Speculative Queerness: Non-Normative Bodies, Genders, and Sexualities in David Cronenberg's Crimes of the Future

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David Cronenberg's *Crimes of the Future* (2022) is a complex, ambiguous, evocative work of science fiction. The film is rich to the point of being overloaded with significance: as critics such as Ann Hornaday (2022) and Richard Lawson (2022) have argued, it seems to contain too many themes and ideas to fully cohere, with David Rooney's verdict that the film 'offers up more mysteries than it solves' (Rooney 2022) being widely shared. The film lends itself to at least five potential lines of interpretation, though insightful viewers will doubtless be able to discern others. It can be read as (1) an ecological parable about how humanity might adapt or fail to adapt to a polluted environment and/or altered climate; (2) an exploration of a range of posthuman themes, including human technological augmentation; (3) a satire on consumer capitalism and/or the influence of biotech corporations; (4) an exploration of the status of art and the figure of the artist in contemporary culture; and (5) a meta-commentary on the course of Cronenberg's own filmmaking career that contains frequent allusions to his previous films. While all these interpretations are valid and defensible, and there is clearly something to be said for each of them, this article develops a somewhat different reading by focusing on the film's queer aesthetic, thematic, and narrative elements. It is argued here that doing so unlocks a queer utopian dimension to the film that is otherwise obscured. The article concludes by proposing the concept of 'speculative queerness' as a way to think about texts like *Crimes of the Future* that concretely explore queer themes in a speculative mode, and contrasts this with José Esteban Muñoz's ideal of a 'queer futurity' that is permanently deferred.

Crimes of the Future is outwardly dystopian: it is set at an unspecified future date in a version of the United States characterised by ubiquitous urban decay, intensified corporate dominance, and an oppressive, quasi-authoritarian government. In a reading of the film as an ecological parable, according

to which it ought to be seen as part of a 'recent turn toward the "weird" in eco-horror' (Booker 2023: 28), M. Keith Booker has emphasised this dystopian aspect, claiming that the film's 'imagination of deterioration is thoroughly informed by a sense that things are not only bad but are getting worse and will continue to do so, leaving little room to imagine improvement' (ibid: 38). On Booker's interpretation, the film's 'especially strong focus on the impact of environmental deterioration', combined with its portrayal of runaway human mutation, implies that there is 'no identifiable fix for the general deterioration of conditions, a sense that resonates with widespread attitudes in the world of the early 2020s' (Booker 28). What this pessimistic framing neglects, however, are two further elements that complicate the film's status as a dystopian text. The first is that although the film possesses some obviously dystopian features, these are without exception over-familiar cultural shorthands or, more plainly put, cliches. As one would expect from a filmmaker of Cronenberg's level of sophistication, however, the film appears to be aware of this. This is surely unsurprising: it would be extraordinary if the director of films as intensely self-reflexive as *Videodrome* (Cronenberg 1983) or *eXistenZ* (Cronenberg 1999) had resuscitated such tropes entirely unselfconsciously. In line with a utopian/dystopian tradition reaching all the way back to Thomas More's richly ambiguous *Utopia* (More 2012), there is thus reason to think that the film's dystopian trappings are not to be accepted at face value but ought to be taken in some other way.

The second element neglected by a dystopian framing of the film is that while its *setting* is somewhat dystopian, much of the *action* that takes place within it is not of the sort that we readily associate with dystopian narratives. While informed in places by a dystopian ambience, a lot of what occurs during the film is in fact not so much dystopian as *strange*. What exactly is strange about the film and how best to understand this strangeness will be fully considered below. To anticipate, though, what is strange in Cronenberg's film clearly has something to do with the nexus it explores between genetic mutations, medical technologies, new kinds of surgery, and emergent forms of sexuality. An archaic term for 'strange' is of course 'queer'. While many critics have reflected on the role of gender, sexuality, and the body in Cronenberg's films, very few have read them through an explicitly queer lens. This is likely due to commentators assuming that by focusing on the transgressive nature of Cronenberg's work they were implicitly engaged in an analysis of its potential queerness. If so, however,

this is unsatisfactory as it neglects to articulate some of the potentially significant links between his films and queer theory and politics.

