



INSECT POLITICS

Body Horror / Social Order

March 17 - April 13, 1990

HALLWALLS

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ISBN No. 0-936739-21-5

This exhibition and accompanying catalogue is funded in part with grants for the Visual Artists Program of the New York State Council on the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency.

Design: Paul Szpakowski

This exhibition and accompanying catalogue has been organized by Stephen Derrickson as part of Hallwalls Visiting Curator's Program.

The Curator thanks Stephen Laub, Dennis Adams, Melanie Neilson, Claire Watson, Kate Loye, Geoff Young for their assistance.

Have you ever heard of insect politics? Neither have I. Insects don't have politics. They are very brutal. No compromise. We can't trust the insect. I would like to become the first insect politician. I would like to, but I'm afraid.

— The Fly,
David Cronenberg

What are insect politics?

Insect Politics alludes to a dynamic involving mutations and transformations of the human body. This exhibition is not about insects, nor is it about political parties. It is concerned with an ethics of signs of the body. The body is a veritable flypaper for metaphor and ideology, a meaning machine whose mouth-motor talks and talks. The social anatomy strolls through the social field, attracting swarms of overt and covert signs of power onto itself and projecting out versions of those same signs. A politics of the body is necessarily a topology of bodies under duress. Confounded with a plethora of intentions, Insect Politics investigates images of bodies in transformation, provoqueurs on the axis (vertical) of the sacred and profane BODY. Its ethics manifest itself both within and outside its subjectivity. The laws of the family and the state collect as a dermagraphics of authority on this body, the first site of political order.

The bodies of the dispossessed and grotesque are joined in turn by disappearing bodies. Discourses swarm around entrances into these corporeal territories with their constantly drifting borders. These territories operate in the manner of switching stations, relays. These body-relays capture and hold whatever paranoid modalities are current to the social order. The body is the matrix where social fears coalesce.



Paranoia is getting the facts straight.

—William Burroughs

In order to effect the oppression of peoples, their body-images must first be objectified. This 'different' object must be reduced to an abstract sign. These are the image-mechanics of dehumanization. Paranoia is the 'starter' for these mechanics. *They are getting under my skin.* Paranoia is a hyperbolic machinery, essentializing one's body by building up its armor. The skin of the paranoid is the wall of a bunker, facing a tense DMZ. Insect Politics promote the snake-like methods of shedding these armored skins. The various modalities of oppression require a fleshy synchromesh between paranoia and objectified bodies. The criminal body, plague body, dirty body, foreign body are all imaged through this alarmed procedure. Paranoia is a double agent capable of producing either the official body or counter-bodies. In the hysteria of the official body scapegoats are sought. MY BODY HAS A SECRET ORGAN.

"I would like to become the first insect politician. I would like to, but I'm afraid." *I am being invaded. I must take precautions.* Feelings about evil are projected onto the body, and the body with its surplus value of code, is projected onto the world.

The constitution of the body as both subject and object is crucial to the reproduction of social formations. Arms of the law. Organs of the state. The oppression of peoples is linked with the codification of the imaging of bodies. Law and order collect on the body as our bodies collect on the body of the state. Mobs. Masses. Swarms. Social order is the control of a flood of bodies. Forces of public order project images of the normal, the ideal, and the eternal onto the body.

The current proliferation of discourses about the body is a response to a subconscious sense of the demise of the ultra-modern body, as though trying to seize one last glance of someone as they disappear on the horizon, a fin de siecle scrutiny. The body is not that of the cold war. It does not duck and cover. This is the post ad-infinitum body, diffused and alienated by velocity. This body appears submerged under a pool of "infotainment." It is flattened by a G force of supercomputers and super conductors, lasers, fiber optics and instantaneity. Electronic media, in their ubiquity and its real-time commutation throws our end-of-the-century body into question as did the machine to the last end-of-the-

century body. Today's machine is not an object, but a density. Immersed in waves of telecommunications, the science fiction body is NOW. Cybernetics, biogenetics, artificial intelligence, advances in sustaining and originating life have formulated the contemporary body in quotation marks. The profligate interpretations of body-texts are also a response to the intensification of social conflicts concerning abortion and birth control, pornography and euthenasia, all sites of civil-body-war. *The body is not unreal.* The ethical questions of the body will seek their representations. This is insect politics, siting and imaging the borders of the body.



