation" are reversed (Ham 8). She absorbs Max Renn--in this way, libido is not masculine. Furthermore, abjection--in the scenes of Nicki Brand's torture--shows how she not only is sexual minus biological function but comes to be "reborn" as sexual energy without a body so that even after her physical death, her image continues to seduce Max Renn further into

the lurid world of "Videodrome."

Abjection in *Videodrome* is also seen in the objectification of the sexual other, Ham adds. Most striking is the scene in which Nicki Brand's image is reduced to a pair of lips that take over the entire television screen. She beckons Max Renn to come hither and enter the screen. The TV set ripples, breathes, and swells. As Max Renn caresses the sides of the television, he sticks his head into the glass of the TV. In another scene, a VHS videocassette breathes, swells, and comes to life. The reverse "birth" of Max Renn entering the television set and VHS cassette coming to life subvert normative/biological notions of birth and complicate Max Renn's conceit that he is able "to remain autonomous and objective in both the sexual and professional spheres of his life," Ham points out (8). Importantly, because Max Renn finds sexual stimulation in "unorthodox sexual stimuli," desire via abjection comes "to evade all its previous 'masculine' confinements" (Ham 9). What is problematic, however, is that while Max Renn is able to escape confinement, Nicki Brand is consumed by sexual energy.

This escape from the masculine allows Max Renn to move toward more "feminine" and multiple forms of sexualities, Ham argues (9). No where is this new feminine multiplicity of sexuality more evident than when Max Renn finds a "vaginal" orifice in his abdomen (9). Ultimately, as the protagonist, Max Renn is able to navigate his new found feminized sexualities because they are part of and not a departure from the masculinist structure of power established in *Videodrome*. As such, Nicki Brand is only able to escape her biological definition

as a woman but is rendered hypersexualized, a figure of seduction and sexual energy so strong it kills her.

#### Abjection--Bridging the Mental and the Somatic

Similar to *Videodrome*, *eXistenZ* also deals with the postmodern issues of technology, information, communication, and biotechnologies, but it addresses the effects of new interactive media on human reality and individual fantasies. In the article "Becoming Inorganic," author Teresa de Lauretis argues that *eXistenZ* documents "the history of our present. It shows us the cinema in its two fold aspect of virtual reality and bio technology" (547). According to de Lauretis, *eXistenZ* bridges "the mental and the somatic" because it shows how biotechnology becomes the interface "of mind and body that produces a third conceptual category, the human psyche, and thus the human's psychic reality," making human reality virtual (547). Indeed, de Lauretis sees capital production and technological development as part of a process of creative destruction, similar to Freud's death drive.

For Kristeva, this death drive and abjection work together; in modern society, de Lauretis explains, the drive to create and preserve is joined by "a contrary psychic force," which "disjoins and dissolves" (548). Drawing on Foucault, Lacan, and Freud, de Lauretis posits that *eXistenZ* is Cronenberg's attempt to create an allegory "of creative destruction in postmodernity" where the death drive is not biological but a psychic one, "signifying relations between the subject and the other" in order to explain the pace of economic growth coupled with technological

innovations (548). This growth, de Lauretis argues, is a growth characterized by creative destruction (549). For Kristeva, abjection is a moment that separates people from this destruction, and through art--film, literature, religion--there is the power to purify and cleanse the destruction.

This destruction is linked with technological progress. In *eXistenZ*, abjection is part of the technology--much like the swelling television set and VHS videocassette in *Videodrome*, the bioport is a socket that is surgically installed into the lower back. The bioport is needed to connect to the "eXistenZ" game module--a device that is both electronic and organic. "eXistenZ" is a game that gives its players a portal to virtual reality. The game requires no hardware, no computer, and unlike "Videodrome," no screen of any kind. As described by de Lauretis, "the software--soft to the touch, quivers, with a fleshly exterior in the shape of a grotesque living organ, suggestive of a uterus with teats and nipples" (557). "eXistenZ" is downloaded into the player's body through the bioport. In both *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ*, de Lauretis notes, "the very explicit foregrounding of the body as flesh, as a layer of sensory receptors where external stimuli and internal organs interface through natural or prosthetic orifices, is a recurrent theme" (558). The bioport and "vaginal" orifice in Max Renn's abdomen are undeniably sexual in nature.

#### Abjection--A New Sexual Economy of the Human Body

However, in *eXistenZ*, de Lauretis points out, the bioport is "both receptacle and porthole, socket and port, a two-way, interactive, living channel and the

body's most blatantly erogenous zone" (559). Allegra Geller is often depicted caressing her pod; indeed, in a sex scene between Allegra Geller and Ted Pikul, de Lauretis adds, the "bioport has taken over the erogenous functions of both anus and vagina, of which it is not a metaphor but a replacement" (559). Here abjection is key because the fetishistic attention given to the details of the bioport and pod "signal a new sexual economy of the human body" (de Lauretis 559). As in *Videodrome*, the female characters are more sexually aggressive than the male--Nicki Brand seduces Max Renn farther and farther into "Videodrome" while Allegra Geller "fits" Ted Pikul with a bioport--a scene de Lauretis deems "halfway between a rite of initiation and a rape" (558). Both Nicki Brand and Allegra Geller articulate that "real" life is filled with ennui, while the worlds of "Videodrome" and "eXistenZ" make sex and experiences come to life. De Lauretis explains, "without a bioport, sex is not viable, the senses are dull (as is the imagination), and life is plain boring" (559). Unlike Nicki Brand, however, Allegra Geller is the protagonist of *eXistenZ*, and as such, like Max Renn, is given agency to navigate all the new complexities of sexual desire as afforded by biotechnology.

Allegra Geller is not merely a devotee of technology; she is the designer of "eXistenZ." She is the "Game-Pod Goddess" and will download the game into players' bodies. The dynamics of power have shifted--in *Videodrome*, Max Renn is the minor executive of a TV station, and Nicki Brand is a reporter. Clearly, Max Renn is the one with the power; though he may suffer hallucinations, he is the one given the weapons while Nicki Brand is whipped and beaten. With *eXistenZ*,

Allegra Geller is in control. Even when she is in pursuit by agents of Antenna Research, as the designer, she has the know-how and the support of her fans. In contrast, Ted Pikul is the supporting character--the Nicki Brand to Max Renn. Unlike Nicki Brand, however, Ted Pikul does not seduce Allegra Geller--she is both designer and seducer. Once again, the power dynamics in *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* complicate Freud's theory that libido is masculine. Because some of the technology in *eXistenZ* is manufactured from amphibians, de Lauretis points out, the "sublime sex" achieved in the game is "followed by death both in the traditional form of fanatical murder and political assassination by commandos, as well as in the new technology form of creative destruction" (560). In this way, *eXistenZ* is a game of sex and death, de Lauretis argues (562). *Videodrome* is also a game of sex and death; however, with *Videodrome*, Max Renn is not the designer; his attempts at making reality transparent fail. In contrast, Allegra Geller is at her best when she can "deform reality" (de Lauretis 563).