In one of the richest discussions of the role of gender and sexuality in Cronenberg's work to date, Barbara Creed has analysed the 'homoerotic' aspect of a range of Cronenberg's films from the 1980s and 90s (Creed 2000). Describing them as simultaneously 'homoerotic, homophobic, misogynist, and melancholic', Creed detects a deep ambivalence at work in what she sees as Cronenberg's 'increasingly bleak, closed, homosexual universe' (ibid., 84). Creed's argument is subtle and carefully qualified, but her main criticism of Cronenberg's work – of which she is also highly appreciative – is that it is often organised around the displacement of homoerotic desire, typically onto heterosexual relationships (ibid., 85–98). On Creed's account, either 'male/female relationships are used to consolidate male/male relationships' (ibid., 85) as in the one woman/two men erotic dynamic of *Dead Ringers* (Cronenberg 1988) or homoerotic desire is 'displaced onto other sites' as in the sexualised technology that Creed sees as indirectly facilitating homosocial relations in *Crash* (ibid., 98). Because *Crimes of the Future* is to a considerable extent a continuation of the themes, philosophical preoccupations, and stylistic conventions of Cronenberg's previous work, there is a case to be made that it is somewhat susceptible to the same criticism. In particular, the fact that it foregrounds a seemingly heterosexual relationship, combined with the way eroticism is, as we shall see, heavily mediated by technologies of various sorts, might be taken to show that it repeats the gesture of displacement observed by Creed. From the point of view of the present discussion, the limitation of Creed's analysis is the way it confines itself to tracking male/female and heterosexual/homosexual correspondences throughout Cronenberg's work. While this framing yields some very valuable insights into his films' handling of gender and sexuality, in the case of *Crimes of the Future* it has the side-effect of making it difficult to engage with a dimension of the film which is less susceptible to being made sense of in terms of familiar conceptual pairings like heterosexual/homosexual. Rather than either rehearsing or pre-empting a Creed-inspired critique of *Crimes of the Future*, a potentially more profitable approach to the film is therefore to try redescribing it in terms of a different vocabulary in order to bring some of its otherwise more intractable aspects into focus.

The redescription and analysis of *Crimes of the Future* put forward below is an example of reparative reading, a way of reading cultural texts that was first introduced by the queer theorist Eve Sedgwick. 'The desire of a reparative impulse,' Sedgwick writes, 'is additive and accretive. Its fear, a realistic one, is that the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture; it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self' (Sedgwick 2003, 149). To read a text reparatively means two things: firstly, to approach it sympathetically and in a spirit of presumptive generosity; and, secondly, to read it with the aim of recovering whatever may be of use to the marginalised constituency from whose perspective the text is being read. In reading Cronenberg's film reparatively and attempting to draw out its queer utopian potential, the intention is not to suggest that it is without fault from a queer perspective or that it ought to be taken as a blueprint or roadmap for a queer utopia, but rather to recover resources from it that may help to hold open the possibility of a queer future at a time when so-called 'gender ideology' is widely proclaimed to be 'a danger to civilisation' (Butler 2024, 2) even as gender and sexual minorities themselves are subjected to pervasive discrimination, demonisation, and violence throughout much of the world (Gevisser 2020, 18–40).

The Critical Reception of *Crimes of the Future*

Popular critical responses to Cronenberg's film in newspapers, magazines, and online provide an unexpectedly fruitful starting point for our consideration of its speculative queerness. Surveying these responses, several clear trends emerge. The first is that most mainstream critics regard *Crimes of the Future* to be straightforwardly dystopian and deeply pessimistic about the future. Writing for *Empire* magazine, Simon Crook takes the film to be about 'the horror of us blindly walking into an eco-apocalypse' and criticises it for being 'All doom. Little suspense' (Crook 2022). Richard Brody's review for *The New Yorker* develops this reading by linking it with what he sees as Cronenberg's own despair over the state of contemporary culture: 'a vision of the end of the line, the end of the world as he knew it' (Brody 2022). The second critical trend is that, although the film generally received fairly positive

