

## **Cronenberg's Debt to Kafka: An Analysis of *A Country Doctor* (1917) and *Videodrome* (1983)**

### **Abstract**

David Cronenberg has often been regarded as a literary director, who draws on a well-versed knowledge of literature for his film projects. This is most evident in his adaptations of authors often thought to exert the greatest influence on his work, from Burroughs (*Naked Lunch*) to Ballard (*Crash*). Yet there is another author with an equally potent, if mostly unacknowledged, impact on Cronenberg's output – Franz Kafka. Cronenberg has never directly adapted a Kafka story, yet elements of the 'Kafkaesque' permeate Cronenberg's oeuvre, none more so than in his 1983 film, *Videodrome*. Drawing on Mark Browning's work, I argue that the similarities between *Videodrome* and the short story *A Country Doctor* (1917) are so stark, that Cronenberg's film should be considered as an adaptation of Kafka's composition, and that further connections between the two artists become apparent in light of this association.

### **Contributor's Details**

Paul Moody is a Lecturer in Film Practice at Brunel University London. His research interests encompass early British cinema, the horror film, and contemporary international film policy, and he is currently working on a history of the British production and distribution company, EMI Films.

### **Keywords**

David Cronenberg, Franz Kafka, *Videodrome*, *A Country Doctor*, analogous adaptation, *The Fly*.

**Cronenberg's Debt to Kafka : An Analysis of *A Country Doctor* (1917) and  
*Videodrome* (1983)<sup>i</sup>**

Of all the directors working in the horror and science fiction genres, none has been more closely linked to literature than David Cronenberg, with Gaile McGregor arguing that 'literary parallels provide a key' to understanding his work (McGregor 1992: 56). Despite this critical attention, there is one author whose influence on Cronenberg's output has remained unacknowledged, yet has exerted a profound effect on a number of Cronenberg's most important films – Franz Kafka. This omission is due in part to the fact that Cronenberg, known for his varied and numerous references in interviews to writers that he admires, has rarely discussed Kafka; in fact, it was not until January 2014 that Cronenberg first wrote about Kafka at length, in his introduction for a new translation of *The Metamorphosis* (1915). However, by presenting a detailed textual comparison of Kafka's short story *A Country Doctor* (1917) and Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (Cronenberg 1983),<sup>ii</sup> this article asserts the importance of Kafka's writing on Cronenberg's work, engaging critically with Mark Browning's notion of 'analogous adaptation' to explore how Kafka's themes are appropriated in Cronenberg's film. In so doing, I argue that Cronenberg's more overt literary influences, Vladimir Nabokov, William Burroughs and JG Ballard, are not in fact the primary inspirations for his art, but rather that it is Kafka that provides the key to understanding Cronenberg's oeuvre.

**'Analogous Adaptation'**

The most detailed study to date of Cronenberg's relationship to literature is Mark Browning's *David Cronenberg: Author or Filmmaker* (Browning 2007). In this work,

Browning addresses Cronenberg's direct adaptations, which have formed a large part of the director's output since his version of Stephen King's *The Dead Zone* (Cronenberg 1983), as well as Cronenberg's self-penned original scripts, which Browning also seeks to place within the context of literary influence. After discussing 'overt' and 'covert' translations (texts that were either directly adapted by Cronenberg or were cited explicitly in his films), he presents a contentious third category - 'analogy', or in other words, films in which parallels can be drawn with literary precedents. Browning leaves this concept tantalisingly obscure, and the majority of the book is devoted to specific examples of these three types of Cronenberg adaptations, with little critical development of the theoretical basis of these categories; in fact, the terms 'analogy' or 'analogous' are referred to only seven times throughout the entire book. Nonetheless, in the conclusion, Browning acknowledges the debt that his schema pays to Geoffrey Wagner, who in *The Novel and the Cinema* (1975) established three similar categories; 'transposition', 'commentary' and 'analogy' (Browning 2003: 199), and as such, Browning's argument is better understood through the prism of Wagner's analysis. According to Wagner, 'transposition' is when a 'novel is given directly on the screen with a minimum of apparent interference' (Wagner 1975: 222), the 'overt' adaptations in Browning's parlance; 'commentary' is 'where an original is taken and either purposely or inadvertently altered in some respect' (Wagner 1975: 224), which translates into the 'covert' adaptations of Browning's terminology; and finally, 'analogy', which represents a 'fairly considerable departure for the sake of making another work of art' (Wagner 1975: 226), and is replicated in Browning's own use of the term 'analogy' for his third category. As Brian McFarlane identifies, Wagner's

structure has itself been adapted by other writers, most notably Dudley Andrew, as well as Michael Klein and Gillian Parker (McFarlane 1996: 11), but like Browning, these authors draw the same interpretative conclusions.