But the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs. This political investment of the body is bound up...with its economic use; it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination...the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body.

—Michel Foucault,
Discipline and Punish

This OFFICIAL BODY is that imaginary body constructed and imposed by the propaganda of the state and status quo. This body is quite similar on both sides of the dissolving Iron Curtain, a body of wishful thinking; perfect, happy, healthy, timeless. It is also constructed around the hearth, from Donna Reed to the Huxtables, the face of the family that does not exist is projected, like a phantom, from the last bastion of the private out into public vectors and conduits. Advertising and business are accomplices of national propaganda in the creation of public images of the official body. This body knows no disease, no conflict, no death. It is an ideological mirage, seeding the clouds of power and capital. The rhetoric of the official body is first and foremost the rhetoric of immortality. Normality is the face of the official body and good taste is the protector of its image.

Without an element of cruelty at the foundation of every spectacle, the theater is not possible. In the state of degeneracy, in which we live, it is through the skin that metaphysics will be made to re-enter our minds."

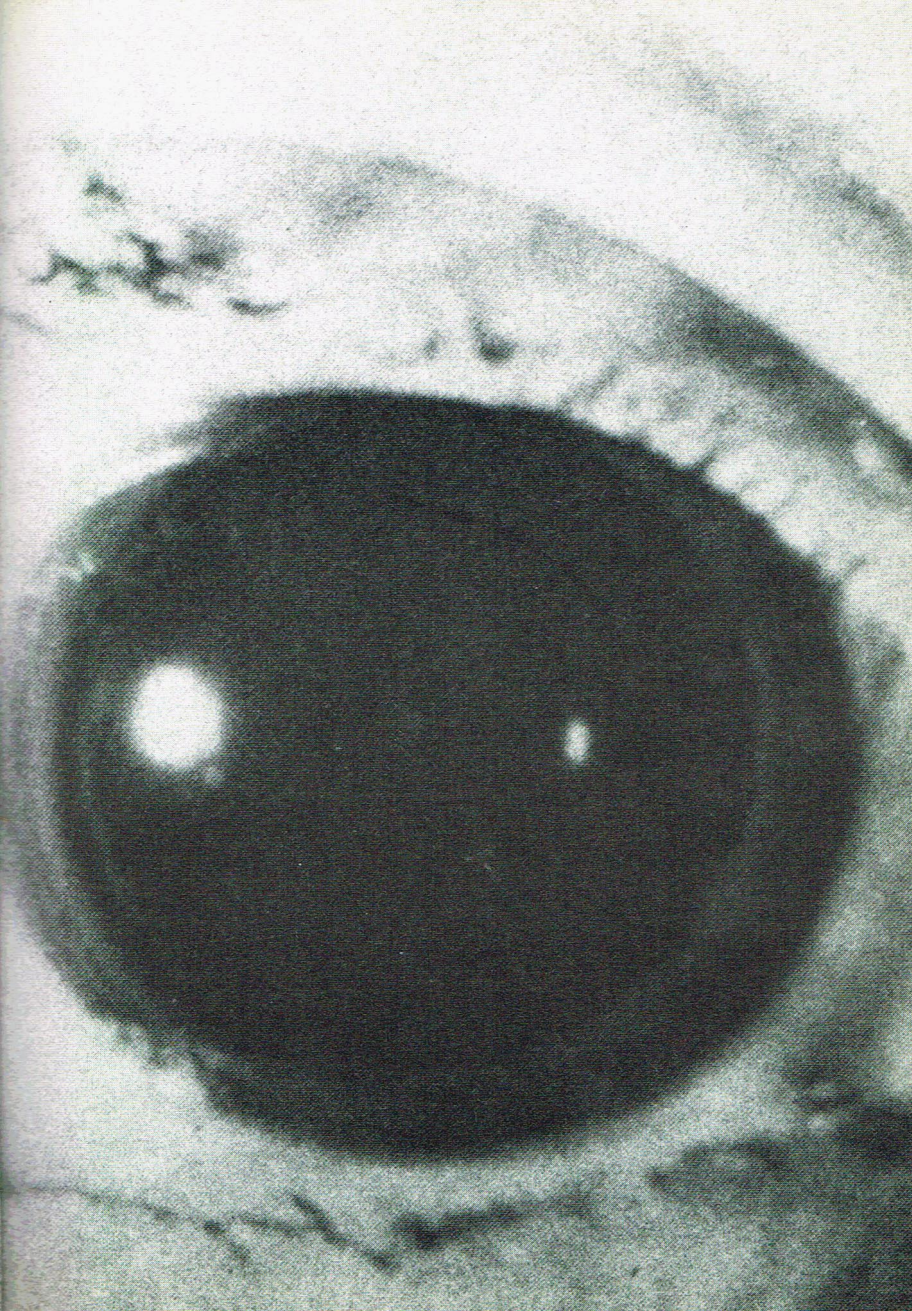
—Antonin Artaud,
The Theatre and Its Double