reviews from such critics, these tended to be interspersed with expressions of confusion, ambivalence, and aversion toward its apparent eroticism. While appearing to relish the 'deliciously wicked eroticism that somehow flows through' all of Cronenberg's films, Tomris Laffly's otherwise sympathetic review for *Roger Ebert.com* concludes that 'the effort to make heads or tails of the philosophies at the heart of *Crimes of the Future* is a laborious one', with the result that the viewer comes away more confused than satisfied (Laffly 2022). Crook's review also refers approvingly to what he calls the 'insurgent erotica' of Cronenberg's films yet goes on to conclude that *Crimes of the Future* is a 'maddening, pervy, and disturbing' film that 'won't be to all tastes' even if it is in some regards quite effective (Crook 2022). Mark Kermode's equally mixed verdict in *The Guardian* is that although the film is not without merit it is somewhat undermined by its 'slightly naff softcore elements', the most egregious of which being 'an irrelevant sapphic romp with a sci-fi sarcophagus that feels like an outtake from a straight-to-video 80s Roger Corman flick' (Kermode 2022). A similar, equally dismissive reference to the film's eroticism is found in Geoffrey Macnab's review for *The Independent*, which refers to its 'air of gothic S&M-style kitsch' (Macnab 2022).

The third trend is that of queer online cultural commentators being markedly more positive about the film than their mainstream counterparts. Whereas critics writing for more established outlets dwelt on the film's dystopian aspects and expressed confusion or derision toward its peculiar eroticism and preoccupation with its characters' bodies, queer critics writing for a variety of popular but less influential websites and blogs responded very differently both in how they evaluated it and in the meanings they found in it. These reviewers tended to find *Crimes of the Future* to be in some way queer coded, even if they disagreed about how, why, and to what extent this was the case. Some went further in expressing excitement or joy at the queer possibilities implicit in the film. Writing for *Study Breaks Magazine*, an online publication popular among US college students, Maria Merlo's very positive review characterises *Crimes of the Future* as a 'distinctly queer' film that is likely to resonate with queer audiences (Merlo 2022). In Merlo's view, the film's protagonist is 'an inherently queer character' whose journey throughout the film constitutes 'a perfect allegory for accepting one's identity as a trans person' (ibid.). Shannon O'Connor, in her effusive review of the film for the news and pop culture website *Daily Beast*, describes it as a 'poignant and beautiful transgender allegory' that 'absolutely screams

transgender rights' (O'Connor 2022). Like some of the other queer critics who wrote about the film, O'Connor links the film's exploration of futuristic forms of surgery to her own experiences as a trans person: 'As someone who had gender-affirming surgery a few months prior to watching the film, there was something satisfying about seeing people come together to watch [the protagonist] get something surgically removed from their body – and not just out of curiosity or fear, but out of reverence' (ibid.). In a conversation featured in *Reverse Shot*, the magazine of New York's Museum of the Moving Image, four trans commentators likewise found the film's treatment of gender and sexuality to be clearly queer coded (Bodrojan, et al. 2022). While voicing the reservation that Cronenberg's treatment of trans identity fails to progress far beyond 'an abstract self-acceptance', Sam Bodrojan nevertheless found *Crimes of the Future* to be 'extremely focused on this future vision of radical trans politics', deeming it 'a thing of beauty', 'a tool of survival', and a 'genuinely cathartic' experience (ibid.).

Given these sorts of responses on the part of queer critics – of which the foregoing is merely a small but representative sample – the question of the timeliness of *Crimes of the Future* and its relevance to current political struggles has sometimes been raised in conversation with Cronenberg himself. Asked about the film's bearing on the contested issue of bodily autonomy, Cronenberg responded: 'It has, strangely and sadly, huge political repercussions right now. When I wrote it twenty years ago, I wasn't thinking of that specifically, but there is always a go-around about who controls the bodies of citizens. Who controls women's bodies, who controls the bodies of transgender people' (Cronenberg, Mortensen, and Seydoux 2022). Elsewhere, asked specifically about the relationship between his film's exploration of bodily transformation and the trans liberation movement, Cronenberg commented: 'They're taking that idea seriously. They're saying, "Body is reality. I want to change my reality. That means I have to change my body"' (Cronenberg quoted in Handler 2022). Explicitly endorsing what he takes to be the aims of trans people who elect to modify their bodies, Cronenberg adds: 'I say, go ahead. This is an artist giving their all to their art' (ibid.).

