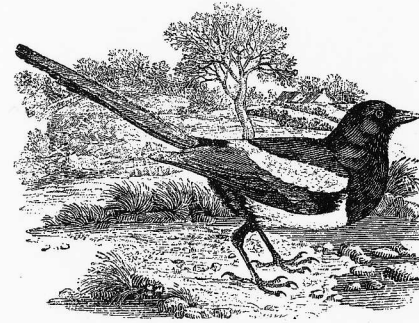


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FROM *VIDEODROME* TO *DEXTER*: 'LONG LIVE THE NEW FLESH!'

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Recent symptoms of obsessive addiction to TV series such as *C.S.I.*, *Criminal Minds*, *The X Files*, *Buffy - the Vampire Slayer* and *Dexter* show a tendency to substitute television soap operas for the Gothic novels and also reveal a perverse attraction to watch violence through the same media that transmits daily news about violent events in different war scenarios all over the world. Perhaps one could consider that this irrational attraction to violent images, where reality and illusion can become as confused as in a psychotic mind, explains our constant state of psychic stress that Marshall McLuhan considered as the most negative effect of technology. Being psychologically infected through media, our minds are dangerously trained to receive stronger stimulants that seem specially designed to increase our desires for violence. Immunity to this condition can only be achieved through art, where we can feel the true nature of our present and be deeply aware about our most perverse impulses. David Cronenberg was able to express this awareness in *Videodrome* (1983), where TV viewers suffer from hallucinations created by electronic signals which provoke brain tumours. We too as potential victims of this disease, whenever we watch some programs that depict torture and murder, we still remain faithful to our TV screen which we have converted into a domesticated monster we love and where we can see reflected our most obscure desires. No wonder we can feel sympathy for Dexter Morgan's violent impulses and for his consciousness of being a "clean, crisp outside and nothing at all on the inside" (Lindsay 49). After all, we share a common dream: we look for another, more inventive, satisfying fleshy existence, perhaps on the other side of death.

The desire to live a more intense and gratifying existence, to escape the emptiness and the mechanism of daily routines, creates strong needs to experience new emotions and sensations that people hope to find in the

new technologies, in general, and TV in particular. The urge can cause an addiction to other kinds of repetitive acts creating an inescapable entrapment that turns viewers into victims of an illusive world where the most transgressive acts of violence can be experienced and lived with the same intensity as if they were real, in spite of being simulated. The involuntary repetition, created by TV, on its domestic viewers is what makes them familiar with all the unfamiliar atrocities they watch, which denotes the presence of the Freudian uncanny in this medium, that led Hellen Wheatley to conclude "the uncanny provides the initial point of dialogue between Gothic studies and television studies" (102). This "uncanny" effect is at the centre of the ambivalence that blurs the boundaries between desire and fantasy, reality and imagination, transgression and norm, an ambiguity experienced by every person who sits in front of a small screen that has the power to produce a constant effect of uncertainty that makes everyone lose his sense of reality. That's why TV is so attuned to the aesthetic purposes of the Gothic, which is defined as "a genre of uncertainty" by Catherine Spooner, who considers television "a space as well suited to the Gothic as any other" (242), an idea that was also partaken by Davenport-Hines, when he stated that "television soap opera provides the 20th century equivalent of Gothic novels" (144). As in gothic fiction, the effects of horror in television are sometimes used to recuperate some sense of the real, but instead they can "make the unreal of familiar horror images real", as Fred Botting concluded, when he also considered that "bloody, violent, horrifying reality - shaped by Gothic figures and horror fictions - is returned as Gothic horror by media" (5). This is the reason why simulated violence can be perceived as real violence, and violent acts can be practiced in reality with huge indifference as if they were quite banal, and didn't require any kind of responsibility for the consequences of their dangerous nature. Being, at the same time, real, unreal and overreal, images of violence on TV can originate a sense of loss in face of contradictory and ambivalent scenes, because the difference between shock and repetition is erased. In a chapter entitled "The small scream", Fred Botting noticed this contradiction when he characterized the television not only as a banal, mundane and repetitive media, but also as a box of flows, shocks, sensations and strangeness, which made him conclude that "Shock has been steadily incorporated in the circuits of broadcasting and spectral pleasure: 'television contains (and pleasures us) by contradictions', the very ambivalence of the impulses of shock and repetition marking the rates of bored familiarity and excited attention on the pulses of the viewers" (131).