By adopting this approach, Browning is able to weave into his analysis a wide range of artistic influences, and suggest links with work that would not normally feature in a discussion of Cronenberg's cinema. In much the same way that Jorge Luis Borges, discussing Kafka, argued that 'every writer creates his own precursors' (Borges 2000: 236), in Browning's conception, Cronenberg can be viewed in a similar vein, charting a path from Nabokov to Ballard, via Burroughs and others (and, as Browning argues, influencing the work of later authors like Clive Barker and Brett Easton Ellis). In fact, Cronenberg has even cited Borges' quote in an interview in the early eighties (Browning 2003: 57), and is clearly aware of his own place within this network of influence. Situating Cronenberg at the end of this wider creative lineage, Browning argues that the director's visual aesthetic is akin to approaching the 'screen as a kind of palimpsest' (Browning 2007: 32), and this concept neatly summarises the depiction of Cronenberg as a literary magpie, digesting various themes and stories and constructing from them a cinema that, ironically, often is regarded as startlingly original. While Browning makes it clear that he is 'not attempting to trace a simple causal connection between specific literary works and Cronenberg's films but suggest that understanding specific passages of certain writers will illuminate features of Cronenberg's literary aesthetic' (Browning 2007: 47), his conclusion is unequivocal:

One of the main findings of this study is the number and range of Cronenberg's unacknowledged 'borrowings' particularly from JG Ballard, William Burroughs and pervasive, possibly unconscious, influences from Vladimir Nabokov. These are not restricted to adaptations of specific works but pervade Cronenberg's entire oeuvre, so that his films not only reward, but at times demand, wider cultural, particularly literary knowledge (Browning 2007: 200).

Despite identifying the influence of these authors on Cronenberg's work, Browning neglects to include Kafka as a source of inspiration, referring to him on only three occasions; first, in relation to Todorov's discussion of the 'fantastic', which references *The Metamorphosis* (Browning 2007: 100-101); second, regarding Cronenberg's occasional display of a 'European Jewish sensibility' that links him with 'figures such as Kafka' (Browning 2007: 169), and third, in a discussion of an interview in which Cronenberg referred to Kafka as an 'example of an artist who only received a widespread readership after his death' (Browning 2007: 203). There is also an oblique reference to the cubicles in the Cathode Ray Mission (one of the locations in *Videodrome*) as being 'Kafkaesque' (Browning 2007: 65), but aside from these brief examples there is no sustained discussion of Kafka's influence on Cronenberg's work, either directly or via the prism of his influences on other authors Cronenberg has adapted. This omission is replicated in Cronenberg's own public discussions of his literary tastes and, to my knowledge, he has referred to Kafka in only three published accounts; first with a passing mention of the 'Kafkaesque' to David Breskin in that

author's *Inner Views: Filmmakers in Conversation* (Breskin 1997: 210 & 229); second, in an interview with Kevin Jackson about *Spider* (Cronenberg 2003), in which he states that 'I was also thinking of Kafka and Dostoevsky' when creating the lead character (Jackson 2003: 14); and third, in the aforementioned introduction to *The Metamorphosis*. Thus, the connections between the two artists are not immediately apparent, and have scarcely been remarked upon by other critics. On the rare occasion that authors have compared Cronenberg's work to Kafka, it has been exclusively in relation to Jeff Goldblum's extended transformation into the eponymous creature in *The Fly* (Cronenberg 1986) which, while being an adaptation of George Langelann's 1957 short story (itself filmed by Kurt Neumann as *The Fly* in 1958), bears a clear resemblance to *The Metamorphosis*. While Kafka's story does not depict the actual transformation from Gregor Samsa's human to insect form, for Iris Bruce, Goldblum's mutation in Cronenberg's film displays the 'Kafkaesque' qualities of an 'exploration of deeply rooted anxieties' (Bruce 2002: 243-244). Despite this, Bruce concludes that *The Fly* seems 'less a commentary on Kafka than on the dangers of modern science and technology and the disastrous consequences that can result from human error' (Bruce 2002: 243). Likewise, while William Beard has also briefly discussed the links between *The Fly* and *The Metamorphosis* in his book, *The Artist as Monster: The Cinema of David Cronenberg*, he argues that '*The Fly's* primary insect-affinities are with Burroughs' (Beard 2006: 217), and as such, agrees with the critical consensus that seeks to distance Cronenberg from Kafka's influence.