#### Abjection--Deforming "Reality"

Cronenberg achieves this state of deformed reality or virtual reality by using the trope of a game within a game within a game (564). According to de Lauretis, "reality is at least four times removed and ever more elusive" (564). This changing and unreliable structure mirrors what de Lauretis explains are the "current views of economic reality that maintain technological innovation which do not merely replace the old with new but causes the old to adapt or to mutate" (564). In *eXistenZ*, this can be seen when the film shifts from one level of

"eXistenZ" to another; the scenes "skip" so that the order is not chronological but "serial," de Lauretis adds (564). Here the connection between economics and film show how old social values become mutated under the impact of technology and innovation so that "reality" is adaptive (565). As part of this mutating or adaptive process, old-fashioned notions of gender are shown to coexist under a new gender economy, de Lauretis stresses (565). Allegra Geller controls the majority of the action of both the film and her game. Additionally, the bioport is a large part of this gender economy since it runs on the energy of the human body--specifically, de Lauretis notes, sexual or psychic energy (566). Importantly, the bioport has also replaced the erogenous functions of both the anus and vagina (566). Here abjection is critical because the threat of infection is ever present, bringing attention to the fact that the bioport--a newly engineered external sexual organ which functions as both penis and uterus--"nulls and voids all our current sexual identities--male, female, hetero, homo, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, and queer" de Lauretis explains (566).

De Lauretis is quick to caution that the new sexual economy does not replace the old sexual economy proposed by Freud since the old provides both logic and context for the new (567). Accordingly, de Lauretis argues, both Freud and Cronenberg do not view sexuality as "a function of anatomy or biology but a product of fantasy" (567). In *Videodrome*, the most intense sex scenes are filmed through a cloud of hallucination; with *eXistenZ*, the sex scenes take place in the game, with the bodies of the players prostrate on the bed. Indeed, Cronenberg's

films show, de Lauretis explains, "that the sexual drive does not originate in the physical body as such but in the psychic structure of fantasy" (567). This is an important distinction since abjection complicates the nature of the pleasure derived from fantasy. This is made apparent in the narrative structure of *eXistenZ*: at the beginning of the film, a player tries to kill Allegra Geller; there are other murders of characters and animals. According to de Lauretis, "these are less fantasies of creation than fantasies of destruction" (567). Moreover, the themes of disease and infection are presented in tandem with the narrative of sex. Here contamination--abjection--points to the effects of a destructive drive. Both *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* bring technology back to the body, even as the narratives use technology to distance "sexuality from the body, from anatomy, from gender, from reproduction," de Lauretis notes (568). As fantasies of destruction, de Lauretis adds, the films articulate the sense that no good can come from technology since it does not "lead to greater social wealth and a better human community" (568). Here Kristeva would disagree because sex and death need not mean the end of social wealth; rather, the death of old traditions of sex, gender, and power dynamics would give rise to new forms of sex and relations between people.

#### Technology--Giving Rise to New Forms of Relations Between People

In order for new forms of sexuality and relations among people to happen, new technologies that better address the need for connection--rather than a retreat into fantasy--must be developed. Nathan Cochrane's article "I Compute,



therefore I am," addresses this issue. According to Cochrane, "the ability to create better and faster computers in the Olympiad of science is hitting a glass ceiling. It is no longer a question of physics--the ability to ever more quickly push electrical impulses along a pathway is insufficient" (34). Indeed, technology must be able to transcend into "metaphysics to solve more complex computational problems," Cochrane argues (34). Technology of the future must be able to grapple with issues regarding the role of God, the emotions, and other "human" paradoxes, Cochrane adds (34). Computers of the future will not merely serve humans but be able to "think, deduce, and program themselves," and they will have what Cochrane calls a moral framework (34). This moral framework, or cyber self-consciousness, Cochrane stresses, is evident in Cronenberg's *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* since these films deal with the inter-relationships between people and technology (34). Rather than a prediction, however, Cochrane calls *eXistenZ* a farce: "what becomes of intelligences trapped in a world with no moral compass, no belief system?" (34). The answer is rather bleak because Cronenberg's films offer narrow possibilities--the technology merely does the bidding of its creator.

*Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* show how technology embedded in the body blurs the lines between humanity and technology (35). Will this relationship affirm humanity or move away from it so that concepts of good and evil are lost to the appetites of people who design technology? According to Cochrane, "we may want to embed in computers a concept of good and evil to keep them on the

straight and narrow" (35). This path on the straight and narrow will need to include religion since artificial intelligence "may bring something like a cyber soul to computers" (Cochrane 35). This ability for technology to think for itself once "embedded in our bodies," Cochrane explains, will erode the barriers between man and machine to "the point of irrelevance" (35). Further, research being done at Genobyte, a United States company working with Japanese researchers, is working on the first artificial life form with its own brain (36). By 2015, the researchers will produce a brain based on human chromosomes, which can solve simple problems in seconds (36). Looking farther into the future, a "hive mind" is being developed (36). With the hive mind, everyone on Earth will be unified by a consciousness that is linked to an artificial system (36). Clearly, technology is moving forward at such a pace that film is merely able to hint at, make assumptions, and predict the outcomes for people as they deal with what it means to be human in a time of technological, corporate, political, and social changes.

When the technology becomes superior to the human, rendering people more like machines, "what is it that makes us unique?" Cochrane asks (36). Indeed, abjection in film reminds the viewer that there needs to be a symbiotic relationship between people and technology. The body is fragile, subject to disease and infection, yet the body is needed in order to access technology. Rather than disparate entities, the body and technology comprise an embodied experience that points to the thought that "humans throughout our history have

praised the primacy of Man over all others. And core to this notion is the belief in an immortal soul" (Cochrane 36). *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* provide powerful examples of what might happen if technology is created without "the distilled goodness of the best of us" since such creations reinscribe inequities and prejudices of heteronormative and corporate culture (36).

Abjection in *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* brings attention back to the body so that heteronormative and corporate structures can be redefined. According to Cochrane, "to make better machines, we may need to become better humans" (36). Being better humans means moving beyond traditional binaries of gender and power so that technology that is created improves the quality of life not just for corporate leaders and the wealthy but children, senior citizens, and those disenfranchised based on race and sexual identification; indeed, the very definition of life as we know it will have to be redefined to include those "who have no corporeal self at all, existing only online as the essence of a human, pure intellect and personality" (Cochrane 36). Abjection in *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* shows that what it means to be human in times of accelerated technology must include accelerated ways of thinking regarding reality, virtual reality, intelligence, embodiment, consciousness--the essence of what it means to be human must keep pace with what technology is able to do.

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva focuses on abjection because it points to a moment of crisis that technology might otherwise distract people who are dazzled by what technology is able to do. Kristeva calls such moments of horror in

literature and film "versions of the apocalypse" that are rooted "on the fragile border where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so-- double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject" (207). Kristeva further explains that abjection shows how what is "intimate and most serious" serves to show how morality, politics, religion, and esthetics are coded (208). Abjection takes the place of what is sacred so that the powers of ideologies are unveiled, providing a path of analysis (209). Confronting the abject, Kristeva argues, helps people to confront what it means to be human, stripped of its "divine" vestments so that systems of power are demystified (210).

This chapter focused on how David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* build upon the genres of science fiction and horror through an examination of oppositional binaries that organize the texts. The binaries of male/female and human/machine were viewed through Kristeva's theories on abjection. Chapter three will conclude by discussing the benefits of science fiction/horror. These benefits include implications for learning, teaching, and agency.

## CHAPTER THREE

### BEYOND BINARIES OF POWER

While chapter one surveyed the history of science fiction in order to see how Cronenberg's films build upon the tropes of the genre, which include oppositional binaries that organize the texts, chapter two analyzed these binaries. The binaries of male/female and human/machine were discussed through the lens of Kristeva's abjection. Chapter three will unpack the tropes of science fiction and horror as well as the binary oppositions in order to explore the benefits of the genre and its broader implications on learning, teaching, and agency. Indeed, agency in the context of embodiment and technology stands in contrast to the reading of science fiction as a genre where posthuman existence entails a future where the connection to technology means the disappearance of the body. Cronenberg's *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* illustrate that such a deconstruction is problematic--this breach in mind-body dualism goes beyond binaries of power dynamics, pointing to a future where technology provides new forms of consciousness where body, mind, and brain are not just redefined but work together.

