FILMIC BODIES AS TERMINISTIC (SILVER) SCREENS: EMBODIED
SOCIAL ANXieties IN VIDEODROME

BY

DANIEL STEVEN BAGWELL

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Approved By:

Ron Von Burg, Ph.D., Advisor

Mary Dalton, Ph.D., Chair

R. Jarrod Atchison, Ph.D.
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ABSTRACT

The horror film genre utilizes spectacles of the human body while alluding to our worst fears beyond the silver screen. “Body horror” is a unique sub-genre that distorts the very nature of human flesh for horrific effect. David Cronenberg’s Videodrome (1983) is an exemplary body horror text that incorporates themes of disease, metamorphosis, and gendering bodies to allude to a litany of social problems facing the larger body politic. I explore how such fears are rooted in the loss of human control surrounding mortality, identity, exploitative media, technology, corporate influence, and gendered power dynamics. I argue for the extension of Kenneth Burke’s terministic screen theory into the realm of filmic visual rhetoric, identifying ways that cinematic bodies in Videodrome shape particular messages regarding broader social problems. In doing so, I argue that rhetorical critics should focus not only on what horror films communicate, but *how* they do so.
When one thinks of filmic horror, images of severed body parts and misshapen monsters are never far from mind. Few American moviegoers are strangers to the sights of Freddy Kreuger’s scarred skin, Leatherface’s stolen face, and Michael Myers’ featureless mask, as well as the piles of mangled bodies left in each boogeyman’s wake. Imagery surrounding the human body has become an integral part of the horror genre, deriving visual power from staples of mutilation and warped physiques. Such imagery serves a symbolic purpose, speaking to larger issues in the minds of audiences and arousing fears by tapping into the conscious and subconscious trepidations of viewers. The horror genre utilizes symbolism as a valuable source of social commentary, going beyond mere depictions of boogeypersons to speak to larger social anxieties and come to terms with the demons of society. Though symbolism in motion pictures takes place through a myriad of ways, horror films often construct visual cues for audiences to understand (even implicitly) underlying messages regarding the world beyond the silver screen.

Body horror is a reflexive sub-genre of horror cinema; it makes spectacular the radical alteration of the flesh, grappling with social fears and mortality in ways that other genres cannot. As opposed to psychological horror films or “by-the-numbers” slasher pictures, body horror narrows its sights on distorting the very nature of the flesh, providing uniquely intimate looks at human identity and how we come to terms with mortality. Some of the most widely
accepted examples of body horror in this camp include the alien-human hybridity in the *Alien* series, the body-snatching creatures in *The Thing* (1982), and the sickening transformation of a scientist in both versions of *The Fly* (1958, 1986). Some of the most common body horror tropes revolve around physical metamorphoses or horrific types of disintegration that entail a substantial change in the materiality of the human physique. The genre is particularly significant in reflecting societal unease, using symbolism of the human form to communicate different meanings to viewers.

Film has always used visual symbolism to create a screen-to-viewer relationship that can inspire deliberation and impart particular messages to audiences. A great deal of film criticism and audience reception revolves around symbolic interpretation from theories regarding consumer culture in *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) to the young girl’s red coat in the otherwise black-and-white *Schindler’s List* (1993). In particular, fright films have come to terms with social anxieties and vent timely concerns that may increase resonance with audiences (Humphries; Jancovich; Klein). Movie monsters are part of a historical pattern of horror films reflecting perceived societal threats. For instance, on-screen monsters in the 1940s have been framed by some critics as manifestations of rogue threats to the American homeland, meant to shore up notions of national identity and civic duty (Worland 48). Others have isolated films such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) and *Invaders from Mars* (1953) that come to terms with McCarthy-era paranoia (Hardin). Even recent films such as *Saw IV* (2007) have been linked to the healthcare debate in the United States, with the healthcare
system analogized to a literal death trap (Rozsa). Body horror derives its communicative value through its tendency to use changing flesh as a persuasive tool, implicating the bodies of viewers and bringing social fears closer to home.

David Cronenberg’s *Videodrome* (1983) is an exemplary body horror film that uses imagery of shifting human physiques to grapple with complex social anxieties. Cronenberg’s film stands above the plethora of other body horror films for several reasons, most notably by weaving together the three main thematic camps of body horror: disease, metamorphosis, and gendering bodies. In particular, *Videodrome* uses the bodies of protagonist Max Renn, a sleazy television CEO, and his acquaintances to confront a litany of social problems outside human control. In grounding its messages in bodily spectacle, *Videodrome* serves as an ideal picture to guide a study of body horror and its communicative nature. Tying the genre’s three foremost categories together with my study of *Videodrome* not only demonstrates the scope of social anxieties confronted within a single text, but it also reflects the most important aspects of body horror cinema. My examination of *Videodrome* sheds light on the overall significance of the body genre, testifying to the depth of the genre’s social commentary. For this reason, most of this thesis homes in on the themes isolated within Cronenberg’s film and the symbolicity of the bodies therein. I am first and foremost concerned with how the changing bodies in *Videodrome* function rhetorically to speak to broader social concerns surrounding human identity, mortality, exploitative media, technology, corporate control, and gendered power dynamics. These fears are grounded in the idea of human control, as each social anxiety deals with some
degree of human helplessness in the face of our most fearsome nightmares. I examine the rhetorical utility of bodies in *Videodrome* by identifying how they serve as visual terministic screens that reflect and deflect certain aspects of reality to craft messages about each social ill.

**Bodies as symbols**

Cinema has always been strongly attuned to the human form. Georges Méliès’ *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), arguably the first science-fiction film ever made and one of the first narrative epics ever produced (Martea), projects a human face onto the Moon, humanizing the cosmos through bodily representation and coming to terms with the unknown by transplanting the most familiar elements of humanity onto an uncharted frontier. Horror films have a strong history of bodily imagery, and the very origins of the genre are rooted in the use of bodily spectacle. Many consider the first true “horror” film to be Thomas Edison’s 1895 short *The Execution of Mary Stuart* (Grey). The 18-second film features the staged beheading of the eponymous Queen of Scots, after which the executioner lifts her severed head for the audience to behold. The dramatized decapitation kicked off what has proven to be a dynamic and robust relationship between the horror genre and the human body, informing the enduring tropes of werewolves, vampires, ghouls, among others.

Body horror is significant in ways that other genres are not, primarily since all viewers have mortal bodies and can thus imagine the experiences of bodily harm. Imagery of physical changes and bodies in pain thus holds universal implications, lending greater potential to body horror films in eliciting responses
from the viewer. By nature, most horror films are rooted in the unexpected and fears of the unknown: the hidden monster in the closet, the ever-present threat of a surprise attack, sudden and unexplained noises. Body horror films juxtapose this fear of unanticipated surprises with the familiar human form, finding terror in the violation of bodily predictability. Instead of a masked villain or alien creature, body films cast the human form as antagonist, contesting the very idea of bodily regularity. This allows body horror to address fears of mortality and explore complex questions of identity, including what it means to be human in the first place. The outstanding nature of the genre as a conduit for self-examination makes it more potent than other forms of horror, warranting a study of how such symbolism may communicate to audiences.

Horror has a unique influence on the screen-to-viewer relationship. Though many genres may explore themes surrounding the human figure, the horror genre has the ability to disrupt traditional conceptions of the body. Horror films, according to film scholar Linda Williams, offer a system of excess that provides viewers a spectacle to which they can relate to their own bodies (3). The excessive nature of gory horror films challenges traditional forms of narrative cinema, focusing more on the exaggeration of violence and bodily abnormalities than linear narratives. Spectacle-laden horror films may offer an alternative, “second voice” (Williams 3) of film that may convey meaning through means other than linear plot devices and Hollywood-style realism. The horror genre not only abandons realism but thrives on disrupting it; the more radical the departure from reality, the more frightening the film may be for viewers who are made to
distrust any sense of predictability. The tendency of horror films to break from both realism and normative melodrama allows them to more easily explore themes of bodily transformations that audiences may find acceptable.

One of the most outstanding features of horror cinema is its ability to elicit visceral reactions in the bodies of the audience, especially in the context of body horror. James Twitchell explains how horror elicits responses from the viewer’s own body while fulfilling psychological needs of the audience:

Horror art, rather like pornography, seems to fill a special need, perhaps biological as well as psychological, a need to express anxiety. In fact, the word “horror” carries this reference within its etymology -- the Latin verb *horrére* means “to stand on end or bristle” and refers to the way the hairs on the neck become erect when there is some threat to physical well-being. Horror, the aesthetic horror of art, is of course psychological, but it excites the same physiological response: we brace ourselves as if preparing for flight or fight (42).

When the audience physically recoils from the disgusting images on screen, the images on screen cease to function solely as visual stimuli and become mediums for the viewer to engage directly with the action on screen. For this reason, cinematic body horror may be the most effective way to generate physical responses from the audience (Badley 11). The viewer need not physically experience the events on screen to undergo a visceral reaction, as bodily reactions may be triggered by the mere exposure to visual stimuli. The act of seeing an
image entails more than merely looking upon a particular sight; it prompts the spectator to situate herself/himself in relation to the subject (Berger 9).

Viewers may empathize with the physical transformation of the characters on screen by imagining their own bodies experiencing similar conditions, adding horrific value by projecting the fears of the audience onto the disfigured characters. This is not always the case, as some unrealistic bodily changes are beyond the realm of comprehension. The viewer may, however, appreciate the symbolism of the film and find horror in its contents. This should not suggest that all viewers make the same mental associations with similar images, since each person interprets images based on her/his own subjective knowledge and beliefs (Berger 8). Some may see Seth Brundle’s transformation in The Fly as disgusting and horrific, while others may envy his escape from normative human reality. As the goal of most horror films is to terrify the viewer, the former perspective is far more common, although the idea of terror varies among viewers. This subjective nature does not mean that large numbers of viewers are affected in similar ways, which can likely explain how some films that involve “jump-scares” continue to draw large audiences. Given the physical reactions that some viewers may have to frightening films, it is perhaps no surprise that an increasing number of horror film advertisements feature night-vision footage of audiences’ shocked reactions to test screenings of films like the Paranormal Activity series, Sinister (2012), and Evil Dead (2013).

Fear is an important dimension of persuasion, lending greater communicative importance to symbolism in horror films. Many studies have
confirmed the positive relationship between fear appeals and persuasion (Dillard and Anderson; Maddux and Rogers), demonstrating how audiences respond to messages crafted around terrifying subject matter. This is likely why cautionary tales in horror films resonate with audiences; if a message is supplemented with frightening hypothetical consequences, the viewer is motivated to heed the implicit warnings in the film. The visually provocative nature of body horror and the genre’s ability to inspire bodily responses from the audience makes the genre an ideal subject for rhetorical study of the relationship between the human body and film.

Body horror cinema offers a limited form of catharsis that can provide some level of emotional relief to viewers. While filmic bodies cannot directly purge the anxieties of audiences, they can come to terms with social problems by providing the illusion of mastery over our fears. Since humans cannot control death, fantastical horror films allow people to shape and recreate our run-ins with death and physical change (Cronenberg and Rodley 75). In other words, horror films simultaneously produce fear and catharsis. Some studies have confirmed that audiences enjoy horror films more when experiencing negative emotions like anxiety and uncertainty (Begley). This likely explains much of the appeal of horror cinema, as the simultaneous attraction and repulsion of horrific narratives allows viewers to experience fear and relief in knowing that the on-screen terrors are worse than those outside the theater.
Visual rhetoric and filmic bodies

Bodies on display, especially cinematic ones that can be fluidly crafted by filmmakers, deserve critical attention due to the sheer communicative power of the human figure. Debra Hawhee identifies the body as a central force of communication, not only through its symbolic effect for spectators but also in the body’s configuration as a network of neurons and receptors, which makes it a “site of mass mediation, a critical instance of broad, affective, communicative distribution” (82). Others have argued that bodies function rhetorically as visual texts to be analyzed, highlighting how the materiality of the human physique is as important as the spoken word in studies of persuasion and cultural practice (Selzer and Crowley 8). Given the symbolic function of bodies, rhetorical theory is useful in reading such texts, allowing critics to “initiate new possibilities of film-thought that can lead to new ways for bodies and subjects to make a difference and to gain valid recognition” (Roberts 107). Thus, I thus assume the role of rhetorical critic, approaching each film as an “agent of engagement” (Roberts 123) with the purpose of identifying the construction of filmic bodies. By taking such an interpretive approach to representative films within the genre, I identify how bodily representations in horror films communicate differing social ideas or anxieties that are illuminated through fantastical bodily changes.

I am particularly interested in the ways in which cinematic bodies may serve as symbols that craft particular messages for viewers to help interpret the social anxieties at play on-screen. To better understand how bodily imagery functions as symbols, I incorporate Kenneth Burke’s notion of terministic screens.
Burke describes terministic screens as sets of terms or symbols that direct the attention of the audience and shape how messages are interpreted (*Language as Symbolic Action* 45), making his theory especially useful in studying the message-imparting nature of cinema. Though Burke’s theory mainly deals with linguistic terms, I argue that cinematic bodies serve as a visual screen that serves similar functions. Burke even (inadvertently) testifies to the visual application of his theory when he clarifies that he derived his screen theory from observing different photographs of the same content, with varying color filters that changed his perception of the content (*Language as Symbolic Action* 45). Just as certain linguistic terms craft particular messages for the audience, visual imagery functions rhetorically by shaping the ways that viewers comprehend a theme, making filmic terministic screens of great communicative importance:

Film rhetoric- the visual and verbal signs and strategies that shape film experience- directs our attention in countless ways, but always with the aim of fostering identification and all that that complex phenomenon implies. Film theory- the interpretive lens through which and with which we generate perspectives on film as both art and rhetoric- likewise functions as a terministic screen, filtering what does and does not constitute and legitimize interpretation and, thus, meaning (Blakesley 3).

Though visual rhetoric is significant to Burke’s theory, few authors have applied his screen concept to cinema. Some have made brief mention of the concept in film studies, however. Paul Campbell argues that the structure of Ingmar
Bergman’s *Persona* (1966) offers a framework for evaluating actor-character identities (82), while others have argued that Steven Spielberg’s *The Color Purple* (1985) selectively emphasizes the source material to direct viewers’ attention to particular themes (McMullen and Solomon 164). Few sources go beyond casual mentions of Burke’s concept, and few scholars have couched their analysis of horror films within the field of communication.

Terministic screen theory offers a critical vocabulary for exploring the rhetorical implications of a text, making Burke’s concept of particular importance to film studies. David Blakesley’s collection of critical film essays stands virtually alone in offering an in-depth look at Burke’s screen theory in film. Like Blakesley, I endorse a communication-oriented focus on cinematic interpretation, which is well-suited to address concerns of film theorists and critics with regard to possible social functions of films (1). James Roberts’ essay stands out in the collection due to its focus on bodies in the acclaimed documentary *Hoop Dreams* (1994). Roberts’ method of analysis is similar to my own, as he explores the diverse meanings that may be found in the film’s depictions of the bodies of basketball players, from reflectors of parental expectations (113) to their own lofty ambitions of stardom (120). While Roberts’ analysis is revealing on the subject of bodily metaphors, I adopt the larger task of identifying how this plays out in a genre exemplar. In doing so, I highlight the synergy between rhetorical and film studies, finding a home for such analysis in the field of communication.

Academic works exploring the link between film and persuasive symbolism remain scattered across many disciplines and have been relegated largely to the
“periphery of interest” (Blakesley 3) in academia. This necessitates an effort among scholars to view such films as rhetorical efforts for social interpretation to identify the genre as a rich source of persuasive power and “put rhetoric back on the agenda” (Naremore).

I draw upon this idea at length, tying Burke’s terministic screen theory to visual elements of filmic bodies that function much like written words to infer meaning. Burke recognizes the communicative value of visually provocative cinema in his word on symbolic motion and action, arguing that it can affect the bodies of viewers, as “physiological behavior on the part of the audience can figure in a totally different kind of ‘communication’” (“(Nonsymbolic) Motion / (Symbolic) Action” 833). For Burke, the body and communication are inextricably linked, as the symbol-using nature of humanity requires a duplication and combination of “bodily sensation with symbolic counter-parts and corresponding analogical extensions” (“(Nonsymbolic) Motion / (Symbolic) Action” 821). I take Burke’s idea a step further, narrowing my focus to a particular genre of provocative cinema and analyzing the social relevance of bodies-as-spectacles. I explore how the body horrific provides a visual vocabulary that poses deeper questions beneath the flesh and bone on the silver screen. This approach allows critics to identify the ways that film persuades not just through explicit messages, but also through symbolism.

**Academic attention**

There exists an academic conversation on the communicative nature of body horror cinema. Andrew Tudor argues that body horror allows viewers to
project emotions and anxieties onto deformed bodies in a genre that “routinely attracts and repels via its imagery” (25). Williams describes such graphic films as the “fear jerker” alternative to “tear jerker” films that affect audiences in less extreme ways (4). By projecting fears onto cinematic bodies, filmmakers may “address persistent problems in our culture, in our sexualities, in our very identities” (Williams 9). Williams blends her focus on horror with that of pornography and tragic melodramas, arguing that such sensationalist genres can convey messages in an extreme manner that can affect viewers more strongly than other types of films (4).

Linda Badley’s 1995 book *Film, Horror, and the Body Fantastic* remains the most noteworthy academic work on the subject, offering a historical look at how grotesque bodily subjects have evolved with the ever-changing horror genre. My work shares a similar spirit with Badley’s, particularly in highlighting the ability of horror to arouse viewers and inspire them to deliberate on themes addressed on screen (11). Approaches grounded in communication studies can add unique depth to work such as Badley’s by uncovering the persuasive elements at play in each film and unearthing the rhetorical functions of filmic bodies. I adopt such an approach to identify how bodies serve as interpretive screens, illuminating the communicative import of the body horrific.

