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CLOAKED TRANNIES ON THE SILVER SCREEN: “EVOLUTIONARY DERANGEMENT”
AND CRONENBERG’S APPROACH TO SHAPING A CRITICAL MINDSET TOWARDS
TRANS BODIES

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
John David Hunter
May 2024

Accepted by:
Dr. Aga Skrodzka, Committee Chair
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ABSTRACT

This thesis engages David Cronenberg's 2022 film, *Crimes of the Future*, analyzing the text through the lens of Saul Tenser (Viggo Mortensen) as a transgender allegory. Through this, the project investigates the way in which Cronenberg's text visually creates a Deleuzian language of the body, which is the body of *becoming*. This queer analysis of the film does so by utilizing the perspective of the trans body, through the character of Tenser, which more clearly illustrates the human body as one which is in a continual process of evolution. Following in the footsteps of scholars such as Susan Stryker and Nick Davis, this text takes the radical stance that the mind and the body each have the ability to act on their own accord, using queer bodies to illustrate how this freedom from a forced and stable subjecthood is something which all bodies—cis or trans—are able to achieve. Cronenberg's film also comes at a critical time for transgender bodies in the US, with laws being passed to increase the government's control of these bodies, in which his text not only questions these actions, but also provides a new language with which to discuss the body and the government's attempts to keep control over it.

DEDICATION

In completing this thesis, I would like to firstly dedicate it to my late best friend Wallace, who was the first person to help me experience my own queerness. They shall never be forgotten, just like the rest of our passed trans siblings who left us much before their time was due. I would also like to dedicate this to my thesis committee, Dr. Maziyar Faridi and Dr. William Stockton, but especially my committee chair, Dr. Aga Skrodzka, without whom none of this would be possible. Next, I would like to dedicate the completion of this project to my writing partner and best friend, poet Naomi Laroche, who painstakingly endured the continual process of having to help me develop all of my ideas through endless discussion—their inspiration was foundational in my undertaking of this work. Finally, I would like to dedicate this to all of the friends and family that have supported my transgender journey of *becoming*, as well as the rest of the trans community—my found family—whom I hope to help uplift and empower through my work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In writing this thesis, I would like to acknowledge the scholars which I engage with in this text, whose academic efforts were invaluable while completing this project. I would like to acknowledge transgender scholar Susan Stryker, whose work was the biggest inspiration to me while writing. I would also like to acknowledge the film scholar Nick Davis, whose writing on Deleuzian ideas of the image in conjunction with queer texts, such as other works by David Cronenberg, greatly helped influence this text. I would also like to thank Judith Butler, Dylan Trigg, Jaynelle Nixon, and Christine Ramsay, whose academic works I also engage with in this text. Another key figure which I must acknowledge is David Cronenberg, whose radical film was essential in seeking to convey these ideas. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the late scholars Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Michel Foucault for their work, which helped guide the direction of this project.

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The transsexual body is an unnatural body. It is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born. In these circumstances, I find a deep affinity between myself as a transsexual woman and the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Like the monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment; like the monster as well, my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist.

—Susan Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage”

“I’m very sorry that you have to have a body / One that will hurt you, and be the subject of so much of your fear / It will betray you / Be used against you / Then it will fail on you, my dear / But before that, you’ll be a doormat / For every vicious narcissist in the world / Oh, how they’ll screw you all up and over / Then feed you silence for dessert”

—AJJ, “Body Terror Song”

Introduction

In this thesis, I read the character of Saul Tenser (Viggo Mortensen) in David Cronenberg's *Crimes of the Future* (2022; referred to as *CoF*) as an allegory of transgender embodiment on screen. With this reading, going beyond perhaps the explicit intentions of Cronenberg himself, I will explore Cronenberg's portrayal of the “body of *becoming*” through the character of Saul Tenser, and argue that this portrayal invites a transgender reading. Through the lens of this analytical interpretation, the many parallels between Tenser and the trans experience become quite obvious; this is part of what allows for audiences to potentially leave

this film with a new language and ways to think about the ever-evolving human body. The film takes place in the near future, where human bodies are undergoing many changes—including the production of completely new organs—and these changes are closely monitored by the government, as they ultimately aim to prevent these bodies from straying too far from what they consider to be human. As the film refuses to project a specific identity onto Tenser and other evolving bodies (disabled, trans, queer, etc.), Cronenberg allows for a diverse audience to be able to relate to the diegetic world, while using language around evolving bodies that connects issues within the film to the ongoing socio-political discourse around transgender bodies (including attempts by the U.S. government to regulate and control such bodies). An analysis of Cronenberg's portrayal of Saul Tenser as a potential allegory of transgender embodiment shows how Cronenberg's text provides audiences with a Deleuzian language in which to discuss transgender bodies, thus offering an intervention in the ongoing public discourse, including the legislative discourse which aims to regulate transgender bodies and subjects to gain control over them. Furthermore, this project explores how a Deleuzian language of the body is introduced in Cronenberg's film, through which the many abject and innovative aspects of the emerging trans body may be marveled and regarded.

As queer film scholar, Nick Davis states, "Deleuze gives queer cinema a firmer theoretical basis, while queer filmmaking incites the *Cinema* books to engage with sexuality and desire—a task for which Deleuze seems ideally qualified but which he avoids" (6). As Davis makes very clear, a Deleuzian model of cinema gives queer cinema a much more solid standing on a theoretical basis, providing a way forward for queer and—specifically—trans cinema, even if Deleuze, like Cronenberg in *CoF*, did not explicitly undertake these subjects within their respective works. This thesis provides a new and urgently needed lens through which we can

discover more creative ways to look at, imagine, discuss, and contemplate trans embodiment in the medium of cinema. Rather than let these causes remain at an impasse, films like *CoF* can help us play out the collective anxieties on the subject. Davis also perfectly illustrates desire in Deleuzian terms, saying “In refusing definition through object-orientations, especially sexed or gendered objects, desire in *Anti-Oedipus* invites queer appropriation: it does not adhere to ‘types’ or prescribe itself any normative targets” (15). Davis displays how desire through a Deleuzian lens is freed from the repression it faces in Freudian psychoanalysis. My goal with this text shall not be to talk down to you, nor leave you with a monolithic answer on these issues, but instead to provoke you to question these things—such as the body and its still for yourself as I believe Cronenberg does in his film. *CoF* poses two paramount, ever-relevant questions to its viewer: how much control does the government have over one’s body, and what does such surveillance mean for how we experience and perform our bodies, especially when the bodies in question are evolving or changing, as trans bodies so often radically do? These are questions that all of us can relate to, but the transgender subject, specifically, faces them acutely.



Figure 1: Caprice enters Saul's chamber to wake him, with his body still inside the LifeFormWare bed

Scholarship review

As film scholar Dylan Trigg writes about Cronenberg's use of the body, specifically in *The Fly* (1986), "a body *can* exist in a conscious state independently of the mind, and the films of David Cronenberg provide a rigorous example of the spatio-temporality of this mutation" (83). Already, with this example, we can see that the scholarship surrounding Cronenberg's films addresses the idea that the body can, and in certain cases does, exist in a conscious state that is independent from that of one's mind. Especially as this reading is not a directly queer reading—but more specifically the reading of a transgender allegory—it shows how viewers other than trans viewers have understood Cronenberg's cinematic processing of the body and its role in self-definition. Arguably, Cronenberg has used the screen to show how as a culture we have been ignoring the important messages and intensities that emanate from and within our bodies. While Cronenberg's films do not directly or explicitly address queer and trans bodies, the scholarship

has been sensitive to Cronenberg's treatment of the human body as on equal ground as the human mind when it comes to defining one's identity.