#### Science Fiction--Technology, the Body, and Critical Thinking

In order to recognize how technology, the body, mind, and brain work together, it is important to understand how science fiction is effective as part of

this discourse. In "Posthuman Rhetorics: 'It's the Future, Pikul,'" authors Muckelbauer and Hawhee point out that with *eXistenZ*, Cronenberg's primary project is to show how technology and the body--both human and animal--come together so that apparatus and human nervous system are part of the game's "architecture" (767). Additionally, according to Laprise and Winrich, authors of "The Impact of Science Fiction," science fiction is a powerful way to motivate interest in science and spark critical thinking about scientific concepts (45).

In "Using a Pseudoscience Activity to Teach Critical Thinking," authors Adam and Manson define critical thinking as "engaged, skillful, judgmental assessment of one's own beliefs or those of others" (130). Indeed, the authors argue that critical thinking is important not just in discussing film and literature but in daily life (130). When students are able to improve critical thinking skills, the authors explain, "they are better able to evaluate arguments, identify flaws in evidence, explain flaws in statements and provide alternate explanations" (Adam and Manson 130). This is a valuable skill, the authors add, since students are able to apply critical thinking skills outside of the classroom to everyday occurrences (131). Adam and Manson give an example of students being able to identify the claims of an infomercial, its evidence and supporting claims (131). Also, the students then evaluated that evidence. Being able to detect flaws in claims is an essential component of critical thinking, Adam and Manson stress (133).

Furthermore, in "Impact of Science Fiction," Laprise and Winrich explain that science fiction as a genre has the potential to inspire those not in the science

field to become interested in science (45). For example, a viewer needs not be aware that *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* are complex studies on transparent and hypermediated technologies of representation to be aware that the films deal with embodiment and technology. Further, even if science fiction films portray science and technology as destructive forces with disastrous results, Laprise and Winrich argue that science fiction is crucial in introducing scientific ideas to the general public (45). Also, science fiction films have the potential to dispel scientific misconceptions and spark people's interests in archeology, physics, and biology (45).

#### Implications on Science, Society, and the Posthuman

Part of this interest, Muckelbauer and Hawhee argue, entails the way *eXistenZ* "mirrors the reality outside the game" so that as the narrative develops, it is "impossible to tell where the game ends and reality begins" (767). Accordingly, Laprise and Winrich note, science fiction is pivotal in raising ethical questions regarding the societal impact of science (46). Moreover, Laprise and Winrich add, science fiction films are "useful both for motivation and for attacking particular misconceptions about science" since they "foster a curiosity and respect for the sciences by encouraging analyses of science fact versus science fiction" as portrayed in popular culture (46). This fact versus science fiction is ideal in cinema because it allows for the distinctiveness of both players in the movie and spectators. Muckelbauer and Hawhee call this relationship an "exchange of information and energy" where boundaries are confused, affecting

experience "when bodies are transformed from self-contained entities into distributed processes" (767). The authors stress that this process is achieved through "the figure of the post-human" since the film deals with "the convergence of virtuality/actuality and human/machine," which results in completely changing "existence" (Muckelbauer and Hawhee 767). Indeed, in this way, science fiction films cause viewers to ask what is "human" in times where cloning and cyborg technology redefine what it means to be human.

#### Cyborg Technology--Redefining Human

"Cyborgs and Generic Oxymorons" author Timo Siivonen explains that the cyborg exemplifies the relationship between people and technology (227). The cyborg completely conceptualizes the human body in new ways because the body is now defined in terms of its relation to the environment and other bodies (227). Also, because people ascribe meaning to technology, it creates a tension between the body and the machine, Siivonen points out (227). With the cyborg, Siivonen adds, the dichotomy between human and machine is problematized (229). Indeed, what is considered natural and artificial becomes ambiguous: in *Videodrome*, Max Renn is never sure whether what he sees/experiences is real or a hallucination; in *eXistenZ*, Ted Pikul is likewise not sure if he is in a state of virtual reality or reality. In this way, Siivonen stresses, the organic body, technology, and culture merge, forming a cyborg discourse (230).

#### Implications on Posthuman Identity and Connection

The responses to visions of technology and its effects on the human body



help people to examine identity, consumerism, and global environmental sustainability. In "Pedagogy of the Apocalypse," author Krista Karyn Hiser argues that science fiction films represent cultural responses to global issues where characters attempt to "navigate a posthuman world where identity and connection are often ambiguous" (154). This ambiguity is evident in the figure of the cyborg due to its position as a transitional character bridging human and machine. Here Muckelbauer and Hawhee argue that not all characters in *eXistenZ* are "cyborg-stale hybrids" (768). "The category of the human must first be imagined as relatively discrete in order for it to be connected to (and potentially troubled by) its Others (human plus machine)," the authors note (768). Further, Muckelbauer and Hawhee point out that many human characters are merely "sites of information exchange," including codes, identities, technologies, and knowledges so that the human is not an object connected to other objects but an example of how humans are a by-product of multiple "inhuman connections" with a trajectory of their own (768). Consequently, the cyborg figure exemplifies how the notion of identity is complicated, for it requires a "different kind of response" when dealing with such "highly distributed machine-beings" (Muckelbauer and Hawhee 768). Accordingly, posthumanism is an attempt to see people as "distributed processes rather than as discrete entities," Muckelbauer and Hawhee explain (768).

### Implications on Teaching

In "Pedagogy of the Apocalypse," Hiser argues that as a teaching tool,

science fiction films can foster experiences in reading, viewing, and writing about current social problems as students trace topics from film to do research (154). In this way, science fiction films can provide context for understanding both problems in the films and in society (155). In films such as *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ*, rather than just being viewed as heteronormative visions of the abuse of technology, there are opportunities to learn about how gender influences the choices and decisions that characters make (155).

Further, Cronenberg's use of violence can be viewed as a politics involving corporate culture and gender roles--the bleak futures are opportunities to analyze, as Hiser explains, the consumer world and its consumption habits (155). The ability of science fiction narratives to look into the future yet offer worlds that are "recognizable," Hiser argues, helps people with "backcasting" (156). In other words, viewers are able to connect to the future through the present, keeping in context existing social dynamics in order to "define what is worth saving about the human race" (Hiser 156). This is especially important as discourses in film and literature deal with the posthuman, or "nonhuman" (157). The nonhuman, Hiser explains, "is a convention of postapocalyptic fiction; it represents humanity's fear of losing its capacity for thought, reason, and compassion" (157). For Hiser, abjection includes flu pandemics, nuclear proliferation, and natural disasters (158). Also, abjection is present when characters lose their humanity, becoming people without hope (157).

### Implications of Abjection

According to Hiser, abjection in film allows for an interpretation of disasters "in light of their knowledge of current issues" so that an examination of real historical events can begin (158). Rather than seeing abjection as moments of excess steeped in gender and power binaries, Hiser argues that understanding the perils of the future through critical thinking about consumption habits and environmental issues will lead to the development of new pedagogical approaches (160). Indeed, viewed in this way, *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* become ways to practice problem solving when viewers explore repercussions of technology that reinscribes stereotypes and patriarchal power structures.

