

Canadian Cinema and *Videodrome*:  
How David Cronenberg Warped Canada's Cinematic Identity

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Canada's zeitgeist is intrinsically linked to America's, whether it is reacting to or appeasing American sensibilities, which is why "the sickness and perversity of Cronenberg films [...] are more traditionally Canadian than anything in the brave new world of multi-formity, re-conceptualization and celebration of difference" (Beard 182). David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983) is a pivotal film for Cronenberg and Canadian cinema because it launched Cronenberg's foray into Hollywood films hence marking mainstream acceptance of his work, all while thematically embodying Canadian theorist Marshall McLuhan's philosophies regarding society's relation to media since *Videodrome* literally depicts television as "not a substitute for reality, but is itself an immediate reality" (McLuhan). Upon understanding how *Videodrome* helped legitimize Canada's cinematic identity by virtue of its unsightly yet ironically familiar style, its thematic exploration of society's relationship with media and its underlying rejection of Americanization, one can grasp the importance of Cronenberg's movie and subsequent work had on English-Canadian culture, both domestically and internationally.

"[*Videodrome*] is exploring what I've been doing all along, which is to see what happens when people go to extremes in trying to alter their total environment to the point where it comes back and alters their physical selves" (Phipps) commented Cronenberg in an interview, unintentionally describing Canada's relationship with its cinema at a time where there were few distinctions between that and American cinema. With *Videodrome*, Cronenberg made a subversive Hollywood film, pushing his vile cinematic obsessions to mainstream audiences without concessions made to his artistic integrity, establishing him as a leading director following the dissolution of the New Hollywood era. Cronenberg's success ushered in a new wave of Canadian filmmakers, which includes Atom Egoyan

and Guy Maddin, while popular acceptance of the repulsiveness within Cronenberg's films made it wholly Canadian for these filmmakers to embrace the abrasive elements within their own films; hence Canadian cinema found its identity through extremity. Egoyan's *Ararat* (2002) is a bold example of a deeply personal film that showcases unmistakable shots of Toronto with French-speaking, multicultural characters in place to boast Canadian tropes. However, *Ararat* is truest to Canadian cinematic tradition in its exploration of outer cultures from a distinctly Canadian perspective, exemplified when Elias Koteas' character, Ali, tells Raffi that they are in Canada and therefore conflicts outside of Canada need not concern them as Canadians, much to the dismay of Raffi. The thematic difference between Cronenberg and Egoyan is that while Egoyan often looks at the psychological development of characters in the wake of tragedies, Cronenberg explores the madness of characters as they inch closer and closer to tragedy. Their individual brands of madness, however, have shaped a wholly unique Canadian cinematic identity and makes Cronenberg's insistence that "every country needs [a system of government grants] in order to have a national cinema in the face of Hollywood" (Garris) all the more important to the prosperity of Canadian cinema.

"In English Canada, we lack the temperament for revolution" (Beard 175) and Canada's cinema and cultural identity suffer as a result of this. Cronenberg took the most grotesque and unsettling subject matter, which adulterates McLuhan's media theories to their extreme ends, and by doing so exposes the fickleness in society's attitude towards media, which considering new technologies change how people perceive the world, can therefore be used against the people. The revolutionary tendency of Cronenberg's oeuvre is hardly questioned since his genre films exist in an intellectual sphere beyond genre

films, as do his Hollywood films above Hollywood films. In *Videodrome*, Cronenberg explores the condition of the body for “its sexual energy, its capacity for extra-sensory, its suggestibility – he implies that the body is a transient state between individual existence and the creation of a “new flesh” for which the television screen is, literally, the retina of the mind’s eye” (Rickey). With a McLuhanesque character named Brian O’Blivion stating “the battle for the mind of North America will be fought in the video arena” (Cronenberg), it is impossible to ignore the shreds of truth in *Videodrome*’s prophecies on account of viewers who spend countless hours with their eyes pasted to television screens and now computer screens in the modern era. This revolutionary exploration of society’s fixation with media culminates in James Woods’ character believing so wholeheartedly in his hallucinations that the lines between reality and fiction blur to the point that a brainwashed Woods understands it to be his destiny to leave his human body to become one with the ‘new flesh’. Having explored how the elderly’s fixation on television in my hometown is their way of transitioning out of reality in anticipation of the afterlife in my movie, *Ema* (2015), these themes of self-isolation stem from society’s desire to escape itself. The bleak outlook underlying Cronenberg’s oeuvre is the Canadian quality antithetical to the brash American tradition of blockbuster cinema that, once widely accepted, made the model for creating identity seem simple in its elegance; solidarity through solidarity.

“It’s a kind of cinema that still makes a lot of people in this country unhappy” (Beard 182) wrote William Beard on Cronenberg’s bleak cinema, and while Beard is most certainly correct regarding the uncomfortable nature of Cronenberg’s films, it is this discomfort which sets his brand of cinema oppositional to American blockbusters while

simultaneously existing in Hollywood. Because of English-Canada's inefficient funding system in contrast to other nations, such as Australia, France or even French-Canada, which are able to recoup their production costs at the box office, the enthusiasm for English-Canadian films is understandably absent. Perhaps this is because Canada models its cinema after the American model without the massive studio system that enables Hollywood blockbusters. Without a sizeable market enthusiastic for English-Canadian cinema on account of Canadian cinema not having a distinct identity or a bold novelty for audiences to clamor over, especially with many Canadian actors such as Ryan Gosling and Rachel McAdams moving to Hollywood to establish their careers. Cronenberg situates almost all his films in Toronto, arguably because "Toronto is a generic North American metropolis" (Beard 173) while the subject matter in *Videodrome* paradoxically opposes Americanization. The pertinence of American media in Canada mirrors the presence of media in *Videodrome*, where the masses' fixation with television makes them yearn for more extreme programming. Such is American cinema's obsession with the loudest spectacle available that is palpably familiar and Canadians' attraction to these tropes hinders the growth of its cinematic identity. This is precisely why *Videodrome* was the great leap forward Canadian cinema needed: a grotesque monster ushered in to shake a room full of generic characters.

Understanding *Videodrome*'s significance as the catalyst to Canada's modern cinematic identity by virtue of its now influential style, prophetic nature and uncompromising vision that allowed for the commercial successes of Cronenberg's subsequent ventures is essential to getting a sense of Canadian cinema's identity as it continues to form into a distinct and attractive cinema. English-Canada's cinematic

destiny has two routes to take for the sake of its survival: broaden its collaborations with the Hollywood machine, as Jean-Marc Vallée and James Cameron have chosen to do of their own perdition, or remain dedicated to Canadian auteurs such as Egoyan or Cronenberg. As the next generation of Canadian filmmakers, which are all indebted to Cronenberg, step up to the plate, Canadians will watch them from the stands as they continue to define who Canadians are as an audience and their cinema will be Canada's.

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