Insect politics are the acts and images of abnormal bodies. The discourses of the abnormal body are the discourses of outside (other) bodies and constitute Counter-Bodies. The body is not a private site. It is a barricade between official and counter-bodies. Counter-Bodies are abject, cast across the border, outside of the realm of purity/normality, they are unnatural, monstrous. They are oppositional arrangements, not revolutionary models. Lenin is an official body, lying in perpetual 'state.'

Counter-bodies seek to reclaim the flesh and blood viability of the body through a radical subjectivity and intervention in the conventions of the Official Body. These irrational images attempt to seize the body and shake it, loosening signs of social control, and weakening the tenacious hierarchy of pieties and proprieties of the official body.

Images of "body horror" are utilized by the counter bodies essentially as acts of protest. The counter-body's images are disenfranchised ones of disease and death, hidden body language, the unauthorized faces of the Other. The visceral, the disappearing, the abject, form a fifth column of subversive bodies. They question the authority of the official body as a unified entity, reflecting the desire to keep the law off our bodies. Counter-bodies create anti-bodies for the official body, though Georges Bataille reminds us that "the transgression of a taboo is no less subject to rules than the taboo itself."





We can understand what seems like an impossible paradox: the ever-present fear of death in the normal biological functioning of our instinct of self-preservation, as well as our utter obliviousness to this fear in our conscious life.”

**—Ernest Becker,
The Denial of Death**

Powerful taboos exist in our culture which deny the inevitability of death. Death is the sine qua non of the body, but in our culture it is rendered virtually invisible. The fear of death is unacknowledged, repressed. "No one gets out of here alive," Hank Williams sings, but myriad forces conspire with us to not hear. Death is given no place in the spectacles of consumer culture or the functions of production and business.

The capacity to disturb, intrinsic to images that illuminate a fear of death and the vulnerable, visceral body is guaranteed by both aspects of this paradox. An image (a counter body) elicits identification and empathy on the one hand, followed by revulsion on the the other, triggered by survival instinct. The taboos enforcing the denial of death erect borders which trigger colliding responses when these borders are transgressed. Death lingers at the lips of the signs of Insect Politics, at the openings (cuts) of these counter-bodies. The story of *The Fly* may be a parable of disease, aging, loss of love or other trans-bodies, but the irreducible fact of death encompasses all these passages. Insect Politics assembles body-parables of transformation. When fears are repressed monsters are created. The official body imposes taboos against morbidity and counter-bodies engineer methods to transgress these taboos. They emerge from the shadows of the normal. The true subject of Insect Politics is the constitution of images that recognize all that our civilization represses or oppresses. The visceral modalities of objectification, duress, and end-of-the-body may be the last arena in which shock is capable of subverting the propaganda of the official body which 'buries' death to promote its own mirage of immortality. Our denial of death is connected to the denial of the 'Other' in us. The repressed fear of death is projected onto Others, for it is others who die. Counter-bodies implicitly acknowledge mortality and the repression of the body, and engage in multiple interventions to dramatize the re-emergence of the repressed.



He would have needed arms and hands to hoist himself up; instead he had only numerous little legs which never stopped waving in all directions and which he could not control in the least. When he tried to bend one of them it was the first to stretch itself straight; and did he succeed at last in making it do what he wanted, all the other legs meanwhile waved to more wildly in a high degree of unpleasant agitation. "But what's the use of lying in bed," said Gregor to himself.

