Reality, Illusion, and the Moving Image

Focus: The Films of David Cronenberg

FLMM 355-TH .01
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Film Center 208
Fall 2015 / Thursdays 1 - 3:45 p.m.
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Important note: To reach David always use the gmail address given above. Otherwise your message will probably never be seen. Thanks.

Course description:

Through extensive screenings, readings, and discussions, this course explores the continually shifting and elusive boundary between reality and illusion in moving-image culture and identifies different ways in which the moving image constructs fantasy or reveals its own self-reflexive nature, using as a theoretical framework key texts and concepts from the fields of aesthetics, semiotics, psychology, and ethics. Turning to the major films of Canadian director, screenwriter, producer, and novelist David Cronenberg as its primary objects of study, the course will embrace an expansive range of inquiry, exploring ways in which cinema constructs illusory spaces of “fantasy” and “reality,” analyzing cinematic techniques employed to question conventional boundaries between “objective” and “subjective” experiential realms, and examining Cronenberg’s particular focus on tensions affecting the material human body, its natural conditions and socially constructed environments, and their virtual counterparts on the screen.

Course objectives:

• Students will sharpen their critical skills through intensive historical and theoretical study of cinematic texts that employ narrative and audiovisual devices to evoke auras of the fantastic, the liminal, and the uncanny. Students will thereby increase their understanding of the social, psychological, and political roles played by media in contemporary Western culture.
• Students will cultivate skills for discerning important themes, tropes, and stylistic traits of cinema through the analysis of works that explore unorthodox means of expressing modes of thought and feeling that are conventionally deemed elusive, intangible, obscure, or otherwise inexpressible.
• Students will learn to integrate different modes of understanding related to modern artistic phenomena – historical, sociological, psychological – and will acquire proficiency in bringing these to bear on specific works.
• Students will further their ability to communicate ideas and opinions cogently and effectively in both written and spoken form.

Required books:
(The required books are available at the MICA bookstore and are readily obtainable elsewhere. All other assignments will be posted on moodle. Additional reading may be assigned during the semester.)

**Course schedule:**

*All films directed by David Cronenberg unless otherwise noted.*

September 3
Topic: Introducing Cronenberg
Independent production *versus* studio production. Genre theory. The horror film.
Auteur theory. The tale of terror as personal expression.
Reading: Mathijs, *Cinema of David Cronenberg*, pp. 9-13, 72-85
Cronenberg, *Interviews with Serge Grünberg*, pp. 4-9, 52-58
Screening: Excerpt from *Shivers*, Cronenberg, Canada, 1975
Excerpt from *Rabid*, Cronenberg, Canada, 1977
*The Brood*, Canada, 1979
Also of interest: *From the Drain*, Canada, 1967 (short)
https://www.google.com/?gws_rd=ssl#q=from%20the%20drain%20site%3Ayoutube.com
Also of interest: *Stereo*, Canada, 1969 (feature) [on DVD of *Fast Company* in library]
Also of interest: *Crimes of the Future*, Canada, 1970 (feature) [on DVD of *Fast Company* in library]
Also of interest: *Secret Weapons*, Canada, 1972 (TV Episode)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MgFgEW8DAfY
Also of interest: *The Lie Chair*, Canada, 1975 (TV Episode)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-rmbOALTOo
Also of interest: *The Italian Machine*, Canada, 1976 (TV Episode)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YC6KM_IZiCg

September 10
Topic: Kaboom!
Reading: Mathijs, *Cinema of David Cronenberg*, pp. 86-101
Cronenberg, *Interviews with Serge Grünberg*, pp. 58-63
Screening: Excerpt from *Fast Company*, Canada, 1979
*Scanners*, Canada, 1981

September 17
Topic: Technodelirium
Reading: Mathijs, *Cinema of David Cronenberg*, pp. 102-113
Cronenberg, *Interviews with Serge Grünberg*, pp. 64-72
Screening: *Videodrome*, Canada, 1983

September 24  
Topic: Plugging into the Stephen King circuit  
Lecture and discussion: Literary adaptation. Reworking a bestseller. The supernatural. Politics. Cronenberg on his best behavior?  
Reading: Mathijs, *Cinema of David Cronenberg*, pp. 113-128  
Cronenberg, *Interviews with Serge Grünberg*, pp. 72-78  
Screening: *The Dead Zone*, USA, 1983  