When beginning to look at scholarship around queer bodies in Cronenberg's film, I ran into a view of Cronenberg's work by Christine Ramsay, who seems to work with gender inclusive groups. Disappointingly, however, Ramsay ends up delivering a critique that is very much shaped by her cisgendered white feminist identity, which remains ignorant to the plight of trans women. The limitations of Ramsay's criticism are symptomatic of the 1990s discourse on gendered bodies. Reading Ramsay's critique today makes one realize the urgent need for a shift in critical perspective. As queer theory was focused on at the time, queer Ramsay wants to claim that "Cronenberg's films are aesthetic representations of masculine issues—of the difficulties phallic heterosexual men can have in acknowledging the existence of others as animated, conscious human beings; in engaging in the aesthetic and ethical activity of consummation; in giving the gift of form to make others relatively whole" (51). I would argue that this take limits our understanding of Cronenberg's films, and that *CoF*, specifically, goes against most claims Ramsay makes. Not only are there no strictly masculine issues in *CoF*—just bodily issues—but there is also the character of Saul Tenser, whose experience of embodiment closely resembles that of transgender embodiment, as it has been narrated in the most recent trans positive discourses, with even right-wing editorials like *The Daily Beast* posting an article headlined "David Cronenberg's '*Crimes of the Future*' screams 'Trans Rights!'". It's important to note that Tenser can also represent many other groups of oppressed people, with the disabled community being a great example, thus opening up an intersectional dimension to Cronenberg's cinematic body.

If we take Ramsay's comments into consideration, and specifically consider the discourse that produced this line of thought, then we understand why and how Saul Tenser can be interpreted as a strictly heterosexual male. In distinction from the discourse of Ramsay's time, I read *CoF* as a film that exhibits a side of Cronenberg that evolved and redirected the 1990s film discourses of queer theory and practice, which were not particularly attuned to trans identity. Instead of attacking Ramsay's position, I use her study to critique the discourse that produced this line of thought, forcing our modern discourse on gender and embodiment to stay roughly within these narrow parameters and reducing our potential for political progress. While things have changed since Ramsay's time with regard to trans culture and trans rights, it seems that the academic discourse has moved very *slowly* to accommodate those changes.

Even in the early Cronenberg films, such as *The Brood* (1979) or *Videodrome* (1983), our understanding of human embodiment is restrained by a heterosexual and phallic analysis, as, in these films, Cronenberg addresses much wider issues regarding the human body and technology, such as how the body relates to its environment, especially while experiencing change that is often sudden and frightening. Ramsay goes on to say that Cronenberg "for all the claims about the radicalness and transgressiveness of his work" has always managed "to unconditionally squelch in high-horror style" (Ramsay 53). This claim by Ramsay *almost* breaks through the limits of the discourse of her time, but ultimately, she decides to deny the radical subversiveness of Cronenberg's work. *CoF* undermines Ramsay's dismissal of Cronenberg's radical vision as the film offers capacious space for transgressive embodiment, coded indirectly to allow for viewers of different identities and bodily experiences to find a relevant visualization of the challenges that the non-normative body has to face (including invasive governmental control). This is a great dsWhile Ramsay's claims do not come from a complete place of understanding of

Cronenberg's work and offer a narrow focus in line with the queer and feminist discourses of 1990s, sadly they continue to inform the Cronenberg scholarship.

In the dissertation titled, "Horror of Racialized, Disabled, and Gender-Nonconforming Monsters," Jaynelle Nixon says, when discussing Cronenberg's film *Scanners* (1981), "Dereliction is often conflated with disability. Disabled people are commonly viewed as draining the financial resources of the state. Jasbir Puar argues that this is a chicken and egg scenario where poverty is a form of and possible cause of disability" (Nixon 121). This view of Cronenberg's display of the human body, while specifically looking at disability, also directly applies to the characters in *CoF*. A version of Nixon's chicken and egg scenario applies to Saul's experience of embodiment on-screen, characterized by the production—or removal—of new organs which his own body is growing, which bring with them new hormones. It is clear at the beginning of the film that these growths are causing/worsening his disabilities, which are expressed visually and audibly through Saul's continuous gagging (which occurs when he is both on *and* off screen); however, by the end of the film when Saul begins to let his body guide him, handing over the reins solely from his mind, we learn that these growths are not merely as they seem to be.

Not only is the government trying to rid society of this underground community of "plastic eaters" and their "dereliction" so that "proper evolutionary growth" can be preserved, but the film also makes it clear that the humans with morphing bodies are viewed by the government officials as somehow disabled. This way of conceptualizing the emerging bodies as deficient allows the authorities to argue that these "less-than" people are the ones who are draining the state resources. As a result a hate narrative builds around these non-normative bodies, which is used to sway public opinion that suggests elimination as the best course of

action, as articulated in the agenda of the New Vice Unit, also formerly known as the “Evolutionary Derangement” Unit. The parallel between the cleansing of the “evolutionarily deranged” humans in *CoF* and the regimentation of the transgender individuals that is happening in the United States right now is easy to draw, especially as both scenarios emphasize the legal/illegal dimension of the morphing/*becoming* body and the insistence of the government to eliminate these bodies from the public sphere. During the 2023 CPAC convention, speaker—and host over at the Daily Wire—Michael Knowles said that “For the good of society... transgenderism must be eradicated from public life entirely—the whole preposterous ideology. At every level” (Wade and Reis). While you might think this is an issue that only faces trans people, it shows how much control the government has over bodies—specifically, bodies deemed as “unacceptable”—and that the government’s definition of “unacceptable” is ever-volatile. While our first scholar, Trigg, focused on how Cronenberg illustrates the body as existing in its own state of consciousness, separate from that of the mind, Nixon shifts the focus to Cronenberg’s specific connection with the body (especially through disability), and how Cronenberg’s cinema illustrates the foundation from which ableism stems, a dynamic relevant to the ways of regimenting transgender bodies. Ramsay, on the other hand, seems to suggest, using “feminist” perspectives, that Cronenberg’s films are not at all as subversive and resistant as they appear because they serve only the masculine and heterosexual men, a claim that *CoF* opposes through its keen focus on non-normative and persecuted bodies.

Finally, film scholar Nick Davis offers a perspective aligned with Nixon’s more progressive reading of Cronenberg and advances his vision further to apply directly to queer scholarship. Davis states,

the extraordinary value of Cronenberg's movies for *The Desiring Image*, integrating their queer and Deleuzian aspects rather than treating these as parallel, inheres in how they defamiliarize sex, gender, embodiment, and sexuality as mutable and open-ended forces in their own right. (Davis 40)

Here, we can see one Deleuzian perspective of how Cronenberg's movies can be seen as sites of queer representation through cinema. While our first scholar focused on how Cronenberg illustrates the body as existing in its own state of consciousness, separate from that of the mind, which will come up as a big idea throughout this paper, Nixon focuses on Cronenberg's specific connection with the body (especially through disability), and how Cronenberg's cinema illustrates the foundation from which ableism stems from, a dynamic relevant to the ways of regimenting the trans bodies. Ramsay, on the other hand, seems to suggest, using "feminist" perspectives, that Cronenberg's films are not at all as subversive and resistant as they appear because they serve only the masculine and heterosexual men, a claim that *CoF* opposes through its keen focus on non-normative and persecuted bodies.