Authors such as Badley, Tudor, and Williams do not share good company, as most authors have addressed body horror in a mostly general manner devoid of application to rhetoric and extra-textual influences, and works on the subject appear to have largely tapered off since the 1990s. A disproportionate number of
works focus merely on the shocking details of films, giving far more attention to behind-the-scenes details of gory makeup and prosthetic limbs (Zak) than to critical interpretation of persisting themes that grotesque film has to offer. Despite their rich potential for social commentary, films that “gross-out” audiences are often characterized by many viewers and critics as mere excess and junk cinema, perhaps regarded just above pornography in cultural esteem (Williams 3). Authors often view shocking images in films like Antichrist (2009) as attempts to bait attention rather than to provide serious commentary (Allen). Due to their provocative nature, gory movies are often considered less socially relevant than tamer, more conventional films. Given this common assumption and the lack of recent critical attention to the sub-genre, it is important for critics to resume the task of identifying bodily symbolism in horror films that moves beyond mere excess to function as meaningful, socially-relevant commentary.

**Film as distinct medium**

Film is certainly not the only art form to commonly depict the human body. Countless sculptures, paintings, written texts, and photographs have used the human body as inspiration and subject. Film offers a unique conduit for somatic study. The precise nature of images provides a richer source of testimony than the written word, yielding powerful and imaginative visions that may convey profound meaning (Berger 10). While photography and static imagery can take some creative liberties with bodily imagery, they cannot truly capture action in the same way that film does, limiting the utility of those mediums in analysis such as my own. Since motion is an essential aspect of the lived body, it is important
for a medium to capture bodily movements. Burke explores the unique communicative value of moving images in his work on symbolic action, claiming that message-driven action in cinema can ensnake the audience into the drama of a narrative (“(Nonsymbolic) Motion / (Symbolic) Action” 833). Movies also offer unprecedented creative expanse, allowing directors to tap into the “magic” of Hollywood to manipulate images for visual pleasure (Mulvey 8), which is especially true for fantastical films in the horror genre that make prominent use of bodily spectacles.

The film industry is also a critical area of bodily interest due to its profound influence on societal body image. Perfection of the human body has become a social obsession, due in no small part to standards driven by Hollywood films and advertising. Idyllic conceptions of physically fit, symmetrical, and able-bodies permeate nearly all major content in the film industry, which has drawn negative attention for promoting unrealistic standards of beauty (WhyFive). The line between model and movie star has all but disappeared, and the physiques of actors appear to be as integral (often more so) to casting decisions as raw talent. In an industry dominated by images of the perfectly sculpted figures of attractive movie stars, the mangled human forms seen in body horror films serve as counterpoints to the glamorous idealism of Hollywood; “even Brad Pitt and Julia Roberts can be absolutely revolting when reduced to their individual severed parts” (Morrione and Morrione). Some authors, such as renowned horror icon Stephen King, speculate that body horror movies serve cathartic functions to confront such physical idealism:
We also go to re-establish our feelings of essential normality; the horror movie is innately conservative, even reactionary. Freda Jackson as the horrible melting woman in *Die, Monster, Die!* confirms for us that no matter how far we may be removed from the beauty of a Robert Redford or a Diana Ross, we are still light-years from true ugliness. (461)

Body horror may therefore function as a critical interruption of perfectionist bodily standards of the industry, exposing in many ways the ugly truth of human mortality and challenging norms of physical predictability. This warrants academic focus on films that break from rigid conceptions of the body and play fast and loose with its visual depictions.

Rhetorical criticism should acknowledge the subjective nature of bodily messages (Roberts 112), which is especially true of horror films that may resonate with viewers differently and allow films to spur viewers to cope with social anxieties in different ways. There are reasonable limits, however, to the credible interpretations of certain films like *Videodrome*. One is unlikely to find optimistic messages regarding technology or corporate power in Cronenberg’s film; indeed, such horror films serve as cautionary tales that can rarely be read in uplifting contexts (hence the “horror”). Though the implications drawn from such films may vary, the overall tones conveyed lend themselves to particular interpretations over others. I qualify my viewpoints based on the content of the films, providing in-text references to support my theories on each theme.
Classifying “body horror”

The “body horror” sub-genre is not monolithic and is unlikely to be a prominent category in any store, online database, or catalogue of films. What constitutes “body horror” may differ according to the viewer, and there are no established criteria for classifying films in this area. For the purposes of this thesis, I use the term to refer mainly to films that emphasize changing human bodies in a horrific light. While body horror primarily falls under the larger horror genre, it can be found in other genres, from drama to science fiction. Movies such as *Metropolis* (1927), *Se7en* (1995) and *Prometheus* (2012) are not primarily horror movies, yet they contain scenes and ideas that center on terrifying bodily changes. The genre commonly features human bodies in flux as they evolve into new forms or undergo some grotesque alteration that distorts the very humanity of the character.

Body horror films most often revolve around themes of disease, metamorphosis, and gender. Although the specifics of each category change with each film, most body horror films can be classified under one (or some combination of) these subsets. Although there are other concepts explored in the genre, such as dismemberment and penetration, these three are the most prominent and promising for critical study in that they address grander changes to the nature of the human figure rather than just homing in on bodily wounds. I will distinguish the body horror films studied in this thesis from those that simply involve acts of physical harm against human bodies, including “slasher” films like *Halloween* (1978) and *Friday the 13th* (1980). While significant in their own right,
these sorts of films do not center as much on the communicative force of the human physique and the nature of the body as spectacle and thus warrant a different approach than mine in this thesis. Any well-rounded study of body horror would be remiss without examining the three subsets listed above, especially the ways in which they may intersect in specific works like Videodrome.

**Videodrome as guide**

Any study of filmic body horror eventually finds its way back to Cronenberg, whose influence and graphic style have earned him a variety of appropriate nicknames, including the “Baron of Blood,” the “King of Venereal Horror,” and “Dave ‘Deprave’ Cronenberg” (Aziz). After over a decade of Cronenberg exploring body horror, from the low-budget Stereo (1969) to the special effects-laden Scanners (1981), Videodrome reflects a fully-confident director synthesizing bodily themes that had previously been scattered across his filmography. The film weaves together numerous somatic motifs that strike at the core of body horror cinema, providing a framework for evaluating how said motifs unfold in cinema. While I trace certain themes throughout numerous films, I anchor most of my analysis in Videodrome, with its nuanced and diverse approach to morphing bodies. There exists a multitude of excellent films that deal strongly with bodily themes yet lack the self-awareness and grander vision of Videodrome, which remains one of the most influential horror films of all time (Da Silva). While a strong case can be made that other films, such as Cronenberg’s well-received remake of The Fly, can guide analysis of the body
horror genre, I believe that \textit{Videodrome} is best suited for such analysis. Above all else, \textit{Videodrome} is unique in explicitly addressing the linkages between media and the body, allowing the film to address the screen-to-viewer relationship and raise broader questions about film as an influential medium for transferring messages. Movies like \textit{The Fly} hold strong symbolic value yet are mostly confined to the messages within their narratives. \textit{Videodrome}, on the other hand, raises pressing questions about the very act of watching, implicating the viewer (and director) in ways that other films do not.

\textbf{Chapter outline}

I trace themes in \textit{Videodrome} through the three most significant sub-sets of body horror, identifying social fears at play within the parameters of disease, metamorphosis, and gender identity themes. I devote a chapter to \textit{Videodrome}’s relation to each of the aforementioned themes, exploring the particular anxieties reflected in each area. I revisit Burke’s screen theory in the context of each category, identifying how bodies in \textit{Videodrome} direct attention to particular messages. To couch my analysis of Cronenberg’s film within larger cinematic trends, I briefly identify how these three sub-categories have been approached in other films in the genre.

The following chapter explores disease motifs, exploring how \textit{Videodrome} uses infected human bodies to reflect anxieties surrounding bodily afflictions and decay. I examine how infected bodies emphasize inherent human frailty, reflecting social fears of mortality, addiction, and loss of control over our bodily functions. I also evaluate how \textit{Videodrome} likens social problems such as
corruption to diseases that plague the public sphere, crafting morality plays that critique problematic behavior. This chapter deals mostly with symbolic imagery of ailing bodies that reflects the horror of *inner* threats and the bodily symptoms that react to them.

Chapter three shifts focus to themes of metamorphosis in *Videodrome*, with its varying depictions of the human figure morphing into other forms. I evaluate several aspects of the film that deal with such changes, including Renn’s body developing a VCR/vaginal cavity on his torso, his limbs melding with weapons, and his television set becoming an extension of (albeit separated physically from) his flesh. I connect these to broader social commentary and fears surrounding human identity and fear of difference, the dangerous effects of media, corporate domination, unchecked technological progress, and uncertainties of human evolution. Specifically, I explore how the film’s concept of the “New Flesh” crafts a visual lexicon for viewers to interpret the messages surrounding each theme.

Chapter four addresses *Videodrome*’s themes of gender and sexuality, beginning with its gender-bending look at Renn’s changing body. I tie this to larger themes of masculine control of the feminine body and the promotion of chauvinistic media, both of which are persisting social problems. I explore how *Videodrome* critiques gender violence by destabilizing Renn’s sexual identity while also confronting the problems raised by Laura Mulvey’s theory of the “male gaze.” Finally, I examine how the film creates a unique vision of male birth, which destabilizes the origin point of life and reflects anxiety over the fate of
future generations. I argue that Videodrome subverts traditional gender relations by problematizing masculine domination and male-centric forms of viewership.

Chapter five concludes my analysis of Videodrome as I call for rhetorical criticism of other notable body horror texts. I tie my reading of Videodrome to a broader discussion of body horror’s symbolic utility, exploring how each of the three sub-categories of the genre boasts a strong base of films to consider. To demonstrate the genre’s promise for rhetorical critics, I briefly draw attention to other films that deal with themes of disease, metamorphosis, and gendering bodies. I evaluate other body horror texts that are either directly related to or expound upon the bodily themes in Cronenberg’s film to demonstrate how my reading of Videodrome can inform the readings of future works by rhetorical critics. I will not look too far into the proverbial crystal ball of where body horror films may head in the future, although I will examine how current films have laid the groundwork for promising avenues for the genre in the future and how it remains a potent source of social critique.
CHAPTER TWO
Disease and Ailing Bodies

Body horror encompasses more than just visual imagery of outward bodily changes. Horrifying bodily changes can occur beneath the skin and out of view, typically in the form of infection and diseases. Through themes of disease and disintegration, body horror is implied nearly as often as it is shown. Illness and infection motifs address the inherent opacity of the human physique, raising terrifying possibilities of unseen interior menaces in addition to outward symptoms. Filmic diseases sometimes originate from within, entailing a failure or betrayal of natural bodily processes, while other cinematic infections are triggered by outside forces that cast our environment as the source of hostile pathogens. Disease-based body horror uses such threats to confront timeless fears of human mortality by emphasizing the fragile nature of the body and our inability to control harmful internal threats. Social ills are also manifested in horror films as diseases that threaten the well-being of society. Much like actual diseases, the effects of societal problems, such as corruption and suggestive media, are internalized and difficult to control. Identifying ailing bodies through the lens of terministic screens offers a way of reading such social ills, shedding light on the particular anxieties reflected through filmic diseases.

Before delving into specific analysis of Videodrome, I must first visit the film’s narrative structure, which contributes greatly to its bodily commentary. The story follows Max Renn, president of the smutty Toronto-based television station CIVIC-TV, as he becomes embroiled in a corporate conspiracy to control the
minds of viewers. When Renn stumbles upon the eponymous Videodrome, a fuzzy channel depicting nothing more than extreme violence and sex, he assumes that he has found the provocative new material he needs to spice up his own programming (Renn calls for “something tough.”). Upon further investigation, Renn finds himself torn between Professor Brian O’Blivion, the deceased creator of Videodrome and media philosopher who lives on through countless pre-recorded videotapes, and Barry Convex, head of Spectacular Optical, an eyeglass company that fronts NATO weapons manufacturing. Convex plans to use Videodrome for mass mind control through Renn’s station, while O’Blivion and his daughter, Bianca, fight against the abuse of the Professor’s creation. Videodrome’s signal morphs the bodies of viewers via brain tumors that kill the host after addicting her/him to graphic sexual and violent media. Renn’s own body is shown in graphic flux as he develops a new stomach-vagina that doubles as a VCR and melds weapons to Renn’s flesh. After being manipulated by the powers around him, Renn is driven to murder his colleagues, including Convex, before committing suicide. The fleshy spectacle of the film revolves around the real and imagined effects of Videodrome on Renn’s body, which, in true film noir fashion, is present in every scene. Renn’s body is the vessel for both viewer and protagonist to experience the film, as the audience is guided through the story tethered to the antihero’s physical form. Though he is the central point of identification, Renn is not the only character who undergoes transfiguration. Other bodies are violated throughout the film, including those belonging to Convex and Nicki Brand, a radio psychiatrist with a taste for sadomasochism. As
Renn becomes involved in the corporate conspiracy for mind control, the film’s bodily commentary springs to life and maps social messages onto the flesh of its main character.

*Videodrome* contains themes of physical illness and bodily disintegration to allude to larger social fears. Though much of the body horror in the film deals with the visible changes to Renn’s figure, much of the horror and metaphorical value of the film comes from unseen infection that Videodrome spreads to its viewers. Cronenberg’s film takes a unique approach to filmic viruses, departing from the usual horror formulas of tracing a global disease outbreak or the frantic rush to contain one. Instead, *Videodrome* follows the gradual infection and disintegration of one doomed character, a stand-in Patient Zero, while alluding to the implications for the whole of society. Infection metaphors in the film tap into grander human anxieties, not least of which is the prospect that people may lose control of their bodies in the face of viral hazards and larger corruptive forces. Since the body is an icon of wellness and our very existence (Badley 28), the loss of control represents a larger ontological crisis of humans losing our grasp of our own bodily processes. Uncontrollable ailments call our very being into question, suggesting the end of human mastery over our physical conditions.

**Screening diseased bodies**

Burke’s terministic screen theory holds unique meaning for infection motifs, mainly since infection-based bodily changes are largely inferred rather than visually displayed. The suggestive symbolism of inner chaos, as well as the outward reactions of bodies, functions rhetorically in shaping the messages of
films such as *Videodrome*. Burke addresses this sort of communication in his work on symbolic motion and audience interpretation (*Language as Symbolic Action* 45; “(Nonsymbolic) Motion/(Symbolic) Action” 833). Inspired partly by his experience with drug research (Hawhee 56) and partly by his own deteriorating health in his old age (Hawhee 130), much of Burke’s work tackles the meaning-making nature of ailing bodies. The screen-to-body relationship is particularly strong with regard to disease-based horror, which is enhanced by the physical responses induced in the viewer through imagery of bodies in pain. Physicians have confirmed the link between horror films and physiological effects on the body, including increased blood pressure and chest pain (Braff). Many films have become notorious for triggering sickly responses from audience members. Extreme bodily imagery in movies such as *The Exorcist*, *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), *Antichrist*, and *127 Hours* (2010) have led to fainting, vomiting, seizures, and even the occasional heart attack (McGinn). The oft-touted phrase of “It’s just a movie” lacks the intended reassurance when it comes to sensationalist horror. While the fantastical diseases in each narrative are contained on the screen, audiences may find themselves made “sick” in a different way (Luerssen; Sparks et al. 471). Burke identifies such affective qualities as core parts of message reception and translation. Turning his focus to endocrinology, Burke identifies how fearful imagery rouses “glandular surges” that boost adrenaline and orient the body toward particular interpretations of a message, constituting a “chemical sort of rhetoric” (Hawhee 85-86). Diseased bodies in films such as *Videodrome* therefore function as terministic screens that are
grounded in fearful association, instigating reflection-deflection processes that condition the attitude of the receiver. Since the horrific elements of messages raise physiological alertness in anticipation of the terrors on screen, the ideas at play lend themselves toward more danger-centric interpretations while deflecting the calmer, more passive views of a less ominous packaging (Burke, *Permanence and Change* 151). Since the viewer is provided visual cues of bodily anguish, attention is more easily directed to the wrongness of a given situation, reflecting the problematic nature of the social themes being addressed. Horrific bodies, especially contaminated ones, therefore reflect realities of human pain and suffering that put larger problems on graphic display.

This is not to say that the infected body horrific only lends itself to messages of doom-and-gloom. Numerous authors have elaborated on Burke’s theory that symbolism, especially of the body, holds cathartic (and thus medicinal) function to confront societal ills (Hawhee 137; Woods 4). Visual metaphors therefore allow audiences to compartmentalize and more easily confront their worst fears, which remain safely confined to the screen. Burke even links this purging quality to horror narratives, which cope with fears through exposition and “by reducing fear to manageable proportions” (*Attitudes Toward History* 183) of fiction. This idea is a driving force behind Cronenberg’s body horror films, which prime viewers to confront age-old human anxieties:

Catharsis is the basis of all art. This is particularly true of horror films, because horror is so close to what’s primal. We all prepare ourselves for challenges that we can anticipate. It’s only when
cultural imperatives require that we avoid the discussion of things like death and ageing that the impulse is suppressed. Humans naturally prepare themselves to meet those kinds of challenges. Certainly ageing and death are two of those things (Cronenberg and Rodley 73).

Infection themes offer viewers a less stressful outlet for grappling with fears of death than can be found in real life, blunting the psychological impact of real-world diseases.

Though authors such as Hawhee and Woods explore Burke’s bodily affect theory at length, it is worth exploring how this relates to his terministic screen concept, which is useful in understanding how processes of bodily affect unfold. Terministic screen theory is well-suited to identify how cinematic visual symbolism directs audience attention and crafts particular messages while demonstrating the tendency of humans to exorcise their demons through macabre works of art. Applying Burke’s screen theory to infected bodies in Videodrome illuminates the cathartic process of film, revealing how horror cinema psychologically exorcises social demons through creative manipulation of bodily realities. If the nature of bodies-as-screens entails selecting bits of reality while deflecting others, films that focus on sickly and weakened characters offer new ways of seeing humankind in relation to our inevitable deaths. Ailing bodies select bits of reality that emphasize the failings of our immune systems, emphasizing horrific messages that draw attention to societal ills. Hawhee identifies how sick bodies in Burke’s fictional stories are more attuned to the
problems of their environment, while healthier bodies are relaxed into the “numb dullness of a status quo existence” (19). Ailing bodies are thus ones infused with the urgency of responding to existential crises, making diseased physiques ideal reflectors of societal unease.