### Implications on "Self-Evident" Assumptions

For Muckelbauer and Hawhee, however, in addition to gender and power binaries, *eXistenZ* challenges the distinctiveness of concepts such as actor and stage, sender/receiver, message and context since posthumanism questions "self-evident" assumptions regarding not only actor and stage but rhetoric and communication (768). Muckelbauer and Hawhee stress that people do not need fictional characters and technology to recognize that the human body is already biologically, ecologically, and socially distributed (768). Indeed, while the film reduces the complexity of what is "real" to the space of a film, the authors propose that different ways of thinking about rhetoric need to be employed in order to engage and respond to the complexities of speaker, audience, message, and context of actual events and global problems (768). While there are no easy

solutions to global problems, Hiser warns, science fiction films get people to think about current issues through cinematic exaggerations of the future so that viewers are able to "interact with difficult information" (Hiser 161). The difficult information about the present is one way to discuss the future.

### Implications on What it Means to be Human

Because science fiction is based on the real world, it provides narratives that are both intellectually complex and emotionally charged. In "From 'The Twilight Zone' to 'Avatar,'" author Susan Lee Stutler points out that "great science fiction can be a springboard to studies of history, Earth and space science, physical science, technology, government, life science, and the environment" (45).

Accordingly, science fiction is ideal for students since science fiction can serve as a foundation for learning and inspire research (45). Additionally, science fiction challenges accepted ideas of what it means to be human. Indeed, part of this challenge is the category of the posthuman itself and "its very engagement with the 'human,'" Muckelbauer and Hawhee explain (769). A focus on distributed bodies does not mean that humanism is "defunct," the authors point out (769).

Posthuman reinscriptions of the body and subjectivity neither return "to the category of the human" nor do they "function as a refusal of the category" (Muckelbauer and Hawhee 769). Instead, Muckelbauer and Hawhee stress, the posthuman "participates in re-distributions of difference and identity" (769).

Furthermore, this discourse on difference and identity does not mean that what is "real" disappears just because it is "structured by simulacra" (Muckelbauer and

Hawhee 769).

### Implications on the Future

According to Debra Benita Shaw, author of "Strange Zones," science fiction is not merely a mirror on the future; science fiction imagines a future that "has already happened" so that what it means to have a future is engaged (778).

Drawing on the theories of posthumanism, Shaw explores the contemporary city, monsters, and metropolitan mythologies in order to show how the concept of the posthuman makes obsolete traditional definitions of human capacities and qualities (778). Indeed, in this way, science fiction is a convergence of narrative and technology that problematizes the way human capabilities are articulated.

Yves Abrioux, author of "Human Without Qualities," points out that "the posthuman implies that the claim to know and judge the human gives way to an openness to acknowledging the potentially absolute other" so that the humanities "infiltrate and inflect the sciences, rather than taking stock of their sometimes problematic achievements" (135). These achievements include genetic engineering, stem-cell research, cloning, the Human Genome Project, and neuropsychology.

Such advances, Elana Gomel--author of "Science (Fiction) and Posthuman Ethics"--argues, rupture the boundaries between ethics and humanity (339). "The very notion of what it means to be human," Gomel notes, "requires a new conceptual map for ethical judgment" (339). Works such as *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* along with other science fiction narratives form what Gomel terms

"contours" on this map that "vividly dramatize the implications and consequences of new technologies and discoveries" (Gomel 339). In the process, Gomel adds, science fiction leaves an indelible impact on culture, creating ripple effects of images and ideas (339). For Muckelbauer and Hawhee, this conceptual map also includes the concepts of memory, moral judgment, and invention so that through posthumanism, rhetoric is part of a discourse where connectivity is engaged through multiple angles--literature, science, critical theory, argumentation, and cultural studies (770). Consequently, Gomel explains that the boundaries of humanity are expanded, exploded, and subverted (339).

#### Implications on Social and Cultural Introspection

Because the boundaries of humanity are questioned and analyzed, science fiction is not just the far-fetched and indulgent fantasies of movie directors--it offers both a serious and critical experience. According to Zigo and Moore, authors of "Science Fiction," science fiction deserves greater respect as a pedagogical tool because it serves as "metaphoric literature" useful for social and cultural introspection (85). Zigo and Moore argue that science fiction teaches students to explore social, political, and cultural criticism (85). Further, because a tenet of science fiction is its preoccupation with change, this is in keeping with the world where change is constant in terms of technological advances and its effects on people. Zigo and Moore urge instructors to respond to such changes by "resisting the conservation of old ideas, concepts, attitudes, skills, and perceptions" so that students are able to engage in new ways (85).

New ways of engaging with change include thinking that is "actively inquiring, flexible, creative, innovative, tolerant, and liberal" (Zigo and Moore 86). In addition, Zigo and Moore stress that students must be able to "face uncertainty and ambiguity without disorientation, formulate viable new meanings to meet changes in the environment which threaten individual and mutual survival" (86). Consequently, even if *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* seem to espouse irresponsible consumption of technology and maintain gender divides, it then becomes the role of the viewer and not the director to face the disorientation rendered in the narratives so that questions are raised, allowing for meaning-making to take place beyond the script of the films. For this reason, Zigo and Moore caution, science fiction should not be reduced to formula--abuse of power, sex, violence, abjection--stock figures, motifs, props, locutions (86). Rather than relying on a list of such items, Zigo and Moore explain that the best science fiction breaks from such lists--it is able to raise critical dialogues involving immediate social and ethical relevance (86). Here Muckelbauer and Hawhee point out that a posthuman politics "finds its strategies in transient, emergent coalitions and in diagramming networks of power" (770). Viewed in this way, the Cronenberg films are more than just shock cinema but provide social relevance.

Social relevance includes narratives involving themes of coming-of-age, colonialism, war, myths and legends, and social, economic, and environmental crisis (89). As a genre, science fiction is able to make such issues interesting so that with *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ*, viewers are likewise engaged and able to

move beyond Cronenberg's presentation of characters as being transformed through their exposure and participation with electronically-mediated technology. Importantly, referenced technologies move from mere presentations of violence, gore, sex, and technology toward discourses of embodiment, realities, self, identity, and subjectivity. In "Becoming Inorganic," author de Lauretis argues that Cronenberg's films present reality that exists "beyond our will to know, a material reality that is other in the sense that it is only ever available to us through its psychic effects" (569). For de Lauretis, reality is "material and embodied" (569). If reality is thus material and embodied, de Lauretis contends, it "resists discursive articulation as well as political diplomacy" (569). This resistance to articulation brings attention to the boundary between the human body and the machine.

Accordingly, people become more than just "a mere agglomeration of data, to be remolded (coded, decoded and recoded) at will," Siivonen explains (236). If they are viewed just as data, the danger is in the control of information. This control of information is evident in both *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ*. Furthermore, the elements of horror in both films orient viewers to the science fiction tropes (237). Abjection, for instance, highlights what Siivonen terms "the fear of femininity," as a guiding principle of many of Cronenberg's films (237). Nikki Brand and Allegra Geller threaten Max Renn and Ted Pikul's autonomy, which is coded as masculine. Kristeva calls abjection the "male fear of impurity" via the female (238). Beyond this view, however, science fiction allows for a larger examination of culturalist discourses where biological life is replaced by



mechanical processes (238). Here Siivonen argues that modern technology effaces the opposition between the biological body and technology so that even sexual difference is defined by its relation to technology (240). The cyborg, abjection, horror, and science fiction coalesce into a discourse where all conventional ways of thinking are questioned and become part of a network of connections (241).

#### Implications on Agency and Diversity

Science fiction, however, offers more than a network of connections. Rob Latham, author of "Mutant Youth," adds agency. Characters in *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* are able to realize what Latham calls cyborg agency (141). Agency is vital because it is more than just a posthumanist fantasy amidst predatory capitalist consumption culture--agency articulates a "utopian longing," an "emotional force" for desire and will (Latham 141). In addition to connection and agency, Jay Clayton, author of "The Ridicule of Time," argues that diversity is crucial (330). According to Clayton, "transformation and species diversity are survival characteristics; continuous adaptation and flexibility about the boundaries of the acceptable" mean that science fiction in the form of the cyborg gives hope for humanity in times of radical change (330).