Being aware of these contradictory effects of television and trying to denounce its horrific potentiality, David Cronenberg created *Videodrome* (1982), a narrative about a man's exposure to violent imagery via videocassettes and

take to bed with you", because of its interests in... Cronenberg's sense of humour allowed him to approach his subject through the detection of many contradictions that deconstruct an apparently controlled communication system, revealing the dark side of its main responsible interveners. Civic TV was never interested in civic service nor in promoting any kind of moral sense because it was a pornographic TV channel. Max Renn, its President, was so concerned about finding new audacious means of shocking his TV viewers, through the most perverted sexual violence, that he became completely addicted to it and totally deranged. Nicki Brand, a pop psychologist, the soul saviour of CRAM Radio in a show called "Emotional Rescue", seemed to possess enough moral credibility to be invited to a TV talk show to contest Renn's obscene activities, but when later she was invited to his apartment, she showed an uncontrollable curiosity for his porno tapes and also for sado-masochist sexual practices. The character of Prof. Brian O'Blivion, a media prophet obsessed with the metaphysics of television, was humorously modelled on Canadian essayist Marshall McLuhan, famous for his cryptic statements about media, which didn't protect him, in Cronenberg's film, from being *Videodrome's* first victim, reducing his existence to his discourses recorded in a video-cassette. Bianca O'Blivion, his daughter, had the mission to stop the side effects of the Videodrome signal, which induced brain tumours in the viewers, but she was described as "her father's screen", which creates certain doubts about the reality and efficiency of her messianic purpose that departed from the suicidal principle that was necessary "to kill your old flesh to become the New Flesh".

Revealing their hidden duplicity, none of these characters seems to escape from his darkest impulses which are stimulated by the spectacle of TV violence, a fact that interested Cronenberg and that was also commented by Fred Botting, when he concluded that "Unless the horror is spectacular or boredom sets in" (Spooner 62). Justifying his interest to delve deeper into these perverse impulses, the Canadian director confesses: "I've always been interested in dark things and other people's fascination with dark things. The idea of people locking themselves in a room and turning a key on a television set so that they can watch something extremely dark, and, by doing that allow themselves to explore their fascinations ... That's closer to the bone in terms of an original impulse" (Lucas 27). On account of this primitive impulse people feel uncontrollably attracted by repulsive and horrifying images that are the cause, in *Videodrome*, for their hallucinations, because as Cronenberg explains: "With *Videodrome* I want to posit the possibility that a man expose

to violent imagery would begin to illuminate (...) there is a suggestion that the technology involved in Videodrome is specifically designed to create violence in a person" (Rodley 94).

This explanation about the influence of a technologic world on our human senses and its power to cleave the mind into the real and the imagined can be associated with a thought expressed by Paul Virilio, when he says that "giving way to the technological instant, vision machines would make derangement of the senses, a permanent state, conscious life becoming an oscillating trip whose only absolute poles would be birth and death" (92). *Videodrome* represents this "oscillating trip" between life and death till it's no more possible to recognize their difference, because every character can fall victim of a death drive, a kind of mechanistic and daemonic compulsiveness based on a desire for immortality, for a dimension that Zizek found very similar to "what horror fiction calls 'undead', a strange, immortal, indestructible life that persists beyond death", or "beyond the 'way of all flesh'" (Zizek 294). This state of "undead" is what seems to be offered to Max Renn by Bianca O'Blivion, when she proclaims "Death to Videodrome; Long Live the New Flesh!". This programmatic imperative was created to fight against the terrible effects of a biomechanical concept called "The Flesh TV", whose name came from the influence on Cronenberg of a science fiction novel by William Burroughs, entitled *The Soft Machine* (1961). As one of the side effects of Videodrome's virus, "The Flesh TV" meant that the viewers could have access to a new kind of TV, that seemed to be ironically inspired by many famous aphorisms based on McLuhan's theory about *mass media*, such as "TV is a physical structure of the brain", "TV is reality and reality is less than TV", "The viewer is the screen", "There is nothing real outside our perception of reality", "Technology is an extension of our own bodies; it's part of our bodies"; "The medium is the message or massage".