Having considered the most common popular responses to *Crimes of the Future*, including its director's own reaction to some of these, we can now turn to a close analysis of the film, which will help us to understand why it might have been received in these differing ways.

Bodies

Much of *Crimes of the Future* follows the story of its protagonist, avant-garde performance artist Saul Tenser (Viggo Mortensen), and his experimentation with his rapidly changing body. Saul has been diagnosed with 'accelerated evolution syndrome', meaning his body is subject to rapid mutations which are not yet well understood by medical science. The main consequence of this syndrome in Saul's case is the constant production of new internal organs, the biological function of which is unknown. In close collaboration with his fellow artist and romantic companion, Caprice (Léa Seydoux), Saul designs and participates in a series of performance works in which his proliferating organs, some of them intricately tattooed by Caprice, are surgically removed before a live audience. In the world of the film, as a result of a prior series of unexplained mutations in the population at large, the human body has ceased to be able to experience pain or become infected, meaning that surgery can be carried out without anaesthetic and with no need for sanitary operating conditions. Combined with creative uses of hormones, dietary regulation, and various aesthetic techniques, this convergence of factors enables Saul and Caprice to earn a degree of celebrity within the art world for their participation in what Cronenberg has referred to as their 'surgical performance art' (Cronenberg quoted in Wise 2022). The growing visibility of the pair's work also attracts the notice of both the government – who require all organs removed from Saul's body to be studied and archived at the National Organ Registry – and a radical 'evolutionist' faction who seek to promote the mutations already underway in the human organism and who regard Saul as someone likely to be sympathetic to their cause. Although they are highly advantageous to his career, Saul's mutations are not without harmful side effects. Throughout the film, he finds eating, sleeping, breathing, and sometimes walking to be uncomfortable and even painful, making him the only character in the film who is still capable of experiencing physical pain, at least in some contexts. This leaves Saul dependent for some of his bodily functioning on a combination of medication, physical care provided by Caprice, and an array of oddly organic biomedical devices, including an animated chair that aids with digestion and an orchid-like bed that regulates his nervous system and helps him to sleep.

Another of the film's science-fictional novums is that the human body is also evolving in such a way that it is becoming able to digest plastic, though the precise nature of this change and the reasons behind it are left largely obscure. At the start of the film, an eight-year-old boy named Brecken (Sotiris Siozos) is murdered by his mother after she begins to regard him as 'inhuman' due to his genetic abnormalities. Depending on how they are interpreted, some scenes in the film seem to imply that whereas members of the evolutionist faction have become able to digest plastic after undergoing a surgical procedure, Brecken had been born with this capacity. In the final sequence of the film, Saul, overwhelmed by the pain from his condition and seemingly no longer able to sleep or eat conventional food, asks Caprice to feed him a plastic candy bar manufactured by the evolutionists. The candy bars, which are the evolutionists' main food source, contain substances that are highly toxic to anyone whose body is not suitably adapted, as is shown by the sudden death of a character upon eating one in the first act of the film. When Saul eats the candy bar, however, he appears soothed and consoled. The final shot of the film is an image of Saul's face as it passes from an expression of uncertainty to a brief but telling smile connoting happiness and peace. An important part of the meaning of *Crimes of the Future* arguably hangs on the significance of this shot and its relation to everything that has led up to it.

At the most literal level, the fact that Saul is able to eat the otherwise toxic candy bars implies that he, like Brecken, is one of the first people to be born with the innate ability to digest plastic. On another level, it confirms the evolutionists' view that humanity is not only evolving away from being able to feel pain or become infected but is adapting to a new environment by developing the ability to receive nutrition from its own previously fatal waste products. On a further level, Saul's decision to eat the candy bar and his ensuing reaction to it have been read by queer commentators as demonstrating a newfound self-acceptance. Merlo summarises this reading as follows: 'While Tenser refuses to fully engage with the changes to his biology, he experiences constant agony, which harkens to the experience of being a closeted trans person who cannot or will not acknowledge the truth of their identity. He cannot find peace until he embraces the metamorphosis' (Merlo 2022). Various things speak in favour of this interpretation: unpacking it more fully, we could read Saul's syndrome as standing for his transness, the National Organ Registry as medical gatekeepers, the government as any political authority

seeking to police gender identity, and the evolutionist faction as trans rights activists and their allies. *Crimes of the Future* may in this way be understood as a trans allegory.