For Jill Galvan, author of "Entering the Posthuman Collective," technology has affected the posthuman in two ways: "it separates the individual from human contact; but more significantly, it makes her dependent upon the life of the machine" (418). The human has already become posthuman, Galvan explains,

so that technology is not the message (422). Indeed, technology "provides a venue--in itself neutral--for the affirmation of political power" (Galvan 422).

Because technology affects the human subject, Galvan contends, it is up to the individual to acknowledge the fact that it cooriginates with her and to accept the fact that the traditional definition of the self is no longer sufficient (428).

*Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* show how science is a commercial enterprise where the lines between producers and consumers are blurred. Moreover, social relations are presented where characters navigate strategies for identity and power. Accordingly, the issues of identity and power center around the body and technology.

### The Posthuman--Transformation through Participation

Chapter three of Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* discusses, among various topics, the female body and technology. Braidotti mentions Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*: Maria is both robot and other where "flesh turns to metal to fuel capital growth" (106). The industrial progress of Lang's film is made possible through the labor of the city's people; the science behind Maria's creation, on the other hand, is exclusive to Rotwang, the inventor. As with other dystopic visions of the future, the Lang film shows how the objectification of people denies them of their humanity. To this equation the female body--in the form of the robot Maria--serves as the lure of technological and industrial advance. These advances, however, are bound up with what Braidotti calls the "ambivalence of

fear and desire towards technology" (105). Moreover, "from the modernist fantasy of ironical distance from the technological object," Braidotti points out, "something fundamental has shifted" (109). This shift is explored in Cronenberg's *eXistenZ* and *Videodrome*, which present virtual reality in church-like spaces that delineate the profane and profound ways in which the biological and technical connect.

With *Videodrome*, virtual reality is delivered via a cable feed and VHS cassette tape; technology is brought into the home. With *eXistenZ*, however, people are brought into the technology by being connected to a "pod." In both movies, a female character is the lure and entry point to technology:

*Videodrome's* Nikki seduces Renn into a lurid world of sadomasochism and snuff films; *eXistenZ's* Allegra Geller is a computer game programmer who convinces Ted Pikul to get a bioport installed at the base of his spine in order to join her in her virtual world. The technological advances are tempered by violence and destruction. In both movies, the protagonists have to navigate their way through an often violent world where they are the first to negotiate new ways of being. In the church of this experience, both viewers and characters soon learn that the division between the biological and technological blurs as morals and ethical questions regarding violence, embodiment, other realities, self and reality, identity, and subjectivity are raised.

Cronenberg's *Videodrome* posits that consumers are transformed through their exposure and participation with electronically mediated technology. His

*eXistenZ* extends this exposure and participation dynamic so that what is hallucinogenic in the first film (video cassettes "breathe," Renn places a gun that has grown into a part of his hand into his abdomen) becomes a virtual reality that is engineered from amphibian DNA thus living. The amphibians are turned into fleshy pods that connect directly to video game players. The connection between people and technology is presented in a visual language that is surprisingly spartan of special effects; this move is countered by narratives that heighten hyperbole and the banal--science fiction with gore and violence. What ties the two films together is Cronenberg's fascination with flesh: in *Videodrome*, Renn says, "Long live the new flesh!" before shooting himself. The tagline for the movie is "First it controls your mind; then it destroys your body." With *eXistenZ*, the tagline is "Death to the demoness Allegra Geller!" In both movies the characters find themselves drawn into worlds that they perceive to be real because they feel real. This tactile representation of reality is delivered via technology--this dialectic underscores the efforts of both films to show how technology is made flesh. Thus information and materiality are confused: the resulting confusion and complexities of embodiment and control bring to sharp attention what Robert Mitchell, in "Data Made Flesh" states is the "presumed immateriality of data and the presumed materiality of 'the body'" (429). Here information and materiality become tangled.

#### Romantic Relationships--People and Technology

Cronenberg makes this data turned flesh discourse possible through the

romantic relationships people have not only with each other but technology. According to Rey Chow, in "Comment on Quillen's 'Feminist Theory,'" Cronenberg uses the romantic relationship to construct narratives that are built on "stereotypical or mythical constructs [as] a means of exploring the limits of humans as subjects and agents of their fates" (136). Indeed, Chow stresses that the characters are "at the mercy of larger ideological and social structures that speak and act for them" so that what emerges is an "antihumanist" perspective where consciousness becomes muddled in misrecognition and representation. The ideological and social structures of both films are the same: there is always the threat of a larger corporation ready to usurp and exploit the intellectual products of its programmers and designers. While Renn battles Spectacular Optical, Allegra fights for control of "eXistenZ." Cronenberg adds to this discourse his characteristic touches of violence and gore.

#### Violence and Technology

Cronenberg's trademark use of violence and gore dates back to his first films *Shivers* and *Rabid*. The focus on violence in these earlier works shows a director commenting on a mass culture steeped in the excess of the 1970s. With *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ*, the violence is used to show what happens when people lose themselves to technology. Aviva Briefel discusses this use of violence in "Masochism, Menstruation, and Identification." According to Briefel, Cronenberg's *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* feature a "Final Girl" (17). In the first film, there is Nikki; in the second, there is Allegra. The Final Girl is a character

who suffers throughout the film but survives, Briefel explains (17). While ostensibly, Nikki dies, her on-cable and video presence keep her alive in the minds of viewers and Renn. Likewise, Allegra's subjection and ultimate victory over male forces point to what Briefel calls is a "revising [of] Laura Mulvey's view that the male spectator's gaze is sadistic" since both Nikki and Allegra's plight are "a site of identification for the male spectator" (17). The Final Girl character of both films recalls what Braidotti states is the ambivalence of fear and desire towards technology. Because the Final Girl is a repeated trope in many horror films, Cronenberg never lets viewers forget they are watching a film: he depicts Renn and Allegra's journeys through cable-feed programming/television and virtual reality/video game as a passage. According to Briefel, this "passage from reality to representation...provides an interpretation of whatever goes through it" (20). The Renn who shoots himself while immersed in "Videodrome" and the Allegra who emerges after playing "eXistenZ" are the film versions of their "real" selves. Their cinematic identity, Briefel explains, "begins as an aggrandized, narcissistic projection of" themselves (20).

#### Cinematic Technology and Transparent Affect

Through technology, these characters are "larger-than-life...[have] a fabulous sex drive, and an unrelenting ego," or rather, the technology makes it possible for them to exaggerate these qualities (Briefel 20). However, this interphase with technology is made problematic because Renn and Allegra are turned into "monsters" who kill. From *eXistenZ*, Pikul is horrified after Allegra shoots a

character in "eXistenZ." Pikul says, "You killed him. Are you going to kill me next?" Allegra's response is, "He was only a game character." He next asks her what if they were not in the game but in fact real life. This representational blurring between real and virtual through the mechanical/biological causes the characters to lose themselves, calling attention to what Briefel calls "a self-referential mode of narrative that foregrounds cinematic technology over transparent affect" (20). The result is that viewers are distanced from the characters--the monster thus is Cronenberg's dystopic vision of what the future of data made flesh might be and not the characters themselves. The result of blending violence and gore with technology-induced states of consciousness is the effort the characters put forth toward finding intimacy and connection--this connection is rendered via a "cinematic apparatus" that inextricably fuses romantic relationships with teleportation that argues the characters lose "all claims to flesh" if the union is successful (Briefel 20).