October 1  
Topic: Science is fiction  
Lecture and discussion: Remaking a Hollywood hit. The obsessive scientist, the contaminated body, and the perils of technological progress. Dissolving the boundaries between nature and culture. “Be afraid. Be very afraid.”  
Reading: George Langelaan, “The Fly.” *Playboy* (June 1957)  
https://alancook.wordpress.com/tag/the-fly-by-george-langelaan/  
Mathijs, *Cinema of David Cronenberg*, pp. 129-135  
Cronenberg, *Interviews with Serge Grünberg*, pp. 82-95  
Screening: Excerpt from *The Fly*, Kurt Neumann, USA, 1958  
*The Fly*, USA/UK/Canada, 1986

October 8  
Topic: Doppelgängers  
Sex and seduction as deception and masquerade. Drugging the body, medicating the mind, poisoning the spirit.  
Reading: Mathijs, *Cinema of David Cronenberg*, pp. 135-155  
Cronenberg, *Interviews with Serge Grünberg*, pp. 96-107  
Screening: *Dead Ringers*, Canada/USA, 1988  
[Also of interest: Bari Wood and Jack Geasland, *Twins*. Lincoln, NE: Authors Guild, 1977]  
Also of interest: *Faith Healer*, Canada, 1988 (TV Episode)  
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cfdWyEgrums

October 15  
Topic: Interzone  
Reading: Mathijs, *Cinema of David Cronenberg*, pp. 156-171  
Cronenberg, *Interviews with Serge Grünberg*, pp. 108-128  
Screening: *Naked Lunch*, Canada/UK/Japan, 1991  
October 21  

**Due date for journal entries covering classes through October 15**

Topic: From stage to screen

Reading: Mathijs, *Cinema of David Cronenberg*, pp. 171-179
Cronenberg, *Interviews with Serge Grünberg*, pp. 128-133

Screening: *M. Butterfly*, USA, 1993

October 29
Topic: The cult of cars

The fusion of flesh and metal.

Reading: Mathijs, *Cinema of David Cronenberg*, pp. 180-195
Cronenberg, *Interviews with Serge Grünberg*, pp. 134-149

Screening: *Crash*, Canada/UK, 1996

November 5
Topic: Virtual reality, actual reality, videogame reality
Lecture and discussion: The puzzle picture. Nested narratives. Gristle guns, umbrycords, and MetaFlesh Game Pods!

Reading: Mathijs, *Cinema of David Cronenberg*, pp. 196-207
Cronenberg, *Interviews with Serge Grünberg*, pp. 150-167

Screening: *eXistenZ*, Canada/UK, 1999

November 12
Topic: Psychodrama

Reading: Mathijs, *Cinema of David Cronenberg*, pp. 207-224
Cronenberg, *Interviews with Serge Grünberg*, pp. 168-173

Screening: *Camera*, Canada, 2000
*Spider*, Canada/UK/Canada, 2002

November 19
Topic: Exploiting violence? Exploring violence? Or both? Or neither?
Lecture and discussion: The ambiguity of guilt and innocence. Appearances, realities, and the American dream. Family values?

Cronenberg, *Interviews with Serge Grünberg*, pp. 173-182

Screening: *A History of Violence*, USA/Germany/Canada, 2005
December 3
Topic: Inscribing the body
Reading: Mathijs, Cinema of David Cronenberg, pp. 237-256
Screening: At the Suicide of the Last Jew in the World in the Last Cinema in the World, Canada, 2007
Eastern Promises, USA/UK/Canada, 2007

December 10
Topic: Theory wars
Screening: A Dangerous Method, UK/Germany/Canada/Switzerland, 2011
Excerpt from Cosmopolis, Canada/France/Portugal/Italy, 2012
[Also of interest: Christopher Hampton, The Talking Cure. London: Faber & Faber, 2003.]

December 17

Due date for journal entries covering classes through December 10

Topic: Cronenberg versus Hollywood!
Cronenberg, Interviews with Serge Grünberg, pp. 183-190
Screening: The Nest, Canada, 2014
Maps to the Stars, Canada/Germany/Canada/USA, 2014
[Also of interest: David Cronenberg, Consumed. New York: Scribner, 2015]

Course requirements:

Students must attend all class sessions, complete all reading assignments in a timely way, and participate actively in class discussions.
In addition, each student must keep a journal during the course, comprising one to two pages per week. This is the equivalent of a short paper each week, in which you respond to that week’s course material: the reading, the film, the lecture, and the class discussion. Journals must be printed by computer, not written by hand. Additional rules and guidelines for the journal are given below.