—Franz Kafka,
The Metamorphosis

A man turns into a fly. In the course of an experiment in the teleportation of matter, this man accidentally creates a fusion at the molecular-genetic level between himself and a housefly. The scientist becomes his own culture in which growth is conceived as an evolution in reverse. He has performed a transgression of matter and is punished for it by being cast into the brave new world of the larva.

His body, for a short time becomes a parody of that body so relentlessly constructed for the consumer culture in media; indefatigable and young, sexually insatiable, with a voracious appetite for mostly sweets. But, in this contemporary metamorphosis the scientist has become his own Frankenstein monster, the monstrous other of his own mutating cells. His physical self is in revolt, his molecules are amok, his body is a battleground on which a war is being waged by two opposing soldiers; man and fly. A fly is popularly considered exemplary of the vileness of the insect world. An insect which feeds on shit and filth, it is a winged sign of death and disease. His initial vitality gives way to a grotesque metastasis as the fly gains hegemony over the man.

His human body begins a dis-assembly process as his extremities fall away like obsolete prostheses. These he stores in his medicine cabinet he now calls his "museum of natural history." Ear, tooth, finger, etc. are "relics of a bygone era, vestigial, archaeological, redundant, of historical interest only." As the medicine cabinet in his becoming-fly serves as a catalogue of limbs fallen into the evolutionary void, it becomes for the viewer a museum of body horror. This medicine cabinet with its decoupage du corps, is paradigmatic of the museum and the cinema, two dominant modes of archival inventory. This archive of his transformation captures two deaths; first the dismemberment of his human parts, then the cataloguing of these parts in a merger of morgue, museum and cinema.

Horror films generally, and David Cronenberg's films particularly, use images of the human body to exploit fears of one's own body and its essential contingency, its mortality. The viewer of the horror film, sitting in the dark, inert, disembodied, occupies a paradoxical seat as (s)he gazes on a genre spectacle engaged in the most graphic representation of destruction of the body ever displayed. From the medicine cabinet to the cinema to the museum, this archive of "horrority" is the project of Insect Politics. "Horrority" is the bodiless watching the destruction of bodies.

— Stephen Derrickson





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Photographs (In order of appearance)

Production still from the film **Coma**. (Cover)

Women exercising, United States of America c. 1950, courtesy National Archives

Israeli soldiers storming an illegal Israeli settlement in which spray foam was used during assault. Assault courtesy of Dennis Adams.

Eye with atomic cataracts (900 meters from hypocenter), Courtesy Stephen Israeli Laub

Marilyn Monroe, Post-Autopsy

Hair taken from Auschwitz victims; used to insulate Luftwaffe Pilot jumpsuits, courtesy Center for Holocaust Studies.

Patty Hearst, Urban Guerilla, at the time of her arrest.

Vera Lehndorff, in process.

Production still from the film **Return of the Fly**.



Works in the exhibition

Dimensions are in inches; height preceeds width preceeds depth.