After having experienced the reality of all these abstract thoughts, Renn's visions became flesh, according to the machine-becomes-man principle, which means that his human flesh suffered mutations to incorporate technological devices that were literally the extension of his body, such as the stomach slit where he kept his flesh gun, the hand grenade, the flesh cassettes and many other organic fusions as the breathing screen, a mechanical effect used when Max Renn was seduced by a television close-up of Nicki Brand's mouth. Confused and puzzled by his strange and bizarre experiences, Renn lives in a constant anxiety and existential uncertainty about the reality of his hallucinations without being conscious of the permanent derangement of his senses, which justifies his final mechanistic impulse to kill himself and become "the new flesh", an ambiguous and very *unheimlich* scene that leaves open the question to know if he really attained a new plane of existence or

about the Freudian concept of the death drive presented in *Principle*, we may say that we are dealing here with a very uncanny impulse that confounds the safe distinctions between life and death. Consequently, what Max Renn attained cannot be called "life" nor "death", because his enthusiasm for destruction comes from a force that is as much internal to the organism as it is external, being the final scenes of *Videodrome* a representation of that fantastic apocalypticism originated by a machinic desire, an artificial death drive that is totally inhuman, as Botting noticed: "Nor more life. Nor death. No more mother and father: just genetic materialisation and digital recreations of doubles. No more humanity, history, or modernity. Just more and more ghosts gliding across screens. Beyond life and death, but insisting as an alien, daemonic, repetitive rhythm of life-death" (Botting 216). However, Cronenberg was very explicit about his refusal to find in *Videodrome* a simplistic message that could say this film is an attack on the television industry, because he wanted to be subtler than that, being his intention to deal with the complexity of things and to focus on TV as a thing we do, because his interest was always directed at the attempts to unify human physiology and psychology in order to understand better what we are. He clarified his concept of "New Flesh" saying that: "The most accessible version of the 'New Flesh' in *Videodrome* would be that you can actually change what it means to be a human being in a physical way. (...) We are physically different from our forefathers partly because of what we take into our bodies, and partly because of things like glasses and surgery. But there is a further step that could happen, which would be that you could grow another arm, that you could actually physically change the way you look - mutate" (Rodley 80). In *Videodrome* these mutations result from the interpenetration of man and machine through a seductive and fatal attraction that we also found in *Crash*, where all the erotic terms are so technical that sexual pleasure seems to have always been mediated and transmitted by a mechanic system of fantasies that, like TV, originates a hyperrealistic impersonalization caused by the fusion between technology, sex and death. In *Sex, Machines and Navels*, Botting expands this idea, saying that: "The object of anxiety and desire appears the same: a horrifying or eroticised technology takes sexual energy beyond sex, beyond corporeality and beyond difference in an ultimate obliteration of every human race" (Botting 1).

Something very inhuman is also represented in *Dexter*, an American Gothic TV soap opera, where there isn't a direct association between body and technology, but the main character, a serial killer with ethic purposes, lives as hallucinated as Max Renn, without being able to distinguish his illusions from reality, because he was also victim of a long period of exposition to

violence, when his body remained for several days covered by his mother's blood, after she had been brutally murdered. After this traumatic experience, Dexter had good reasons to feel psychologically damaged, being only able to act mechanically to respond to his murder impulse, a death drive driven by his Dark Passenger, whose secret presence inside himself forced him to be a total simulacra, "a perfect imitation of human life", like the *media* through which his image is transmitted and like the viewers who watch the series with an increasing interest in Dexter's violent crimes developing an uncanny identification with a monster. Dexter's strangeness becomes surprisingly familiar, not only because there is a deep ambivalence in the Freudian concept of the "Uncanny" (Das Unheimliche), but also because Gothic television is a hybrid domestic medium, as Helen Wheatley observed in her study of the Gothic on British and US television, where we are constantly reminded that this terror/horror television is *viewed*, within a domestic milieu. This explains why Dexter's monstrosity is defined through so many connections with all common American citizens who are obsessed in keeping up appearances possessing dark hidden truths, empty lives, violent and uncontrolled impulses, psychotic personalities, inhuman behaviours and dysfunctional families, which make Dexter proud of being "a neat and polite monster, the boy next door" (Lindsay, 42), allowing him to pass as a fully emotional member of the human race, and not the unfeeling predator he really is. As a consequence, this smart, funny and thought provoking TV series brings the horrid and the normal into juxtaposition until the viewer is unsure what is normal anymore (Wheatley 167). On account of this proximity between Dexter and his viewers' psychological and social realities, he can become their double, abolishing the distance between his image on the screen and everyone who sits in front of it, because it's impossible not to feel identified with a monster that makes us perceive our inhuman condition. Being a modern equivalent to Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Dexter succeeded in making a serial-killer seem very familiar, showing that we suffered a posthuman transformation that changed all of us into Frankensteinian monsters, who anxiously live in the same uncanny reality, that seems to be simultaneously real, unreal and overreal, what makes us so unsure, as Dexter, of who we are and what we do. Consequently, Richard Davenport-Hines concluded that: "In films and novels, serial killers have become emblems of the evil duality supposedly haunting every modern individual: They are the external embodiment of all the inner anxieties, interdictions and guilt of the age, and they are represented as behaving like soap-operatic goths" (Davenport-Hines 314).