### ***Videodrome* as 'Analogous Adaptation'**

In *David Cronenberg: Author or Filmmaker*, Browning applies his 'analogous adaptation' method to *Videodrome*, devoting an entire chapter to the film and seeking to draw parallels with a range of literary sources as diverse as Marshall McLuhan, Leopold Von Sacher-Masoch, Brett Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991) and Clive Barker's *Books of Blood* (1984-85) series. McLuhan was a lecturer at the University of Toronto at the same time that Cronenberg was a student there, and while there is no record of the two having met at this time, Cronenberg claims to have 'read everything he wrote' (Browning 2007: 64). Other critics have noted how the character of Brian O'Blivion appears to have been modelled on McLuhan (Koven 1997: 29), and Browning refers to Mark Czarnecki's reading of *Videodrome* as 'a Burroughsian interpretation of Marshall McLuhan's influential book, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*' (Browning 2007: 63). Beyond this, Browning's other literary allusions are more tenuous, with Sacher-Masoch name-checked due to the films' sadomasochistic sex scenes, especially regarding the character Nicki Brand (Browning 2007: 63), and Ellis and Barker are presented as part of a wider cultural sphere that Cronenberg's films are adjudged to have contributed to. Thus, while Browning presents a compelling framework that places Cronenberg within a broader literary culture, it is difficult to discern a direct textual lineage for *Videodrome* in his analysis. In fact, Browning explicitly states that '[*Videodrome*] is not an example of a text being "translated" from a literary entity into a cinematic one but the analytical focus here will be on potential links between Cronenberg's work and a range of analgous (sic) texts...' (Browning 2007: 57). The problem with Browning's methodology here is that his

chosen texts are so varied and disparate, and have such slender connections to the film both thematically and aesthetically, that with the exception of McLuhan they offer little to our understanding of *Videodrome* or Cronenberg's work in general. In Browning's analysis, the mere presence of sadomasochistic sex suggests a connection to Sacher-Masoch, ignoring the countless portrayals of the interplay between sex and violence that followed his work and which could have provided equally rich sources for inspiration. In essence, this is where Browning's interpretation of Wagner's use of 'analogy' differs, and where it fails to elucidate *Videodrome*; for whereas Wagner views analogy as a 'departure' from an acknowledged text, in Browning's conception, 'analogy' is used to introduce unacknowledged sources into Cronenberg's development process, with little indication that Cronenberg would have drawn on them during the film's production.

Despite this, Browning's central thesis, that Cronenberg is a 'literary' director, is widely accepted, and there remains significant evidence from his general working practices to suggest that he would have derived much of *Videodrome's* thematic concerns from an existing literary source, locating it much more neatly within Cronenberg's later releases of 'overt' and 'covert' adaptations. As Tomáš Pospíšil argues, *Videodrome* marks an important turning point in Cronenberg's career, as it was with this film that Cronenberg 'started to move away from the "shoddy-exploitation-movie stereotype"' (Beard 2003: 147) toward a more controlled, detached, polished style with higher budgets and wider distribution' (Pospíšil 2005: 218). Arguably, the reason for the critical reappraisal of Cronenberg's work during this period is directly related to his shift towards straight

adaptations of literary sources, which was integral to his ability to command larger budgets and wider distribution than earlier in his career. *Videodrome* was the last of his original screenplays until *eXistenZ* (Cronenberg 1999), written sixteen years later, but I suggest that he already had a literary source on his mind during the writing of *Videodrome*, and that this operated as a 'rehearsal' for his later acknowledged adaptations. This text, Franz Kafka's *A Country Doctor*, provides the missing link between Browning's and Wagner's concepts of 'analogy', the story that, to use Wagner's terminology, Cronenberg 'departed' from to make his unacknowledged adaptation, titled *Videodrome*.

### **Narrative and Thematic Similarities in *A Country Doctor* and *Videodrome***

Kafka's short story was one of the few published while he was still alive, in the collection *Ein Landarzt/A Country Doctor* (1919). It depicts a doctor's attempt to attend to a patient late one winter's evening, and the various surreal experiences he encounters. On the surface, *Videodrome*, about the manager of an adult cable television channel called Max Renn, is not obviously indebted to this work, and the various narrative twists and turns, along with the ethereal atmosphere of both texts, makes the links between the two difficult to follow. Thus, to demonstrate the influence of the story on Cronenberg's film, I have categorised the core narrative elements of both *A Country Doctor* and *Videodrome* into four sections; 'The Protagonist and the "Groom"'; 'The Woman'; 'The Wound'; and 'The Transformation'. As these divisions suggest, there are explicit similarities in the narrative structure of both texts, with Cronenberg's film following the development of Kafka's story extremely closely. Despite the fantastical