Infection narratives initiate a process of screening that has much in common with pathological examinations, involving diagnosis, evaluation of physical affliction, exploration of possible symptoms, and attempted remedy. This plays out through critical interpretation of artistic metaphors, which re-frames the author-reader relationship as a doctor-patient connection (Woods 6). Infected characters also assume a sort of “patient” role before the engaged gaze of the viewer. Films such as Videodrome entail a “screening” of characters for disease, making the viewer privy to all of the morbid details of bodily infection and the ensuing side effects. As the action unfolds, the audience is largely witness to the characters’ contamination, realization and endurance of illness, and frantic search for a remedy. Message interpretation surrounding filmic disease is a diagnostic process, with the entire act of watching serving as the remedy. Infection films grant audiences “vicarious near-death experiences that allow viewers to approach death time after time, without risk” (Badley 24-5), keeping contaminated persons quarantined on the silver screen.

Filmic viruses and parasites are often conceived of as social and psychological forces, as opposed to merely biological ones, that function rhetorically to expose larger public anxieties. This relies on a conception of society as a metaphorical body, with social ills serving as contaminants to the
overall health of the social sphere. The treatment of filmic diseases as manifested societal problems allows filmmakers to craft infection narratives as morality tales, using horrific fates to punish certain characters for their transgressions. Susan Sontag’s *Illness as Metaphor* speaks to the notion of illnesses as reflectors of character, identifying how certain diseases have been viewed in the public imaginary as punishment or self-inflicted ailments arising from particular behavior patterns. Cancer and AIDS, for instance, have been viewed as indicators of the shameful or evil nature of the host (Sontag 112), leading to forms of victim-blaming. Sontag raises the obvious problems with viewing disease as a determinant of character and is correct in claiming that illness-based metaphors should be eschewed in real-world situations (3). This is not true, however, in the case of fictional outlets such as cinema that use illness metaphors to horrific effect in exploring social relations. Since filmic metaphors of disease hold symbolic value for audiences, they allow filmmakers to craft morality plays to condemn undesirable behaviors while keeping disease-to-mind linkages confined to the realm of fiction. Although diseases in the real world are no indicator of the ethics of their hosts, cinema affords filmmakers the flexibility to portray characters through the lens of crime-and-punishment. Fiction can frame individuals as purely good or evil, trumping up qualities that bolster the potency of a film’s message. This idea dates as far back as Todd Browning’s *Freaks* (1932), which ends with its sideshow heroes turning a malicious, gold-digging beauty into a deformed carnival attraction, projecting her inner nastiness onto her body. Diseased filmic bodies function as terministic screens that can selectively reflect certain mindsets
or emotions, allowing filmmakers to use ailing characters to reflect unethical human qualities while deflecting the positive ones that ill people hold in the real world. Characters who are representative of social ills demonstrate Burke’s theory of mind-body parallels (Hawhee 90), which testifies to the rhetorical value of cinema and bodies as source of symbolic action. The nature of diseased bodies as terministic screens directs attention toward several questions that shape the message of each given morality play: Who is the suffering character, and how did they contract their affliction? What are his/her symptoms? What are the social conditions surrounding them? Social messages can be inferred from the answers to these questions, making screen theory a strong framework for understanding how fears are reflected in movies such as Videodrome.

Disease on display

Fears of disease and infection are as old as humanity itself, as past civilizations have grappled with (and have sometimes been destroyed by) deadly pandemics and unsanitary conditions. Many modern-day discussions of pandemics conjure imagery of more severe historical health calamities involving smallpox, various strands of flu, the Black Death, and many others. Though most pandemics are less devastating than they used to be, diseases continue to emerge and spread across the world, giving each generation its own series of health crises with which to grapple. Recent outbreaks of Ebola as well as scares over avian and swine flu continue to capture headlines, prompting concern over inadequate medical infrastructure. Increasing debates over the efficacy of vaccines also reflect ever-present anxieties regarding how to best prevent diseases, tapping into
larger discussions of parental obligations to future generations (Hofman et al. 874). Cancer has proven a largely resilient killer and remains the most feared of all diseases (A. Smith), posing a threat to every demographic and mostly lacking reliable remedies. Given the alarmingly high profile of disease in the minds of people everywhere, it should come as no surprise that such social fears have become a common theme in the body horror genre.

Richard Harland Smith traces filmic infection back to F.W. Murnau’s classic *Nosferatu* (1), which features a rat-fueled illness wiping out most of a ship’s crew in a horrific allusion to the Bubonic Plague. Filmic infections have taken many forms since then, with wide variants of infection sources and horrific symptoms. Horrific “infections” are commonly shown as communicable, spreading through bites or fluid transfers from hostile beings such as werewolves, vampires, zombies, and even rabid animals. Disease-based films most often depict a physical withering away or breakdown in the normative functions of the body. Infection films imagine threats as natural, biological. Disease narratives hold uniquely frightening dimensions by alluding to real-life afflictions and social problems, reflecting enough of actual anxieties to rile audiences while exaggerating infection for horrific effect. Though most films in this sub-genre put exaggerated spins on each affliction, many of them are coded explorations of real-world sickness. Anxiety toward the animal kingdom has been manifested through zoonotic diseases in films such as *Braindead* (1992), *Outbreak* (1995) *28 Days Later* (2002), and *Contagion* (2011). Each of these presents the all-too-real possibility of infected animals spreading a virus, which has been the source of
several scares involving swine flu and mad cow disease. Many other films express fears of accidental contamination through bioweapons accidents or experiments gone awry, as seen in *The Satan Bug* (1965), *The Crazies* (1973 and 2010), *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977 and 2006), *Carnosaur* (1993), and Cronenberg’s own *Shivers* (1975). Even the common sliver and the related fears of tetanus have been used as a source of uncontrollable mutation, as shown in the bluntly-titled *Splinter* (2008). Most disease films feature (or allude to) mass outbreaks of infection that rapidly spread out of control, examining the larger implications of pandemics for society.

The sources of disease in horror films have symbolic dimensions that inform the messages of each movie. Animal vectors raise the possibility that, despite our dominion over other species, we may still be powerless to stop existential threats from the animal kingdom. Films featuring diseases spread by toxic chemicals reflect fears of unruly industrialization and incorporate messages of technological pessimism and the mishandling of scientific advancements.

Though depictions of disease in *Videodrome* differ substantially from the aforementioned tropes and movies, Cronenberg’s film uses its fictional affliction to allude to grander fears of unwieldy societal problems. As opposed to the verifiable spread of pathogens from animals or accidents in most disease films, *Videodrome* features the most popular form of mass entertainment as a social contaminant that plagues the minds and bodies of the populace, offering a nuanced spin on a largely predictable sub-genre. Cronenberg’s film also departs from the traditional framework of disease cinema by focusing on the micro-level
effects of bodily infection in its protagonist as opposed to a global outbreak. The film’s intimate look at a specific patient unearths the fragile nature of the human condition, homing its focus in on the particular bodily changes spurred by disease as opposed to the global response to infection. Videodrome uses Renn’s ailing body to cast popular entertainment as a direct health hazard, highlighting how easily the human mind may be controlled by outside stimuli and the resulting bodily corruption. Cronenberg’s film offers bizarre, hyperbolic metaphors as bearable ways of coping with everyday fears of disease and mortality (Badley 10), providing fictional outlets for venting timeless anxieties toward infection.

Videodrome is painted as a disease, an infectious change in the viewers’ bodies via tumors that translate into broad social problems. Though many of Renn’s bodily changes are imagined (which I further explore later), there is a biological reality to Videodrome derived from its gradual infection of the brain, which is the sole reason that the program holds sway over its viewership. By spreading mind-controlling tumors, the program creates an infection-of-control that changes the entire nature of the individual. The afflicted viewer is robbed of autonomy, ontologically re-programmed with the entirely new purpose of serving Spectacular Optical and consuming sensationalist media. Infection is shown as synonymous with a total loss of control, making the ailing persons helpless to escape their new existence of couch-bound obedience. In particular, we witness Renn’s bodily changes and descent into madness as a direct result of his newfound sickness, making the biological facets of Videodrome just as important as the (arguably) hallucinated metamorphosis that Renn undergoes. Elena
Lamberti further isolates how Videodrome’s disease is a unique type with cognitive effects on the victim, implicating themes of larger societal control:

Here the tumour is not necessarily an illness in the way we traditionally conceive of illnesses, but an extension wrapping both brain hemispheres in the hallucination it develops. It is the unexpected point of contact between organic and inorganic, between real and unreal, between consciousness and virtuality. This is the point through which Big Brother comes inside of us (256).

The distinctive illness in Videodrome evokes themes of corporate and mass media manipulation explored more thoroughly in the following chapter. Unlike most filmic pandemics, Cronenberg’s disease is one deliberately spread by humans with an explicit mind control agenda. By weaving themes of disease into larger musings on social control and death, Videodrome forms what Burke would call a “disintegrating art” (Hawhee 20) to cope with disquieting human realities.

**Bodily fragility**

The horror genre has always appealed to peoples’ fear of death, normalizing murder as a reliable source of scares and highlighting the uncomfortable truth that death could always be imminent (M. Smith). Given its universal reach and infinite mystery, death is arguably the most potent of all social fears, surpassing even that its most widely cited competitor, public speaking (Dwyer and Davidson 99). Although death is an inevitable human reality, creative works like horror films allow people an outlet, however fleeting,
to bring mortality within a realm of control that can reflexively address our most commonplace fears (Cronenberg and Rodley 75; Keisner 419; Smith). Although nearly all sub-sets of horror deal with fears of death in some manner, infection-based films are uniquely attuned to human anxiety surrounding mortality for several reasons. While metamorphosis themes attest to fears of change, infection themes strike at the heart of human health and the finite nature of the flesh. Disease represents the end of the healthy body, exposing the faults and fragility of the human form by displaying how easily our antibodies may fail us. Infection also threatens the entire spectrum of social stability and survival, since each person is a potential carrier with the ability to spread civilization-ending microbes. Diseased characters are made frightening through the process of mental association of his/her affliction to the body of the viewer. Visuals of bodies facing extreme sickness trigger a form of “over-identification between viewer and imperiled character on-screen” (Snyder and Mitchell 183), bolstering the allegorical value of films such as *Videodrome*.

The prominent use of infected bodies in advertising campaigns for disease films confirm the horrific value of deadly pestilence. Posters for Steven Soderbergh’s *Contagion* feature a screen capture of Gwyneth Paltrow’s horrified face in her death throes, parading the intimate last moments of an infected person as the film’s selling point. The covers of movies such as *Shivers, Infection* (2004), *Carriers* (2009) and *Contracted* (2013) all offer close-ups of infected individuals both dead and alive, promising intimate looks at the bodily responses of victims to deadly disease. Such imagery of suffering bodies, especially those near the point
of dying, appeal to the audience’s innate fear of (and thus morbid attraction to) painful and untimely death. Though many films deal with the post-apocalyptic worlds after pandemics, I am mostly interested in the depiction of bodily symptoms that emphasize the “body” in body horror.

Like most disease films, *Videodrome* draws attention to failing bodies that succumb to dangerous new intrusion, mostly through Renn’s own suffering body. Although it is nearly impossible to recognize on first viewing, the viewer witnesses Renn’s “infection” when he first catches a glimpse of Videodrome’s fuzzy footage. This signals his first encounter with the tumor-spreading program, initiating his addiction and development of his disease. Renn soon begins experiencing symptoms, including severe headaches, gross cosmetic changes, and bizarre hallucinations. When his stomach turns an irritated red in anticipation of his VCR-organ, Renn dismisses it as “a rash or something.” While we do not see Renn withering away in a hospital bed like many disease victims, we do see his bodily responses to inner infection as he undergoes phases of contraction-to-symptom-to-death. This departure from typical horror movie disease-deaths expands the concept of what it means to be “infected,” while still capturing the fatalistic aspects of illness. The effects of Videodrome also take on an abnormal form of communicability, although the program is meant to spread across large swaths of the populace using Renn’s station as the vector.

The uniqueness of the “Videodrome-problem” allows Cronenberg’s film to explore aspects of illness not usually covered by horror films. Specifically, *Videodrome* grapples with the linkages between television and bodily harm,
exploring the damaging effects of couch-potato lifestyles. Intensive TV-viewing sessions and the resulting sedentary habits have been linked to cancer, heart problems, and obesity (Gregory). This sort of bodily disintegration is precisely what Videodrome relies on, as it preys on the bodies of weak-willed, obedient viewers. The film even winks at the common parental warning for children to keep their distance from the TV screen, as a deluded Renn shoves his entire head into his television set. Renn’s diseased figure is the direct result of his media consumption patterns, making his fate a warning sign to TV devotees. Renn is confronted with these connections firsthand when he is told by a colleague that televised smut is “rotting us away from the inside.” These sorts of media-related health concerns have only become more severe as people are increasingly glued to their respective electronic screens, making Videodrome steadily more and more relevant to modern generations. Cronenberg’s film raises the frightening idea that our collective doom may be linked to our favorite forms of entertainment, centering fears of death in our pockets and living rooms.

The side effects of Videodrome do not always necessarily imply death as a direct result of the tumors but guarantee horrific fates for the host nonetheless. Sontag identifies how disease often leads to forms of social isolation (6) that may be considered “social death” (122) that radically alters the lifestyle of the victim. Renn experiences such social distancing throughout the film. While he is shown interacting with many colleagues (and even appearing on a talk show) in earlier scenes, he later withdraws from social interaction as a result of his hallucination-fueled addiction to Videodrome. He confuses his secretary through odd
ramblings, while unsettling another friend whom he asks to verify his visions. All semblances of normalcy are lost after infection, making Renn a social leper eventually driven to madness.

*Videodrome* captures all of the human yearning for continuation of experience after death. After murdering Convex and just before his suicide, Renn is assured by his Nicki-television that the death of his body is “not the end,” and that he needn’t fear what comes after. His repetition of “Long live the New Flesh” up until he pulls the trigger captures his hope for a more transcendent reality, a new body more resilient than his old one. For religious people, the notion of embracing death as a step toward a better afterlife is nothing new. *Videodrome* poses the question, however exaggerated, of whether death is the end of human consciousness and if the mind can survive the death of the flesh. Given his morbid hallucinations throughout the rest of the film, Renn’s last hope of rising above his material body does not bode well, casting his disease as fatalistic. While the disturbed protagonist ultimately comes to embrace his death, his fate is hardly depicted in a positive light; his tormented downward spiral is still horrific, and the flames licking his face in the final shot conjure imagery of hell. The audience can witness Renn’s ominous step into the unknown but is not privy to the details of whatever afterlife, if any, that he finds. We may see Renn comforted and emboldened by the prospect of a better afterlife, but death remains a fearsome mystery of which humans have little control or conception.

The lack of bodily safeguards in the film invites fears over the lack of human control. *Videodrome* reflects an anxiety that infection will turn
uncontrollable, bypassing human agency and our most advanced remedies. This demonstrates an overall trend of incurable (or unsuccessfully addressed) afflictions in disease-based body cinema. Diseases are most horrifying when there is no clear or easily-accessible remedy, as it lies beyond the realm of human management. We have little fear of diseases that have been eradicated or largely controlled, hence cancer is universally feared while polio is not. This explains the tendency of most disease films to focus on pandemics without simple (or often, any) cures and depicts the race for vaccines; the irrelevance of human agency in preventing outbreaks is nearly as horrifying as contracting the condition in the first place. When our natural physical processes are interrupted or jeopardized, all sense of bodily control is called into question. Internal parasites and viruses (often forming at microscopic levels) are much harder to control than cosmetic details of the body, making infection a unique threat to humankind’s ability to control its environment. This is especially true given the difficulty in tracking, much less containing, certain pandemics. Disease narratives imagine worlds where our health services are inadequate, where the tragic shortcomings of the human body are beyond repair. This taps into real-world anxieties surrounding afflictions such as cancer, which has largely evaded quick-fixes and can only hope to be slightly mitigated in many cases despite overall medical advancements. Though cures and preventative measures exist to combat many diseases, they are no silver-bullet solution to the wide range of possible deadly ailments. The lingering threats of resurgence, or worse, mutations, ensure that disease remains a prominent concern among most people regardless of medical remedies. Many filmmakers have
picked up on this horrific appeal of mutated diseases. Elaborate horror films capitalize on the uncontainable nature of viral threats, including how new diseases and infections often go unseen and undetected until much too late.

_Videodrome_ illustrates an infectious social force that goes unrecognized by the larger public. Victims of the program are unaware of their infection until much too late, as seen in Renn’s case. By the time Bianca informs him of his brain tumor, the unruly process of brain mutation is too far gone. Renn soon loses the ability to act independently, signifying the total loss of control over his bodily faculties. Even the creators of Videodrome are unable to control its effects. The program begins as a tool to manipulate infected persons, but Renn’s fate confirms the inability to master the unruly flesh. Although both Convex and Bianca attempt to control Renn’s disease for their own agendas, the protagonist is ultimately overcome by his illness and is therefore no further use to either side.

For all its dealing with symptoms, _Videodrome_ makes little to no mention of a cure. Once infection sets in, the victim is helpless, set on autopilot for their inevitable disintegration before their TV set or in the line of corporate duty. The only implied “remedy,” hinted at through Renn’s fate, is suicide. Renn’s mad dash to murder pre-selected targets replaces the rush for a vaccine featured in other disease films. Fitting in with themes of uncontrollable physical illness, _Videodrome_ is all about the side effects and never about the cure, morbidly suggesting that humanity’s future may hold new and incurable diseases. The aforementioned fears of death are intimately tied to anxiety of uncontrollable
bodies; disease suggests that we may not have the happy ending that we all desire, robbing us of the ability to decide how to spend our final days.