Finally, Nick Davis, when addressing Cronenberg and his approach toward bodies specifically, talks about not only how the filmmaker displays queer bodies, but how he integrates both the queer and Deleuzian aspects within the text, rather than treating them as parallel. Davis goes on to say, "On the contrary, *Naked Lunch* deindividualizes the labors of authorship and atomizes erotic orientations throughout a sprawling, counterpublic collective—one inextricably defined by sexual variability, by the undermining of subjects and diegetic realities, and by an agnostic approach to the myths of the revolutionary artist" (Davis 71). Here, we see one interpretation of how Cronenberg's work can be read as queer and not monolithic, but we get an even closer look into how Cronenberg constructs this Deleuzian language of the body in *CoF*,

which has seemingly been an on-going project of his since his early work. With this in mind, what exactly is *CoF* trying to undermine? This thesis attempts to illustrate how Cronenberg's work in *CoF* ambitiously undermines the entire perspective from which we currently view the body, replacing it with one that is shown through desiring-images that are reverse-Lynchian in a way—completely opposite of our world, yet we can't help the feeling throughout the whole film that this is not just somewhere we have been or dreamed of, but this is where we are now, where we live—how we live. Desiring-images deterritorialize the assemblages on screen, freeing them from subjecthood. As Davis says,

Queer politics of difference bear strong implications for how the film [*Naked Lunch*] imagines desire and how it stages its minor interventions into Burroughs's legacy—infiltrating his figures and syntaxes with alien energies. Rather than professing slippages innate to all language, in line with Dellamora's 'generalized linguistic transgression,' *Naked Lunch* as a film sustains the more targeted projects that Deleuze and Guattari call 'minor' artistry. The film essays that platform through its estranging grammars; through the conjoined idioms of writing, fleeing, fucking, drug taking, and image-making; and through the deterritorializing energies common to them all. (Davis 72)

CoF implicates this language within the other Cronenberg text which Davis brings up here, *Naked Lunch* (1991). *CoF* similarly is a 'minor' work, as it resonates the political minority while using the dominant language, however it is used outside of the very context of that language, as the spatiotemporality of the film is mostly set in the seedy 'underground' of the area, or private and intimate events, like Saul and Caprices' artistic endeavors. These endeavors lead to a deterritorialization of language, as Timlin asks, in a way which appears as if she is making a statement instead of actually asking the question "Surgery is sex, isn't it?" and soon stating that

“Surgery is the new sex.” (*CoF* 28:11). Here, we see in the text that the meaning of sex becomes unstable, and freed from its previous monolithic identity, and free from stable subjecthood, and takes on a role of *becoming*. While in the film, the surface appearance maintains a pollution destroyed alternate/future reality which is different from ours, the actual narrative and experiences happening to characters are things that are eerily similar to what is happening now in the real world, something the film isn’t hesitant to remind us about.

Cronenberg’s ingenuity in constructing this new language of the body begins inherently at a cinematic level, as he uses visuals and imagery (desiring-images), as well as cinema’s many other ‘vocabulary of forms’ which can be deployed, such as sound, lighting, and *mise en scène*—all except language. Desiring-images are produced on screen as the subject becomes freed from the need for identity, hence, freeing the body from subjecthood. It is when Cronenberg brings focus back to the desiring-image, rather than trying to use language to describe the language of the body, and getting distracted by semantics, that this film has the most success in leading the creation of this Deleuzian language for the body, especially one which takes a lot more account for transgendered people and any body that doesn’t fit inside the current gender binary. This work from previous scholars on the body in Cronenberg’s films suggests that the Cronenbergian body is a transgressive body, something also emphatically communicated in *CoF*. This transgressive body is a body that is just as conscious and seeking as the mind is. It is also often a disabled body. Finally, in his subversive portrayals of the non-normative body, Cronenberg seems to integrate queer and Deleuzian aspects as one as he seeks to free the body from subjecthood altogether. This work from previous scholars investigating the body in Cronenberg’s films has helped tremendously to shape my argument about the potential of reading the character of Saul Tenser as a transgender allegory.

Film Summary

CoF is set in a close dystopian future, where most humans can no longer feel pain—as a result of which, DIY surgery has become all the rage—and most importantly, the human body is producing new organs. Saul and Caprice (Léa Seydoux) are simply performance artists: as he grows new organs, she removes them live, in front of an audience. To keep their work documented, they inform a government bio-team—Wippet (Don McKellar) and Timlin (Kristen Stewart)—about their process. The team has been creating the National Organ Registry. Saul's freshly registered organ, the first of many to follow, is tattooed in a self-referential style. However, Wippet and Timlin's registry quickly becomes absorbed by the government agency, the New Vice Unit. Detective Cope (Welket Bungué) who is leading the unit explains to a puzzled Saul that it used to have a 'sexier' name, "Evolutionary Derangements," a name that secured easier funding (*CoF* 47:40). Before Saul meets Cope, he is introduced to Lang Dotrice (Scott Speedman), who pleads with both Saul and Caprice to do a live autopsy, in a fashion similar to their performance pieces, in front of an audience as a public event. The corps to be autopsied belongs to Lang's son, an eight-year-old dead Brecken (Sotiris Siozos), who was the first person naturally born with a digestive system that digests plastics. In an effort to confront the government's mission to cover up and control the evolving bodies, Lang (who is a member of a resistance movement) wants to publicize Brecken's bodily adaptation. The viewer learns from the very first scene of *CoF*, that Brecken's changes are interpreted as 'inhuman,' even or especially, by his own mother, who murders her child unable to accept his radical bodily difference. Lang refuses to settle for a mere police autopsy, convinced that this would lead to the

sealing of the evidence and expunging the record of Brecken's bodily changes, denying his very existence.

Saul and Caprice agree to do the autopsy, but not until it becomes obvious to the viewer that Saul is secretly working undercover for Detective Cope, providing him with information on the underground resistance movement and, particularly, reporting on Lang. Saul explains that he engages in his performances, because he doesn't like what is going on with his body. These changes cause him, like most humans seemingly, to need special technology in order to eat and sleep properly. The technology is made by a private company called LifeFormWare. The growth of the new organs shifts the body's pain centers. LifeFormWare builds beds and chairs that allow to mitigate the challenges that result from the new bodily adaptations. The beds and chairs wiggle and jostle the user around to help them digest their meals and sleep. However, Saul is beginning to have problems with his throat, which prevents him from eating entirely. It is apparent that his bodily changes have begun to occur more rapidly. Saul seems to display both attitudes of wanting to let these new organs gestate for longer as well as wanting to cut them out faster as he is 'feeling extra creative' (*Crimes* 35:49).

This adds fuel to the constant debate throughout the film as to Saul's role in his position as the organ producer—does he will his bodily adaptations into existence? And if he does, is it through his body or mind that he is able to do this? Or is he merely a vehicle, growing and carrying a new invasive organs inside of him at the behest of his body? This is an example of the very Deleuzian language through which Cronenberg represents body as a site of *becoming*, one which is ultimately freed on screen for the need of identity and subjecthood as a whole. As Deleuze and Guattari state in their seminal work, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*:

The full body does not represent anything at all. On the contrary, the races and cultures designate regions on this body—that is, zones of intensities, fields of potentials.

Phenomena of individualization and sexualization are produced within these fields. We pass from one field to another by crossing thresholds: we never stop migrating, we become other individuals as well as other sexes, and departing becomes as easy as being born or dying. (Deleuze et al. 85)

Saul, at this early point in the film, is yet to see it clearly, but as the audience we can recognize this process occurring within Saul from the very beginning. He never stops creating new organs and gradually he comes to accept this Deleuzian body-of-becoming, which Cronenberg attempts to depict.