elements of his work, up until *Videodrome* Cronenberg's feature films had adhered to a relatively straightforward three-act structure. However, with this production, the form is noticeably more experimental, with shifts in narrative and location that challenge audience expectations, such as a 'hallucination' in which Renn imagines hitting his secretary, Bridey, the cut from Renn's encounter with his flesh-like television to his arrival at the Cathode Ray Mission, and the final, repeated scene of Renn's 'long live the new flesh' speech. Cronenberg's next few films following *Videodrome* revert to a more conventional approach, and it is not until *Naked Lunch* (1991) that he is this unorthodox again. By employing these techniques, Cronenberg was making a conscious effort to create a visual style that captured the mood of Kafka's story and more broadly, the unnerving, nightmarish qualities associated with the 'Kafkaesque'.

### **The Protagonist and the 'Groom'**

This approach is signified from the start of the film, with the unusual introduction to a close-up of Bridey on a television screen, to provide a pre-recorded wake up call to her employer, Max Renn. The suggestion that what is to follow may be dreamlike, if not an actual dream, also occurs at the start of Kafka's story, even though this is merely implied in Kafka's text by it being set in the middle of the night (and Kafka's doctor has clearly been awake for some time when the reader is first introduced to him). Kafka's story begins in the courtyard of the eponymous doctor's house, who has been summoned in the middle of the night to attend to a 'gravely ill man' waiting for him in a village ten miles away. The narrator is the doctor himself (who remains unnamed), and Kafka introduces two other characters at the property, the doctor's maid, Rosa, and

an (also unnamed) groom, revealed after the door of a pigsty has been kicked down by the doctor in frustration because he believes he is unable to procure a horse for his journey. Rosa goes to help the groom prepare horses for the doctor, but instead of accepting her assistance, he 'thrusts his face against hers' and leaves 'the red marks of two rows of teeth on the girl's cheek'. At the start of *Videodrome*, Renn's 'groom' Harlan, a technician at Renn's channel based in the building's basement, informs him of a mysterious broadcast he has discovered called 'Videodrome', with no plot save for women being sexually tortured on a sparse set. Harlan agrees to record it so that Renn may consider it for inclusion on his own station.

Of course, both the writers and their respective narrators are male, and the stories are presented as a masculine fantasy, with sexual violence towards women a key concern. In both instances, the protagonist is introduced to this issue via a male who also serves as their narrative double, a mirror image of them who reflects their hidden desires. This is made explicit in both texts by the way that these characters are initially concealed from view (the groom in the stable and Harlan in the basement), and once revealed to the protagonist facilitate his descent into sexual transgression. The unsettling notion of discovering an unknown and unexpected entity on the doctor's property (or in *Videodrome*, Harlan's secretive illegal recordings that first 'discover' the 'Videodrome' signal) prefigures the later revelation of the strangely hidden wounds on both the doctor's patient and Renn, and suggests the ambivalence towards invasion that pervades both Kafka and Cronenberg's work. The groom and Harlan also introduce the first examples of sexual violence in each story, with the savage, unprovoked attack on Rosa by the groom and Harlan's presentation to Renn of the sexual torture in 'Videodrome'.

By the time the groom has begun his second attack on Rosa, there have been several suggestions that the doctor and he are one and the same person, and other commentators have noted the recurring instances of doubles throughout the story, from the prosaic to the more symbolic (Leiter 1958: 337). As the doctor is readying to leave his property, the groom says to him 'I'm not even going with you, I'm staying with Rosa'. Rosa screams and runs back to the house, and the doctor perceives her journey with uncanny accuracy. 'I hear the rattle of the chain on the door, as she pulls it across; I hear the click of the lock', and later, after the doctor leaves his house astride the horses, he thinks 'I can still hear my front door cracking and splintering under the assault of the groom'. If one accepts the interpretation that the doctor and groom are the same character, then it is the doctor himself who threatens Rosa and breaks down the door to assault her, and the surreal fantasies that comprise the narrative are his attempt to reconcile himself to the thought of his actions. The constant reminders of his 'duty' towards others, always tinged with guilt, form a consistent thread that binds the elements of the plot together, and is paralleled in *Videodrome's* portrayal of Renn and Harlan. Harlan is presented throughout as Renn's closest confidant, and he is the person that Renn calls when in one of Renn's hallucinations he believes that he has killed one of his channel's content suppliers, Masha. Harlan is also, most importantly, revealed near the end of the film to be the person who has co-created 'Videodrome', and who introduces Renn to the broadcast in order to rid him and the world of the pornography that he views as a 'cancer' on American society. Harlan, like Kafka's groom, functions as the physical manifestation of the protagonist's repressed desires, but in a typically Cronenbergian

twist, he also takes the place of Renn's conscience in a role that is adopted by the patient in Kafka's original story.

