



<http://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz>

## ***ResearchSpace@Auckland***

### **Copyright Statement**

The digital copy of this thesis is protected by the Copyright Act 1994 (New Zealand).

This thesis may be consulted by you, provided you comply with the provisions of the Act and the following conditions of use:

- Any use you make of these documents or images must be for research or private study purposes only, and you may not make them available to any other person.
- Authors control the copyright of their thesis. You will recognise the author's right to be identified as the author of this thesis, and due acknowledgement will be made to the author where appropriate.
- You will obtain the author's permission before publishing any material from their thesis.

To request permissions please use the Feedback form on our webpage.

<http://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/feedback>

### **General copyright and disclaimer**

In addition to the above conditions, authors give their consent for the digital copy of their work to be used subject to the conditions specified on the Library Thesis Consent Form.

**The Politics of Insects:**  
Discipline and Resistance in the  
Cinema of David Cronenberg

**Scott. A Wilson**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,  
The University of Auckland, 2007.

## Abstract.

This dissertation examines the films of David Cronenberg which all conduct a consistently thorough examination of the relationship between the ideologically constituted Cartesian subject and the disciplinary structures that surround, control and limit this subject. Cinema, because of the presence of both film form and narrative content, functions as a double articulation of this disciplinary activity. Each film's narrative disciplines, on screen, the bodies contained within the plot, even as each film's form disciplines both the way in which these cinematic bodies are delivered to an audience, and the way the audience's own viewing practices are controlled and composed. Thus it becomes vital to explore the mechanisms implicated in these processes, and to gain an understanding of how Cronenberg's cinema works to highlight and critique them.

The primary assertion of this thesis is that Cronenberg's work functions as a particular style of resistance to hegemony that Slavoj Žižek labels 'heresy'. For Žižek, heresy occurs not when one disobeys one's ideological requirements, but when one over-fulfills them, thereby extending these ideological demands and disciplinary discursive structures out to a site of logical absurdity. In assessing and charting this territory, the thesis is constructed in the following manner. The first chapter, which outlines my methodology, applies itself to a brief examination of Cronenberg's least-discussed commercial feature (Fast Company). Chapter Two is concerned with charting the disciplines applied to the body in Shivers, Rabid and The Fly, while Chapter Three continues a focus on Cronenberg's movement and play with framing devices as a means of subverting a stable spectatorial position, utilising eXistenZ, Spider and The Dead Zone as examples. Chapter Four explores the manner with which heretical adherence to a single ideological construction pushes the protagonists towards large-scale disciplinary violations, as detailed in Crash, M. Butterfly and Dead Ringers while the fifth chapter examines notions of discipline and recuperation is focused on Naked Lunch, Scanners and The Brood. A final sixth chapter compares Cronenberg's most recent film, A History of Violence, with Videodrome in order to explore the changing face of his disciplinary ambivalence and its relationship to a broader cinematic industry.

This Thesis is dedicated to Teresa,  
Queen of the Bears.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the support of the following people and institutions, without whom this project would have certainly fallen by the wayside:

- First and foremost, thanks are owed to Teresa Callaghan. Her hard work and continued self-sacrifice in the face of my academic selfishness goes far beyond the bounds of expectation. This document therefore stands as partial repayment for her years of dedication.
- To my supervisor, Misha Kavka, I owe an enormous debt of gratitude for her guidance and wisdom. Indeed, I thank her for salvaging this project from the dustbin of history, and for providing both encouragement and discipline, in equal measures, exactly as required.
- Thank you to Carla Seth for ‘The Stratford Insight’ that allowed me to resolve the trajectory of perversity in Cronenberg’s films and thereby complete this project.
- To Stephen Turner for his guidance and support.
- To Amy West, for continued friendship and wisdom.
- To my sister Robyn for her support, friendship and coffee.
- To the staff and students of the Unitec School of Performing and Screen Arts whose support and patience has contributed to this document.
- To the Ministry of Education whose generous financial support kept the wolf from the door.
- To the University of Auckland – specifically the Department of Film, Television and Media Studies and the Faculty of Arts for their generous support and enthusiasm for this project.
- To the staff and students of the School of English, Film, Theatre and Media Studies at Victoria, University of Wellington.
- Finally thanks to David Cronenberg, whose films continue to entertain, stimulate and provoke, even after a number of years of near-daily viewings.

## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract:</b>	ii
<b>Dedication:</b>	iii
<b>Acknowledgements:</b>	iv

### Chapter One: The Filmmaker as Heretic

Introduction: The Politics of Insects:	1
The Filmmaker as Heretic:	4
Cinematic Apparatus as a Disciplinary Structure:	7
The Canadian Heretic:	14
A Cinema of Perversion, a Cinema for Perverts:	21
<u>Fast Company</u> :	24

### Chapter Two: The Body Explodes

Cartesian Difficulties:	34
<u>Shivers</u> :	35
De-Eroticising Sex:	39
Overcoming the Porn Aesthetic:	43
<u>Rabid</u> :	48
Shades of Transformation:	49
Rose's Ambiguity and the Porn Aesthetic:	53
<u>The Fly</u> and Agency of the Flesh:	57
Self Knowledge and Knowledge of the Self:	61
The Flesh as Agent:	64

### Chapter Three: The Mind Erupts

Frames and Framing:	68
<u>The Dead Zone</u> :	75
Saving Amy:	77
Smith's Dream:	79

Character, Narrative and Interpretation:	86
<u>Spider</u> :	87
Shifts in Time and (Subjective) Space:	89
Attending the Visions:	97
<u>eXistenZ</u> :	99
The Nested Diegesis:	101
Playing the Game:	104

## **Chapter Four: Functions of Failure**

Escaping the Genre Bind:	108
The Focus on Sex:	111
<u>M. Butterfly</u> :	114
The Film Itself:	115
When a Woman is Not:	120
<u>Dead Ringers</u> :	127
Multiple Monogamies:	131
<u>Dead Ringers</u> and Issues of Form:	135
Marvellous Mutations:	139
<u>Crash</u> :	143
‘Sex and Car Crashes ...’:	145
Sexual Heresy:	147
<u>Crash</u> and the End of Desire:	150

## **Chapter Five: The Subject Under Examination**

Shadow Texts:	154
<u>The Brood</u> :	156
Layers of Discourse:	158
Producing the Brood:	163
<u>Scanners</u> :	166
Scanning the Permeable Body:	167
Scanning and Surveillance:	173
<u>Naked Lunch</u> :	177

Thematic Accretion:	178
Bugpowder Dust and Mugwump Jism:	180
Discipline and Control:	183
Annexia:	186

## **Chapter Six: “All Agents Defect ...”**

Can We Call for Meta-Heresy?:	189
<u>Videodrome:</u>	192
The ‘Videodrome’ Project:	195
The Pre-Ontological and the Real:	198
The Trajectory of Perversity (I):	205
<u>A History of Violence:</u>	206
Millbrook, Indiana:	210
The Trajectory of Perversity (II):	215
Surprising the Non-Duped, or, The Emperor’s New Clothes:	217
“... All Resistors Sell Out”:	222

<b>Bibliography:</b>	227
----------------------	-----