At the event of another performer, whilst he himself hides in the shadows, Saul is greeted by the biotech coordinator. She ends up giving Saul the information for Dr. Nasatir, who specializes in ‘inner beauty,’ saying that she is sending him there for ‘a consultation about a political problem,’ rather than a medical one (*CoF* 38:50). Caprice later informs the two LifeFormWare technicians (Tanaya Beatty and Nadia Litz)—who seem to be the only working employees of the company—that Saul has what is called Accelerated Evolution Syndrome, and it is pathological. Saul returns from his visit to Dr. Nasatir’s office with some new equipment—something that is akin to a zipper that stretches across the length of his lower abdomen, allowing him and Caprice ‘easier access’ to his insides, which quickly results in a highly sensual moment between the two and the new zipper.

Before conducting the public autopsy on Brecken’s body, Saul decides to visit Brecken’s mother in jail, hoping to find some speck of humanity within her. However, the visit makes it very clear that the mother thought of her changing son only as a thing, a creature which scared

and disgusted her. Saul's meeting with the mother helps him decide to perform the child's autopsy in order to bring witness to Brecken's altered embodiment. During the autopsy, Saul meets the members of the resistance movement and learns that they are producing synthetic material food ('synth bar') that supports the evolving bodies. This is also when Saul learns why the autopsy is so important to Lang and his mission, as Brecken was the first child to be born 'naturally unnatural,' which further proves that the human body is adapting to its new environment created through pollution and destruction of the earth (*CoF* 1:24:54).

Wippet soon reveals to Saul that he is organizing the 'inner beauty' contest and begs Saul to be a part of it. Saul dismisses the invitation, as he is now more invested in the rebellion and the political potential of his becoming body. Saul discovers that Wippet's partner Timlin has ambivalent feelings about the processes of state control. Timlin shares with Saul that Wippet is 'playing games with subversive groups.' She also confesses to Saul that she feels the need to turn him in to the authorities. Saul asks Timlin if she has run across a neo-organ which had actually developed into a system of organs. Timlin explains that her unit has only come across singular organs. Later, as they are prepping for the autopsy performance, Lang offers Saul a synth bar. Upon Caprices advice, Saul declines the offer by stating that he is fussy about his food. Lang responds by saying that Brecken was also fussy about his food, and that was why the synth bar was created. Lang's organization had realized that with so much pollution and irreversible damage to the earth, the body had not just gone haywire and started making random and useless organs but was actually creating new organs to adapt to the environment around them and the waste as the new food source. The body led them to the answers their mind couldn't reach. Lang hints that Saul is just like Brecken.

Meanwhile we learn that the LifeFormWare technicians are also assassins, as we witness them murder Dr. Nasatir in his home, under the guise of fixing his chair. Finally, after much anticipation, Brecken's autopsy performance begins. The space is packed with people, even those who have been told to stay away by their government bosses, such as Wippet and Timlin. With Saul behind the controls, Caprice begins the autopsy with a monologue, guiding us into the procedure which we are about to witness, when all of a sudden, they realize something is terribly wrong. It seems someone has gotten to Brecken's body before the autopsy. All we can see is the horror of the young boy's defaced organs, covered in tattoos. This inflicts further pain on Lang and makes it clear to the viewer that Timlin and Wippet's unit has "cleansed" Brecken's body. There seems to be something else that is quite not right with the inside of the autopsied body, making it even more abject and disturbing, but the film does not make it clear what causes the consternation. Lang runs out frantically crying and blaming Brecken's mother, while the two LifeFormWare workers come to seemingly console him, but then they actually kill him. Later, when Saul learns for himself that it was Timlin who was the New Vice's double agent, he informs Detective Cope that the death of Lang was going to make him a martyr for the cause, making the movement stronger than ever. As the film comes to a close, Saul can be seen to be in clear distress while attempting to eat in his LifeFormWare machine, which seems to no longer support his becoming body. Caprice quickly runs into the other room and grabs a finger camera and a synth-bar, asking Saul what he thinks. He agrees that it is time for him to finally try it, so he takes a bite from the purple bar and begins slowly chewing, only to realize that something is different. The machine he sits in powers down all of the sudden, without anyone physically turning it off. There seems to be an intense wave of euphoria passing over Saul's face as he finally eats the synth-bar, and the film ends with a black-and-white close-up shot of the bliss

which Saul experiences in this moment, very clearly displayed through the cathartic look on his face.

Film Analysis

Within the first few minutes of the film, the viewer is introduced to Djuana (Lihi Kornowski), Brecken's mother, and immediately feels the disdain which she has towards her own child. Moments later, after cutting to night-time with Brecken brushing his teeth, he finishes this ritual, and to our surprise, crawls under the sink and begins to eat the pink, plastic trashcan (*CoF* 3:28).



Figure 2: Brecken Ritualistically Devours the Plastic Trash Can

However, not only does he seem to enjoy this, but it is clear that his body is easily digesting the material, creating a pink foam-like substance around his mouth to emphasize this new process of digestion which Brecken's body utilizes. The shot jumps to his mother, who is hiding around the corner, observing Brecken eat the plastic in disgust. It is evident that she is genuinely terrified of

him, beyond just seeing him as ‘not human.’ In the following moments, Brecken’s mother smothers him to death in his sleep with a pillow, despite his pleas for her to stop, signaling to the viewer that Brecken knows who it is killing him (*CoFs* 4:58). This scene suggests that Brecken was caught performing the human body “wrong.” Thus Cronenberg’s text opens the film by actively questioning the audience, “What is a human? And where do you draw the line between human and non-human?” These implicit questions come up repeatedly throughout the film, resonant of Davis’s earlier statement from page 15 about desire, which illustrates perfectly how Cronenberg’s new language of the body is specifically Deleuzian and queer (Davis 15).

The potential for a trans reading that opposes the normative vision of the body becomes evident around the plight of the grieving father. Lang wants Saul and Caprice to perform on Brecken’s body because anything found in a police autopsy would be hidden and sealed away from the public. This moment is painfully relatable to transgendered people, as any knowledge about us or the violence inflicted upon us is censored by governmental forces. Brecken’s murder reminds the viewer of the brutal murder of 16-year-old trans teenager Brianna Ghey in the UK. Ghey’s murder was dismissed as a symptom of a malfunctioning health care system and not a hate crime. The official narrative about Ghey’s death discloses the mainstream system’s prerogative to seal the truth of the transgender body away from the public, as to keep its heteronormative institutions in balance. Cronenberg’s film, indirectly yet emphatically, dramatizes the narrative manipulations that affect non-normative bodies, especially trans bodies, in the official public discourse.

When thinking through the inclusion of Brecken’s public autopsy in the repertoire of the performance duo, Saul and Caprice, queer philosopher Judith Butler’s words about drag performance come to mind, perfectly framing performance art as a political medium,

The performance is thus a kind of talking back, one that remains largely constrained by the terms of the original assailment: If a white homophobic hegemony considers the black drag ball queen to be a woman, that woman, constituted already by that hegemony, will become the occasion for the rearticulation of its terms; embodying the excess of that production, the queen will out-woman women, and in the process confuse and seduce an audience whose gaze must to some degree be structured through those hegemonies, an audience who, through the hyperbolic staging of the scene, will be drawn into the abjection it wants both to resist and overcome. (Butler 91)

Here, if we adapt Butler's argument about drag to our argument about trans, Brecken as a trans body becomes the "occasion for the rearticulation of terms," where we are not greeted by bodily amazement when he is opened up, but instead, just another reification of government power over all citizens' bodies. Sadly, the government is able to get to Brecken's body before Saul and Caprice, taking the liberty to disfigure the child's body in order to hide its progressive and potentially radical adaptations. The vice unit's intervention is effective. Lang and the public are robbed of the opportunity to witness Brecken's 'naturally unnatural' insides. The government successfully interrupted the new narrative about what the human body can be, projecting only horror and fear of Brecken's alternative body.