### **The Woman**

In both texts, the otherworldly experiences of the male protagonists appear to be closely linked to a sexually available and, as it transpires, sexually violated woman. In Kafka, this role is encompassed by one character, Rosa, but in *Videodrome*, Cronenberg expands this into three separate women. The first, Bridey, is a relatively one-dimensional part, with the more interesting female characters appearing later in the film (in much the same way that the more interesting depictions of Rosa appear near the end of Kafka's story). Bridey represents the naïve, subservient Rosa that the reader is first introduced to at the start of *A Country Doctor*, the archetype of innocence that both the doctor and Renn think of when troubled by guilt and/or sexual desire. It is the thought of hitting her later in the film that represents the start of Renn's most troubling hallucinations, and which through cutting from her image to that of Renn's girlfriend Nicki Brand, makes explicit the Madonna/whore dichotomy represented by the two characters (and developing further the binary oppositions that permeate the film and Kafka's story). The construction of Brand as an ethereal symbol of sexual deviance could not be any clearer in Cronenberg's film, and begins immediately with her introduction in a bright red dress on a television talk show debate about sex and violence on television (the script even has Renn ask her 'what Freud would say' about her dress) with video 'guru' Brian O'Blivion, present via a television link. After the talk show has ended, Brand returns to Renn's flat and they make love. He discovers that she has a wound on her neck and she asks him to pierce her ear, literally 'branding' her. Renn

tells her about the 'Videodrome' transmission that Harlan has introduced him to and, as they make love with 'Videodrome' playing on the TV in the background, the scene cuts to reveal that they now appear to be physically on the programme's set. After Renn's sexual encounters with Brand, he begins to develop hallucinations, and he imagines hitting Bridey, who in the next shot appears to turn into Brand before reverting back to herself. Later, after watching a videotape sent to him from O'Blivion, Renn's TV becomes anthropomorphic, an electronic embodiment of Brand, and he caresses it and is seduced by it, pushing his face into what has now become a pliable, fleshy screen. This association between Brand and television/video, was even more pronounced in Cronenberg's first draft of the script, which featured her body 'twitching video' as if it was recorded in a different format to the rest of the film, clearly demonstrating Cronenberg's conception of her as an imaginative, non-corporeal entity (Lucas 2013), and once more suggesting that she is acting as a symbol, in much the same way as Rosa when conceived by the doctor.

### **The Wound**

Upon arrival at his destination, Kafka's doctor is lifted out of his carriage by the patient's parents, before the patient drapes his hands around the doctor and pleads to be allowed to die. While inspecting his instruments, the doctor remembers Rosa, and her impending attack at the hands of the groom. He inspects the boy and believes him to be perfectly healthy, then, cursing that he has been called out for no reason, his thoughts turn to Rosa once more. As he is about to leave he inspects the boy again, and discovers the wound that frames the turning point in the story. Inside the lesion, the doctor witnesses, 'Worms, the length and thickness of my little finger, roseate and also coated

with blood'. Of course, Rosa is not merely intrinsically linked to the doctor's thoughts, but also she is indelibly associated with the patient's wound. Her name evokes the color of the lesion, and equates with its description in the text as a 'flower'. As this discovery is made at the moment the doctor contemplates Rosa's assault, it has been argued that the patient's wound represents Rosa's own violated sexual organs (Engelstein 2006: 350), and thus depicts the trauma as at once attractive and repulsive, the flower and thorns dichotomy inherent in the name *Rosa* (Golomb-Bregman 1989: 77). According to Aaron Manson, this posits 'illness as a metaphor for spiritual and moral decadence' (Manson 2005: 305), and Cronenberg's detractors have noted the potential for similarly reactionary readings of *Videodrome* (Petley 1984: 35-40), with its seemingly implicit support of the notion of mediated sex and violence as 'harmful'. However, Kafka's patient is 'dazzled by the life in his wound', and the earlier allusion to it being a blossoming flower is also suggestive of something that has creative as well as destructive elements. That the parasites inside the wound have an indiscriminate will to survive, without regard for, or awareness of, the life they are taking, is a concept that Cronenberg would make into his cinematic trademark, and there is a similar level of ambivalence about Kafka's portrayal which refutes straightforward accusations of negativity.

