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Information and Entropy: The Disorganisation of Narrative in Cronenberg's *Videodrome*

In *Narration in the Fiction Film*, David Bordwell explores the fundamentals of organising information in narrative cinema. He describes an active viewer who thinks, and in watching a film draws on schemata derived from experience of the everyday world, and of other artworks, and films. On the basis of these schemata, “we make assumptions, erect expectations, and confirm or disconfirm hypotheses. Everything from recognising objects and understanding dialogue to comprehending the film’s overall story utilises previous knowledge.”¹ The spectator applies schemata to a film, and is encouraged to do so. Bordwell writes that in narrative cinema,

the film offers structures of information—a narrative system and a stylistic system. The narrative film is so made as to encourage the spectator to execute story-constructing activities. The film presents cues, patterns, and gaps that shape the viewer’s application of schemata and the testing of hypotheses.²

Film narrative, as Bordwell describes it, is both a system of organising information that is given (“syuzhet”), and the imaginary construct (or “fabula”) the viewer creates in order to organise the information that is received. The fabula is constructed “on the basis of

prototype schemata (identifiable types of persons, actions, locales, etc.), template schemata (principally the ‘canonic’ story), and procedural schemata (a search for appropriate motivations and relations of causality, time and space).”³ Bordwell states that, “to understand a film’s story is to grasp what happens and where, when, and why it happens.”⁴

In the cinema, the canonic story is the dominant template schema against which the spectator tests information gained from the narrative, reorganising this information into a fibula; Tzvetan Todorov describes this format as a causal “transformation” of a situation through five stages:

1. a state of equilibrium at the outset;
2. a disruption of the equilibrium;
3. a recognition that there has been a disruption;
4. an attempt to repair the disruption;
5. a reinstatement of the initial equilibrium.⁵

It is the symmetry of this format that Raymond Bellour describes as the “principle of classical film:” “the end must reply to the beginning; between one and the other

mise-en-scène in *Dead Ringers* (1988) from an ordered state to a disordered one.

media controller: “Benway is a manipulator and a co-ordinator of sign systems, an expert on all phases of interrogation, brainwashing and control.”⁸ Burroughs attacks this power structure in *Naked Lunch*, *The Soft Machine*, *The Ticket That Exploded*, and *Nova Express*, reacting against the torpor of addiction, habit and control.⁹ The central aim of Burroughs’s writing is to undermine the media’s claim to objectivity and truth. The sign systems under the control of Benway must be exploded if we are to be free from junk. The cut-up and fold-in methods used by Burroughs are such an attempt to do violence to the power structure. The organisation of the text is broken down by the active rearrangement of many texts, rendering them ever more chaotic. Thus, as Robin Lydenberg points out, the reader becomes overwhelmed in a random text, the construction of which is largely governed by providence:

Burroughs’s experiments with narrative deny the reader all continuity, even that of a narrative persona, and the temporal dislocations of his style cannot be framed or explained by an omniscient narrator or by the scope of any single character’s subjective perception.¹⁰

Burroughs does violence to the “Algebra of Need” by removing the ability of a text, as produced by an author designed for a specific purpose, to speak. Language, in the tradition of the Symbolists, speaks: “The key to symbolist perceptions is in yielding the permission to objects to resonate within their own time and space.... The symbolists freed themselves from visual connections into the visionary world of the iconic and the auditory.”¹¹ Tony Tanner sees this as the link between Burroughs and McLuhan:

McLuhan’s first work about communications, *The Mechanical Bride*, is in effect a

for reversing this process.’ It would not be too much to call his method a cut-up technique. By extracting a large number of news items and advertisements from their contexts and making us really see how they work on us and influence our perceptions, McLuhan is to some extent freeing us from their thrall. This is also the aim of Burroughs.¹²

It is also a theme of Cronenberg to show us how the media controllers Spectacular Optical “get inside” Max Renn. The scientist at the heart of the conspiracy, Professor Brian O’Blivion, carries in his name the mark of Burroughs’s Nova philosophy. The essence of this conspiracy to control is the power to feed information to the receiver. This idea of information is described by Michel Serres in *Le Parasite*.¹³ Serres puts forward the view that the key to our culture, our modernity, is the parasitic relationship as described by Burroughs in *The Job*:

Dr. Kurt Unruh von Steinplatz has put forward an interesting theory as to the origins of this word virus. He postulates that the word was a virus he calls a “biologic mutation” offering a change in its host which is then genetically conveyed....¹⁴