DENNIS ADAMS

Patricia Hearst A-Z, 1979

26 Black and white photographs

16 x 20 each

Courtesy Kent Gallery, New York

MAC ADAMS

Post-Modern Tragedy, 1988

Ektacolor print

40 x 30

Courtesy Farideh Cadot Gallery, New York

GWEN AKIN and ALLAN LUDWIG

Face I, 1985

Platinum print

24 x 20

Courtesy Farideh Cadot Gallery, New York

Verso Face I, 1985

Platinum print

24 x 20

Courtesy Farideh Cadot Gallery, New York

VICTOR BOUILLON

Collapse, 1990

Silkscreen on enamel and aluminum with flourescent lights

48 x 67 1/2 x 5

Courtesy of the artist

NANCY BURSON

Untitled (Allison), 1989

Polaroid photograph

24 x 20

Courtesy Jayne Baum Gallery, New York

SARAH CHARLESWORTH

Thomas Brook Simmons, Bunker Hill Towers, Los Angeles, 1980, 1980

Black and white photograph

79 x 42

Arthur and Carol Goldberg Collection

JENNY HOLTZER

There are Places from the *Survival Series*, 1980-82

Bronze plaque

8 x 10

Private Collection

JESSE HOWARD

Untitled (Nazi Sign), date unknown

Enamel on metal

36 x 18

Collection of Kate Loye

ALFREDO JARR

Business Week Magazine Cover, December 24, 1994, Untouched, 1985

Color photograph

38 x 27

Courtesy of the artist

STEPHEN LAUB

Untitled, 1989

Aluminum leaf on wood with black and white photograph

18 x 72 x 17

Courtesy Stephen Laub and Koury Wingate Gallery, New York

DORTHEA LANGE

Man Entering Internment Camp, 1941

Black and white photograph

8 x 5

Courtesy The National Archives, Washington, D.C.

VERA LEHNDORFF and HOLGER TRULZCH

Sirius V Prado, 1986

Altered Kodak Prestige Print

66 1/2 x 55 1/4

Courtesy Scott Hanson Gallery, New York

SALLY MANN

Kathy Mundy, 1984

Black and white photograph

8 x 10

Courtesy of the artist

Vomit, 1985

Black and white photograph

8 x 10

Courtesy of the artist

ADRIAN PIPER

What will become of me?, 1989

Glass jars with hair, nails, skin pairings, and shelf with text

18 x 18 1/2 x 6

Courtesy John Weber Gallery, New York

AIMEE RANKIN

The Flesh from the *Atrocities Series*, 1987

Mixed media box construction with sound, lights and motor

24 x 24 x 24

Collection of Alexis Rockman

TIM ROLLINS and K.O.S.

Waldheim from the series *Animal Farm*, 1984-87

Acrylic on book pages on linen

26 x 20

Collection of Susan Hort

MARCIA SALO

Carrie, 1989

Color photograph

41 x 31

Courtesy fiction/nonfiction Gallery, New York

ANDRES SERRANO

Madonna and Child II, 1989

Cibachrome print

40 x 30

Courtesy Stux Gallery, New York

NANCY SPERO

Codex Artaud XIII, 1972

Handprinting and collage on paper

51 1/4 x 24 2/1

Courtesy Josh Baer Gallery, New York

ALAN TURNER

By Request, 1986

Oil on canvas

55 x 45

Courtesy of Alan Turner and Koury Wingate Gallery, New York

JOEL PETER WITKIN

Siamese Twins, Los Angeles, 1989

Black and white photograph

16 x 20

Courtesy Pace Editions, New York

KRZYSZTOF WODICZKO

Public Projection, Royal Bank Place, South African Consulate, Place Ville Maria, Montreal, Canada, 1985

Mixed media construction with color transparency

21 x 31 x 4

Courtesy Hal Brom Gallery, New York

ROBERT YARBER

Night Drop III (Pool Drop), 1984

Pastel on paper

40 x 28

Courtesy Dorsky Gallery, New York



Monster in Our Minds

"Monsters are disturbing to people because they appear contrary to Nature, but monsters are obviously part of nature and it is only our understanding which is limited."

—Aristotle

"INSECT POLITICS examines political allegories of the body and its extensions. The body in this sense is the beginning of politics. The constitution of the body as both subject and object is crucial to the reproduction of social formations. INSECT POLITICS is about the transformation of representation of the body in society."

—Steve Derrickson

The history of simple tools is a chronology of extensions and articulation of human functions. Tools, originally conceived about two million years ago as crude adjuncts of the body to increase power and efficacy, are passive participants in accomplishing work.

A machine is merely a supplement limb; this is the be-all and end-all of machinery.

Tools connected in series produce machines. Machinery has gone a step beyond the tool in that it is capable of varying degrees of automatism (self-regulated activity without human participation), contingent human behavior (decision-making), and reaction to sensory stimulus through artificial organs. Mechanical history involves not only extension but replacement of human activity. You might say that the extension of the limbs evolved into extensions of the brain.

We perceive our iron creatures with both fear and euphoria: the machine as saviour and the machine as killer. The machine is an object of projection of our inner wishes and fears. The basic motivation to invent and to use technology is to soothe our fears and to fulfill our wishes. This is why the two most important sources of technological developments today are irrational mega-machines: the military and the space exploration program. The one as a prototype of all fear-machines, the other as the new model of the wish-machine, promising even eternal life for the space traveller.