**Social contaminants**

“What is the most resilient parasite?” asks Dominick Cobb in Christopher Nolan’s *Inception* (2010). “An idea. Resilient, highly contagious. Once an idea has taken hold in the brain, it’s almost impossible to eradicate.” Though *Inception* is not necessarily a body horror film, Cobb’s words testify to the wide range of conceptions of contamination. Infection metaphors in film are not limited to the effects of a literal, physical organism. Society is often compared to a body, with public problems likened to diseases. Assigning human bodily features to society is a common rhetorical device. Ideological battles are framed as contests over the “heart” of the nation, while portions of the working class are deemed the country’s “backbone.” It follows that a number of social problems may be viewed as corrosive to the well-being of the larger populace, adding rhetorical dimensions of such problems as “diseases” that may “infect” society, as seen during the Red Scare of the 1950s when Communism was likened to cancer (Patterson). “Infection” thus becomes both an internal and external antagonist, making the entire world and its range of ideological values an ever-present threat to both body and mind. In his study of Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*, Burke praises diseased bodily imagery as a fitting symbolic tool to address instability in the larger body politic (*Language as Symbolic Action* 88). In doing so, Burke identifies infected bodies of characters as reflectors of the social conditions surrounding and molding them, making bodily spectacle a microcosm of larger
forces in human relations. By analogizing Renn’s disease to corrosive media forces and casting its protagonist as a stand-in for the body politic, Cronenberg’s film confronts the dangerous facets of the entertainment industry.

The linkages between societal ills and diseased bodies are made clear in Videodrome, which makes its image-to-tumor effects a central plot element of the film that inspires Renn’s physical transformation. The tumors inspired by Videodrome allude to larger problems surrounding mass media, which are prevalent across the world. Social unease surrounding the manipulation and effects of media is a global concern, from concerns over war-mongering “yellow journalism” to social media censorship in countries such as Iran, Egypt, and Syria (Corbett). The fear that televised violence desensitizes viewers and thus erodes the moral fabric of society has been an increasing concern, particularly in the United States where this threat of social impurity poses a perceived threat to the American Dream (Johnston). The prospect of widespread addiction to such content has been subject to countless political debates, spurring controversy over censorship and the extent of the media’s effects on audiences. The film indictss social threats posed by suggestive media, primarily by likening suggestive television programming to an infectious disease that leads to the mental (and later, physical) disintegration of the audience. Renn’s body becomes the marker for corruptive social forces that he encounters, reflecting the pervasive processes of corporate supremacy and the manipulative elements of mass media. The ideas spread through popular media are framed as parasitic to the minds of the masses; it can absorb their focus and shape their disposition, directly trading off with an
active and healthy citizenry. The bodies of those addicted to Videodrome are ailing ones, suffering not only physically from the tumors inspired by the program, but also from the mental disintegration inspired by their addiction to soulless, explicit material. Infection is not just a bodily deterioration, but also a psychological one that lurks beneath the surface of the skin in the same way as an unseen inner virus.

I am most interested in how villainous characters such as Renn and Convex (and their bodies) often represent antagonistic social forces, standing in for societal problems that lack simple solutions. In Videodrome, the horrific fates of Renn and Convex allow the viewer to denounce their actions while raising broader ideological questions of how the well-being of the social sphere. Given its use of morally questionable characters, Videodrome uses the infected body as a site of ethical deliberation, projecting inner corruption onto the human form (Stone). Renn’s own nastiness is made evident throughout the film, even before his transformation begins. He swipes food from a room service cart and slaps the rear of a female co-worker before spouting his nihilistic worldview, “The world’s a shithole, ain’t it?” The fact that the main body on display is that of a shameless media head honcho is also significant, as the audience can more easily associate his bodily changes as a result of his actions. This helps construct Renn’s body as a fleshy map of his character’s ethics, a site of moral critique. Renn is forced to answer for a career of injecting exploitative material into public consciousness, turning from a sleazy producer of destructive material to an obsessive consumer.
of it. His body is therefore a screen of his moral character, with every step away from his identity as a human serving as another marker of his ethical impurity.

Convex’s death indicts the far-reaching influence of malevolent corporations, punishing the villain for his hidden agenda of public deception. Spectacular Optical and its realm of corporate influence are painted as a disease-like force that represents an invisible threat to the well-being of the public body. Though this is a disease of a different sort than may be typically seen in stories of animal contaminations and experiments-gone-wrong, Videodrome projects corporate supremacy as a societal disease that has direct implications on the human body. The graphic death of Convex, caused by rapidly-accelerating cancerous tumors that erupt from his body after Renn shoots him, suggests the parasitic nature of the villain and his associates. Convex embodies the corrupt businessman, while his grim disintegration confronts the villain with his greed and “disease-demon of crime” (Kapelos-Peters). His sins are projected onto his flesh after being “infected” by his own weapon, offering a visual morality play for the viewer. Convex makes a living on exploiting consumers and spreading weaponry, and as a result suffers the ultimate physical toll. The eruption of cancerous tumors from inside his body puts his true character on display for the terrified people around him. The fates of Renn and Convex offer as close a form of catharsis as the viewer can get with regard to each corresponding social anxiety. Even if larger demons of corruption and manipulative media are not truly exorcised, there is relief to be found in such forms of narrative justice. Physical illness in Videodrome therefore functions as a form of “creative cancer”
(Cronenberg and Rodley 80) that does more than just depicts ailing bodies. It radically reconstitutes them with substantial rhetorical value. Body horror in films such as Cronenberg’s is simultaneously discomforting and relieving, as we may be dismayed by the frightening images yet feel emotional relief knowing that the spectacular diseases are more outrageous than the illnesses we face in the real world.

*Videodrome* does not only address unethical behavior like corruption or media manipulation. The film paints addiction as a broad societal problem, incorporating motifs of disease by raising questions of whether addiction is merely a side-effect or a disease in itself. This may strike a nerve with the current generation, as addiction has become quite the hot topic in recent years. Debates over whether addiction qualifies as a disease continue to rage, with some arguing that it is a complex type of brain disease (Clark; Leshner 45; Volkow) and others claiming that it is entirely behavioral and bears no resemblance to disease processes (Dodes; Levy 5; Lewis). Regardless of which perspective is correct, it is beyond question that many forms of addiction are detrimental to society as a whole and pose severe health risks. While most debates about addiction relate to drugs and alcohol, *Videodrome* takes the idea to the realm of popular entertainment with a seemingly prophetic look at the dangerous evolution of media trends. Obsessive fixation with TV and other media has become a growing problem that meets the basic criteria of addiction. Media takes up vast amounts of the viewers’ time (often more than intended), interferes with social obligations
such as family events, and even causes some to suffer withdrawals after cessation (Csikszentmihalyi and Kubey).

In exploring how media keeps viewers hooked on illicit material, Videodrome conjures themes of substance abuse and television addicts. This is made most visible in the syringe-like imagery of cords penetrating Renn’s arm as he becomes increasingly devoted to Videodrome, which is likened to a drug that keeps viewers entranced. Though he does not explicitly inject Videodrome into himself, the visual representation of how the program weaponizes his body is strongly suggestive of “shooting up” to achieve his new digitally inspired lifestyle as a killer drone. The addiction theme continues in one scene of Renn visiting Bianca O’Blivion’s “Cathode Ray Mission,” which invites the homeless to get their daily fix of television. Videodrome imagines a not-so-crazy world of television addicts and media junkies, where viewers get their “high” from visual stimulation as opposed to the typical illicit substances. Renn and patrons of the Cathode Ray Mission may be seen as TV junkies at risk of physical disintegration. Like a drug addict, Renn finds himself increasingly drawn to his vice, which ultimately causes hallucinations (also reminiscent of hard drugs) of his body becoming one with his television. In one scene, Renn’s TV is depicted with a layer of skin as his own pistol-hand appears to emerge from the screen before shooting its owner. Here, the self-destructive nature of television is exposed, confirming Renn’s disease as one of his own making. The connection between addiction and disease is explored further in Renn’s encounter with Bianca. When the protagonist visits the Mission, Bianca explains that the patrons
undergo withdrawals due to “a disease forced on them by the lack of the cathode ray tube.” Media create a cycle of dependency where even the lack of television becomes detrimental to the viewer, fostering a functional spiral of illness. Addictive media is shown to create a perpetual loop of disease, sustained by the physical necessity to watch.

Using Renn’s physical dependence on the program and his subsequent downfall, the film paints another pessimistic portrait of the debilitating side effects of television. Radical bodily transformation often goes hand-in-hand with addiction, as the body of a junkie sometimes deteriorates and alters the user’s look beyond recognition. Although this type of “metamorphosis” is a league below the horrific and fantastical one shown in Videodrome, it does cast light on Renn’s status as a TV junkie and nudges the film toward larger discussions of the bodily effects of addiction.

**Infection-as-transformation**

The effects of Renn’s Videodrome-disease are not solely interior. His affliction is equally notable for the outward effects on Renn’s body, which constitute some of the most notable visual imagery in the film. Videodrome ties together themes of infection and metamorphosis by depicting Renn’s metamorphosis as an external manifestation of his inner ailments. Though not all filmic diseases inspire metamorphosis (most cinematic disease symptoms decompose the body rather than spur its evolution), Videodrome imagines an infection that triggers a radical re-shaping of the human body beyond mere disintegration. The Videodrome-disease still evokes deathly symbolism even
though the immediate effects are not fatal, as Renn’s transformation directly contributes to his death after a prolonged period of violence.

The fact that Renn’s physical transformation is largely imagined still testifies to the horrific nature of his infection. His unseen brain affliction reconstitutes his own self-image, shaping the ways that he relates to his body. His symptoms of metamorphosis appear real to Renn, psychologically priming him to commit violence with his newly weaponized figure. His disease-induced hallucinations yield material consequences, not only by making Renn easily manipulated by others, but also causing Renn to commit suicide. His disease remains an interior threat, changing his entire sense of being while operating from beneath the skin.
“Long live the New Flesh,” declare several characters throughout Videodrome, referring to Renn’s transformation into a strange new human-television hybrid. Throughout the film, Videodrome de-humanizes Renn through radical physical changes, turning him into a “new” life form that welcomes a dangerous technological era. A great deal of Videodrome’s horror revolves around Renn’s transformation from an average Joe into a creature of the New Flesh, challenging static conceptions of the human form. Such filmic transformations trumpet processes of becoming that speak to larger fears of change and the inability of people to control their own bodies.

The idea of the New Flesh, or newly morphed forms of the human body, is certainly not new to the horror genre. Films involving metamorphosis have long played with themes of humans either transforming into or melding in some way with other forms, including animals, aliens, technology, different sexes, among many others. The theme of metamorphosis is one of the most common thematic elements of the body horror genre, producing monster movie staples including werewolves, vampires, and mutations created from failed experiments. Such films depict human identity as malleable by reconstituting the human physique and erasing accepted bodily norms. Méliès’ Le Manoir du Diable (1896), widely considered the original horror film (Wilson), opens with the devil shifting his form from bat to human before transmogrifying other objects in the room. Other films would soon popularize transformation motifs, including adaptations of
various written works through *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1920) and *Nosferatu* (1922). Bodies have since gone through countless horrifying changes in different films: the human body becomes imperceptible in *The Invisible Man* (1933), takes on a feline form when sexually aroused in *Cat People* (1942), and is even converted to pencil erasers in *Eraserhead* (1977). Metamorphosis themes are still going strong through series such as *True Blood* and *Hemlock Grove* as well as film reboots of *Fright Night* (1985, 2011) and *The Wolf Man* (1941, 2010).

Films shape-shifting echoes Franz Kafka’s 1915 novella *The Metamorphosis*, in which a salesman discovers that he has transformed into a large insect overnight. The reader is spared any explanation for the transformation, and there is no description of the change itself. Body horror films like Cronenberg’s reflect a willingness to fill in the blanks left by Kafka, focusing explicitly on the processes of change rather than the endpoint and consequences. The shock value of such filmic evolution speaks to deeper societal fears reflected through the altered bodies of characters. Horrifying transforming bodies serve metaphorical functions for the audience, informing how viewers interpret underlying messages. In describing how terministic screens shape the perception of the audience, Burke argues that a given screen simultaneously reflects and deflects aspects of reality to direct interpretations of a message (*Language as Symbolic Action* 45). Metaphors function in a similar fashion, crafting particular meanings that can reflect social realities (Lakoff and Johnson 96), which is especially true in the context of cinema. The carefully constructed bodily imagery
on screen serves the metaphorical purpose of coping with some form of social reality, implicating the conscious or subconscious fears held by the audience.

Transforming bodies implicate the reflection-deflection aspects of terministic screens by deflecting typical bodily traits in favor of new, horrific ones. Morphing bodies thus center their message (and their horrific value) on how each body departs from its normative form. The allegorical qualities of movies like Videodrome can therefore be seen in the contrast between the body’s previous form and the one that it takes post-metamorphosis. The process of change serves to create new bodily realities while deflecting others. In shaping messages for the viewer regarding human identity, media manipulation, and corporate influence, among others, evolving bodies in Videodrome craft a visual lexicon to attune viewers to persuasive messages at play. As opposed to linguistic terms that Burke describes in most of his work on screens, the bodies in Videodrome are visual screens that shape the film’s messages. Images hold persuasive value that implicates the same sort of mental associations that Burke attributes to linguistics; the construction of visual imagery directs the attention of viewers toward particular interpretations. Body horror demands a visual focus, as attention must be drawn to the manifestations of the before-and-after details of physical appearance. A solely discursive focus ignores the rhetorical power of material bodies on display. In the case of Cronenberg’s film, particular messages can be gathered from the appearance of Renn’s new body and the social conditions that surround him.
Renn’s metamorphosis is unlike the archetypes of werewolves or alien mutations, as his condition is largely imagined and retains many core human features. As a result of his tumor-induced addiction to Videodrome, he experiences his flesh melding with material objects and developing new, warped organs. Most memorably, Renn inexplicably develops a large, vertical slit in his abdomen resembling both a vaginal orifice and a VCR. These physical changes are a precursor to Renn’s self-destruction, as mind-control and obsession trigger a spiral into insanity, murder, and ultimately, suicide. Though it is often unclear whether certain bodily changes are real or hallucination, Renn’s diegetic bodily transformations come to shape his entire reality and lead to the death of his physical body. His strange transfiguration and the resulting loss of bodily control implicate several resounding social themes. What his metamorphosis means is equally as important as what it does, placing the bodily spectacle at the heart of larger themes raised in the film.

**Human identity**

Filmic metamorphosis grapples with fears of losing a true sense of self, thrusting the human form into a new frontier that radically reconstitutes human identity. Every horrific transformation requires a baseline of normalcy to juxtapose with the body horrific; for the horror to resonate, there must first be something desirable to rupture. The “New Flesh” is only horrific when compared to the normalcy and reliability of the typical human figure that it violates, which can be deemed the “Old Flesh.” The Old Flesh alludes to a static, “true” human identity that is lost through change and an implied slippery slope carried with it,
making changes such as Renn’s tragic and terrifying. Metamorphosis entails a loss of identity by shattering notions of bodily predictability, and thus, security. When the body is in flux, so too is the identity of its owner, who has always taken for granted a particular genetic code and distribution of cells as part of her/his selfhood. Themes of evolving bodies thus cope with fears that static human identity will gradually erode, eventually dissolving non-existence (Fusillo).

Physical transformation also entails an ontological shift, as the entire human sense of being is reconstituted. The quest for meaning and the purpose of existence are reset at square zero, as the morphed subject is thrust into a new mode of existence. The subject is no longer one human among billions searching for purpose, but is rather a newly-born entity with entirely different reality to prepare for. Such ideas of morphing human bodies have proven resonant with each consecutive generation, as the idea of becoming un-human is a timeless concern.

Renn’s identity crisis speaks to larger fears of difference that plague societies everywhere. Anxiety surrounding social difference is a part of everyday life, as people routinely stigmatize other races, sexes, classes, and age groups that are viewed as distinct and dangerous. This is exemplified when of Renn’s white male colleagues casually expresses disgust at the physicality of foreign identities, claiming that “Oriental sex is unnatural.” Others are rhetorically constructed as threatening to a particular identity or way of life, making them horrific to the bigots in question. As a result, psychological and physical divides arise from concepts of the Self and Other that even shape the moviegoing habits of viewers who seek theaters with familiar demographics (Hubbard 53). Cronenberg’s film
does not exemplify a fear of the Other in the typical sense. Renn does not morph into a member of a stigmatized group of people, and the film does not use his transformation to trumpet fear of becoming like certain groups of people. Rather, the protagonist changes into a new “Other” entirely that still holds many of the same implications, including anxiety toward the unknown. Becoming other people is not in itself horrific, because the basic tenets of humanity are still intact and assimilating into other cultures and lifestyles is not unheard of. Shifting into the realm of the non-human, however, is a strange and terrifying new frontier that entails a radical reconstitution of physical reality that challenges the very laws of nature. Rather than facing the monster in the darkness, Renn is forced to become it. The deeper his devotion to Videodrome, the more dangerous and unpredictable his body becomes. He ultimately becomes an unrelatable monster, complete with deadly limbs, that appears entirely separated from the reliable “humanness” of the viewer. Renn’s new deformity confirms that Videodrome stands as a morality tale, offering visual cues to the viewer of the deadly threat posed by violent media and how it fundamentally changes the character of the viewer.

*Videodrome* is unique in that it does not deal much with the process of transformation, opting instead to explore the end-state of Renn’s metamorphosis. The moment of transition is brief; we do not see the literal opening of the flesh, but rather see a faint, scar-like outline of the stomach-vagina before it is on full display in the following shots. Renn differs from other transforming protagonists in that he seems almost unfazed by his new form. While other characters like David in *An American Werewolf in London* (1981) panic during their
transformations, Renn seems accepting of his wondrous new organ as he caresses it while barely batting an eye. The protagonist seems to accept his new identity, yielding to difference and neglecting to fight to preserve his old body. I explore Renn’s immediate reaction to his new organ more deeply in my fourth chapter, which examines the implications of Renn’s shift to intersexuality.

Metamorphosis-driven horror films reflect an urge to break the boundaries of human identity, to see what happens when the very physical foundations of humanity are challenged. An implicit aspect of the New Flesh, according to Badley, is “a desire to reconfigure identity, and multiple selves, thus transcending limitations of gender, race, species, age, and class” (31). Though Videodrome imagines a pessimistic scenario of such bodily transcendence, the film refuses to play by the rules of bodily predictability, erasing the boundaries of the flesh and constructing a fantastical vision of what humanity could become.