Cronenberg continues the natural course of Burroughs’s “word begets image, image is virus” chain as Max Renn is subjected to this type of “biologic mutation.” By transforming Max, Spectacular Optical proceeds with its conspiracy. For Serres the metaphor of information as parasite lies at the origin of all cultural institutions and the operation of bureaucracies, which establish their power by imposing structures of inclusion and exclusion. A central problem occurs in defining who is the host and who the guest? The binary opposition of host/parasite dissolves into indeterminacy, and the parasitic control of bureaucracy is founded upon the control of the information that allows us to define our position in relation to the medium.¹⁵

In *Videodrome* the descent into narrative disorganisation leaves the spectator without a determined position. Is this reality? Or is this television? This effect is achieved by withholding information from the viewer. Here we turn to a specific concept of disorder in a statement of the second law of thermodynamics given by Tom Stonier. Entropy describes the level of disorder within a system, and the second law of thermodynamics states that entropy always increases. Thus the level of chaos within a system also tends towards a maximum. Stonier argues that, like energy, information should be considered a basic property of the universe, and should be defined operationally as *the capacity to generate organisation*. Any system that exhibits organisation contains information, and this is as true for the arrangement of molecules in

that comes to restrict and disorganise the story information made available to the spectator, rendering the process of fabula construction null and void.

The first phase (I) of *Videodrome* is composed of the following seven narrative units:

- A. Max's apartment: a video message from Bridey informs us of Max's meeting.
- B. Max meets with the pornographers at the Classic Hotel where he is shown "Samurai Dreams."
- C. Max and his partners watching "Samurai Dreams."
- D. Max is shown "Videodrome" for the first time in Harlan's laboratory. Max asks Harlan to get more "Videodrome."
- E.
 - i. Backstage at the Rena King Show: Nicki and the Professor are introduced to us.
 - ii. The Rena King Show. Max asks to meet Nicki later.
- F. Max watches "Videodrome" again in Harlan's lab.
- G. Max meets Nicki at the CRAM radio station.

This phase of the film has two main functions. Firstly, the viewer is trained to recognise the marks of narration, exploiting his or her familiarity with the classical cinema. The narrative at this point is highly self-conscious and communicative, making us very aware of the process of narration. For example, I.A sets up I.B through Bridey's video message, communicating causal, spatial, and temporal information about what is to come. We are told what will happen (a meeting), where it will happen (the Classic Hotel), when it is to happen (6:30 am). An establishing shot of the Classic Hotel demarcates these scenes and prepares us for what will follow. Establishing shots are used repeatedly to make us aware of a new space: for example, the Classic Hotel, Harlan's laboratory, and the radio station. A standard classical device then links us from I.B to I.C with "Samurai Dreams" providing a visual bridge between the spaces of the hotel and Civic TV. The Rena King show introduces us to the Professor and Nicki Brand, and also initiates the causal chain of

the latter's relationship with Max: he asks to meet her later, and in I.G the narrative fulfils our expectations.

The syuzhet in this phase also trains the spectator in distinguishing between the diegetically "real" world and the media. The Rena King sequence provides us with the best example of this difference in the syuzhet organisation, dividing the scene into two parts. The first establishes the location of the television studio, preparing us for what is to come. The second part consists of the Rena King show itself, the narration bisecting this scene with the highly self-conscious use of the TV inter-title for the show and the voiceover from the announcer. Scenes I.A to I.F all show various people watching television, establishing a physical distance between spectator and image in two ways. In I.C Max and his partners look off-screen to the right as they watch "Samurai Dreams," the television set never appearing simultaneously on-screen with these viewers. Alternatively, in I.A the camera pulls back to reveal the distance between Max and the television, establishing a dividing space within the frame. It is also in this first phase that Cronenberg hints at the future development of *Videodrome*, as in I.F Harlan describes the "Videodrome" show as having "no plot or characters." It is through "Videodrome" that *Videodrome* is disorganised.