When viewing Brecken's body as a young trans body, the visual horror parallels the first-hand knowledge and experience of having a trans body. The paranoia and anxiety that Cronenberg shrouds Brecken's body in reminds me of the lived pressures as a trans subject. The New Vice Unit, like the US government, practices heavy censorship in order to keep a heteronormative status quo. Additionally, the visual hatred signaled by Cronenberg through the tattoo documentation system imitates the inner hatred which trans children have for themselves,

specifically if their knowledge is censored and they never learn that it is an option to be transgender. The infestation of this darkness inside of Brecken illustrates the internalized homophobia and transphobia which society engrains in the young trans subject, causing a great deal of self-hatred.

When looking for the source of this hatred which has infested the human body, we can find it back in the linguistic origins of the body itself, and how these linguistic powers shape how we see the body from the very start. Referring to the tattoo which the New Vice Unit's agents gave his organ while registering it, Saul seems to be upset with the word they used to describe this new organ of his. He tells Caprice, "Rambunctious...that's what they called it...it takes over the form, the shape of the organ itself. It really, in a sense, dominates it, reshapes it—it's not just, parasitic—although, I suppose in a sense it is that too. It seems to take meaning away from the organ. Takes the process of meaning, for itself, so to speak" (*CoF* 21:20). Even though Saul produced the organ, the government is the one to assign it an identity and meaning (or, lack thereof, in their eyes). Just like the body of a trans person, Saul's body is "given" a label, one which he does not have any say in. Though he is forced to occupy this position, he refuses to acknowledge the unnaturalness of the whole process—specifically how the government treats him while registering the organ. This moment in the film perfectly illustrates a quote from theorist Susan Stryker—a pioneering academic, who is one of many to help establish Trans Studies as its own space separate from Queer Studies—who writes,

Transsexual monstrosity, however, along with its affect, transgender rage, can never claim quite so secure a means of resistance because of the inability of language to represent the transgendered subject's movement over time between stably gendered positions in a linguistic structure. Our situation effectively reverses the one encountered

by Frankenstein's monster. Unlike the monster, we often successfully cite the culture's visual norms of gendered embodiment. This citation becomes a subversive resistance when, through a provisional use of language, we verbally declare the unnaturalness of our claim to the subject positions we nevertheless occupy. (Stryker 241)

Saul finds the language which the government assigns to his recently removed organ not only upsetting to him, but simultaneously insufficient at representing it. His verbal analysis of the tattoo and the word 'rambunctious' shows the viewer his subversive feelings towards the government's treatment of his body. Despite being forced to occupy this position, he continues to declare his issues with it, leading to Caprice walking over and stopping his train of thoughts, getting very close to both Saul and the camera to say, "You'd really better get into bed" (*CoF* 22:10). It is as if his feelings become sublimated by Caprice in this moment, seeming to suggest that his language was moving into "illegal" territory regarding new government policies. Saul's words seemed to suggest that these new organs being produced by him can "take the process of meaning" away from pre-existing organs, becoming a new functioning "desiring machine" in Saul's "Body without Organs," to use Deleuze's term. In this case, Saul is deterritorializing his body, as he begins to favor these new assemblages within himself, which is shown as he begins to leave them in and "cook," instead of instantly having Caprice remove them like he used to do.

Here, not only does Saul make light of the government's treatment of trans bodies, but he also reminds us that the body, just like the mind, has the ability to experience the intensities of desire itself. As Deleuze and Guattari would agree, the text exhibits that desire is not repressed in the mind like psychoanalysis believes, but instead a free and productive force (Deleuze et al. *A Thousand Plateaus*). Just as Davis says when speaking about Cronenberg's text *Naked Lunch*, *CoF* also exhibits how "In keeping with the stylistics of *Cinema 2*, Cronenberg's movie shapes

its images less as forward steps in a narrative than as a series of ‘pure optical and sound situations,’ delinking scenes, shots, and even discrete audiovisual stimuli within a given frame from any stable relation to those that adjoin them” (Davis 72). However, in *CoF*, one of the major differences of this exhibition is through how we are shown the body throughout the film, especially with the inclusion of the information in the text that pain has virtually all but disappeared, giving most everyone the ability to experiment with “self-surgery.” As a result, the bodies which appear on the screen are often disconnected from what audiences might view as a “typical” body, such as the artist who has a performance around her plastic surgery to cut visible and long wounds on her face, even resulting in the sudden change of Caprice’s appearance to the audience, as the next time she appears on screen, we see that she has also had plastic surgery, which are implants at the top of her forehead (*CoFs* 1:01:48). Especially with the juxtaposition against audiences’ expectations for what plastic surgery is “for,” illustrating a deterritorialization around the body and what can be changed about it, and specifically why this change would occur.

Caprice and her friend are just following their bodily instincts when undergoing these processes of *becoming*, instincts which radically subvert those which audience members would expect the mind to make. The same goes for Saul, as later in the film he has the instinct to leave his new organs (or, assemblages) inside of his body for a bit longer to ‘cook,’ instead of removing them shortly after their discovery as he and Caprice are used to doing, as even she questions Saul on his choice to do this (*CoFs* 1:04:33). Throughout its entirety, Cronenberg’s film works visually to deterritorialize audiences’ knowledge of bodily understanding, especially in how it relates to its environment and continues to develop in its process of *becoming*, specifically when the body is allowed to follow its instincts as opposed to those of the mind.

This subverts the traditional view that we are just a mind stuck inside a body, where the agency and our essence as a subject are imagined to reside in the mind itself, reminding us that this process of creating meaning works both ways. Here, Saul first hints at his body taking over the process of making meaning, rather than his mind being behind the reigns. This is almost identical to the experience of many trans people—like myself, for example—who learn that they are trans first through their body, way before this knowledge even reaches the conscious mind. This leads to many problems in the system that create situations where knowledge about trans embodiment is manipulated. As the government restricts sexual education, especially making sure not to mention the mere existence of transgendered people, many of us can grow up with anger misdirected at oneself (which correlates to the unusually high rate of trans youth suicide attempts), often simply because we do not have the information needed in our brain to help us understand our own bodies.

Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argued in 1993, “Seemingly, this society wants its children to know nothing; wants its queer children to conform or (and this is not a figure of speech) die; and wants not to know that it is getting what it wants” (Sedgwick 3). Saul’s comments about the new organs display his first insights into what is actually happening within his body, not just what people are telling him. The government wants Saul to “conform” by registering and removing all of the new organs. The registration requirement helps the government to monitor those who may resist the pressure to eliminate the *becoming* body. As Susan Stryker explains best,

bodies are rendered meaningful only through some culturally and historically specific mode of grasping their physicality that transforms the flesh into useful artifact. Gendering is the initial step in this transformation, inseparable from the process of forming an

identity by means of which we're fitted to a system of exchange in a heterosexual economy. Authority seizes upon specific material qualities of the flesh, particularly the genitals, as outward indication of future reproductive potential, constructs this flesh as a sign, and reads it to enculturate the body. Gender attribution is compulsory; it codes and deploys our bodies in ways that materially affect us, yet we choose neither our marks nor the meanings they carry. (Stryker 249)

With this, we are able to view LifeFormWare as both a capitalist corporate entity as well as an extension of the government's violence, specifically that of the New Vice Unit. From the start, our bodies are introduced into the system of heterosexual exchange, and in the film, the LifeFormWare company seems not just compliant, but happy to fill this role of helping from behind-the-scenes to make sure this hetero-/homonormative economy of exchange is reified continuously, eliminating the bodies that don't conform strictly to their products and rules of the flesh. But his LifeFormWare products, as we see from the very start until the end of the film, have all but completely stopped working for Saul. Not only does the government want him to "conform or...die," it appears that his process of conforming is actually killing him slowly. This is a perfect example of homonormativity, one of the biggest current dangers to the queer community and its continued existence. As Davis states while explaining his Deleuzian model of queer cinema,

Among these 'minoring' operations, my Deleuzian model of queer cinema stresses the deterritorializing of desire into new relations and definitions, renouncing structures of the heteronormativity but also what Lisa Duggan, Michael Warner, and others have called 'homonormativity.' This latter ideology absorbs gay—and lesbian—identified people into

major-culture structures of identity, alliance, and power, which frequently perpetuate key inequities and deny desire its fundamental unruliness. (Davis 6)

Cronenberg's text wants to reinfuse the body with its own fundamental unruliness, clearly illustrating to viewers how the body is more Deleuzian than we would like to think. Especially as Saul's homonormativity is conforming by cutting out his organ growths, we can see how Saul is continuously destroying the new desiring-machines which his body continues to create. The quicker he is to remove them, the more harm they seem to do to him. However, leaving them in for longer quickly brings new feelings, new experiences, and new intensities.



Figure 3: Saul struggles to eat in his LifeFormWare—supposedly—'personalized' machine

Arguably, *CoF* champions desire to let go of your mind, your “intellectual self,” and follow the lead of your body instead. Especially when paired with a trans reading of Saul, the viewers of *CoF* are able to comprehend how the unruly becoming body can take direction in shaping one's existence. When adjusting to the changes of a new organ growth within Saul, it

initially seems like these changes are negative as he gags and chokes in an attempt to get food down but is ultimately unsuccessful (*CoF* 40:51). However, as Caprice and Saul begin to talk about these changes, a new understanding begins to emerge. Saul first refers to his throat problems when stating “I can’t... open it,” to which Caprice replies, “what’s going on?” only to receive an answer of “I am not sure” from Saul. He says “it’s not my allergies, in fact, they’re not bothering me. It’s strange,” to which Caprice’s first reaction is “Are you in discomfort?” As a viewer, we expect him to answer with some sort of agreement to the fact that he is in discomfort; however, Saul responds “No, it’s a...compelling fullness. Not a completely bad feeling...at least not uninteresting.” This moment in the film makes it explicit that instead of displaying that the mind and body are one, the text shows that they both have the power to lead and enact change within the body. If Saul were to just admit his feelings as discomfort, then we are stuck in a reality of the mind engaging on its opinions of these changes. However, as he counters the viewers expectations with his somewhat pleasant acceptance of these new changes, we are shown how Saul has begun to let his body lead the way, rather than to reject all of the changes it brings him by removing them and “hacking them into pieces.” He acknowledges that what is going on isn’t just isolated to the organ, but is changing his body completely, and finds acceptance of this change and the new feelings it is bringing him.

This moment is very critical for a trans reading of Saul, as this is one of the first moments in which he is learning to love his body and be accepting of its changes, rather than let internal hatred about what is happening to him consume him completely. This is one of the most important parts of living as a transgender individual. The first step you take, admitting that something within you is different, and acknowledging you are transgender. We can see here a clear acceptance from Saul of this acknowledgement, as he leans in towards the changes and

their new pleasures which they introduce in his body. And through this, Saul displays not just a knowledge that these organs are changing him in perhaps a positive way, but also that it is his body which is entirely responsible for these changes, as it was his mind which kept rejecting them (having Caprice cut them out). In reading Saul as transgender, one can contemplate the situation of a trans person, who needs to acknowledge and accept that their body is different from their mind — specifically in how the mind “views” the body—and that the body can make decisions for itself regardless of what the mind may think.

Moments like the one discussed above are what make Cronenberg’s new language of the body Deleuzian throughout the film, perhaps without even the intent to do so. As Davis writes, Queer insofar as they take open-ended variation as their guiding premise, desiring-images work against normative models of sexuality and their social, political, and epistemic buttresses. They simultaneously *mirror* time—images in resisting uniformity and rational organization; they *dovetail* with persistent structures of movement-and-time-based cinema; and they *resist* the masculinist and heterosexist ideologies so prevalent in both. Grounding cinema in the unruly productions and permutations of queer desire cannot help but induce novelties at the level of form and style, as explorations of movement and time previously did. This helps explain why so many films and filmmakers addressed in *The Desiring-Image* earn reputations as ‘weird,’ ‘ambiguous,’ or ‘confusing.’” (Davis 9)

The desiring-images which fill *CoF* don’t just work against the buttresses of these normative models of sexuality, but actively work to tear from them their very support from social, political, and epistemic foundations. With *CoF* as a quite compelling example, it is clear that queer cinema may take upon a Deleuzian analytical structure, as Cronenberg does—through his use of desiring-images through the film, he introduces audiences to new, never-examined, languages of

the body—in order to secure its status as legitimate text coming from the medium of film, which will impact other cultural discourses, including academia, through its use of filmic forms.



Figure 4: Saul Preforms the Trans Body in Public

Cronenberg mechanically constructs this body of *becoming* on-screen using cinema's unique 'vocabulary of forms,' in order to do so without the reliance upon language—as this is one of the many places where language falls short at obtaining its goals. One example is clearly seen above in Figure 4, where the frame displays Saul and Lang out on the public streets chatting while they walk. While Lang is completely unaware of his body in this moment, we see that Saul is intensely worried about how he appears in public, as his eyes remain positioned ahead while Lang's gaze is downwards, reinforcing that Saul is completely focused on how his body interacts with the environment around it. Saul is forced to maintain almost complete attention to both everyone around him, and every move his body makes, which he remains very careful about. Saul's physical behavior on-screen in this public environment stresses that he remains hyper

focused on his body, its actions, and the subsequent reactions by those around him, rather than being in the moment and focusing on the conversation with Lang. The blocking of Saul's character demonstrates that he is careful to duck through the shadows—created through the lighting choices made on set within the *mise-en-scène*—while Lang continues to walk freely throughout both the shadows and light, without a single thought paid to the relationship his body has with the environment around it. The camera is careful to exhibit Saul's constant changing and shifting of his body. This is all due to the danger which Saul faces at all times, existing in the body he does, constantly facing fear around every corner—just as the transgender person would. As Stryker says herself, “Transsexual embodiment, like the embodiment of the monster, places its subject in an unassimilable, antagonistic, queer relationship to Nature in which it must nevertheless exist” (Stryker 243). Perfectly paralleling the queer performance of Saul and his body in public, so does the transgender body exist in an inherently queer and antagonistic way vis-à-vis the environment around it. Just as Saul wears an almost completely covering and all black outfit, like a Niqab, so are trans people forced to pass for “one specific gender” inside the heterosexual gender binary. In this way, Cronenberg constructs the trans body, or body of *becoming*, with an intense awareness of itself and the world around it. Lang moves freely without care, while Saul must watch his every move, or else put his life at stake, perfectly paralleling the experience of transgender people in public spaces in the current political climate of the US.

