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# Cronenberg goes humane: A filmmaker who did much to break down the division between high and low art is a striking example of a characteristically Canadian interest in the Fall of Man: [National Edition]

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## Abstract

One can generate from [Julia Kristeva]'s idea of abject a set of oppositions: mind/body; self/other; the bounded/the unbounded; male/ female; sensory excess/language; structure/ flow. [William Beard] analyzes [DAVID CRONENBERG]'s oeuvre in terms of these dualities, and they fit it very well. Kristeva's ideas are very much in vogue right now, and there is a tendency among critics to treat the idea of abjection as if it could be reduced to a common stock of images. Though Beard nicely avoids doing that, I wish he had dealt with the connection between Kristeva's ideas of the abject and Melanie Klein's ideas about the good and bad breast and her view that infantile sadism is directed first toward the frustrating (bad) breast, and later toward the inside of the mother's body.

Beard examines recurrent themes, motifs and forms in Cronenberg's oeuvre, demonstrating how these have changed in the course of his career. Beard shows how Cronenberg's filmography has become increasingly distressed by the power of sexuality -- and the body in general -- to threaten the self-contained subject.

There is an aspect of mythological structuralism to Beard's analysis, though it is unacknowledged, perhaps unconscious. He does not discuss the recurrence of a narrative structure in Cronenberg's films, for which Canadians seem to have an affinity: the myth of the Fall. Beard does analyze many of Cronenberg's films in terms of a fall into guilt, isolation and even abject horror, though this mythic structure is never named. The scientists in Cronenberg's early films are presented as though they sought forbidden knowledge, and they pay for that defiance.

## Full Text

Bruce Elder is a filmmaker who teaches in the Ryerson-York joint graduate program in Communication and Culture.

THE ARTIST AS MONSTER: THE CINEMA OF DAVID CRONENBERG

By William Beard University of Toronto Press 469 pp., \$50

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Times was when the advocates of Canadian culture hoped a Canadian cinema would soon appear -- one based on the model of the European art film (Godard, Fellini, Resnais and Antonioni). So they were shocked in 1975, when a Canadian director released a grotesque story of a parasite designed to help ailing human organs that goes hideously out of control.

Times change. The distinction between "high" and "low" art has fallen into doubt; commentators argue the latter reinigorates the former with its vitality, its unabashed interest in the body and in sexuality, and a formal daring that is unconstricted by norms of taste. The enthusiasm for the writings of Artaud, Bataille and Sade and for Cindy Sherman's photographs testifies to an openness to "excremental culture."

In William Beard's meticulous study, *The Artist as Monster*, he defends David Cronenberg's films, showing they are as formally intricate and conceptually rich as the high-modernist films of the 1960s.

The most fruitful way to study a genre has been the structuralist one, which analyzes the system of oppositions that organize the genre's syntax. Beard varies that approach, using "auteur- structuralism," which analyzes the evolution of common themes, images and narrative patterns in a filmmaker's body of work.

Beard draws upon a set of oppositions derived mainly from Julia Kristeva, a literary theorist. She proposed the idea of "the abject" -- of feces, blood, spitte. These "abjected" substances are expelled from the human body and seen as disgusting, almost unrepresentable to the cultural psyche. The apparatus of human reproduction, and the female body generally, are perceived as abject; so, above all, are human corpses.

Beard shows that Cronenberg's ideas about art-making arise from the repudiation of the abject: The artist ventures into areas that are psychically dangerous, and for this is rewarded with contempt.

The abject disturbs identity, system, order; the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite are abject. The abject emerges when the boundaries between subject and object and between inside and outside become uncertain. Thus the opposite of the abject is "one's own clean and proper body," as distinct from the insides of other people's bodies. This results in a concern with the controlling boundaries of the body, and this concern is mirrored in the realm of prohibitions and laws.

The abject challenges the narrative order. But when narrative is not entirely repudiated, its makeup changes. Its linearity is shattered, it proceeds by flashes, enigmas, short cuts, incompleteness -- which is not a bad first-cut description of the narratives of Cronenberg's later films.

One can generate from Kristeva's idea of abject a set of oppositions: mind/body; self/other; the bounded/the unbounded; male/ female; sensory excess/language; structure/ flow. Beard analyzes Cronenberg's oeuvre in terms of these dualities, and they fit it very well. Kristeva's ideas are very much in vogue right now, and there is a tendency among critics to treat the idea of abjection as if it could be reduced to a common stock of images. Though Beard nicely avoids doing that, I wish he had dealt with the connection between Kristeva's ideas of the abject and Melanie Klein's ideas about the good and bad breast and her view that infantile sadism is directed first toward the frustrating (bad) breast, and later toward the inside of the mother's body.

That might have produced a more dynamic view of the sources of Cronenberg's images, and mitigated Beard's tendency (not a pronounced one) to fail to treat abject fantasies as overdetermined (as structured by a number of different wishes), and as iconic rather than indexical (related to what they represent not as a picture is to its model but as an effect).

Beard examines recurrent themes, motifs and forms in Cronenberg's oeuvre, demonstrating how these have changed in the course of his career. Beard shows how Cronenberg's filmography has become increasingly distressed by the power of sexuality -- and the body in general -- to threaten the self-contained subject.

The principal development Beard traces is one of an increasingly humane vision, which he relates to a basic change in the character who is identified with abjection. The narratives of the earlier films -- before Videodrome -- were impelled by the sexuality of a monstrous female. But the later films locate sexual transgression in male protagonists, and this transgression is clearly labelled as sadistic. The earlier films associated transgression with scientific knowledge. The later ones link it instead with artistic creation, with the courage of artists in knowing themselves to be sadistic.

But Beard also shows how the protagonists increasingly value restraint, sensitivity, compassion and fellow-feeling. They are decent humans -- but their sexuality opens them to a cataclysmic power. Though Beard does not quite put it this way, his commentary suggests Cronenberg has a tragic vision. The protagonist is caught between two forces: the desire to maintain one's restraint and compassion, which can be realized only at the cost of isolation from the powerful forces that reveal the operations of something larger than human beings; and, the desire to have intimate knowledge of these greater forces, which comes at the cost of being submerged in a dark element. Neither alternative is satisfactory; nor is any synthesis of the two. We are torn by the conflict between unsatisfactory alternatives, and our life is tragic.

There is an aspect of mythological structuralism to Beard's analysis, though it is unacknowledged, perhaps unconscious. He does not discuss the recurrence of a narrative structure in Cronenberg's films, for which Canadians seem to have an affinity: the myth of the Fall. Beard does analyze many of Cronenberg's films in terms of a fall into guilt, isolation and even abject horror, though this mythic structure is never named. The scientists in Cronenberg's early films are presented as though they sought forbidden knowledge, and they pay for that defiance.

## Illustration

Black & White Photo: David Cronenberg on the set of *Naked Lunch*, an ambitious paranoid fantasy film based on the controversial novel by William Burroughs. ;

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## Details

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