In order to emphasise this ambiguity, Cronenberg puts his protagonist in the midst of physical transformation by locating the wound on Renn himself. Renn's journey takes him to Brian O'Blivion's home, the 'Cathode Ray Mission', which doubles as a refuge for the homeless - yet rather than providing food, it sustains its visitors with a diet of TV. He discovers upon meeting O'Blivion's daughter, Bianca, that O'Blivion is nothing

more than a wall of videotapes, having died from a brain tumor several years ago. Bianca O'Blivion lends him several tapes to watch later and, in the next scene, Renn is back home viewing one of the tapes while sitting topless on his sofa, scratching a vertical scar on his stomach with the end of a gun. Renn hears Brian O'Blivion in the recording describe the 'Videodrome' tumor as a new organ, and then looks down to discover that his scar is now exposed. Renn's hand, still holding onto the gun, becomes trapped inside his body. When he finally manages to free his limb, the gun is gone, his wound has healed, and his flesh has begun a process of assimilating with inanimate objects.

That this is as sexualised a wound as Kafka's is made explicit; its vaginal form is literally penetrated by the gun in Renn's hand, which becomes trapped inside. This equation of the wound with a predatory orifice is only one of many instances of Cronenberg's use of the imagery of the *vagina dentata*, starting with *Rabid* (Cronenberg 1977) (in which the protagonist, who is also called Rose, has a vampiric parasite come forth from a vaginal orifice in her armpit), through to the vaginal typewriter in *Naked Lunch* (Jaehne 1992: 5) and Rosanna Arquette's scar in *Crash* (Cronenberg 1996). This approach mirrors Stefani Englestein's description of Kafka's ability to create 'an aesthetic out of the sensual appreciation of the wounded and wounding body' (Engelstein 2006: 340), and with this in mind, it is instructive to consider the ending of Cronenberg's original draft of *Videodrome* - an epilogue in which Renn reunites with Nicki Brand and Bianca O'Blivion on the 'Videodrome' set, and discovers them to have vaginal abdomen wounds of their own, from which issue forth mutated sexual organs

(Lucas 2013). This focus on wounds, with wormlike sex organs emerging from within, only serves to heighten the connections between Renn, the other characters and ultimately *A Country Doctor* itself. It is his treatment of wounded bodies, and more precisely the changes to both mind and body that wounds induce, which expose Cronenberg's greatest debt to Kafka in general and *A Country Doctor* in particular.

### **The Transformation**

Near the end of *A Country Doctor*, the patient's family and the village elders arrive and start to undress the doctor, and once again, he is carried, this time to the patient's sick bed. Everyone leaves the room and the door is closed, highlighting that this is either another instance of a dream or that it has some sexual connotation - or that it is a combination of both. The doctor hears what he believes to be the boy's disembodied voice speak to him, opining that 'I have very little faith in you... Instead of helping, you make free with my deathbed. I'd like to scratch your eyes out.' Kafka's doctor chides his patient for lacking perspective: 'I, who have been in sickrooms far and wide, tell you; your wound isn't so bad as all that.' This silences the boy, and the doctor turns his thoughts to his 'own salvation'. At the end of *A Country Doctor*, the doctor exits the room, jumping naked onto his carriage. Once more, he considers Rosa and the end of his practice. Kafka's doctor is contemplating a new life, his 'new flesh', viscerally depicted in the vision Kafka paints of the doctor's final ride away from the patient's house. As the reader leaves Kafka's protagonist, he is described as an 'old man adrift', with an 'earthly carriage and unearthly horses'. His material possessions have been cast

away and, like Renn, he is ready to contemplate his new destiny. It is implied that his salvation is to die, and embrace his new existence, whatever that may be.

At the close of *Videodrome*, Harlan reveals that he created the 'Videodrome' signal with a man called Barry Convex, in order to rid America of the types of people who would want to watch it. Convex inserts a videotape into Renn's abdomen that programmes him to kill his business partners, thus enabling Convex to broadcast the 'Videodrome' signal across America. Convex instructs Renn to kill Bianca O'Blivion, but she reveals that Brand was killed to seduce Renn, before unveiling another flesh-like TV, which mirrors Renn's actions and shoots him. O'Blivion tells Renn that he has now 'become the video world made flesh'. He visits Harlan on the pretence of accepting a new assignment, but when Harlan tries to insert a fleshy videotape into Renn's wound, the opening turns Harlan's hand into a grenade, killing him and leaving a hole in the wall for Renn to escape and track down Convex. Renn kills Convex by shooting him, and Convex's corpse bursts open as if destroying itself from the inside. Arriving at a boat in a disused dockyard, Renn discovers a TV screen, upon which Brand explains to him how to become the 'new flesh', depicting Renn shooting himself - an act that prompts the TV to explode, spew forth entrails and burst into flames. Renn kneels in front of the burning TV and places the gun to his head. He announces 'long live the new flesh' and the screen goes black at the sound of a gunshot.