As in the case of the mainstream film reviews surveyed at the outset, however, something important seems to be left out of this reading – not because it is implausible or contradicted by anything that happens on screen, but because the film can be seen to encompass it while also offering something more. On this view, the film is both a timely trans allegory and a text which goes on to situate that allegory within a broader frame of reference. One reason for thinking this is that, were the film to be *exhausted* by the trans allegorical reading, that would appear to align the film as a whole with the perspective of the evolutionists, an interpretive move we have reason to doubt. In a noteworthy exchange between the two, the evolutionist leader Lang Dotrice (Scott Speedman) tells Saul that what is happening to his body is entirely natural and is in fact the key to realising his true self: 'You're a man who's fighting what he really is' (Cronenberg 2022). The implication of this and earlier lines spoken by Lang is that in persisting in eating conventional food and using drugs and biotechnology to keep his mutations at bay, Saul is failing to realise an authentic self that society has forced him to deny. Yet an awareness of Cronenberg's previous films cautions us against taking *Crimes of the Future* as an endorsement of this position.

This is because it is one of the defining features of Cronenberg's work, early and late, that it opposes itself to the idea of an authentic self. Rather than his protagonists uncovering a true self that was there all along, in most of Cronenberg's films they are involved in an unpredictable process of experimentation whereby a new self emerges from a series of contingent encounters: a medical experiment gone wrong in *Shivers* (Cronenberg 1975), mistakenly tuning into an illegal TV station in *Videodrome* (Cronenberg 1983), a malfunctioning teleportation device in *The Fly* (Cronenberg 1986), exposure to hallucinogenic insecticide in *Naked Lunch* (Cronenberg 1991), a car accident in *Crash* (Cronenberg 1996) – and so on. *Crimes of the Future* is closer to this established pattern than to the perhaps more reassuring narrative template of a move from a clearly defined inauthenticity to an equally clearly defined authenticity, which would almost certainly open the film to Bodrojan's previously cited criticism that the film is only able to make sense of trans subjectivity in terms of an 'an abstract self-acceptance'. Recent queer theory encourages us to be wary of the rhetoric of naturalness and

authenticity (Cuboniks 2018). Cronenberg's work to date similarly calls into question related discourses on the part of the evolutionist faction.

Saul's resistance to the bodily and psychological changes he is undergoing and his reluctance to countenance what he may be in the process of becoming suggest a parallel with internalised homophobia or transphobia. The more interesting question here, though, is not whether Saul's *self-rejection* is queer coded, which certainly seems to be the case, but rather what his bodily changes *themselves* portend. The staff at the National Organ Registry deem Saul's new internal organs to be either of uncertain function or of no discernible function at all. Against this dominant medico-juridical categorisation, which the film constantly calls into question, Saul's mutations may be read as a partly visual, partly conceptual means for Cronenberg to gesture toward the unknown possibilities of the body as it enters into new relations with forces within and beyond itself. Saul's mutations' indeterminate status from the point of view of the dominant culture is especially revealing in this regard as it points to how that culture will itself have to change in unforeseeable ways in order to comprehend whatever new ways of being these mutations make possible. While exploring how a particular individual's embrace of their unique form of embodiment challenges a normative understanding of the body, as well as the political and medical institutions that enforce it, the film at the same time articulates an implicitly utopian sense of the body's potential for myriad new becomings in response to changes in the composition of forces of which it is comprised. Saul's eventual embrace of his non-normative body and its possibilities may, then, be read allegorically as trans self-acceptance so long as this reading is itself understood within the wider queer speculative horizon which the film projects.