Due dates: Journals are due in two installments. Entries for the first seven weeks must be submitted on October 21. Entries for the remaining weeks are due in class on December 17. No journal entry is required for our last class on May 5, since journals are due on that day.

Attendance and Participation:
Attendance will be taken. It is your responsibility to get to class on time. Unexcused absences or excessive lateness will result in a lower final grade. If you know you will be absent on a future date, let me know in advance. Absences will be excused only if you provide verification (documentation of a legitimate reason: illness, family emergency, etc.) as to why the class was missed. You must catch up with work missed due to absences, excused or otherwise. This includes all films that have been screened in class; if you miss something, you must watch it on your own. (All film material for this course is on reserve in Decker Library for re-viewing or catching up.) You should participate fully in class discussions, since part of your final grade will reflect class participation.

Journals must be submitted on the dates given above unless a later date is arranged because of special circumstances. Handing in a journal late because of unforeseen circumstances requires verification (documentation of a legitimate reason: illness, family emergency, etc.) as to why the due date was missed.

Journal rules and guidelines:

The journal must contain one to two pages on each week’s subject matter, demonstrating knowledge of the pertinent film material, topics considered in class discussions, and subjects covered in the reading assignments. You are encouraged to view additional relevant films outside class and include references to them in your journal entries. This is not a diary and it is not class notes – it is an academic journal, meant to record what you are learning and thinking with regard to the course on a weekly basis. You are welcome to include material suggested by reading and film viewing outside class, but such material must be relevant to this course.

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Additional information

Academic integrity:

Academic integrity -- the pursuit of scholarly activity free from fraud and deception -- is an educational objective of this institution. Academic dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, fabrication of information or citations, facilitating acts of academic dishonesty by others, submitting work of another person or submitting work previously used without informing the instructor, and tampering with the academic work of other students.

A student charged with academic dishonesty will be given oral or written notice of the charge by the instructor. If students believe they have been falsely accused, they should seek redress through informal discussions with the instructor, department head, dean, or campus executive officer. If the instructor believes the infraction is sufficiently serious to warrant the referral of the case to the Office of Conduct Standards, or if the instructor decides to give a final grade of F in the course because of the infraction, the student and faculty will be afforded formal due-process procedures.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is using someone else’s words or ideas without acknowledgment. Submitting work containing plagiarism is grounds for failure of an assignment or failure of the course.
Repeat offenses will be brought to the attention of the department chair. To be responsible when summarizing, paraphrasing, or quoting, include a citation like:

*** I read in yesterday’s New York Times that…
*** As Simone de Beauvoir famously asserts: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (p. 34).
*** My roommate Pete noticed that…
*** If it’s common knowledge and your own idea, you do not need quotations. The yellow of the Lance Armstrong bracelet suggests bravery.

Document your citations in a bibliography or “works cited” page at the end of your paper and follow standard guidelines such as MLA or Chicago manual style. Familiarize yourself with these guidelines in Diana Hacker’s A Pocket Style Manual, and always check with your instructor before turning in questionable work. You may also check on these and other language-related issues with one of the helpful tutors in the Writing Center, (410) 225-2418. The Writing Center has copies of the Hacker manual as well.

**ADA Compliance Statement**

**Classroom: Health and Safety Guidelines**

**Health and Safety**
It is the responsibility of faculty and students to practice health and safety guidelines relevant to their individual activities, processes, and to review MICA’s Emergency Action Plan and attend EHS training. It is each faculty member’s responsibility to coordinate with the EHS Office to ensure that all risks associated with their class activities are identified and to assure that their respective classroom procedures mirror the EHS and Academic Department guidelines. Each of these policies and procedures must be followed by all students and faculty. Most importantly, faculty are to act in accordance with all safety compliance, state and federal, as employees of this college and are expected to act as examples of how to create art in a way to minimize risk, and reduce harm to themselves and the environment. Faculty must identify, within each art making process, and require personal protection equipment use, by each student for each class, when applicable. Students are required to purchase personal protection equipment appropriate to their major. Those students who do not have the proper personal protection equipment will not be permitted to attend class until safe measures and personal protection is in place.

**Classroom: ADA Compliance**

**Learning Resource Center ADA Compliance Statement**
Any student who feels s/he may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact the instructor privately to discuss specific needs. Please contact the Learning Resource Center at 410-225-2416, in Bunting 458, to establish eligibility and coordinate reasonable accommodations. For additional information please refer to: http://www.mica.edu/LRC