#### Flesh/Technology and Infection

This preoccupation with the flesh/technology binary brings with it the corporeal fear of infection. In *Videodrome*, infection occurs when Renn watches "Videodrome." In this case, viewing digitally mediated programming has the power to affect people via their central nervous system. The result is an impaired view of the world--a state of virtual reality--a hallucinogenic nightmare. With *eXistenZ*, the infection comes in the form of computer viruses and through getting the bioport installed at the base of the spine. Here technology is not only

a conduit for physical contamination but psychic as well. Both films point to a loss of individuality and humanity as the protagonists become Spectacular Optical and Antenna Research. Cronenberg's orchestration of infection is redolent in both films, disturbing viewers.

This unease brings attention to the fact that his use of violence and infection makes viewers complicit through the act of watching his films. For example, an orifice grows out of Renn's abdomen; objects are inserted into the bioports on the lower backs of Pikul and Allegra. For Cronenberg, this obsession with the body and technology and all that can be done to it suggests alternate realities. Indeed, according to David Sanjek, in "Dr. Hobbes's Parasites," these alternate realities insist "on the equal reality of...other states of mind" (57). In showing how Ren, Pikul, and Allegra's partaking in violent acts turns them into "monsters," Sanjek argues that this infection of humanity towards inhumanity is "the most meaningful, most daring kind of violence" since it is a "penetration into empathy with other consciousness in action" (59). This eschewing of social mores and psychological constraint, Sanjek adds, points to Cronenberg's thought behind the violence--that violence is a manifestation of thought which comes as a consequence that life has become pointless and lifeless so that the characters must escape to "Videodrome" and "eXistenZ" to find what consumer culture has rendered sterile. This anomie is neither idealized nor condemned through the use of infection, Sanjek contends (61). Indeed, this violence is a "painful but necessary process" as the threat of infection is reflective of what Cronenberg



presents as a diseased culture (Sanjek 61).

### The Role of Science--The Human Body, Self, and Reality

Cronenberg's films seek to show the human body in crisis as a part of society, not separate from it. Hence mutation, bodily damage, science, and transformation are expressed in a cinematic language that focuses on the violent depiction of sexuality, paranoia, and the role of science. Ultimately, Cronenberg's films are proof that people are fundamentally affected by technology. Technology that is virtual and interactive has the power to shape perception, space and time, and identity. Indeed, in "Terminal Identity," Scott Bukatman argues that technology "demonstrates the inseparability of technological change and a subject's sense of self and reality" (126). In other words, technology can erase as it inscribes identity. In this way, *Videodrome* reshapes what is identity through virtual reality by placing the virtual subject literally in the technological landscape. From the first viewing, Renn is at once lost and aware of himself. He is never sure if he is hallucinating or seeing the real world. This emphasis on the virtual human body as it navigates through cybernetic spaces makes the viewer consider "the implications this has for our conceptions of phenomenology and environment," Bukatman points out (127). This transformation of identity is positive, Bukatman explains, since exposure to technology will profoundly affect subjectivity and play an important role in what it means to be posthuman (127).

### The Body--Interface Between Mind and Experience

In "Postcards from the Posthuman Solar System," Bukatman explains that the

body is the "interface between mind and experience" (343). In Cronenberg's films, this interface is explored to show that "electronically-based postmodern experience is inscribed" (Bukatman 343). Consequently, the body is a cyborg body--this body connects Renn to "Videodrome" and Allegra to "eXistenZ." A negative side effect of this connection, however, is addiction. This addiction threatens to replace the human with the posthuman world: both Nikki and Allegra find life in virtual reality more rewarding than the real world. Cronenberg's use of the human body and technology is violent and gory because he wants to illustrate that in order for there to be a connection, adaptation is necessary. Nikki and Allegra's addiction to virtual reality and the violence that comes with the transition has the potential to drain the human experience of "transcendent meaning," Bukatman warns (344). With Cronenberg, there is no benign synthesis with technology because behind the "utopian" excess of pleasure there is always the looming presence of corporations--Spectacular Optical and Antenna Research--at the controls. With *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ*, Bukatman states that "the body is qualified by its signifying function" so that Cronenberg's films depict a posthumanist future that dazzles viewers with its stylized semiotics of the future--a future that is redolent with biological and technological metaphors (350). This imbrication of body and machine is delivered by the amphibian pods that are fleshy, replete with nipples and an umbilical cord.

The film narratives present rival factions (Renn/Spectacular Optical, Allegra/Antenna Research) that struggle for biological, political, technological,

and economic domination. Accordingly, the characters are mired in the discourses of science and technology where the borders between "conscious and unconscious, subject and object, individual and group, reality and simulacrum, life and death, body and subject, and future and present" are challenged (Bukatman 351). This connection is exemplified when Renn's hand turns into a gun; also, a parallel scene in *eXistenZ* occurs when Pikul assembles a gun that is made of bones. In refashioning the sense of self and the body in order to fuse with virtual worlds, Cronenberg shows how breaking the body from consciousness is part of cybernetic existence since a character's journey through virtual reality is always anchored by a machine.

#### Cartesian Mind/Body Duality

*Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* point to Cronenberg's obsession with the Cartesian mind/body duality; this duality is further complicated by the dangers of unconscious/conscious thought and action/what is real and virtual reality that lie within the realm of virtual reality. Indeed, there is a dialectic between embodied experience and modes of representation that are created in virtual worlds. Both films grapple with the themes of product/production, signification, consumption, bodily experience, and representation as being part of a constant feedback with other systems where pattern and randomness are a hallmark. In "Virtual Bodies," Katherine Hayles points out that these systems are "not so much opposites as complements" since each defines the other, adding to the flow of data (70). Hayles argues that this information is not conceptual but sensory and kinesthetic"

(70). Hayles calls for an "interpretive spin" that opens up ways of seeing pattern and randomness as being part of knowledge rather than an antagonistic consequence (70). "Information," she stresses, "like humanity, cannot exist apart from the embodiment that brings it into being as a material entity in the world; and embodiment is always instantiated, local, and specific" (91). Cronenberg exemplifies this sentiment by showing that the diegetic worlds in his films revolve around the screens of technology.

#### Virtual Reality--Experiencing the Body in New Ways

Renn and Allegra's connection to virtual reality through TV, PC screens, and flesh pods become more important than their relationships with fellow human beings. Their entrance into cyberspace has implications for the fate of the body. With their bodies left in supine poses, both characters lose themselves in virtual reality, becoming seemingly bodiless. Jojada Verrips, author of "Haptic Screens," disagrees. According to Verrips, the experience of cyberspace is not bodiless but "possessing another--etheric, virtual, weightless body which does not confine to the inert materiality and finitude" (22). Renn's TV hallucinations and Allegra's video game adventure are not moments where the body is forgotten because they return to their bodies; the technology allows for only the temporary loss of the immediate material body to illustrate that "we learn that there never was such a body that our bodily self-experience was always already that of an imaginary constituted entity" (Verrips 22). What Cronenberg wants viewers to realize is that virtual reality is not about losing the body but experiencing the material body in

new ways.

Hence, virtual reality is not the escape of embodiment since virtual reality "would be impossible without a material living body on the one hand, and specific material objects, especially screens, on the other" (Verrips 22). Cronenberg's focus on the Cartesian mind-body split and on how it relates to technology reveals there needs to be an understanding of how technology impacts not only the relation of his characters and the screens of entry but coming to terms with this issue as a subject/subject dialectic--not subject/object (22). The eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue, the skin--indeed--the entire body is used to relate to the world, Verrips argues (39). Similarly, people react the same way to technology since they touch: hands handle a device; fingers press keys; eyes follow; and ears respond to sounds. For this reason, Verrips calls for "an anthropology of the touch and how people have learnt to fragment this basic human experience in such a way, that it, for instance, hampers our understanding of our relation to" others (39). This touch and fragmentation of experience is part of the cinematic language of Cronenberg's films.