Manipulating Media

Videodrome is most notable for its morbid sendup of mass media, exploring the ways that television shapes the realities of viewers. Cronenberg’s film implicates media control in several ways, tying its critique to the distorted bodies of its doomed characters. Videodrome is distinguished among other horror films in implicating film itself as a dangerous, message-driven conduit and distorting the line between medium and flesh. Televisions become flesh, and vice-versa. The horror lies not in a monster under the bed but rather on the nightstand in front of it.
Cronenberg’s film comes to terms with perils of graphic media by casting Renn’s bodily changes as direct results of explicit television programming, indicting the dangerous effects that it can have on the audience. *Videodrome* thus imagines spectacular effects of the hypodermic needle theory, which implies the powerful influence of media on the audience and underlies many parental concerns about the effects of violent content on their children (Lamb). Renn’s body functions as a screen for the typical TV viewer supposedly at risk of moral decay, with his transformation into a monstrous walking VCR/weaponized organic machine alluding to the consequences of televised junk. The film makes clear the influence of violent media on the body of the viewer, particularly as Convex describes *Videodrome*’s effects as a result of “exposure to violence on the nervous system.” Televised material is thus a penetrative force, intruding upon the most sensitive aspects of the human body. The material changes in Renn’s body signify his moral deterioration spurred by the addictive material on which he becomes fixated.

*Videodrome* implicates the screen-to-viewer relationship through its imagining of the harmful relationship between content and the psyche of the audience, the effects of which unfold on Renn’s physique. The accompanying loss of bodily predictability, or ability for a person to control or anticipate changes to his/her body, may be read as a broader concern of how media manipulation can alter entire worldviews and create artificially constructed realities:

In the postmodern horror film, loss of control pertains also to the power of the media over how we perceive and make sense of the
world, the power of the media to fabricate reality. As such, to become an expert in these films requires not so much knowledge of the laws of nature as textual mastery of the genre’s rules and conventions—mastery over how the genre constructs its world. To control the media is to control the world (Syder).

The fact that Renn’s transformation is largely imagined is also significant, as his perception of his own body is shaped entirely by the graphic content that leads him to madness. Videodrome transforms his reality, replacing sanity and stability with murder and suicide. The film uses its bodily metaphor to address fears that television may be used by elites to brainwash the public, which can subconsciously “program” viewers to accept a particular agenda (Icke).

“The battle for the minds of North America will be fought in the video arena,” prophesizes a cryptic O’Blivion in one of his pre-recorded videotapes. This “battle” implicates a wider contest between U.S. and Canadian broadcasting, with Renn’s flesh caught in the middle. Videodrome reflects broader concerns in the Canadian film industry that American media will spread and overwhelm indigenous industries throughout the world. The film would be the last of Cronenberg’s under the system of “tax shelter” incentives (Cronenberg and Rodley 93), which were designed to make Canadian film projects more globally competitive. The “Americanization” of Canadian broadcasting has been a source of controversy, as the success of indigenous projects has been touted as a core part of cultural identity (Filion 447). Although Videodrome was produced by Universal, Cronenberg has made public his own disdain for Hollywood
dominance by indicting its overbearing studio involvement. Cronenberg has gone on record against such digital imperialism while offering Canadian subsidies as the answer, claiming that “every country needs that in order to have a national cinema in the face of Hollywood” (Phipps). The implications for Videodrome’s media critique are thus international; citizens of any given country can be heavily influenced by dangerous content from around the world, with the U.S. serving as the epicenter of televised smut. The film draws an explicit line to American media when Renn discovers that Videodrome’s feed is based in Pittsburgh, clarifying the role of the U.S. in contaminating the channels of other countries. Renn’s distorted body and ethical character can be understood as the side effects of American programming, turning a Toronto station from merely sensationalist to deadly. This indictment of how such “Format Wars” may challenge Canadian sovereignty (Benson-Allott 84) exposes larger patterns of heated competition among the film industries of different countries, problematizing yet another aspect of dominant media patterns.

The ramifications of extreme violence and sex in mass media have always been a source of controversy, provoking debates over the line between fantasy and reality and how viewers may be stimulated in harmful ways. Concerns usually revolve around graphic content becoming more desirable to the viewer, providing excitement that is missing from everyday life that ultimately inspires violent behavior (Johnston). Fears of harmful media are directly related to the inability to control how viewers respond to media. Although ratings systems exist and media content is regulated to prevent “excessive” depictions violence and sex,
no one can control how viewers respond to sensationalist media. Even films such as Oliver Stone’s *Natural Born Killers* (1994) have inspired real-life shootings, despite the fact that Stone’s film satirizes the same forms of media-glorified violence that it led demented viewers to commit (Brooks).

When Videodrome takes hold of Cronenberg’s protagonist, Renn’s body becomes a manifestation of media violence as he becomes a walking armory, a vending machine for fleshy weaponry. Before long, he reaches into his newfound abdominal womb to remove a pistol that melds with his arm through sharp cords, and he later uses the cavity to morph an unfortunate colleague’s hand into a live grenade. Throughout the course of the film, Renn not only kills others on command but also commits suicide when prompted by a televised Nicki. Cronenberg has made such themes of media’s suggestive effects explicit in claiming that *Videodrome* is, in part, an imagining of the actualized societal fears of unregulated media:

> With *Videodrome* I wanted to posit the possibility that a man exposed to violent imagery would begin to hallucinate. I wanted to see what it would be like, in fact, if what the censors were saying would happen, did happen. What would it feel like? What would it lead to? (Cronenberg and Rodley 94).

As shown in Renn’s case, media violence has both inward and outward effects; it triggers an inward change in the body of the viewer, while inspiring outward violence toward the bodies of others. The influence of suggestive programming
thus has broad societal implications, as it reconstitutes social relations as more openly aggressive.

The ending shot of the film is perhaps the most relevant with regard to how media directly inspires violence in the viewer. Renn, who originally claims that media is a “harmless outlet” for venting one’s violent tendencies, is driven to commit an unhesitated suicide after his television commands him to do so. Television becomes his Big Brother, and Renn is more than willing to allow it to determine the fate of his mortal body. Videodrome blurs the line between consumer and product, turning television programming into a vampiric medium that engrosses viewers into obedience through bodily distortions. Television thus becomes product and consumer, taking as much from the viewer as it provides. This is no cookie-cutter movie transformation, but a nuanced metamorphosis that crafts particular messages about media, audience reception, and the act of watching.

**Corporate influence**

Though *Videodrome* seems first and foremost concerned with media content, the forces behind production of such material are a key aspect of the film’s social commentary. Television has never been solely a depoliticized medium for audience enjoyment, as it draws the interest of corporations that have long recognized and benefitted from heavy media involvement. In the U.S., nearly all television programming stems from large corporations such as General Electric (which controls NBC) and Westinghouse (which controls CBS), setting the stage for broad debates over corporate brainwashing (Ansary). From concerns over the
Easy India Trading Company’s legal immunity in the 1600s to recent judicial decisions regarding election contributions, the public has always been concerned with the scope of corporate power (Higgins). These concerns have continued as recently as the controversy over Saving Mr. Banks (2013), which has been criticized as an attempt by Disney to manipulate public opinion in favor of the corporation (Nicholson). Just as Videodrome grapples with anxieties of media and technological misuse, it also rhetorically constructs bodies to address corporate influences that guide media trends in the first place.

In exploring the ways that Spectacular Optical spreads its vision of an obedient citizenry, the film constructs Renn’s metamorphosis as a symptom of entrenched corporate influence that has violent effects on the public. In doing so, Videodrome homes its corporate critique on the individual level, offering an intimate look at how individual persons (and their bodies) are implicated by the schema of Big Business. Renn’s body becomes the site of corporate warfare between O’Blivion and Convex, with Renn acting as intermediary for the interests of both. Renn is thus a stand-in for the consumer. The eternal struggle between corporate giants for power over the masses plays out on his body, distorting his humanity beyond recognition in the process. Renn reflects the relationship between business and consumer, particularly through his transformation from autonomous individual to obedient corporate pawn.

Renn’s VCR-cavity is not merely cosmetic; several videotapes that resemble pulsing bits of flesh (the “video word made flesh”) are inserted into Renn’s new organ to “program” his behavior. This takes the idea of viewers
replicating what they see on television to a graphic extreme as Renn becomes a medium himself, transforming into the same sort of device that delivers questionable material in the first place. This ability for television programming to shape Renn’s behavior reflects the relationship between business and consumer, with Renn viewed not as an autonomous individual but rather as a pawn in a larger agenda. Demographics are turned into devotees, reifying the common fear that television turns viewers into zombies to be manipulated by powers-that-be (Moore 66). The contest for control over Renn’s body is a zero-sum game between the protagonist and Big Business as he loses the ability to control himself when acting on Spectacular Optical’s behalf. He is “programmed” to eliminate Bianca, or the “competition” that threatens Spectacular Optical’s profitable model. This takes the age-old rivalries between businesses (Pepsi vs. Coke, Nike vs. Reebok) to fantastical heights, physically orienting Renn to choose between competing sides.

The fact that Spectacular Optical is a front for NATO arms manufacturing sheds more light on Renn’s flesh-to-weapon transformation. Renn is more than a devotee to the corporation. He is a literal walking product, an organic weapon that doubles as a test-run for a new weapons system rooted in the flesh. Videodrome thus imagines a new frontier for warfare controlled by corporate interests, situated within the bodies of consumers. Cronenberg’s film paints a graphic picture of the hapless consumer caught between competing corporations, signaling how Big Business transforms the populace into soldiers fighting for the interests of companies. Renn’s transformation primes him for war, fighting for the profit of an
all-controlling entity. Like soldiers in real-world warfare, Renn bears the physical costs of the conflict, ending up a casualty in the war over the hearts and minds of the masses. Videodrome therefore uses its bodily spectacle to problematize Big Business and its manner of transforming consumers into sheep to be duped for profit.

**Technophobia**

Videodrome crafts pessimistic messages of technophobia through Renn’s transformation into an organic VCR. The film’s themes regarding media overlap with those of technological misuse, dependence, and escapism. These are also explored through the bodily changes of Renn and others in the film, finding monstrous possibilities in the by-products of technology and its effects on the body (Blakesley). Videodrome is one of many films that espouse technological pessimism. Filmmakers have often sought to vent fears of technological abuse through themes of artificial creations causing death and despair:

> It is technology that movie-makers seem to fear. Even the best-loved science-fiction films have a distinctly ambivalent take on it. Blade Runner features a genetic designer without empathy for his creations, who end up killing him. In 2001: A Space Odyssey, computers turn against humans, and Star Wars has us rooting for the side that relies on spiritual power over that which prefers technology, exemplified by the Death Star. Why would an inherently technological medium seem to be so wary of its own creator? (“The Mad Technologist,” 908)
*Videodrome* imagines technology taking on a life of its own, becoming so powerful that it takes over the very flesh of its audience. The film critiques an overly cozy relationship between humans and technology, depicting horrific changes to human bodies when the gap between flesh and mechanical creation is nearly eliminated. The effects of technology are, in a sense, uncontrollable. Once new capabilities are revealed, it becomes difficult to prevent the abusive use of technology despite the best intentions of scientists and engineers.

The transformation of Renn into a human VCR/war machine brings the already close relationship between human and machine into much more intimate territory, illustrating technology as a direct replacement for the flesh. Though robotic limbs are within the realm of comprehension, Renn’s New Flesh shifts his entire genetic makeup into a strange new frontier. Renn functions as a unique breed of cyborg (Blakesley), only with distorted flesh in the place of the typical mechanical body parts seen in films such as *Metropolis* or *Robocop* (1987). Technology penetrates and transforms Renn’s body, creating a hybrid subject that vents anxieties surrounding the loss of humanity in the face of technological advancement (Aziz). Once initiated, Renn’s transformation is beyond his control as he mechanically carries out the agendas of Spectacular Optical and, later, Bianca. His evolution confronts the prospect that humanity will come to mirror our own robotic creations and that social relations will lose all semblances of emotion and autonomy. Technology is constructed as a corruptive force, eroding all notions of bodily control.
For the most part, *Videodrome* is unique in focusing its technological critique not on futuristic super-devices, but on the most familiar of household objects: the television. This, combined with the fact that the film is set in a contemporary setting as opposed to a futuristic city, allow its commentary to hit close to home and makes it easier for viewers to imagine themselves in the narrative. The one “futuristic” device depicted in the film is a helmet-like prototype of Videodrome’s virtual reality simulation, which Convex urges Renn to test out. The device is not so futuristic when considering the time period of the film’s production. It is likely a product of the virtual reality boom in military and video game arenas in the early 1980s (NCSA), which offers some context into the film’s technological symbolism. The device physically conditions the viewer to experience (and interact with) violent content firsthand by opening brain and spine receptors to stimulate the “neural floodgates.” When donning the machine, Renn initially sees a pixelated version of Nicki entering the room before images become indistinguishable from reality. Soon, Renn finds himself whipping a television-Nicki hybrid in the Videodrome room, alluding to his transformation and violent behavior to come. He is able to retreat into a digitized world to re-enact the provocative acts seen in Videodrome, which is ultimately shown to be dangerous. Convex alludes to how this primes the viewer for violence when he claims, “You don’t have to actually hurt anybody. You just have to think about it.”

The headset prototype is just one aspect of *Videodrome*’s commentary on digital escapism. Videodrome, like other sensationalist media, allows the viewer
to escape into a world of fantasy. For Renn and Nicki, it offers an outlet to pursue twisted sexual fantasies after they begin an affair after a mutual gig on a talk show. Both are shown to rely on graphic television to become sexually aroused. After asking for some videos to get in the mood, the couple fornicates to the gruesome torture scenes of Videodrome. During the act, Renn drags a needle across Nicki’s ear and pierces her lobe before licking the blood away. The violence on screen becomes an excuse for inflicting pain in the real world, allowing the couple to escape what they perceive as monotonous sex and romance. When Nicki vanishes later in the film, she lives on in the form of a seductive, fleshy television in Renn’s paranoid hallucinations. Technology becomes an acceptable substitute for real human interaction, reducing the need for human contact and teasing the end of the social interactions altogether. The final scene in which a televised Nicki urges Renn to shoot himself is full of her promises of escapism from the limits of the Old Flesh and transcendence into the New, casting media as a method of flight from material reality as we know it. The fact that the film ends with Renn’s final gunshot does not bode well for Nicki’s promises of physical transcendence. No glimpse at a better future is offered, and the cut to black suggests the end of the road for all but Renn’s dead body. The promise of a new life through media becomes more desirable than the real thing, reflecting a misplaced faith in technology as an eternal solution to human problems.
**Evolving bodies**

The body genre implicates the ongoing debate over evolution, raising larger questions about grand changes in the genetic makeup of humanity. Given the increasing acceptance of human evolution across much of society, questions arise on the prospect of future changes. In its dealings with the future of humanity’s genetic makeup, body horror tackles many questions about how humans may evolve forward. What might the next step in human evolution be? Will it benefit or harm humanity? Will we control it, and to what extent? These questions have gained more salience in recent years and have been increasingly explored in fictional films like *Videodrome*. Such body horror films take ideas of human evolution to extremes, finding terror in the idea of evolutionary processes turning unpredictable. Evolution necessarily involves a physical response to the organism’s environment, making Renn’s surrounding social conditions a core determinant of his unique transformation. This new phase of the body is a socially-conscious one that has rapidly caught up with the times. The fast pace of evolution in Cronenberg’s film adds some rhetorical potency. Much filmic horror derives from the rapid acceleration of a threat, triggering fears that our demons will arrive before we are ready to face them (Williams 11). Renn’s evolution reflects this idea and occurs mostly before he even realizes what is happening, leaving him woefully unprepared to cope with his new bodily reality in the end. The evolutionary processes that have always taken generations are condensed into days, with horrifying consequences for the affected persons.
Cronenberg’s filmography explores the idea that drawn-out, Darwinian-style evolution may be over, replaced by new physical changes rapidly brought about by human doings rather than natural processes (Cronenberg and Rodley 80). Renn’s transformation into a human-media-device hybrid reflects this idea, imagining media as the hurried stimulus for the next stage for our evolution. This is a far cry from suggesting that humans will control the next phase of our evolution. Renn is no more in charge of his transformation than any other evolving creature. His metamorphosis is, however, a side effect of human creations, made horrific precisely because it is both human-made and uncontrollable.

Videodrome depicts artificial human evolution with horrific imagination. Renn’s New Flesh is one of human design, spurred by his infection through Videodrome. It ushers in a new human form entirely, albeit one that is connected to technological inventions of our own design. O’Blivion’s daughter, Bianca, explains that Videodrome represents the next step in “the evolution of man as a technological animal,” clarifying the bodily changes as part of a peek at what “a fully evolved human being might look like” (Cronenberg and Rodley 65). O’Blivion himself is cast as an “evolved” human who has taken his place in the digital arena as his new habitat. Though he still fulfills some human functions (and even appears on a talk show via videotape) his body is all representation and no physical reality. He is media incarnate, a new form of humanity reduced entirely to pixels on a screen. The film thus sets up technology as the next frontier for human bodily change, making humanity’s creations more determinant than
nature for the future of our species. O’Blivion refuses to acknowledge the
dangerous tumors that Videodrome instills in the audience, claiming that they
instead represent “a new organ, a new part of the brain.” His deluded theory
represents the folly of scientific hubris; we become so enthralled at the idea of
“progress” that grander consequences (in this case, literal cancerous growths) go
unheeded.

The new “technological animal” phase is shown to be a dead-end for our
species. It results not in new efficiency for humankind, but rather in violence and
Renn’s own suicide. By envisioning Renn’s body as a “use-and-lose” weapons
system, Cronenberg’s film offers a gloomy peek at how the human-induced era of
evolution could be its last. The fact that Renn’s new sexual organ “births”
instruments of death as opposed to the life-affirming nature typically associated
with the birth canal suggests that new forms of life may interrupt normal cycles of
reproduction. Such hybrids confront fears that the inherent drive to pass on genes
through offspring may become futile, erasing the genetic future of humans and
nullifying normal reproduction (Cruz 162). Renn’s new techno-flesh appears
incapable of normal human functions; it hints at an end to humanity as we know
it, replacing it with a tumor-ridden pawn of corporate interest. The fact that
Renn’s life comes to an abrupt end is another red flag addressing the uncertainty
of these new forms of uncontrollable evolution, suggesting a bleak end of the road
for humankind.