Cronenberg's approach to transformation, depicted none more viscerally than in the final scene of *Videodrome*, forms a common link between this film, Kafka and his other most obviously 'Kafkaesque' work, *The Fly*. Cronenberg has gone on record as saying

'When I look at a person I see this maelstrom of organic, chemical and electron chaos; volatility and instability, shimmering; and the ability to change and transform and transmute' (Gordon 1989: 40), and this dynamic approach to the human body in flux permeates both Kafka and Cronenberg's work. This aspect of Kafka was not lost on Nabokov, who lectured on *The Metamorphosis* as part of his literature course at Cornell University in the 1950s, and his interpretation of Kafka's themes bear striking parallels to Cronenberg's approach to the subject. Nabokov preferred the term 'transformation' instead of 'metamorphosis' (De La Durantaye 2007: 324), and was keen to stress the human aspect of Kafka's description of his protagonist Gregor Samsa, arguing that

Kafka's art consists in accumulating on the one hand, Gregor's insect features, all the sad detail of his insect disguise, and on the other hand, in keeping vivid and limpid before the reader's eyes Gregor's sweet and subtle human nature (De La Durantaye 2007: 327n).

Nabokov did not regard Samsa's 'transformation' as necessarily pejorative, in much the same way that the various 'transformations' of Cronenberg's protagonists are at the very least ambiguous. As Nabokov argued, crucial to the understanding of Kafka's story is the recognition that Samsa does not view himself as someone else – 'he thinks he is Gregor *and* an insect' (De La Durantaye 2007: 324), and once again, this parallels Cronenberg's depiction of the 'new flesh' in *Videodrome* and what *The Fly* refers to as 'Brundlefly', a literal conflation of the scientist Seth Brundle and the fly that inadvertently ventures into his prototype teleportation device.

Cronenberg's recent introduction to *The Metamorphosis* shows clear signs of the influence of both Kafka's text and Nabokov's interpretation of it, and helps to explain his portrayal of transformation in *Videodrome* and his wider body of work. Like Nabokov, Cronenberg is eager to stress Samsa's humanity, and Kafka's satirising of the bourgeois horror Samsa's family exhibit on discovery that he has mutated into a beetle:

[Not] one member of his family feels compelled to console the creature by, for example, pointing out that a beetle is also a living thing, and turning into one might, for a mediocre human living a humdrum life, be an exhilarating and elevating experience, and so what's the problem?' (Cronenberg 2014: 10)

Cronenberg compares Samsa's predicament to his own upon waking up on the morning of his 70th birthday. It is a typically Cronenbergian conceit – at once humorous, absurd even, and yet tinged with the troubling realisation of the limitations of the human body and the transformations that each of us undertake as we age. Just as Samsa's fantastical metamorphosis forces him (and his family) to confront the reality of his existence, Cronenberg argues that his own maturity produces the same effect:

The source of the transformations is the same, I argue: we have both awakened to a forced awareness of what we really are, and that awareness is profound and irreversible; in each case, the delusion soon proves to be a new, mandatory reality, and life does not continue as it did.' (Cronenberg 2014: 11)

It is this conception that, according to Cronenberg, was key to his vision of *The Fly*, and by implication, the transformations that feature throughout his oeuvre. Often regarded as an eighties AIDS metaphor (Mathijs 2003), instead, in this introduction Cronenberg posits Brundle's plight as 'more fundamental: in an artificially accelerated manner, he was ageing' (Cronenberg 2014: 14). Cronenberg thus arrived at a concept for a film that was 'Kafkaesque', distilled via Nabokov, Langelaan and Neumann, yet maintaining distinctive differences (Cronenberg's brief introduction uses the phrase 'unlike...Gregor' twice when discussing Brundle). By opening up the story's themes in this fashion, Cronenberg provides an insight into how Kafka's influence on his work runs much deeper, and was present several years before *The Fly* was made – none more so than on his 1983 production, *Videodrome*.

### **Cronenberg and the 'Kafkaesque'**

While not acknowledged as a direct adaptation, *Videodrome's* themes are so closely entwined with Kafka's that the author's influence in general, and in particular of his *A Country Doctor*, seems undeniable. It is clear that Cronenberg, the literary aesthete, is knowledgeable about Kafka's work, as his recent introduction to *The Metamorphosis* confirms. He was inspired by Nabokov, Burroughs and Ballard et al, two of whom he directly adapted and who each owed a debt to Kafka to varying degrees. What I have sought to demonstrate here is that Kafka's work should be considered as one of the key influences on Cronenberg's films, and that the apparently striking originality of *Videodrome* was in fact a clear example of what Browning has conceptualised as an 'analogous adaptation'. However, whereas Browning does not consider *Videodrome* as

a 'translated' text, in fact, the film is more akin to Wagner's notion of analogy, and can be viewed as a 'departure' from the original source. The notion of the director as a parasite feasting on his literary precursors seems apposite to Cronenberg, and is presented here not as a pejorative critique, but in the same ambiguous, non-discriminatory way that both Kafka and Cronenberg adopt in their work. *Videodrome* was the result of this 'parasitic' process, and *A Country Doctor* was its host.