#### The Self--From Traditional Liberal Self to Posthuman Subject

Cronenberg's cinematic language shows the conflict between the body as an external object and physical reality. In "Simulating Narrative," Hayles points out that the virtual "can teach us that this divide is itself historically contingent, a result of the ongoing transition from the traditional liberal self to the contemporary posthuman subject" (2). This self, Hayles explains, is the product of historically

specific cultural formations that brings into question what is the material, the operational, and the symbolic, which form a "recursive structured hierarchy" (4). This is evident in Cronenberg's direction: Allegra is a video game programmer. As such, she gets to make decisions on who gets to live or die. Her intentions and criteria are specified by the values she assigns to these criteria. According to Hayles, the designer "intervenes to encourage 'interesting' evolutions and prohibit 'inelegant' ones" (4). In *eXistenZ*, Allegra points out to Pikul that some characters are static ones that serve to further the plot of the game and only respond to specific stimuli. Additionally, she is free to kill characters she deems unimportant. Allegra spends much screen time delineating the boundaries of "eXistenZ." These boundaries go beyond the game and its programming to include the viewer. By the end of the film, viewers realize that the actual "time" of the movie and the "time" of the diegetic world do not match.

#### Simulation--Expanding the Boundaries of the Body and Technology

In this way, the viewer becomes an "actor." Hayles explains that "the functioning of any one actor can be fully understood only in relation to that actor's interactions with all the other actors"(8). Simulation, then, requires expanding the boundaries of the body and technology since virtual reality allows for the construction of models based on what Hayles describes as "causality, meaningful temporal sequence, and interrelation between behavior and environment" in order to "see a scene, either literally or metaphorically, in the mind's eye" (9). There is a reason Renn and Allegra respond to their virtual worlds, Hayles states.

Virtual worlds have been designed to ensure that people anthropomorphize virtual characters. Indeed, Hayles stresses that it is important to "see" the body and the bodies of virtual creatures not "as nouns that enact verbs, but first and foremost as dynamic processes that weave together the embodied materialities of diverse life forms to create richly complex and distributed cognitions" (25). Accordingly, Cronenberg's films task the viewer with experiencing life that is no longer defined by its biology--people are no longer themselves but agents in cyber technology.

In this realm, the network of actors break from self-conscious modes of identity, becoming organisms of mediated signification. Renn and Allegra travel through hybrid realms of consciousness. They are cyborgs in what can be perfect communities; under Cronenberg's direction, however, what results is a dystopia where the posthuman's sense of self is made problematic. In "Historicizing the Posthuman," Alan W. France states that when "the posthuman self is ruptured, transcended, dispersed," the premise of technology having the power to liberate people from western binary logic is fractured, and its system of dualism based on "body/mind; nature/culture; organic/machinic" is exposed (178). Films such as *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* make visible these binaries, causing the viewer to reflect on the implications of information technologies and how they are applied under systems of social and environmental control.

### The Implications of Information Technologies

Are *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* cautionary tales regarding the pernicious

effects of commodification? While Cronenberg does present tableaux delineating what France calls "the penetration of capital into new areas of human experience," what is clear is the commodification of human relationships and experience (180). Both Renn and Allegra are affected by and controlled by the hypercapitalist companies behind them. "Paid for experience," France points out, highlights the change in the way people relate to commodities: Cronenberg turns the "market" to a "network" to show how products will be replaced by services, affecting the cultural production of intellectual property (180). Under this regime, as Renn and Allegra exemplify, the material body and subjectivity are reconfigured through technology. Additionally, representation is dominated by the televisual. For this reason, there is the risk of the human becoming subsumed by this convergence of the human and the machine (180). Here is where Cronenberg's films fetishize the negative impact of technology by focusing on its pathology over its potential positive uses and outcomes (180).

With *Videodrome*, Cronenberg presents a dark tableau where the last frontier is not outer space but an illegal cable network featuring snuff films. The line between reality and hyper-reality--the body--the mind--shadowy cable network officials--the authorities--church-like figures all convene in a phantasmagorical foray into the consumption of television and media that not only transforms the characters but the viewer as well on a psychic and biological level. Some characters audition for "Videodrome" because life on a cable feed program is more real than their own existence. The protagonist--Max Renn--must navigate



his way through what is happening or what he thinks is happening in order to escape from the forces of his own paranoia induced by the consciousness-altering effects of cable programming and the VHS player and cassette tape that not only brings the experience to his home but is able to be replayed over and over again. Cronenberg weaves together the booming technology of the time--cable television and the VHS player--to delineate a future run by legitimate and pirate-cable companies that vie for the control of viewers' minds. Much of the technology is centered on the body: televisions and VHS cassette tapes breathe, inhaling and exhaling like lungs; a gun becomes part of Renn's hand; the same gun is later stored inside his abdomen; Nikki auditions for "Videodrome" and "lives" forever in its broadcast--her tortured body on display; and Professor O'Blivion, like Nikki, lives on after death because his image, thoughts, aphorisms, and ideas are recorded on tape.

### Staying with the Body

With *eXistenZ*, Cronenberg again posits an ominous future; this time, however, the focus switches from cable television to a virtual-reality game. As with his other films, the technology is connected to biology. In Muckelbauer and Hawhee's "Posthuman Rhetorics: 'It's the Future, Pikul!'" players are connected directly to the game via "bioports" that are installed right into the base of the players' spines (767). The film begins in a church--people are assembled to take part in the launching of game-designer Allegra's latest innovation. Almost immediately, she is shot, and in the ensuing confusion, she is shuttled off into a

motel. In the motel room, she cradles the fleshy game pod that viewers come to find out is actually made from the bodies of river creatures. She seems bored with reality--her ennui is only assuaged by entering the world of her game. Like Nikki, "life" is at its sweetest away from reality.

Despite all the technological advances, the theme of fear of infection--dating back to the 1970s and Cronenberg's *Rabid*--is prevalent in *eXistenZ*: "the players also frequently panic or experience 'penetration phobia' (as well as the constant fear of biological and software infection) when their bodies are transformed from self-contained entities into distributed processes," Muckelbauer and Hawhee explain (767). The film ends in the same church space--viewers realize that all the characters and events are part of the game--likewise, the viewer has been tethered to the game via technology--the DVD to the DVD player connected to the television or viewing device and as a participant in the movie. Indeed, is the viewer participant or merely another "site" of information swathed in what the authors call "codes, identities, technologies, [and] knowledges" (Muckelbauer and Hawhee 768). In fact, they add that this cyborg mix of biology and technology "demonstrate a different form of identity, one that not only complicates our notions of identity but also may require a different kind of response" (Muckelbauer and Hawhee 768). Is this response a critique of the designer and her attempt to sell her vision of reality to the masses and is thus a comment on the nature of networks of power? Her idea is under constant attack from her own company and a rival company. As with Cronenberg's *Scanners* and

*Videodrome*, there is a tension/anxiety among the everyday person, the person of technological prowess, and a network of power other that seeks to exploit everyone. Ultimately, control over ideas, thoughts, and inventions return to the body--technology has not done away with the need for the body because its use is still connected to the body.