Every film involving mutated humans raises implicit questions about the
imagines a shocking future where humans have evolved into giant, immobile masses of flesh as a result of corporate-driven artificial diets. Many horror films, including the *Wrong Turn* series, both imaginings of *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977 and 2006), and *Chernobyl Diaries* (2012) deal with inbreeding and mutant generations caused by toxic pollution. There is great terror in the prospect of contaminated, unrecognizable future generations, and metamorphosis-driven body horror is uniquely positioned to address it by crafting wild stories of lurid conversions of humans into strange new beings. Morphing bodies in films such as *Videodrome* are rhetorical signifiers of things to come, venting concerns over the frightening prospects of humanity’s unknown future. Metamorphosis themes do more than just expresses anxiety of human changes to come. Films like Cronenberg’s also use evolving bodies to confront problems surrounding human identity and gendered power dynamics based in the flesh.
CHAPTER FOUR
Gendering Bodies

Given its emphasis on human anatomy and physical difference, body horror holds outstanding potential in exploring persisting gender dichotomies. Themes surrounding gender and sexuality have always been pivotal to the horror genre, both in terms of biological sex and the clash between masculine and feminine forces. Badley identifies how horror cinema has been a historical outlet for expressing fears and desires surrounding gender confusion, feminism, masculinity, and homophobia, among others (12-13). The genre is rife with bodily symbolism that alludes to female bodily processes, from bleeding female characters alluding to menstruation (Briefel 16; Creed 52) to women pregnant with horrific children (Tushnet). Body horror offers symbolic methods of problem-solving through its ability to deploy violence, sex, and emotional intensity to “address persistent problems in our culture, in our sexualities, in our very identities” (Williams 9).

In particular, much of Videodrome’s social commentary centers on gender and sexuality, including Renn’s heterosexual fantasies of domination and the development of his new sexual organs. Adding another dimension to its morality play condemning Renn’s ethical character, Videodrome sees that its protagonist is forced to answer for a lifestyle of promoting misogyny and media visions of women as sex objects. If such movies are reflections of the social conditions that shape them, then they are well-positioned to address structural problems regarding gender inequality and masculine privilege. Videodrome’s disease
commentary is also related to its gendered themes, as mass media consumption is “diseased” through its problematic treatment of gender. Cronenberg’s film uses its bodily spectacle not only to problematize masculine aggression, but also to blur gender distinctions to raise larger questions of sexual politics.

**Screening sexuality: Gendered horror cinema**

The clash between (and often synthesis of) masculinity and femininity has pervaded horror cinema since its infancy. The plot device of women under attack from male aggressors is one of the oldest and most enduring staples of the horror genre, seen in early texts including *Nosferatu, The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1920), and remains strong through recent films such as *All the Boys Love Mandy Lane* (2006) and *You’re Next* (2013). Battles between fierce aggressors and passive victims have long been framed as contests between masculinity and femininity (Clover 77; Keisner 426), raising larger concerns of societal gender construction. In particular, the bodies of women have been the most common spectacles of violence in horror cinema (Clover 187; Williams 5); women have been disproportionately stabbed, hacked, burned, dismembered, raped, and eaten in horror films, reflecting a particular fascination among audiences and filmmakers with violations of the female figure. Promiscuous women are often killed while disrobing or having sex, “punishing” females for their sexual transgressions (Clover 199). Some have used the trends identified above to critique horror as a masculine genre (Blakeley 1; Keisner 422), as it creates demand for spectacles of female anguish. Other authors argue that feminism and horror are synchronous. Badley argues that horror films can express
gender troubles by exposing misogyny (34), while Cynthia Freeland claims that feminist interpretations of horror films can reveal the genre’s complexity beyond women as mere victims (204-5). The “Final Girl” trope, or a female would-be-victim who outlives her peers to fight back against her attacker, has been identified as a feminist development in horror films (Reini) by empowering female victims. Authors like Clover dispute the uplifting value of the trope, arguing that the Final Girl is masculinized in her fight for survival (214), still subjecting the character to the fantasies of the audience.

Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze paints the inherent act of watching as a masculine one through its assertion that cinema, particularly that which is grounded in visual spectacle, is crafted for the visual pleasure of heterosexual male viewers and thus sensationalizes female bodies on display (11). Films such as Videodrome critique scopophilia by uprooting problematic viewer-to-image relations, problematizing the fetishistic desire of male viewers to witness the mutilation of women. While the horror genre is largely complicit with masochistic forms of spectatorship, Videodrome offers a way of exposing many of the male-centric aspects of cinema, utilizing bodily spectacle to subvert gender norms and problematize the male gaze.

Burke’s screen theory is an especially promising lens through which to view filmic treatment of gender. Societal conceptions of gender roles are already constructed through processes of reflection and deflection, as certain personality and biological traits are selectively used to categorize people into set gender categories. Boys are often expected to be tough and assertive, and girls are
expected to be passive and nurturing (Boundless). The fact that gender is largely a construct of social conditioning (Freedman 5; Kuypers 40) explains how “masculinity” most often draws attention to power and bravado, while “femininity” commonly directs attention to emotionality and docility. These mental associations create a host of social problems, not least of which is the assumption that men and women must correspond to socially acceptable gender traits. Gender is also commonly grafted onto biological sex. Since the body is largely viewed as a marker of social difference (Hancock 7; Sorrells 53), biological sex is often assumed to determine the gender identity of individuals. Burke’s screen theory offers a method of identifying processes of revealing and concealing (Donald 12; Holterhoff 50) to uncover how such societal understandings of gender operate. Viewing cinematic bodies as screens is particularly useful in studying the contest of masculine and feminine forces in films such as Videodrome while speaking to larger social conditions.

Renn’s transforming body in Videodrome crafts its gender-based messaged through spectacular visuals of penetration and metamorphosis, among other visual tricks. Renn’s gender re-assignment re-directs his physical masculinity into a newly feminized form, creating a more socially constructive version of what Barbara Creed deems the “monstrous-feminine” (44), or horrific spins on female figures. Videodrome thus uses its fantastical bodily imagery to re-appropriate problematic aspects of the genre, exposing systems of masculinity that continue to pervade mass media. I focus mainly on themes in the context of masculinity versus femininity, which Cronenberg’s film explores in depth.
**Videodrome** confronts a host of gender issues related to contentious social problems, conjuring themes of sexual domination, gender-switching, the male gaze, and the birthing process.

**Domineering masculinity**

*Videodrome* deals heavily in themes of gendered power dynamics, which persist in varying forms throughout every society. Masculine control over the female body remains a visibly pressing problem across the world, as men continue to maintain sexual dominance over women in domestic and public settings (Edmonds 1; Freedman 255). Documentaries such as *Killing Us Softly* (1979 and 2010) and *Miss Representation* (2011) have indicted the ways that the masculine drive for superiority pervades popular media, creating gender hierarchies and harmful bodily standards for women while appealing to heterosexual machismo. *Videodrome*’s narrative is certainly conscious of such gender problems, evidenced by its focus on the media machine and its distortion of reality with regard to sexuality. Cronenberg’s film departs from the typical slasher/monster movie framework of overpowering (and thus “masculine”) killers stalking hysterical victims (made “feminine” through their overt emotionality). Renn does not stalk and kill women, but rather seeks to cash in on the filmic exploitation of them. *Videodrome*’s morality-play overtones position Renn as a stand-in for masculine control over the female body, linking his own masochistic desires to larger media trends of over-sexualizing women.

Renn’s bodily changes are directly tied to his chauvinistic attitude and behavior. His dominating personality is clearly demonstrated through his
treatment of the women around him, his hallucinated fantasies, and his occupation as a purveyor of sexually exploitative smut. He is the dominant partner in his relationship with Nicki, and he brushes off a female colleague who warns him of the dangers of Videodrome. His job makes him an arbiter of the bodies of women, lending him power to decide which actresses are physically appropriate subjects for the audience’s lustful gaze. This sheds light on how men operate behind-the-scenes to control how “attractive” women are conceived in the public imaginary. Renn can accept and reject women on a whim to decide who will be broadcast to thousands of viewers, molding the social standards of physical appeal. His job is thus a perpetual process of screening, as his programs can reflect idyllic traits of womanhood while avoiding those deemed unsexy or tame. Even from the beginning of the film, Renn makes clear his thirst for sexually domination through his quest for more “tough” material; visuals of the female body in orgasm are insufficient to Renn, warranting the interplay of sex and violence. His initial attraction to Videodrome centers on the subjugation of women, as his interest is piqued by images of a collared woman clad in inmate-orange being shackled to a wall by two men dressed in black. In addition to his occupation, Renn’s own attitudes towards sex and his relationship with Nicki reflect a masculine tendency to dominate the bodies of others.

Renn’s attraction to Nicki likely stems from her taste in sadomasochism, which feeds her lifestyle of a perpetual “highly excited state of overstimulation.” His ideal woman is one who yields sexual control to him, allowing him to dish out pain while receiving none himself. He seemingly views Nicki as more of a sex
object than anything, as evidenced by their lack of intimacy beyond intercourse. Renn’s first reaction to Nicki’s plans to audition for Videodrome in Pittsburgh reflects his foremost concern with maintaining her beauty, as he warns her “Don’t stay in the sun too long, I hear it’s bad for the skin.” Nicki’s body becomes the site of Renn’s sexual and aggressive desires, with her beauty and submissiveness prioritized above all else. His status as masculine aggressor is apparent throughout the film, including the first “love” scene in which Renn pierces Nicki’s flesh with a needle. His abusive desires begin to blur the lines between real and imagined violence. When Renn slaps his secretary for touching his videotapes, she appears to turn into an aroused Nicki before Renn learns that he imagined the entire ordeal. When he dons the Videodrome headgear later in the film, Renn whips a television set that moans with Nicki’s voice, fulfilling his violent fantasies even in the absence of his sexual partner. His addiction to Videodrome is fueled by his desires to control and damage the female body, placing him at the helm of his sexual encounters.

The abusive masculinity on display in Videodrome holds parallels to real-world structures of privilege and domination, reflecting fantasies of total male control reinforced by (and often created by) popular media. Exposure to imagery of idyllic and controlled female bodies gives Renn a taste for sadism, leading to material consequences for the bodies of the women he encounters. Modern society does not appear to fare much better than the bleak world of Videodrome. Public manifestations of male control are visible from debates over reproductive rights (Doll) to macho fantasies in Axe Body Spray advertisements (Zeilinger), all
proving resilient in the face of feminist outcry. Cronenberg has acknowledged his own complicity in preferring the sights of tortured females as opposed to males due to his repressed heterosexual fantasies (Cronenberg and Rodley 98-99). His film is thus a form of self-indictment, a critique of societal gender dynamics that implicate even the creators of subversive art. While some body horror films such as *Teeth* (2007) envision female empowerment in response to overbearing male attention, *Videodrome* focuses on rampant male power to expose the darker motives behind social systems of patriarchy. Renn’s domineering behavior throughout the film helps explain his physical metamorphosis, which shoves him torso-first into the lived experience of the subjugated feminine Other.

**Sexuality in flux**

Renn’s new vaginal cavity offers some of *Videodrome*’s strongest gender commentary, as it destabilizes the male body to make way for the feminine. As discussed in the previous chapter, bodily metamorphosis offers a way of coming into contact with other identities in ways that would not otherwise happen. Many attempts at breaking down social divides involve inter-group dialogue aimed at changing the mindsets of the parties involved. Movies such as *Hairspray* (1988 and 2007) and *Do the Right Thing* (1989) involve cross-cultural dialogues against racism, while others including *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) and *Brave* (2012) challenge gender roles through displays of female prowess at male-dominated activities. Films such as *Videodrome*, on the other hand, imagine the changing of bodies in addition to mindsets to promote a better understanding of foreign experience. The forced becoming of the Other is the ultimate method of fostering
empathy; characters like Renn have no choice but to walk in other peoples’ shoes. Through its flesh-based bridging of cultural and biological gaps, *Videodrome* reflects an urge for a better understanding of difference through Renn’s mutating physique.

Renn’s body is one in a state of flux, shifting him from a purely masculine being to a hermaphroditic one. He develops a vaginal slit so that it may be violated, intruded upon with fleshy videotapes that force his hand. If, as mentioned in the previous chapter, filmic bodies may be seen as reflections of their characters’ souls, then Renn’s transformation and subsequent suffering serves as punishment for his domineering behavior. A long-time perpetuator of violence against women, Renn is made into a passive and receptive creature of the New Flesh who experiences a form of sexual assault when Convex forces mind-controlling videotapes into his orifice (Badley 126). Now the victim of penetration, Renn’s entire identity is re-directed as he is robbed of his machismo and forced to experience the subjugation of women. Renn’s gender-switching also makes him the subject of control, reversing his privileged occupational status as a media bigwig with the power to influence societal body image of women in the media. The state of being female is not viewed as punishment in itself, as Renn does not fully become woman. Rather, he develops female qualities that pertain to his punishment and allow him to experience sexual degradation.

This process of organ-switching in *Videodrome* destabilizes static conceptions of gender, as Renn can no longer take for granted his privileged status as a heterosexual male. Renn’s body is a screen of his new sexuality, which
redirects attention from his domineering masculinity and manifests social conceptions of the feminine onto his body. Badley identifies how some Gothic art can form a feminist “language” to vent female victimization and rage by adapting male codes of symbolism (103). By forcing Renn to confront aspects of the embodied female experience, *Videodrome* uses its bodily spectacle to project feminine rage onto Renn’s flesh. This occurs largely through a process of symbolic castration, which has long been a staple of the horror genre through imagery of gaping wounds and symbolic threats to sexual identity (Creed 52). Renn’s transformation is largely one of castration, as he is emasculated through his newfound organ and subsequent acts of assault. While most horror films evoke castration themes through the threats that Survivor Girls pose to the masculinity of their antagonists, *Videodrome* paints Renn’s castration in a positive light through its function as a somewhat rehabilitative act. By bringing the flesh itself into contact with the bodies of others, films like *Videodrome* unsettle hostile ideologies by changing the very bodily realities of their flawed characters. This form of imagined organ-switching blurs the distinction between male and female to reduce gender polarization (Cronenberg and Rodley 82), psychologically closing the distance between the sexes.

Psychological gender-switching remains one of the pleasures that cinema affords its audience (Badley 127; Clover 82) by allowing them to identify with and vicariously experience through the bodies of other sexes. In the case of *Videodrome*, the audience not only experiences the gender-switching process psychologically, but visually as well. Renn’s transformation offers explicit
imagery that directs attention toward the sexual organs, reflecting a level of
gender consciousness that is much more visible than other films in the same vein.
Burke identifies genitalia-based imagery as a hidden form of catharsis despite
social taboos of the naked body (340). In Renn’s case, his sexual re-formulation is
cathartic in (at least partially) purging him of his virility, symbolically
superseding the dominant male body with the feminine. His feminization begs the
larger question of Renn as a new subject of the male gaze, which holds more
unique implications for Videodrome than most other horror films.

**Gazing at the gazer**

*Videodrome*, as opposed to most other horror films, contains overt themes
regarding the act of watching and screen-to-viewer relations. Most of the horrific
qualities of the film surround Renn’s relationship to his television and the content
that it delivers, made much more potent by Renn’s career of making women as
visually appealing for the viewer as possible. These plot devices allow
Cronenberg’s film to illuminate the troubling nature of the male gaze, exposing
how viewers become entranced and molded by the bodies on screen that are
constructed for their visual pleasure. The problems posed by the male gaze are
ones that affect the whole of society, as fascination with visually appealing bodies
shapes societal norms of beauty and overall gender relations. The bodies in
*Videodrome* address social anxieties in this area that have proven quite resistant to
change, as women are continuously fetishized in popular franchises such as
*Transformers* despite critical attention from authors like Mulvey. *Videodrome*’s
construction of bodies subverts many of the harmful implications of the masculine gaze, directing focus to the nature of spectatorship itself.

*Videodrome* offers a layered look at the workings of the male gaze, as Renn is shown as both creator and gazer of sensationalist media. By showing Renn in negotiation with his all-male team of colleagues over their smutty programming, *Videodrome* gives viewers a behind-the-scenes look at the production of provocative material to identify the tailoring of media for pleasurable gaze of male viewers. By depicting his obsessive viewing habits and twisted fantasies, Cronenberg’s film paints Renn as the problematic masculine gazer, with his fate suggestive of the ethical consequences. We frequently watch Renn watching; many scenes involve him staring longingly into TV screens, captivated by real and imagined women as they seduce him either directly or indirectly through their suffering. Renn’s vision of his television adopting human flesh and sexual desires is a visual realization of Mulvey’s theory. The TV set becomes more than a mere image and sound medium by taking on the form of a breathing, fleshy seductress. Another chauvinistic aspect of the male gazer is his tendency to fetishize the female figure through depictions of punishment to reaffirm his own masculinity (Mulvey 13-14). Renn reflects this in fantasizing himself as the dominant sexual partner in charge of dishing out “punishment” with whips and needles. All of his dark fantasies are shown as fueled by his addiction to Videodrome, demonstrating the ways that provocative media may negatively influence psyche of the viewer.
Mulvey argues that women in film are framed as threatening through their symbolic relation to castration (13). Their lack of a penis is therefore frightening to the male viewer, making their empowerment a direct threat to other male characters and thus the male viewer. As opposed to depicting a threatening female character, Videodrome introduces its castration themes through Renn’s bodily changes arising from his own treatment of women. This serves as a critical interruption to the typical processes of masculine identification, and is where Videodrome departs from the standard script of female spectacle. Nicki disappears somewhat early in the film and only reappears (mostly in non-human form) in Renn’s fantasies, robbing the viewer of the typical source of heterosexual male pleasure. By feminizing Renn, Videodrome actualizes the male fear of castration rather than using female bodies to allude to it for frightening effect. Renn’s body becomes the central spectacle, with his metamorphosis throwing his gender identity into disarray. The typical process of male viewers identifying with male characters (Mulvey 12) is unsettled, as the masculinity of the protagonist is fundamentally altered. Clover identifies how horror films may center masculine and feminine categories within the same body, better allowing the audience to vicariously experience the emotions of different characters (Clover 220). Renn’s newly intersexual body is the ultimate manifestation of such gender duality, especially given the psychological changes that he undergoes throughout the film. By reconstituting Renn’s body as the passive receptor for media penetration, Videodrome hystericizes the male form, recasting the masculine subject by “recovering the feminine within himself” (Badley 126). Renn becomes the focal
point of the male gaze as he is bestowed with the sexual apparatus of its typical subject, creating a new form of hermaphroditic spectacle that directs the viewer away from Renn’s rigid masculinity and toward a multi-faceted, unique sexual being. In doing so, Cronenberg’s film challenges harmful, masculine modes of viewership by de-coding the male-centric structures at play in cinema. Mulvey confirms the utility of such strategies, arguing that the links between cinematic codes and external structures must be exposed to challenge the pleasures of mainstream film (17).