Because it dissolves the boundaries between a serial killer and his viewers, *Dexter* stimulates their perverse pleasures transforming them into the reality of a TV monster whose identity is defined as being "a perfect

monogram" (Lindsay). This condition makes them particularly receptive to body mutations and as fascinated as Dexter to explore their aesthetic impact, whenever he transforms his dead bodies into real works of art abolishing the differences between a crime scene and an art exhibition. Practising crime as one of the fine arts, Dexter's morbid sense of composition could remind us of Cindy Sherman's assemblages of body parts, Robert Gober legs protruding from walls, Abigail Lane's wax corpses, Keith Edmier's monstrous fabrications of human beings, and Von Hagen's plastic corpses, where flesh has been replaced by plastic without leaving any trait of the original tissue, which can be compared to Dexter's beautifully bloodless and wrapped body packages. In a chapter entitled "Fake Plastic Corpses", Catherine Spooner concludes that "contemporary Gothic is more obsessed with bodies than in any of its previous phases: bodies become spectacle provoking disgust, modified, reconstructed and artificially augmented. (...) Gothic bodies are frequently presented to us as simulations, as replacements of the real" (Spooner 63).

"Long Live the New Flesh!" translates this replacement, which reveals a desire, common to *Videodrome* and *Dexter*, to transcend the body, giving flesh to an obsessive ideal for a more perfect life, which ironically becomes a monstrous ideal, because in both cases the main characters' obsession lead them to build a new life out of corpses or out of their own dead bodies, making them lose their sense of reality what justifies Baudrillard's belief that the rate of reality is falling every day. Existing in an inhuman dimension, Max Renn and Dexter are very similar to all mad artists and scientists in several gothic fictions. Transforming the body into simulacra that replace the real life, they are like Frankenstein, victims of their destructive impulses, that instead of creating "new life" create "new deaths" or mere simulations of life or death. Their narratives, completely dependent on their perceptions, have also the ethic purpose of showing the dark side of the creative process. They expose not only the dangers and costs of creativity, but also alert against all fatal art and scientific projects revealing certain paradoxes of creation. Their images of violence make us aware, as Elisabeth Bronfen also perceived, that "art need dead bodies, art creates dead bodies" (Williams 122) and that "the perfection of aesthetic idealization can meet its opposite: monstrosity" (123).

Subverting the distinction between the real and the phantasmic and provoking extensive effects on our minds and bodies, Max Renn and Dexter make us feel more death than alive, or mere products of an artificial reality whose limits and processes of creation should always be questioned. The relevance of this subject was underlined by Christoph Grunenberg: "In an era of genetic manipulation, disintegrating subjectivity, and the technologic

into the process of creation, as established in Frankenstein and the related motif of the double (...) are more pertinent than ever" (Grunenberg 63).

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BETWEEN THE BEAUTY AND THE BEAST: AN ANALYSIS OF THE PERFORMATIVITY OF GENDER IN CHUCK PALAHNIUK'S *INVISIBLE MONSTERS*

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Chuck Palahniuk is widely believed to be one of the most controversial American contemporary writers, well-known for bringing up contentious subjects in his novels, namely those social issues that seem to haunt society displaying its fragilities and contradictions. In *Invisible Monsters* he sets out to examine the way society understands the concept of "woman" and gender related matters, calling our attention to its paradoxical situation in Western culture. By means of this dark humoured story, tarnished by a heavy social critique, the writer undertakes a deconstruction of the concept of sex, incarnated in the classical patriarchal paradigm, particularly exploring and dissecting both the concept of *woman(liness)* and the role which has been historically attributed to women.

The story presents itself as a sort of autobiographical report and narrated by Shannon McFarland, a girl who is a supermodel and embodies the ideal of the All-American girl. This girl suffers a car accident and goes to the hospital, where she learns that she will have to start a new life, because her face has been disfigured. There, she meets Brandy, a transsexual undergoing operations in order to become a woman who, in turn, ends up being her best friend and advisor. Depicted like this, the plot of *Invisible Monsters* would appear another melodramatic novel with a predictable storyline. However, what later comes as a surprise to the reader, and operates as a disruptive factor, is that the apparently random accident that Shannon suffered, which left her without a face and unable to speak was, in reality, self-inflicted. "The Truth Is I Shot Myself In The Face" (Palahniuk 282). Bearing this new fact in mind, some questions begin to take form: What is the meaning of Shannon's deed? By becoming a monster what does she intend to *de-monstrate*? At