The perversion of *Videodrome*'s "reality" comes with the onset of Max's

- D. Max meets Masha at the restaurant to her report on “Videodrome.”
- E. Max goes to the Cathode Ray Mission, where he meets Bianca O’Blivion and asks to speak to the Professor.
- F. Max hallucinates that he hits Bridey in his apartment. Whilst watching the videocassette he has received from Bianca O’Blivion he hallucinates that his television becomes flesh.
- G. Max returns to the Cathode Ray Mission and confronts Bianca about what he has “witnessed.”
- H. Max returns to Civic TV and quizzes Harlan.
- I. Max hallucinates that his gun disappears into his belly. Barry Convex contacts Max.
- J. Max meets with Barry Convex at Spectacular Optical.

The number of scenes between hallucinations, from II.A to III.A, decreases by a standard ratio from four to two to one. From the moment the helmet is placed over Max’s head at Spectacular Optical and he begins to hallucinate, it becomes impossible to distinguish between “reality,” television and hallucination. As we enter the third phase (III) the syuzhet information is disorganised and insufficient to allow the spectator to construct the fabula:

- A. Max hallucinates that he is in the “Videodrome” arena whipping the television set.
- B. Max wakes up in his apartment to find Masha’s battered body next to him. Harlan cannot see the body.
- C. Max confronts Harlan at the laboratory. Barry Convex “programmes” Max with videotape.
- D. Max assassinates his partners at Civic TV.
- E. Max goes to the Cathode Ray Mission to kill Bianca O’Blivion, but is persuaded to assassinate Harlan and Convex.
- F. Max kills Harlan at Spectacular Optical.
- G. Max kills Barry Convex at the Spectacular Optical trade fair.
- H. Max commits suicide aboard the derelict boat.

Although we can plan out this final phase, we find that it becomes merely a list of on-screen action as the strength of the causal connections is weakened. The supposed covert war between Spectacular Optical and the O’Blivions is never fully elaborated and only hinted at briefly, and Max is very easily turned from one to the other without any proper

“word virus,” the filmmaker operates against an “image virus” transmitted by O’Blivion and Convex.

The transformation of narrative continues at pace until we reach a threshold beyond which we must re-orient our experience of representation in order to embrace something new. As Cronenberg states: “at a certain point chaos equals destruction.”²¹ For Max Renn the point of destruction comes with his apparent suicide, urged on by the image of Nicki Brand to “go on to the next phase” through the annihilation of the “old flesh.” This brings about the annihilation of narrative, a de-struction of the text in the sense intended by Martin Heidegger: “to destroy the traditional content of ancient ontology until we arrive at those primordial experiences in which we achieved our first ways of determining the nature of being.”²² Only once we have passed through this point of de-struction will we be able to approach a new narrative structure, the “new flesh.”

The Unformed World

It is important to acknowledge that the various systems that we encounter in

4. the emergence of something new into the environment.

This schema may apply to only some of the systems in any given film, with others proceeding according to more general schemas. As a narrative schema some similarities with Todorov's pattern are apparent, particularly in the first stages of establishing characters and locations, and in the phase of disruption. It is also possible to identify the point at which the disruption is recognised, and the attempts made to reinstate the initial order. However, these moments in the narrative cannot be separated from the process of evolution and show that all attempts to return to the initial state of order are futile.

The transformation of Starliner Towers as a societal system in *Shivers* follows this pattern, with the introduction of the parasites disrupting the order of the island. The parasites transform the residents of the Towers into sex-crazed zombies, who literally emerge from the underground car park to spread their disease around the world. *The Brood* does not feature the initial order of the Carveth family, or the point at which this system is disrupted. We are launched *in medias res* into the evolution of family relations into something monstrous. With Candy carrying this monstrosity in her genetic code the next generation will represent a family of monsters, a family of the new flesh. The Mantle Clinic in *Dead Ringers* is transformed from a highly ordered state, in every sense of the word "clinical," to utter chaos, mirroring the impact of science and sex upon Elliot and Beverly. Drugs, surgical instruments and other debris consume their sterile, geometric furniture.

In *The Fly* the four-phase evolution is enacted upon the body of the protagonist, Seth Brundle. In his first phase Brundle is a biologically ordered system: a healthy human being. Through a freak accident, a chaotic and random act, he becomes gene-spliced with

undermines the processes of applying schemata and testing hypotheses that underwrite the spectator's construction of the fabula in the classical cinema, and if we are to engage in the testing of the emergent world in Cronenberg's films these classical narrative schemata must be discarded. We must become accustomed to a "new flesh" of the cinema, and like Max Renn go on to the next phase in order to find a new way of perceiving and experiencing images.

Notes

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1. David Bordwell,

23. Michael Grant, *Dead Ringers*