Looking back towards the scene mentioned earlier, which regards how Saul expresses these changes he is experiencing in specifically non-negative language, like the audience would presume him too. Despite his unique response to the question, as Saul continues to talk with Caprice he is constantly choking and gagging, expressing the discomfort his body is going

through as it experiences these changes while only having limited knowledge (*CoF* 41:24).

Through the diegetic soundtrack, Cronenberg is once again able to construct the trans body on-screen by displaying a clear discomfort with one's own body, despite the clear attempts to hide or reveal one's own struggles. This is just one example, as almost every time Saul speaks on screen his voice is accompanied by these viscerally gut-wrenching sounds of gagging and choking, almost as if he is dying. One of the most successful ways in which Cronenberg creates the trans body, or body of *becoming*, on screen is directly through the display of Saul's discomfort in his own body and his attempts to hide himself as much as possible in public. Cronenberg's body of *becoming* is mechanically produced on-screen primarily through visuals and soundtrack as a body which is both constantly hyper-aware of how it is perceived, while also experiencing very uncomfortable sounding changes (despite Saul's attempt to fight through it) that illustrate a body which is not even comfortable with itself. In this way, Cronenberg's creation of Saul is the perfect time-image—where an image in cinema actually becomes infused with time, reflecting our own inner worlds and freeing the body of subjecthood—of the trans body on-screen through the way in which it illustrates a focus on the body and its relationship with the world around it, rather than specifically focusing on the body itself.



Figure 5: Saul's transgender bodily performance while visiting the Doctor

Queer cinema is inherently non-commercial Hollywood cinema, and thus is often overlooked in Film Studies when it comes to examining the “most” culturally impactful texts. In line with Deleuzian thought, film—as a form and medium—is always in a state of *becoming*, and never remains just one thing. This is why all of the greatest films—and the ones which are most continuously re-visited to this day—are constantly being portrayed in new perspectives, bringing out more meaning to the film as a whole, and its continual state of *becoming* rather than merely “being.” Cronenberg sees this state of *becoming* through the lens of both the world, due to man-made pollution that is a central theme in *CoF*, as well as through the lens of cinema itself, just like Deleuze would agree of the body. *CoF* does not concern itself with constructing a clear and easily followed narrative, instead giving extended focus to the human body itself, especially as it has begun to change. This is precisely the reason why the reading of Saul Tenser as a trans allegory fits into this discourse so well. The transgender reading of the film offers the viewer

(especially the trans viewer) a way to see and work through the problems that the trans subject is encountering living in a state, where the government is focused on controlling the body of the nation by deciding which bodies are legitimate and which ones must be eliminated, or at the very least registered. Where a cisgendered person (and viewer) might not recognize this as a big issue, trans person (viewer) who happens to live under harassment and assault by police officers—the armed thugs of our government’s personal defense against change—will notice and identify with *CoF*’s critique of the state control over the citizen’s body. My interpretation of Saul Tenser as a trans subject attempts to fill the void that trans people experience due to their inherited societally fixed subjecthood, where their struggle against state control fights the very idea of a stable identity. Additionally, I believe that *CoF* makes it possible for other viewers, including those with cis bodies, to explore the state oppression of our bodies and, along with Saul and Lang, imagine a way to confront the state control.

While we discuss Saul through the lens of a trans person, we see that Caprice embodies many more of the “masculine” qualities that she performs to help Saul in his daily life, yet her gender is not stable enough to claim she is a female-to-male trans subject. In truth, gender is not a matter of concern for her, allowing us to read Caprice as not just a trans subject, but specifically a non-binary subject. This is a very critical, yet very small detail within the film, as it portrays (perhaps unwittingly) a diverse range of trans characters, as non-binary people are often left out of the discourse when we mention trans issues, yet they are just as trans as any of us! Many people forget that to be “transgender” simply means that you identify with a different gender identity than the gender identity which was forced on you after birth. Thus, people often forget this entire group of trans subjects, whose gender identities exist in between and outside of the established male/female binary.

Transgender rage is almost just what it sounds like, stemming from disjunction between the mind and body; however, it manifests quite differently than, say, the rage of a cisgendered white male. As Stryker writes, “The rage itself is generated by the subject’s situation in a field governed by the unstable but indissoluble relationship between language and materiality, a situation in which language organizes and brings into signification matter that simultaneously eludes definitive representation and demands its own perpetual rearticulation in symbolic terms” (Stryker 248). Trans people are not given the choice to pick and choose their role as a subject, but rather, are constantly forced to define themselves and the subjectivity assigned to them through performance. We can see this experience brilliantly displayed through Viggo Mortensen’s portrayal of Saul, who is constantly coughing and gagging—on seemingly nothing—throughout the entire film, clearly illustrating the discomfort which Saul continually experiences just existing in his body (as it is now, guided by societal regulations). This can also be seen through Saul’s choice of wardrobe, as the only article of clothing he will wear into the outside world is a full body cloak, similar to a Niqab.¹ This full body covering shows that Saul is aware of society’s ability to project an identity onto a subject, forcing one into a presumably stable subjectivity. Thus, Saul prevents his body from being seen by others in public. Only his eyes are unveiled to observe constantly and sharply everything around him. He must continually observe his surroundings and shift his body to maintain a degree of safety, making sure to move around from shadow to shadow, despite already being fully covered in black. This very much mirrors the experience of transgender individuals, as our safety is constantly at risk when we are in a public space. Many of us must rely on the ability to “pass,” not because we want to, but because if we

¹ A Niqab is a traditional veil worn by Muslim women, which differs from a full Burka, as there is an opening for just the eyes of the wearer.

don't perform our gender "correctly," we risk becoming yet another murder statistic to be glossed over by heteronormative institutions (i.e. the "gay panic" defense).

The audience for Brecken's autopsy performance is massive. Both Wippet and Timlin bump into each other, despite previously noting that they were banned from attending events such as this. Lang views this as the opportunity he's been waiting for—to express to the world the true beauty of our abject and ever-changing bodies—which, just like Butler notes, is "a kind of talking back" (Butler 91). However, what he doesn't know is that the New Vice Unit has an agent on the inside, who had already obtained access to Brecken's body in order to cover it in repulsive and disrespectful tattoos, which in a sense stole the meaning from the child's transgressive body before anyone had a chance to witness it for themselves. As Caprice guides the audience through narration, Saul begins the autopsy procedure, only to reveal this shocking and horrifying discovery to audience members (*CoF* 1:28:58). Everyone in the audience, including Saul himself, is flabbergasted upon what they see in front of them. While we see a visibly confused and disorientated Lang, the shot cuts to Timlin and Wippet, where Wippet—the organizer of the "inner beauty" pageant—can only gasp in horror, briefly exchanging glances with Timlin, who appears to have a slight grin and no visible shock to the body she sees in front of her. It is immediately apparent to Wippet that Timlin is the one responsible for this horrible deed. Wippet immediately shakes his head in disgust at Timlin and exits out from the screen towards the back.