## Works Cited

- Beard, William. (2003), 'Thirty-Two Paragraphs About David Cronenberg', in William Beard and Jerry White (eds) *North of Everything: English Canadian Cinema Since 1980*, Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, pp. 144-159.
- Beard, William. (2006), *The Artist as Monster: The Cinema of David Cronenberg*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Borges, Jorge Luis (2000), *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, London: Penguin Books.
- Breskin, David (1997), *Inner Views: Filmmakers in Conversation*, New York: Da Capo.
- Browning, Mark (2003), "'Thou, The Player of the Game, Art God': Nabokovian Game-playing in Cronenberg's *eXistenZ*", *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 12: 1, pp. 57-69.
- Browning, Mark (2007), *David Cronenberg: Author or Filmmaker*, Bristol: Intellect Books.
- Bruce, Iris (2002), "Kafka and Popular Culture", in Julian Preece (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 242-246.
- Cronenberg, David (2014), 'Introduction: The Beetle and The Fly', in Susan Bernofsky (ed.) *The Metamorphosis: A New Translation by Susan Bernofsky*, New York: WW Norton & Co., pp. 2-18.
- De La Durantaye, Leland (2007), "Kafka's Reality and Nabokov's Fantasy: On Dwarves, Saints, Beetles, Symbolism, and Genius", *Comparative Literature* 59: 4, pp. 315-331.
- Engelstein, Stefani (2006), "The Open Wound of Beauty: Kafka Reading Kleist", *The Germanic Review* 81: 4, pp. 340-60.

Golomb-Bregman, Etti (1989), "No Rose Without Thorns: Ambivalence in Kafka's 'A Country Doctor'", *American Imago* 46:1, pp. 77-84.

Gordon, Bette (1989), "David Cronenberg", *Bomb* 26, pp. 39-41.

Hoffman, Michael (2007), *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, London: Penguin Books.

Jackson, Kevin (2003), "Odd Man Out", *Sight and Sound* 13:1, pp. 12-15.

Jaehne, Karen (1992), "David Cronenberg on William Burroughs: Dead Ringers Do Naked Lunch", *Film Quarterly* 45: 3, pp. 2-6.

Koven, Mikel (1997), 'Voices From the Periphery: *Videodrome* and the (Pre) Postmodern Vision of Marshall McLuhan', *Postscript: A Journal of Graduate School Criticism and Theory* 4: 4, pp. 25-37.

Leiter, Louis (1958), "A Problem in Analysis: Franz Kafka's 'A Country Doctor'", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 16: 3, pp. 337-347.

Lucas, Tim (2013), "Medium Cruel: Reflections on Videodrome", *The Criterion Collection*, <http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/676-medium-cruel-reflections-on-videodrome>, Accessed 22 May 2015.

Mathijs, Ernest (2003), 'AIDS References in the Critical Reception of David Cronenberg: "It May Not be Such a Bad Disease After All"', *Cinema Journal* 42: 4, pp. 29-45.

Manson, Aaron (2005), "A Theology of Illness: Franz Kafka's 'A Country Doctor'", *Literature and Medicine* 24: 2, pp. 297-306.

McFarlane, Brian (1996), *Novel to Film*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McGregor, Gaile (1992), 'Grounding the Countertext: David Cronenberg and the Ethnospecificity of Horror', *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 2: 1, pp. 43-62.

Petley, Julian (1984), "V.D. O'Nasty", in Wayne Drew (ed.) *BFI Dossier 21: David Cronenberg*, London: BFI Publishing, pp. 35-40.

Pospíšil, Tomáš (2005), 'Attractive Ambiguities: Epistemological Uncertainty of the Films of David Cronenberg', *Theory and Practice in English Studies* 4, pp. 217-22.

Wagner, Geoffrey (1975), *The Novel and the Cinema*, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.

---

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> All quotations from *A Country Doctor* are taken from the Michael Hoffman translation, *Metamorphosis and Other Stories* (Hoffman 2007), and all quotations from *Videodrome* are from the 2004 Criterion Collection DVD release.

<sup>ii</sup> Throughout the text, *Videodrome* written in italics refers to the 1983 film, and 'Videodrome' written in single quotation marks refers to the fictional television broadcast presented in the film.