This film series meditates on machines throughout history, machines in myths. It studies machines in places we might otherwise not look—in religion and in the military, where human individuality is systematically suppressed. It asks why man continues to fabricate ever-more complicated machines, in hopes, perhaps, of one day merging with them himself, as he does, for example in *Robocop*.

This series features *Nosferatu* by **F.M. Murnau** (1922), *Freaks*, by **Tod Browning** (1932), *The Devils* by **Ken Russell** (1971), *Even Dwarfs Started Small* by **Werner Herzog** (1971), *Phase IV*, by **Saul Bass** (1974), *Carrie*, by **Brian De Palma** (1976), *Soldier Girls* by **Nick Broomfield & Joan Churchill** (1979), *The Hunger* by **Tony Scott** (1983), *Humanity* by **Terry Klein** (1984), *Bad Blood for the Vampire* by **Lysanne Thibodeau** (1985), *Robocop* by **Paul Verhoeven** (1987), *Vel* by **Regine Steenbock** (1988), *Machine Dreams* by **Peter Krieg** (1988), and *The Fly* by **David Cronenberg** (1986).

In his article "The Visceral Mind: The Major Films of David Cronenberg," William Beard writes:

The mad scientist is the most overtly represented figure in [Cronenberg's] films, whose attempts to make everything work perfectly inadvertently knock the delicate balance askew, sending the body on its rampage. Scientific experiments in telepathy, cosmetics, organsubstitution, plastic surgery, radical psychiatry, tranquilizers, subliminal

video signals are among the metaphors for hubristic rationalism in Cronenberg's work, and the scientist engaging in these practices are older males (often father-figures) who believe unquestioningly in their ability to improve mankind. Their faith—and that of society in general—in the power of consciousness and reason to control human nature is confounded by the appearance of eruptive side-effects whose force utterly overturns reason, morality, and every other form of civilized order. For Cronenberg the mind/body dichotomy is, so to speak, a two-way street: when the confident head tries to manipulate the gut, it not only fails but also provokes the gut to rise up and have its way with the head—often literally.

The most idiosyncratic aspect of Cronenberg's work is certainly his obsession with the dichotomy of, and relationship between, mind and body. This is a dominant element in every one of his films, from the early *Stereo* (1969) and *Crimes of the Future* (1970) onwards, and it represents the major difference in content (and ultimately in theme) between Cronenberg's horror films and those of any other practitioner. Generally speaking, the body may be equated with the passions, instincts, and unacknowledged desires of the central horror genre dualism, but a simple equation is not adequate to explain the grim enthusiasm and inventiveness of Cronenberg's regurgitative version. His depiction of the body as an anarchic domain of its own is the most vivid, startling, and horrific characteristic of his movies, and is undoubtedly the first thing people recollect when they think of his work: congealing goo seeping from ears and noses, squirming fleshy parasites inhabiting people's abdomens, strange growths, new organs, bizarre changes occurring in the body and explosions of blood and flesh. These and other spectacular expressions of the body's will constitute an insistence on the physical, unknowable, untamable half of the human animal—an aspect that forever lies in wait beneath the bland assumptions of control and the airy cerebrations of the conscious mind.

Much of the objection to Cronenberg's work is simply an objection to horror movies as such—or at least to the horror movies of the 1970s and 80s, with their escalated levels

of sex and violence. The standard critical view of these films is that they are superficial, morally suspect to cash in on debased attitudes without scruple or artistic purpose, that they represent indulgence for the sake of indulgence to the same degree as a Roman banquet and with possibly more degrading results. The notion that it might be possible to speak of a philosophy of the horror film or to claim for it and kind of meaning would be regarded in many quarters as laughable.

Yet it can be argued that the horror genre has at its base a symbolic action that articulates ordinary psychological tensions—tensions resulting from a conflict between repressive social norms and the innate desires of the human animal. Wishes unacceptable to society are repressed. But repressed wishes do not cease to exist—especially not when they are being renewed constantly in the unconscious mind. They are merely forced into new shapes or stored in the form of frustration, resentment, and hostility. In the horror film the repressed returns in form of a “monster” (a deranged human, an alien creature, or some other manifestation) to wreak destruction in a release of damned-up feeling, twisted into violent aggression by its period of imprisonment and denial. The viewer beholds what he fears but also what he desires, and together with horror he experiences a feeling of liberation.