Sexualities

Intertwined with the film's exploration of embodiment is its treatment of sexuality and the complex relationship between sexuality, embodiment, and gender. In one especially revealing sequence, Saul accepts an invitation from a surgeon/body artist to have an organic 'zip' added to his midsection, allowing him to 'open' his body at will and display some of his internal organs. The sequence can be

read as suggesting that it is on account of his already non-normative body that Saul elects to have the surgery, with his zip becoming one of the film's most vivid links between sexuality and embodiment. In the scene immediately following Saul's operation, Caprice sensuously remarks that 'zippers have their own sex appeal', before lowering herself to Saul's waist height, undoing the new zip, and beginning to probe and caress the raw flesh and exposed outer surfaces of Saul's innards with her tongue. The movement of Caprice's head, the sounds made by her mouth, and the sexual pleasure evinced by Saul are visually and acoustically redolent of cunnilingus. The connotations of the scene are clear: by having the zip installed, Saul has acquired a vagina, which in turn makes it possible for him to be the recipient of (intensely pleasurable) cunnilingus. Revealingly in the context of the present argument, this means that the only conventional sex act shown occurring between the film's male and female romantic leads is one in which it is Saul whose vagina is penetrated by Caprice, thereby confounding and queering the pair's ostensible heterosexuality.

Although surprisingly not remarked on by any of the queer commentators cited above, this scene not only lends support to the trans allegorical reading but helps us to understand some of the further connections the film makes between non-normative bodies, genders, and sexualities. One implication of the scene is that the features that mark Saul's body as different – whether these be innate (his mutating internal organs) or acquired (his zip) – are what enable him to chart, inhabit, and enjoy new modes of sexuality and different forms of gendered experience. Viewers familiar with Cronenberg's much earlier film *Videodrome* will be reminded of a closely related scene in which the male protagonist, Max Renn, spontaneously develops a vagina-like opening in his chest into which he inserts VHS tapes. The meaning of the two scenes is nevertheless very different. In the case of *Videodrome*, the protagonist's so-called 'New Flesh', which is presented as momentarily erotic but chiefly horrific, is later revealed to be part of a corporate conspiracy in which he has unknowingly been enmeshed, and which ultimately leads to his suicide. In the words of Robin Wood, 'the whole paraphernalia by which the "New Flesh" is to be produced (if it is) carries entirely negative, sinister connotations' (Wood 2018, 252). As William Beard likewise notes, although in both *Videodrome* and *Scanners* (Cronenberg 1981), Cronenberg occasionally implies that the horrifying changes undergone by his protagonists are 'not necessarily destructive' and 'maybe even friendly', it is nevertheless the case that 'he does not convince

himself or the viewer' of this (Beard 1994: 159). The equivalent scene in *Crimes of the Future*, by contrast, depicts Saul's transformation as differing from that of Max Renn in three key ways: firstly, it is a product of his own agency as opposed to the manipulations of unknown groups; secondly, it liberates him into creative new forms of bodily comportment; and thirdly, it is filled with genuine erotic potential. In these ways, the scene strikes an affirmative note that is almost entirely absent from its clearest precursor in the Cronenberg canon.[1]

Sexualities take many forms in *Crimes of the Future*, not all of which can be reviewed in detail here. These include: the growing conviction on the part of Timlin (Kristen Stewart), an investigator with the National Organ Registry, that, as she excitedly informs Saul, 'surgery is the new sex'; futuristic medical pods and tools that function as ersatz sex toys; the practice of 'cutting', whereby young people who no longer experience pain receive pleasure from reciprocally scoring marks into one another's flesh; Saul and Caprice's habit of lying naked together while automated surgical machinery alternates between slicing and healing their flesh; and a more diffuse sexual atmosphere that pervades many other scenes. Commenting on these, Booker claims that 'no one in the film ever actually has sex, despite the fact that so many things are sexually charged' and that this is because 'the conventionally erotic, along with so many other emotionally charged categories, has [in the world of the film] deteriorated into obsolescence' (Booker 2023, 40). Given the sexualised nature of so much of the film's content, from its style and mise-en-scène to the behaviour and mannerisms of most of its characters, what Booker presumably means by 'sex' is penetrative intercourse. In one of the film's few comic moments, however, this kind of sex is explicitly rejected by Saul, who increasingly takes on the guise of unwitting prophet of a new age in the history of sexuality. After Timlin tries to seduce and initiate intercourse with him, Saul bashfully refuses and informs her apologetically that, 'I'm just not very good at the old sex.'