#### Technology--Connected to the Body--Coding the Body

Sherry Turkle, author of *Alone Together*, discusses this anxiety. According to Turkle, "anxiety is part of the new connectivity" (242). Indeed, she notes: "our habitual narratives about technology begin with respectful disparagement of the what came before and move on to idealize the new" (242). With *Rabid*, a skin graft to repair a burn turns a woman into a vampire; in *Videodrome*, watching the program/video cassette alters the consciousness of the viewer so that as Renn consumes the program, it consumes his mind and ultimately his entire existence; *eXistenZ* furthers the journey into the mind/body escape through technology as Allegra finds the virtual-reality world of *eXistenZ* more stimulating than real life. As much as she would like to remain in *eXistenZ*, Allegra is reminded that her connection to that realm is contingent on the health of the program, the game pod, and the bioport itself.

This parallel focus among technology, cognitive, and corporeal processes underscore Cronenberg's oeuvre. In the book titled *Technologies of the Gendered Body*, author Anne Balsamo grapples with the role of the body in cyberspace as a product of culture, "the virtual reality industry, media spectacles,

and commodities-on-offer" (117). Balsamo gives a brief history on cyberspace, a term first coined by cyberpunk novelist William Gibson. To enter into cyberspace, users need to don wired goggles: this device tracks head movement and is connected to a computer (117). She references Jaron Lanier, a cult and founding member of virtual reality technology. According to Lanier, "whatever the physical world has, virtual reality has as well" (117). Coupled with the ability of the user to "control" what goes on in cyberspace, it is no wonder that characters such as Nikki and Allegra are so profoundly drawn to the recesses of the mind that they are willing to forego the physical world.

Both *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* offer virtual worlds that are what Balsamo calls an ominous fusion of sex and technology because "the best sex is virtual" (119). Indeed, when Renn and Nikki make love, they watch "Videodrome" on television; the only time viewers see Allegra and Pikul make love is while she is in *eXistenZ*. Furthermore, this emphasis on virtual reality "belies a gender bias in the supposedly disembodied (and gender-free) world of virtual reality," Balsamo points out (123). While there is a surface neutrality to virtual reality technology--users connect to a computer via some kind of bio-apparatus--once in VR, it is clear that the programs, whether "Videodrome" or "eXistenZ," do not "simply mimic or *represent* reality--they virtually recreate it" to reflect "the desires of those who program them" (Balsamo 125). This is key since most of the technology created is by men, Balsamo explains (125). This "masculinist frame" imbues *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* since male and female bodies are coded

differently: Nikki is hypersexualized, her lips painted red; she enjoys both traditional and sadomasochistic sex. This embrace of sex is the root of her destruction and not a form of agency. Renn, on the other hand, is able to not only figure out what is going on but emerge as the white hero of the film. In *eXistenZ*, ostensibly, Allegra is the hero of the film; however, she is aided by Pikul. She fights to maintain control of her invention but is rendered at the mercy of her own company as well as that of rival companies. She is beautiful and sexualized. Indeed, she is what Balsamo explains is a "conventional inscription of the gendered, race-marked body" (131). The escape into VR is no real escape so long as technology is tethered to the body. Also, because VR is a realm populated by heroes who are usually men, the representation of male and female bodies reflects highly sexualized and body-based identities that perpetuate white-male narratives, repeating traditional gender and racial binaries (131).

#### The Human Body--A Network of Systems

Muckelbauer and Hawhee see this moment, almost fifteen years after *eXistenZ*'s release, as an opportunity to examine the human body as a complex network of biological, ecological, and social systems (768). These systems, the authors argue, need not be in conflict with the nonhuman realms; rather, "might there be a way of rethinking rhetoric that would encourage us to engage this complexity and to respond to it?" (Muckelbauer and Hawhee 769). This will require what Muckelbauer and Hawhee explain is a consideration of "the body problem" not as a focus on the loss of the body due to technology but a "return to

embodied information" that requires an elaboration and not reinscription of posthuman rhetoric concerning identity and subjectivity (771). At the church, fans idolize Allegra, but among the devoted loom forces that want to kill her and appropriate her invention.

These looming forces point to not only networks of power but the anxieties of privacy as a politic. Turkle references Michel Foucault and the panopticon, where the available technology at any given time encourages people to police themselves: "for Foucault, the task of the modern state is to reduce its need for actual surveillance by creating a citizenry that will watch itself" (262). Turkle argues--and perhaps Cronenberg cautions--that all people have something to hide, "a zone of private action and reflection, one that must be protected no matter what our techno-enthusiasms" (264). These zones of private action and reflection must be extended to intellectual property and the need to love and be connected to others, control over dreams and subconscious/unconscious thoughts, and technological designs: all must be shielded from appropriation by networks of power so that what exists in the real world and virtual reality reflects not a need to be *alone together* but a desire to--as Turkle points out--live peacefully with technology and not let it consume us (264).

Ultimately, it is up to the viewer to decide if *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* laud or eschew leaving the body--whether Cronenberg's films offer narratives that extend awareness toward new forms of embodiment or remain mired in giving visions of people who are detached and trapped in bodiless intelligence. While *Videodrome*

brings technology to the person, *eXistenZ* brings the person into the technology. Rather than predictions of the future, these films describe the way people are fascinated by transparent and hypermediated technologies of representation. Both films derive their impact by referencing established technologies and problematizing them through Cronenberg's signature use of violence, gore, sex, and technology, showing how each affects embodiment, realities, self, identity, and subjectivity.

Both *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* offer narratives where science fiction and horror present viewers the opportunity to explore the benefits of the genre and its broader implications on learning, teaching, and agency. Moreover, the films extend awareness toward new forms of embodiment where characters seem to be both detached *and* trapped in technology. This simultaneous detachment and entrapment quality of technology is salient since representation as well as technology are cultural constructions where science and technology work with culture--gender, race, and class. In this discourse, people engage with technology. This engagement stands in contention of the reading of science fiction as a genre where posthuman existence entails a future where the connection to technology means a disappearance of the body. Cronenberg's *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* illustrate that such a deconstruction is problematic--this breach in mind-body dualism goes beyond binaries of power dynamics, pointing to a future where technology provides new forms of consciousness where body, mind, and brain are not just redefined but work together.

## Implications on Rhetorical Studies and Pedagogy

Muckelbauer and Hawhee ponder the implications of new forms of consciousness, asking what holds for rhetorical studies and pedagogy when posthumanism challenges distinctions between subjectivities (770). One answer, the authors point out, rests with rhetorical scholars, teachers, and students and the way they "encounter distributed identities and morphing ontologies as well as portable consciousness" (Muckelbauer and Hawhee 770). Accordingly, capital, bodies, life, memory, and time need to be questioned as a way to "encounter" and "produce" posthuman rhetorics (Muckelbauer and Hawhee 770). With Cronenberg's *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ*, the rhetoric is encountered through science fiction, abjection, and horror. In Will H. Rockett's review of Twitchell's *Modern Horror*, Rockett explains that "horror has no end, no closure, no conclusion" (89). As applied to the structures of identity and consciousness, the anatomy of horror offers an endless loop that can never be controlled (89). In this way, violence is "not the thing itself, but merely the simplest, most readily available metaphor with which we can explain human experience" (Rockett 90). For this reason, as a narrative device, violence is the quickest way of getting people's attention.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, film manipulates viewers' hopes, fears, dreams, memory, and



consciousness itself (90). Accordingly, reflections about the body in the context of new technologies and electronic media must view the body as an area of study involving not just mind/body but its transformation and elaboration. Indeed, rather than a focus on sex and gore, films allow for a discourse where self-discovery and self-construction seem to be at odds with virtual reality technologies. Is this cyberspace a utopia or cite of crisis? Rather than viewing the films of David Cronenberg as cautionary narratives, perhaps viewers will do better to proceed with caution when considering new possibilities regarding the construction of gender, representations of the body, and new technologies.

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