Films such as Videodrome look beyond how the cinematic gaze functions, serving the additional purpose of imagining the social consequences of such spectatorship. In particular, Cronenberg’s film links the male gaze to a psychological substitution of women’s bodies with their images. The fear that televised beauty may become more attractive than the real thing has become an increasingly potent public concern that has received some attention from the film industry. Recent films such as Don Jon (2013) indict how popular media warps societal standards of beauty and sex appeal by casting women on-screen as more desirable than others. Films like Simone (2002) and Her (2013) have also brought this theme of artificial women (and the men who love them) to popular attention by imagining the replacement of women with “better” digital versions. Videodrome imagines the replacement of Nicki with a television set bearing her voice and image, which comes to satisfy Renn’s sexual fantasies in her physical absence. Captivated a television that he finds sexually appealing, Renn seems content with the gaze itself. This plays out in a strange “sex” scene when Renn
imagines his TV as a living embodiment of Nicki, with her lips engulfing the entire screen. His imagines his TV as a living body (complete with skin and veins) that pulsates while projecting Nicki’s ecstatic moans. Renn caresses his television-lover, even making efforts at penetration by shoving his head into his TV screen at “Nicki’s” request. This bizarre form of intercourse intertwines sex and television, exposing the ways that provocative media can tap into the sexual desires of a captive audience. Television becomes Renn’s seductress, which now satisfies even his physical desires and not just his psychological ones. As a result, he heeds its every command despite warnings to the contrary. The final scene involving the death of Renn’s real body demonstrates the consequences of such seduction. When he stumbles upon an abandoned ship after his public shooting spree, Renn encounters Nicki’s image on another television as she gives him new commands to “kill the Old Flesh” to become the New.

Renn’s fate suggests the misleading nature of the masculine gaze, which causes the captivated male viewer to bow to suggestive programming. The film-to-viewer relationship is framed as a potentially destructive one, with the power to command the viewer as well as re-position his/her gender identity. Renn’s own conception of self is destabilized, directing the viewer to his newly “feminine” features that raise a host of questions about his unique existence as an intersexual, and thus potentially reproductive, being. Just as Videodrome offers a unique take on the interplay of masculinity and femininity, it also implicates age-old horror themes surrounding birth through its exploration of the New Flesh.
Birth of the New Flesh

The body horror genre has long dealt with themes of birth and motherhood, playing off of the numerous anxieties associated with pregnancy. Such themes made popular through classics such as *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968) and *The Omen* (1976) have made their way to French New Wave cinema in *Inside* (2007), and have even reached the “fout-footage” sub-genre with *Devil’s Due* (2014). A compelling case can be made that birth is the ultimate body horror theme due to its implication of the genesis point of all human life; the physical process of our very entry into the world is made the stuff of nightmares. Birth themes deal not only with the origin point of life, but also raise questions of humankind’s future and what we bring into the world with each new generation.

*Videodrome* does not deal with demonic children as much as it ponders what sort of society will be born from this violent and media-addicted one. Acts of physical metamorphosis such as Renn’s involve processes of “giving birth to a new body and a new subject” (Badley 126), raising further questions about Renn as a new, potentially “female” organism. *Videodrome* offers a strange twist on issues of birth, using its gender-switching concept to introduce an odd, childless form of reproduction. Though it is a step beyond the childbirth-gone-wrong scenarios of the aforementioned movies, *Videodrome* implicates fears of unruly pregnancies by imagining a form of birth that made unrecognizable, and thus dangerous, to modern society.

Renn’s shift to intersexuality begs the question: has he been feminized to the point of possible childbearing? If so, what would he produce? Though the film
does not mention childbirth explicitly, Renn does give “birth” through his stomach cavity as his condition worsens. His orifice produces new flesh, but not in the sense of birthing a human child. Nevertheless, the film contains a linear progression of impregnation, incubation, and birth as Renn becomes more deeply involved with Videodrome. After watching one of O’Blivion’s tapes regarding the effects of Videodrome on perceived reality, Renn is “impregnated” by himself on his couch. Entranced by his TV (recalling Nicki’s method of getting “in the mood”), Renn begins to caress his stomach with his handgun. Shortly thereafter, we see his stomach cavity opened and pulsing, apparently aroused. Expressing what appear to be simultaneous feelings of pain and pleasure, Renn shoves his handgun into the orifice only to lose his grip on the pistol when pulling out. Knowingly or not, the viewer has witnessed a bizarre form of conception. This theme of handgun-as-penis offers another linkage between masculine sexual control and violence, directing attention to the dangerous aspects of pervasive male sexual desire. Renn implants himself with what later manifests as a form of organic weaponry, fostering a newly lethal libido. His gun-seed is allowed time to incubate, during which time Renn learns more of Spectacular Optical’s plans and fantasizes about whipping Nicki. The “birthing” scene occurs just after Renn is commanded by Convex to kill his partners. Reaching inside his stomach-womb, Renn removes his pistol (which, much like a newborn child, is covered in fluid) before it violently melds into his hand. He is made both parent and child through his own genetic reprogramming, making him a newborn human-cyborg with an entirely different worldview and biological makeup. His “child” is nothing more
than a warped extension of his own body, a merger of flesh and weapon that heralds a threat to the social order.

Films such as *Videodrome* are also notable for re-positioning the physical layout of the birthing process, moving from the traditional locale of the genitals up to the torso. *Shivers* and *Alien* (1979) feature males “birthing” new life forms from their chests and abdomen, signifying a violent new form of creation separate from the mother. This re-location of the birth canal onto the center of the body allows the pregnant male to witness his new reproductive process with his own eyes. No longer merely a spectator in the process, he must now watch and feel the entirety of it. Gender-swapping thus becomes a form of reciprocity, as the female is no longer the sole bearer of physical pain during childbirth. Though male viewers will never truly experience all the physical pain of labor, films such as *Videodrome* initiate the process of bridging psychological social divides by bringing childbirth closer to the realm of male comprehension.

As explored in the previous chapter, Renn’s weaponized body is a signifier of social violence, making his “offspring” a warning of the consequences of overtly aggressive masculinity. Humanity’s genetic future is called into question through the destabilization of the birthing process, casting Renn’s sexuality as destructive rather than creative (Merriam). Renn’s act of birth is the death of “humanity” as we know it. We bear witness to a new generation wedded to a culture of violence, with each new media-addicted child likened to a “gun” set to go off. Such themes fit well within pregnancy-based body horror, which often imagines inhuman “children” as frightening signs of bodily uncertainty and
an unpredictable future (Cruz 162). What will be the legacy of our generation? What will our children give to the world? Videodrome answers with the frightening possibility that harmful popular media may be the downfall of future generations, visually destabilizing our natural body processes to warn of dangerous things to come.

**Problematizing cinematic horror**

Videodrome captures the most rhetorically potent aspects of the body horror genre while also challenging the more problematic aspects of cinema, including scopophilia and rigid gender binaries. Cronenberg’s film centers its most significant gender commentary in the body of a single male, subjecting the masculine body to critical scrutiny unheard of in other films (mostly slashers) that are more tailored for the male gaze. Videodrome’s critical nature makes it an ideal example of how filmic bodies serve as terministic screens. Horror films may dramatically restructure the human figure to convey messages that problematize harmful interpersonal relations and shed light on the relation between our flesh and the worst problems facing the body politic.
This thesis demonstrates the rhetorical potency of body horror cinema and the visual application of termistic screens, using *Videodrome* as a guide through the most significant subsets of the genre. By basing its symbolism in the flesh that defines so much of the human experience, body horror is uniquely suited to confront societal problems beyond our control. Through its evocative use of metaphors and vivid bodily imagery that address a wide variety of human anxieties, *Videodrome* remains a seminal work in the pantheon of socially-conscious horror films. The film’s cautionary tone becomes more relevant as technology and media outlets increasingly dominate social life, testifying to the lasting relevance of filmic bodies to the human psyche and interpersonal relations. In-depth study of fantastical films such as *Videodrome* demonstrates the communicative value of the body horror genre, which holds outstanding promise for rhetorical critics.

Case-specific studies allow critics to dive into the nuances of bodily symbolism with a deeper understanding of their social messages as opposed to the surface-level focus of broader studies. As I demonstrate with *Videodrome*, the detailed study of individual films can foster an understanding of the broader aspects of the genre, adding both depth and breadth to studies of horror cinema. Case-specific focus also holds the benefit of highlighting films that may otherwise be omitted from overarching looks at the body horror genre. Films such as *Outbreak, Requiem for a Dream* (2000), and *Prometheus* do not fall neatly into
the horror genre, but deserve close attention due to their frightening construction of bodily change. Taking a closer look at particular films using Burke’s screen theory allows critics to identify how films in genre grey-zones still direct attention to the horrific aspects of the body, thus testifying to the communicative power of bodily spectacle. My analysis of Cronenberg’s film is a call for further rhetorical treatment of other films in the body horror genre, which crafts social messages by drawing attention to particular physical attributes of the bodies on screen.

Critics should focus not only what horror films communicate, but how they do so. My application of Burke’s screen theory to visual rhetoric in Videodrome provides a framework for critical interpretation, namely by identifying how the film utilizes (and often critiques) genre conventions in ways that illuminate deep-rooted social anxieties. Critics should examine how bodies direct attention toward particular messages, carefully studying the selective depictions of horrific human figures. Viewing films as rhetorical texts can better enlighten critics by “initiating cultural critique and stabilizing cultural pieties” (Blakesley 5), thus creating scholarship more attuned to the problems of a given social sphere.

There is abundance of body horror movies that confront societal anxieties, and filmic interpretations such as my own can inform the readings of other films to unearth the social commentaries contained in each text. Critics need not look far for socially-conscious horror films from every decade of cinema that warrant close examination, all of which testify to the rhetorically powerful nature of the body horror genre.
Infection

As I examine in my second chapter, terministic screen theory is well-suited for evaluating disease-based cinema since it focuses on the sources, symptoms, and reactions to bodily ailments that are often likened to social ills. Viewing diseased bodies through a screening lens allows critics to interrogate how films make public arguments, thus revealing the appeal of horror films in addressing our biggest fears. Though not all infection-based films are as unique in depicting disease as Videodrome, there is nonetheless a large base of horror films in the sub-genre for rhetorical critics to choose from. This category of film is addressed at length throughout other works in Cronenberg’s filmography. Shivers deals explicitly with sexual disease through its depiction of slug-like creatures that cause uncontrollable sexual desires in their victims. Rabid (1977) shows its protagonist infected via medical malpractice, as an experimental skin graft turns her “rabid” and causes her to infect others after feeding on their blood. eXistenZ (1999) features the infection of video-gamers by futuristic gaming “pods” that plug into “bio-ports” in the gamers’ spines. The diversity of filmic infections within Cronenberg’s own filmography is a microcosm of disease-based body horror in general, which has been approached by filmmakers in a number of creative ways.

Outbreak and Contagion depict zoonotic diseases that threaten the global population. Contagion features its disease going global, drawing attention not just to the bodies of a few infected characters but also to the global panic and rush for a cure. The cure for the virus in Open Grave (2013) is tragically lost in the
confusion after the outbreak, demonstrating fears that solutions to health crises may be squandered even if cures exist. A common theme among infection films is the failure of the healthcare system to adequately respond to threats, which taps into real-world fears of the inadequacies of global medical infrastructure.

The vast mystery of outer space has yielded several imaginative disease-narratives surrounding extraterrestrial viruses, posing the possibility that humans are unprepared for extraterrestrial disease threats. Materials from space have been viewed by many films as dangerous to human health. *The Andromeda Strain* (1971) features an extraterrestrial pandemic spread by a fallen satellite, while characters in *Slither* (2006), *District 9* (2009), and *Prometheus* are infected by mysterious alien substances that cause grotesque physical transformations. Such films capitalize on the incompatibility of outer space and human life, reflecting fears of unknown threats beyond the confines of Earth. *Slither*, *District 9*, and *Prometheus* also reflect the combination of the main body horror categories into single texts. *Slither* and *District 9* both feature infection as a trigger for metamorphosis, while *Prometheus* does the same in addition to exploring complex themes of gender and birth. My method of exploring how bodily spectacle communicates can expose the complexity of these narratives and how they weave together the most rhetorically powerful aspects of the body horror genre.

The horrors of sexually-transmitted diseases have been explored in a number of horror films. In *Shivers*, sex is both the symptom and method of transmission for its virus, which is definitively one of heightened passion. *Cabin
*Fever* (2002) shows its cast of promiscuous youngsters succumbing to a flesh-eating virus (perhaps evoking themes of punishment for sexual transgressions mentioned in the previous chapter), featuring at least one case of sexual transmission. Sex-based infections in film have also addressed persisting problems of domestic violence and rape culture, painting violence against women as an infectious disease that destroys the bodies of women. Not all films are constructed as morality tales to argue that a given character deserves to suffer, as some disease films paint illness in a more tragic light. Using mind-body parallels to indict the devastating emotional consequences of domestic violence, *Thanatомorphose* (2012) features a female protagonist who finds her entire body rotting away after having sex with her abusive partner. The female lead in *Contracted* (2013) undergoes a horrific deterioration after being drugged and raped at a party. While *Videodrome* symbolically punishes its protagonist with illness, other films base their disease-laden commentary around the tragic consequences for the female victims of masculine aggressors. My method of evaluating bodies as screens can help distinguish between gender-based morality plays and tragedies, as it requires a closer look at how afflictions are approached in a given film.

Several films have framed addiction as the stuff of horror. Though they are not “horror” films per se, *Trainspotting* (1996) and *Requiem for a Dream* contain terrifying scenes of drug-induced visions that reveal the mental disintegration of junkies. The protagonist of *Trainspotting* hallucinates a dead baby crawling on his ceiling in the process of going cold turkey, while a pill-
addicted mother in *Requiem* imagines her refrigerator turning into a monstrous creature. Films such as *Resolution* (2012), *The Lords of Salem* (2012) and the remake of *Evil Dead* (2013) feature protagonists who are recovering drug addicts, making their fights for survival parallel to their struggles with kicking their habits. Though few films offer as unique a vision of addiction as *Videodrome*, there is a strong base of films that paint addiction in a horrific light. Screen theory can better understand the nuances of addiction themes, including the “junkie’s” poison of choice, his/her bodily reaction, and the suggested implications for society.

Applying screen theory to other films that follow *Videodrome*’s themes of media-as-disease can better expose the effects of popular entertainment on the human body. Demonstrating the evolving nature of disease tropes to address timely concerns, some recent films have begun implicating the linkages between social media and disease. *The Signal* (2007) imagines a strange media signal that “infects” the viewers/listeners, amplifying negative emotions and leading to mass violence and societal breakdown. Echoing *Videodrome*’s themes of media as a primer for violent behavior, *The Signal* imagines the immediate and persisting psychological effects of harmful programming. *Pontypool* (2009) contains relatively similar themes of media infecting the populace, this time through a radio show. Where *Videodrome* tackles the influence of provocative images, *Pontypool* confronts the power of the spoken word and persuasive nature of popular entertainment. Certain words become infectious when spoken, which drives the speaker insane and creates a strange new breed of “zombie.” Such films
pose the frightening possibility that our most beloved electronics have more of an impact on our bodies than we suspect, posing covert dangers to the health of media-obsessed publics. *Pontypool* and *The Signal* carry on *Videodrome*’s legacy of unique electronic infection, offering rhetorical critics new case studies for studying disease in an increasingly technological era.

**Metamorphosis**

Through their tendency to reconstitute the human figure into new forms, films in the metamorphosis sub-genre are ideal for studying visual terministic screens. Cinematic creatures of the New Flesh draw attention away from bodily normalcy and toward new visions of what the flesh could become, crafting messages about the social conditions that foster their transformations. What unique monsters does the sub-genre feature? What do the processes of change look like? How does the New Flesh relate to the old material body? The answers to these questions can shed light on where filmmakers imagine the human race heading in the future, illuminating the larger fears driving the development of some of the most spectacular films in horror cinema.

*Videodrome* is hardly the only film to imagine grotesque metamorphoses for symbolic effect, although it remains of the most unique films to do so. Metamorphosis holds quite the filmic legacy, with Cronenberg’s own body of work contributing many of the most intriguing entries. Most notable is his re-imagining of *The Fly* three years after *Videodrome*’s release. *The Fly* ties its bodily evolution to tropes of mad scientists and human-animal hybridity, exploring complex themes of scientific advancement and fears that nature will
subvert the dominant position of humanity. Scientist Seth Brundle, though a much more likable and sympathetic character than Renn, shares a similar fate with *Videodrome*’s protagonist: both men bring about their own evolution and self-destruction through abuses of their occupation. The folly of misguided science unfolds on Brundle’s flesh as he initially experiences physical benefits of strength and flexibility, while eventually succumbing to his non-human form. The viewer is privy to all the gory details of his transformation, witnessing the gradual shift of Brundle’s fit body into that of an oozing, oversized insect. Brundle’s physical deterioration parallels his psychological crash as he pays the price for his hubris, allowing the viewer to observe the perils of scientists overstepping their bounds. Such themes represent a broader social criticism of the dangers of scientific “progress,” which is constructed as “too clinical, too abstract, and that the scientists who control the mysteries of modern secular knowledge are unaccountable to conventional standards of morality” (Tourney 411). This notion that the fate of humanity may fall into the hands of reckless and insane persons adds symbolic value to the morphing body of cinematic scientists like Brundle, and the rhetorical packaging of the film as a morality tale allows directors to “explain whence comes evil in the guise of science and how to repel it” (Tourney 411). Through the similar morality tale in *Videodrome*, Renn may be one of the first “mad TV producers” who implicates many of the same negative effects on society at large. Viewing Brundle’s body through the lens of terministic screens can better explain how *The Fly* draws attention to the different phases of his transformation and to the significance of each. For instance, there is much to be
said about Brundle’s temporary surge in strength before his physical
disintegration sets in; Burke’s screen theory can foster a better understanding of
the progression of Brundle’s metamorphosis to uncover the messages conveyed
by each.