The scene, however, does not conclude. Instead, it takes an interesting turn – the autopsy is still ongoing, and Caprice continues to narrate as Saul operates the machine, saying "So, we see...that the crudeness, and the desperation, and the ugliness of the world has seeped inside even our youngest and most beautiful" (*CoF* 1:29:5). Though the performance is not exactly the

“talking back” which Lang hoped for, it instead presents another, yet more gruesome, opportunity for subversive resistance. Through *Caprice*, we see how ugliness and destruction are not built into us as humans, yet, through our treatment of the environment which we inhabit and the many hateful and greedy institutions and systems which express control over our bodies have already infiltrated them from birth/youth. Just like the common practice of doctors gendering babies immediately out of the womb, with no ability to think about and make this decision for themselves. As acts of institutional aggression like this become normalized, it becomes ingrained in the minds of citizens to live and abide by either a hetero- or homonormative lifestyle, and institutions shift the blame onto us—queer and trans people—for not “doing as we are supposed to,” for not abiding by the traditional and heteronormative encoding of the human body. Just as Brecken can represent the tragic loss of trans youth, his character simultaneously (through means of the autopsy) represents how the cycle of hatred directed towards trans people begins through the knowledge which our institutions choose to share and/or censor from its public. By limiting the information with which we know of our own bodies, the government reifies itself as a heteronormative institution by force, perfectly exemplifying Foucault’s power-knowledge model, as power reproduces and shapes knowledge, giving the government full-access to create their own notion of what the body is.

Conclusion

Through a transgender reading of Saul Tenser in David Cronenberg’s *Crimes of the Future*, we are able to see a uniquely queer vision in which Cronenberg envisions the body, creating a new language, which we can use to talk about the body. Doing so, he engages the current political climate in the U.S., where anti-trans laws are appearing everywhere, like the bubonic plague viciously ravaging our national body. In a time where the government is

increasing its restrictions on what is and what isn't a body, Cronenberg's film embraces the body and all of its beautiful abjection, even if we don't understand it for the moment. Cronenberg also focuses on the government's relationship to the body through these new changes, a cinematic display which parallels the experience of a trans person, living in today's US and facing the aggressive laws that are being passed to control, even erase, trans people.



Figure 6: Saul's first moment of bliss on-screen, after just trying a synth-bar for the first time

Viggo Mortensen's final moments on screen, in which he is eating the synth-bar for the first time, have been compared (in jest) within the trans community to the experience of someone who is undergoing the HRT for the first time, which is strikingly poignant within this reading—especially as his body is creating new hormones (Codega). Just as the government within the film seeks to stop the entire project that is responsible for the production of the synth bar and the movement that embraces the becoming body, the US government continues to increasingly restrict access to gender affirming care, specifically HRT, where someone is changing their physical body through hormones, as they see it as “in-human” or, like the film states, “veering away from humanity.” The language of *CoF* allows us to see that US anti-trans laws are a result

of institutions viewing trans-people as not-human, or less than human, and trying to erase the entire existence of transgender people. It all comes back to the restriction of bodily knowledge which we are deprived of during our upbringing. Through a transgender reading of *Saul*, we can see how this film looks at the body and how it is highly applicable to the current state of US politics, but the film doesn't just speak to trans bodies. This reading displays that Cronenberg's text is envisioning a whole new way for how we see the body, cis or trans. However, it is through the specifically transgender reading that we can engage with Cronenberg's film as a deeper contemplation on the 'nature' of the body. *Saul* manifests the power to follow one's bodily instincts and exist as a version of oneself that was not an option previously. In this new world, what do you see your body as? Do you choose to follow the limited role with which you've been assigned to? Or shall you look inward and hand over the power of choice from the mind to the body—recognizing them as two separate entities? Will you embrace the true abjection of the human body, acknowledging it for all of its possibly beauty, as it always exists in a state of *becoming*, and accepting that the body exists to change?

Coda: My Trans Manifesto

Writing about a real example of what happened to Brecken—the murder of transgender performer Venus Xtravaganza—queer philosopher Judith Butler notes that, “If Venus wants to become a woman, and cannot overcome being a Latina, then Venus is treated by the symbolic in precisely the ways in which women of color are treated. Her death thus testifies to a tragic misreading of the social map of power, a misreading orchestrated by that very map according to which the sites for a phantasmic self-overcoming are constantly resolved into disappointment” (Butler 90). Only here, after having her life taken away from her, that she is symbolically freed from the forced subjecthood which she faced in her lifetime as a trans woman. We can see an

instance of this mirrored in the film through Lang's son, Brecken, who was the first human to be born with a digestive system which can completely process plastic, the same formation which members of Lang's underground society must undergo a surgical procedure to adapt their bodies correctly.

This is a common problem today recognized amongst the trans community, as hateful messages or words directed at us often times come from someone who is uncertain of their ability to become free from their forced subjecthood, but without this necessary information to become free, and through their systematic re-direction of anger towards the common enemies of the dominant hegemony (queer and trans people in this occasion), they continually reify the heteronormative dominant hegemony, portraying heterosexuality as being the 'one true' lifestyle, leading these people to often hating both themselves, and trans people—not knowing that this lack of bodily knowledge is the foundation from which their hatred stems from. The attitude of 'If I can't be a woman because I want to, then neither can you,' reiterates this perfectly, because it shows a societal agreement to these hateful traditions which have been passed down—instead of choosing to let their body guide them, they strictly adhere to social customs which they regard as "law," and which already reifies itself as pre-discursive. Thus, their bodies become forced to subjectivity by the government, in order for them to be able to be controlled by the government, keeping them stuck in a constant cycle of uncertainty in their own identity and expressing violence to anyone who dares to disobey these societal gender norms. Sadly, a decent portion of these individuals are recruited by the US military, who then are able to re-direct this anger towards any innocent civilian around the world who dares interfere with our supply routes! Chelsea Manning is a beautiful exception to this example, as she entered service with the military before discovering her identity as a trans woman and experiencing freedom from a

forced subjecthood, to which she promptly responded by becoming a whistleblower against the US military and its numerous nefarious and immoral actions which this country has committed all over the world. Though she was promptly arrested and charged with an initial 35 years in prison. Once there, she received the gender dysphoria counseling which she badly needed, in the midst of multiple past suicide attempts, but she also gained a following and large group of support whilst in prison, receiving \$150,000 worth of donations to a GoFundMe account set up by others. Manning's story not only illustrates how her own self-hatred dispersed after experiencing her own freedom from subjectivity as a trans woman, but also how any remaining 'outward' hate towards the world was shifted back to the real enemies of citizens—the United States Government. Just like Chelsea, Saul follows a similar character arc throughout the film, first hating what is going on with his body, then coming to try to understand it, and eventually finally letting go of the reigns with his mind (symbolically, his intellect) and handing them over to his body. At the beginning, with the displeasure he displays at the very idea of his body, is coincidentally within the same time frame that Saul is recruited by Detective Cope of the New Vice Unit to provide intel about all of the underground activities of the so-called "plastic-eaters" (*Crimes* 45:40). Cope directly starts the conversation by questioning why Saul Tenser, of all people, are going undercover. This moment is where Saul explains to cope, "What I'm saying with that 'body art' stuff, is that I don't like what's happening to the body. In particular, what's happening to my body...which is why I keep cutting it out." Here, the audience is given very clear insight into Saul's feelings and mental state regarding the changes his body is going through, or rather, *his process of becoming*. We can see that even though he participates in the artistic process around it, he does not like it, as it is simultaneously something which he doesn't understand and causes him immense pain. However, throughout the film, he continues to learn

his body, explore it, and let it guide him. And so we are left with Tenser, finally experiencing bliss or 'bodily euphoria' on-screen, with one question directly facing us: do we dare to begin following our bodies? Or will we limit our being to that of just the mind?

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*Labor party leader Keir Starmer suggests that Brianna's death was due to poor mental health and sees this as the problem which the party should face, rather than the blatant transphobia that led to her brutal murder.

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