The emotional forces involved here are very powerful, springing from the deepest wells of the unconscious, and they are not only by their very nature inarticulate but also completely unmediated by reason of ethics and quite repugnant to the conscious mind. It is the generic aim of the horror film to tap this cauldron of explosive feelings and give expression to them—and since they are “unacceptable forms: unrestrainedly sexual, violent. The concept of violation is central to the genre. Those things that are found most objectionable in the horror film are the most central to its existence—it is not sufficient merely to refer to such feelings, to observe them from a distance or to encounter them only in their sublimated forms, because as anything other than direct, audience-shared feeling they are simply unavailable to the conscious mind. Nevertheless, it remains possible to condemn the horror film, to feel that the experience it evokes is unhealthy

and potentially destructive. But judgement cannot be rendered one way or the other in ignorance of the mechanisms that structure and sustain the genre, and any condemnation must be preceded by an understanding."

David Denby, accepting "morality" as a system for ordering human behavior, sees an important fact—what movie-making is all about: money! He writes:

Part of what action movies have been doing in the last dozen years or so is discovering a way of releasing the audience from normal "moral" responses to death. They do that by making the criminals and madmen and drooling, fanged creatures worse and worse. The kicks keep escalating, the scum gets scummier. Outer-space monsters, devils, fascist helicopter and motorcycle squads, Communist torturers, Mexicans with ugly beards (always disposable in movies), black and Latin voodoo cultists (ditto), terrorists, rapists, thrill-killers.... "Get me a BEAST" the studio executives must be crying. Because there is always more money in killing a BEAST.

—Jürgen Bruning, Film Curator

Sources: Article in *Exit* magazine by **David Paul**; notes by **Steve Derrickson**; program notes to *Machine Dreams* by **Peter Krieg**; "The Visceral Mind: The Major Films of David Cronenberg" by **William Beard**, in *The Shape of Rage*, edited by **Piers Handling**; article by **David Denby**, *New York* magazine.



Disease Child

Stricken by rheumatic flu at the age of five, I watched my innocent body heave, swell, blotch, blister, and decay. In my diary I carefully recorded the downward progress of my health. On the edge of extinction I hovered for three weeks, lapsing in and out of comas, suffering indescribable agonies in every muscle and organ. Doctors, nurses, medicines surrounded me....Surrogate blood, food, oxygen circulated in and out of my body....In short: High Drama, morbid, humiliating, and seductive. When I finally recovered, I was filled with a sense of sadness, knowing that never again would my life be as interesting.

I became fascinated with disease....Whenever we played neighborhood games, I was always the doctor. I could imagine the most hideous symptoms, and the vilest cures. Later, through my reading, I discovered that the variety and horror of sickness far exceeded even my wildest expectations....

I became a hit at family parties, talking to aged relatives for hours, patiently listening to the minutest symptoms of their decay. I took their blood pressure, listened to their pulse, and kept a chart recording their decline through the years. Their deaths never surprised me. I attended the funerals with an air of smugness, the sudden shock of grief that overwhelmed others was incomprehensible to me. "See?" I demanded, revealing my meticulous graphs, "there's no surprise, really. Grandpa was right on schedule, and Aunt Emma will probably be next." Needless to say, my pronouncements were regarded as utterances in the worst of possible taste.

When I was ten years old, I got up suddenly and walked out of church. My parents followed me, worried, of course. I patiently told them that religion was absurd.

"God is Disease," I said simply, "and our bodies are his paradise. His saints are Virus and Bacteria...."

"Shush!" said Mother.

I continued. "Dear parents, the real metaphysics involves circulatory, lymphatic, coronary knowledge, the vast unexplored realms of anatomy. Only through science can we understand God and defend ourselves from Him. God will defeat us, this is true, but there is nobility in delaying the inevitable!"

"No!" said Father.

"Yes!" I insisted.

My blasphemy was not taken seriously...

Hank Hyena, a San Francisco based artist, performs "Miracles of the Flesh" in conjunction with this exhibition.

— Hank Hyena