Becoming non-human raises larger questions of what it means to be
human in the first place, which invites speculation over the human-animal divide.
Humankind benefits from overwhelming domination of the animal kingdom, as
we sit comfortably atop the food chain and take for granted our unique status as
the overlords of wild creatures. Society operates on a hierarchal foundation of
humans controlling their natural environment as best we can, entailing a mental
barrier between our species and all others as creatures with distinct destinies.
Movies such as The Fly and An American Werewolf in London that focus on
human-to-animal transformations express anxiety over the tenuous grasp of
humans over our natural environment, specifically the animal kingdom. Even our
own bodies may be usurped by wild beasts or the most common of household
insects. In The Fly, the lifelong plans of a brilliant scientist are thwarted by an
insect no larger than a nickel, while the protagonist of Werewolf loses all
willpower in the face of his newfound animal instinct. Films involving animal
hybridity confront the notion of humans losing power in the face of an animal
kingdom that is racing to catch up. Suddenly, we are not so far separated from the
creatures that we view as a breed apart; species are synthesized, and human
uniqueness is destabilized. Viewing bodies as screens can be critical in this
regard. Most metamorphosis films begin with depictions of the typical human
body, only to depart from predictable bodily imagery when transformation sets in. Terministic screens offer a closer look at how humans cope with such changes and interact with their natural environment.

Filmic bodies are also commonly shown melding with alien creatures. Themes of the human body melding with extraterrestrials are explored in films such as *The Thing* and *District 9*. The shape-stealing alien in *The Thing* inspires paranoia among isolated researchers in Antarctica over who is human and who is a “thing,” coming to terms with the savage ways that humans confront difference. Though the alien is clearly depicted as a threat, the downfall of the group comes primarily from their infighting over the genetic solidarity and purity of each member. The paranoid threat-construction among the researchers is reminiscent of actual social demonization that occurs between different groups of people based on sexual, racial, geographic, and other forms of difference. Xenophobia causes humans to turn on one another, securitizing the identities of others while promoting the self as the desirable and trustworthy norm. *District 9* gives a new context to “illegal aliens” by likening an alien race stranded on Earth to stigmatized immigrant groups, offering meaningful social commentary on citizenship. Its protagonist, a bureaucrat tasked with evicting desperate aliens in their reserved areas, begins to transform into one after being exposed to a vile of strange liquid. The persecutor becomes the persecuted as he is pursued by government forces, forcing him to develop empathy via physical conversion into the Other. By the end, the fully transformed protagonist is more relatable than most of the xenophobic human characters in the film, confirming a theme of
positive interaction with stigmatized Others that can shift from problematic worldviews to more tolerant ones. The screening function of bodies draws attention to physical difference and the ways that characters approach them, shaping the messages conveyed in films about domestic-alien relations. By centering attention on how characters view difference, terministic screen theory can foster a better understanding of interpersonal relations with regard to human identity.

Not all body horror films adopt the same pessimistic tone as *Videodrome* regarding the character transformations. Some construct more uplifting narratives of bodily transcendence and feature heroic, independent characters capitalizing on their physical changes to liberate themselves or others from oppression or danger. *Alien: Resurrection* (1997) sees the headstrong Ellen Ripley genetically altered with alien DNA, the physical benefits of which she uses to dispatch hostile extraterrestrials. Similarly, the wildly popular *Spiderman* series puts a positive spin on human-insect hybridity through its heroic depiction of Peter Parker and his superpowers. The protagonist in *Black Swan* (2010) imagines her own evolution into the eponymous bird to achieve the “perfect” ballet performance, expressing a desire to transcend the confines of humanity for high art. *Black Swan* may end on a somber note, but it constructs tragedy around the physical limitations of human bodies that inhibit the dreams of their owners.

Regardless of the overall tone of the films, metamorphosis speaks to our fears of uncontrollable changes, imagining incredible and terrifying (albeit exaggerated) visions of what the human body could become. Films in this
category boast a diversity of distinct transformations beyond the typical sights of humans shifting into vampires, werewolves, or zombies. By further exploring nuanced filmic metamorphosis, rhetorical critics can better grasp how litanies of social anxieties manifest in fluctuating human bodies.

**Gender**

Considering the long-running relationship between gender and horror films, it is unsurprising that there are countless movies that can illustrate gender dynamics related to the body. *Dead Ringers* (1988), another of Cronenberg's ventures into gendered body horror, deals with twin male gynecologists who (deceptively) share the same girlfriend while “experimenting” on women with odd surgical tools of their own design. After a woman complains that her procedure was too painful, one of the twins quickly faults the woman’s body, claiming “There’s nothing the matter with the instrument. It’s the body! The woman’s body was all wrong.” Such aspects of the film expose male hubris as men inflict harm on women under their care, only to blame the female patient for their own mistakes.

Male control over the female body dates as far back as Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*, which features Rotwang, a mad scientist, who kidnapst and experiments on Maria, the beautiful leader of a working-class revolution. To create social chaos, Rotwang creates a seductive robot in an overly-sexualized image of Maria, re-creating the female figure to better appeal to the desires of men. The film makes clear the social implications of the male urge to “create” the perfect, sexualized woman. Made explicitly for the consumption of the male gaze,
Maria nearly destroys an entire society by blinding its men with desire. Lang’s film suggests that societal stability is impossible in a world of women being defined through their overt sexual appeal to men. Georges Franju’s *Eyes Without a Face* (1960) picks up where *Metropolis* leaves off, adding more explicit and nuanced themes of men dominating every aspect of female physical appearance. The film follows Dr. Génessier, a skilled physician experimenting with heterograft surgery. When the face of his daughter, Christiane, is disfigured in a car accident, Dr. Génessier begins abducting attractive young women to surgically remove and transplant their faces onto Christiane’s. Deeming his daughter unfit for public view, Dr. Génessier keeps Christiane locked away in their country home wearing a featureless mask, implying that it is better for her to be considered dead than ugly. Notably, Christiane is not the one pining for her own bodily restoration throughout the film. It is mostly her father who laments the loss of her former beauty and resorts to violence to restore it. When Christiane questions his methods, he dismissively responds, “I know my own abilities, don’t I? You’ll have a real face.” Dr. Génessier has no regard for the bodily autonomy of the women he kidnaps; their bodies are no longer their own, and their very faces exist only for his experiments. *Eyes Without a Face* is unique among many horror films in that the villain is not the “monstrous” body, but rather the man who seeks to conceal it. Recent films such as *The Human Centipede* (2009) have continued to address similar themes of women held in captivity for the cosmetic manipulation of men. The film (boasting the less-than-subtle tagline, “Their Flesh is His Fantasy”) involves two young women who, after their car breaks down, are
kidnapped as specimens for a gruesome medical experiment. Dr. Heiter, a former surgeon, wishes to stitch three people together to form a “human centipede.” The mad surgeon embodies “power as domination” (Kuypers 43), or the abuse of power to marginalize others for the sake of privileged social status. Viewing bodies as screens allows critics to focus on gendered bodies in relation to the men who aim to control them, bringing attention not only to idyllic bodily standards but also to the physical consequences of masculine control.

While films, including Videodrome, focus largely on male domination of women, others imagine more uplifting narratives of female liberation through bodily changes. The end of Eyes Without a Face shows Christiane wandering free from her father’s captivity after allowing him to be disfigured by his own dogs, facing him with the same sort of disfigurement that he found unacceptable for her. Mitchell Lichtenstein’s Teeth follows Dawn, a sexually confused teenager with “vagina dentata” (Latin for “vaginal teeth”), who uses her unusual condition to defend herself from unwanted, aggressive sexual advances. Castration becomes a fitting punishment for her aggressors, flipping the script of female victimization and restoring sexual command to the oppressed feminine body. My approach of applying Burke’s theory is helpful in understanding such uplifting texts, as it focuses on the ways that body horror is directed into more optimistic territory through bodily empowerment.

Pregnancy and childbirth have been explored in several significant body horror films, expressing fears over the fates of future generations and making horrific the genesis point of all life. My approach to filmic bodies as
communicative symbols helps understand how themes of demonic children and suffering parents reflect long-standing social anxieties surrounding the family unit and reproductive rights. Children are often depicted as demonic through their lack of bodily normalcy in narratives of childbirth-gone-wrong seen in *Rosemary’s Baby, It’s Alive* (1974), *Blessed* (2004), and *12/12/12* (2012). In *Rosemary’s Baby*, upon seeing her newborn (revealed to be the son of Satan) for the first time, Rosemary screams about her child’s eyes, only to hear that the infant “has his father’s eyes.” Rosemary must confront the reality of finding no semblance of herself or her husband in the physical appearance of her child. The passing on of genetic material has been made irrelevant, and the unnatural union creates an inhuman (and therefore un-relatable) baby (Cruz 162). Reproductive rights have also been explored in horror films. *Prometheus* sees its female protagonist take control of her reproductive future, performing her own graphic “abortion” (with a machine only programmed for men) after being impregnated with an alien creature that threatens to rip her apart from the inside. Some films have explicitly addressed the battle between pro-life and pro-choice forces. *The Life Zone* (2011) imagines a group of pregnant women who are kidnapped and forced to deliver the children that they planned to abort. Such films are attuned to wider problems surrounding reproductive rights for women, which is perhaps the most controversial and visible aspect of many public discussions of feminism (Freedman 238). Burke’s method of identifying how messages are crafted can help expose the particular positions that can be derived from these sorts of films. To unearth the political ideologies at work, one must closely examine how female
bodily control is depicted in each narrative. For instance, *Prometheus* may not appear to be politically-oriented after a surface-level viewing. Closer examination of the film’s depiction of the mother’s body in relation to the unresponsive men around her, however, reveal social parallels that enrich the symbolic resonance of the film.

Gender-switching is an especially significant theme for horror cinema, seen in the tendency of Norman Bates in *Psycho* (1960) and Buffalo Bill in *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) to “become” women in their own psychotic ways. Sexual re-appropriation has influenced body horror as well. *Victim* (2010) and *The Skin I Live In* (2011) both feature sexual reassignment surgery against males as a form of punishment for sexual transgressions against women, using horrific forms of gender-switching to craft morality tales around misogyny. Male viewership is also critiqued in films such as *Eyes Without a Face*, which problematizes the male gaze and problematic standards of physical beauty; Christiane is the antithesis of the typical male gaze subject. Rather than parade her before the camera, the film confronts the very search for an attractive face for its female lead, indicting the perpetual quest to emulate the beauty of others and appeal to the normative male audience. My move to evaluate bodies-as-screens in the visual sense is important in this regard, as the viewer can better examine the appearance of characters to derive messages surrounding societal conceptions of beauty.

Body horror films explore themes of gender related both to psychology and biological sex. By subverting physical norms, the sub-genre challenges
societal gender problems, including discrimination, harmful stereotypes, and both psychological and physical violence. Body horror is uniquely able to do so through its ability to radically reconstitute human bodies in ways that are acceptable to and embraced by audiences, warranting a greater focus by communication scholars on the construction of particular filmic bodies.

**New moves in the genre**

Although many of the most well-known body horror films are from the 1980s, the genre remains alive and promising for rhetorical study. Recent body horror films deal with aspects of film-to-body relations that *Videodrome* only vaguely anticipates, namely obsession surrounding the bodies of celebrities and the viewers that desire them. Body horror cinema even appears to be evolving and heading in new directions as filmmakers increasingly address body modification and celebrity worship, which offer interesting new areas for critical interpretation. Films such as *The Skin I Live In* and *American Mary* (2012) deal with surgeries that can change a person’s entire physical appearance, cosmetically altering human identity. Such films are likely responses to the increasing ease with which people may radically alter their bodies, which has fed a desire of people to look like their favorite icons (Ellin), creating a realistic form of New Flesh. *American Mary* features extreme body modification of people to resemble human dolls and even Betty Boop, reflecting the increasing malleability of the flesh. The film reflects a growing societal trend of rejecting rigid conceptions of what the human body should be, as people have more control than ever over their physical appearance. *American Mary* poses the possibility that identity crises and
dissatisfaction with our bodies may be vented through physical alterations, bringing people closer to the visions of beauty espoused in mass media. If humans are increasingly dissatisfied with the limits of their bodies, it is worth examining how and why we wish to change our bodies. This makes body modification themes especially conducive to my application of terministic screens, which can identify the aspects of the body that we wish to change and expose our ideals of what we hope to become in the future.

Brandon Cronenberg appears to have inherited his father’s taste for bodily spectacle in his film Antiviral (2012), which depicts a society obsessed with the flesh of celebrities. The film imagines a society where fans pay to be infected with the diseases of their favorite stars, bringing their own bodies closer to ones that are idealized by the media. The film even illustrates a “celebrity meat market,” where fans can buy steaks made from the cells of celebrities. When protagonist Syd March is infected with a deadly disease, he is kidnapped and forced into a room for a reality show to document his condition. Reflecting the ways that horrific bodies on screen can serve cathartic functions for viewers, Syd is told that his public deterioration can psychologically ease the suffering of millions of people. It is no coincidence that Antiviral’s protagonist is the antithesis of the typical celebrity; he is deathly pale and freckled, with a sunken, serpent-esque facial composition. Such aspects of the film challenge the culture surrounding mainstream media, painting a morbid picture of the consequences of societal obsession with superstars. Themes of celebrity worship and the resulting
bodily envy add subversive qualities to films that critique the film industry itself, exposing the social problems inspired by the Hollywood star system.

A new handful of filmmakers are picking up where the elder Cronenberg left off to “put body horror on the map” (Cohen). *American Mary, Antiviral, Contracted, Thanatomorphose, Errors of the Human Body* (2012), and *Afflicted* (2013) are only a few examples of newly released films that extend themes of bodily transformation and disintegration into modern cinema, testifying to the timeless resonance of the flesh-as-spectacle. Even popular films like *District 9* and *Prometheus* contain elements of body horror that speak to broader problems off-camera. By taking up the task of studying how body horror films are evolving, critics can further illuminate the lasting relevance of the genre for human psychology and social relations.

**Final thoughts**

Communication studies benefits from rigorous interrogation of symbolicity and interpretation, which is especially true of media that foregrounds our greatest societal problems. This thesis calls for further rhetorical attention to the body genre of cinema, as there is much room for deliberation over the myriad of ways that the human form has been symbolically re-appropriated on the silver screen. The rhetoric of the body horrific reveals much about human nature and how we confront our deepest fears. We have a taste for the symbolic, for a form of catharsis to safely prime us for the unsettling realities that we face beyond the movie theater. In the face of social ills beyond our control, emotional catharsis through the suffering bodies on-screen may be the best solution that anxious
audiences can hope for. The interpretive lens of Burke’s screen theory provides critics a framework for better understanding how cinematic horrors communicate to viewers, uncovering the particular messages surrounding filmic imagery.

As horror films and societal bodily standards continue to evolve, the opportunities and challenges for rhetorical critics and film theorists will intensify. Just as horror films continue to change throughout consecutive generations, so too do bodily standards in the public imaginary. Since horror cinema moves in cycles that are tied to emerging cultural anxieties (Twitchell 41), it is the task of rhetorical critics to keep pace and maintain a rigorous focus on cinematic depictions of the body and the somatic aspects of our nightmares. Perhaps one of the primary reasons that the horror genre continues to thrive and evolve is that it not only terrifies us, but reveals much about ourselves that we are reluctant to admit. It puts our larger problems on display, confronting us with our deepest fears. Horrific filmic bodies are thus more than screens; they are also mirrors, reflecting uncomfortable social realities back at us. Invigorating studies of the body horror genre can reveal the communicative power of the cinematic body horrific, with profound implications for our understanding of the public imaginary.


sexuality/introduction-to-gender-and-sexuality/gender-roles-and-differences/>


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CURRICULUM VITAE

Daniel Bagwell
4260 Brownsboro Rd. Apt A1, Winston-Salem, NC, 27106
danbagwell@gmail.com

EDUCATION
Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC
M.A. in Communication, Emphasis in Rhetorical Studies 2014
(anticipated)
Thesis Advisor: Ronald von Burg, PhD
Samford University, Birmingham, AL
B.A. in Journalism/Mass Communication 2012
Minor: Film Production
Thesis Advisor: Julie Williams

WORK EXPERIENCE
Wake Forest University
Graduate Assistant Debate Coach August ’12 – May ’14
Coached teams to a national championship and consistent top-ten rankings, conducted legal research and produced files, handled finances at tournaments, transported and chaperoned students.

Wake Forest University
Teaching Assistant August – Dec. ‘13
Led classroom discussions and activities for nearly 70 students, independently designed curriculums for and led a weekly lab, managed academic records, designed and graded test materials.

Grandview Financial Group, LLC
Marketing Intern 2012
Conducted marketing research, assisted in organizing company events and meetings, filmed and edited promotional videos

Pace Academy
Assistant Debate Coach 2008-14
Coached debaters to elimination rounds of national championships, conducted legal research, produced files, judged competitive debates.

A is for Advertising
Media Manager 2011
Prepared and edited infomercials within strict time limitations, designed logos.

Samford University
Lab/Research Leader 2008-13
Produced thousands of pages of legal research, led lab activities, designed curriculums, taught research and public speaking skills.

HONORS
Octofinalist at the 2011 National Debate Tournament, 4-year Samford Debate Team captain