What we can infer from this scene, and others that echo it, is that the erotic is undergoing a radical *change* rather than sinking into obsolescence. It is not that Saul is ceasing to be an erotic being, but that the 'old sex' is ceasing to have any appeal for him (and others) from the point of view of the 'new sex'. In a final comment on this dynamic, the film further distances itself from the old sex in one of its last scenes, during which Lang is murdered by two agents acting on behalf of a biotech corporation that profits from supressing human evolution. The agents kill Lang by driving power drills into his head

– a brutal assassination technique that visually and generically recalls the slasher films and so-called 'video nasties' of the 1980s (Barker 1984). If, however, we keep in mind Carol Clover's influential dictum that the power drills, chainsaws, and similar thrusting weapons of such films ought to be taken as phallic symbols (Clover 1992, 26–30), the agents' otherwise bizarre modus operandi takes on a fuller meaning. On a symbolic level, we could say that whereas the new sex is associated with polymorphous sexual creativity, the old sex is associated with patriarchal violence. This helps to further explain many mainstream critics' puzzled responses to the unconventionally erotic quality of the film. Just as the human body is shown to be in a state of flux as it begins to take on new forms, so new sexualities are proliferating around novel bodily affects and intensities. The new sex is not geared toward reproduction, not centred on genitalia, not structured around binary gender, encompasses pain as well as pleasure, is partly organic and partly constituted by technology, takes place in public as well as in private, and is sometimes enacted in front of an audience as a form of artistic display. It is, in other words, decidedly queer. It is not that the film ought to be taken as advocating any of the specific sexual practices it depicts. Rather, trends like 'cutting' and slogans like 'surgery is the new sex' are a means for Cronenberg to provoke in the audience the initial incomprehension that typically greets any radically new form of sexual culture (Berlant and Warner 1998), with the aim of then surmounting and surpassing this response at the level of the film taken as a whole.

Genders

During a fascinating discussion of the role of masculinity in Cronenberg's films, Scott Loren has put forward two claims that have a bearing on our reading of *Crimes of the Future*. The first is that while in many of Cronenberg's films 'mutations of gendered bodies have repeatedly accompanied the destabilization of fixed notions about gender' (Loren 2011: 151), 'male recourse to action' in these same films is 'often one of spectacular masculine violence', making it 'difficult to argue for a form of masculinity truly emancipated from phallic authority/power in Cronenberg's work' (ibid: 156). The second claim is that Cronenberg's 'visions and revisions of gender' are 'always characterized by visions

of horror and the monstrous (ibid). Along related lines, Lianne McLarty has astutely observed that there is 'both a reactionary and a progressive Cronenberg': for McLarty, Cronenberg's films are (politically) reactionary whenever 'dissatisfaction with the social world…is displaced onto some variant of, in Barbara Creed's words, a "monstrous-feminine"', while being (politically) progressive insofar as they 'locate the monstrous in a mind representative of patriarchal social practices rather than in a female body that resists them' (McLarty 2015: 260).

Crimes of the Future partly fulfils but generally departs from each of these characterisations of Cronenberg's earlier work. Firstly, it takes the destabilization of gender further than any previous Cronenberg film: as queer commentators were the first to note, it is as subversive of cisnormativity as it is of heteronormativity (Merlo 2022; O'Connor 2022; Bodrojan, et al. 2022). At the same time, unlike most of the Cronenberg films discussed by Loren, the protagonist at no point resorts to 'spectacular masculine violence'; indeed, his gentle, softly spoken, and deeply meditative persona stand in sharp contrast to this. Lastly, the film also works to severs the link between gender variation, horror, and the monstrous, with the gory visuals of earlier Cronenberg films receding almost entirely from view – the phallic power drill murder being the exception that, as we saw, proves the rule – and the category of the monstrous largely neutralised by the film's queer erotic ambience. Although it displays some obvious continuities with the 'body horror' subgenre with which Cronenberg is most closely associated, the absence of horror-specific affect from scenes of invasive surgery or body modification mean that the film likewise paradoxically confirms what Timothy Holland has called 'the marked disappearance of body horror elements in David Cronenberg's films since [2005's] *A History of Violence*' (2017: 141).

As our discussion of the trans allegorical reading of the film showed, gender can be seen to be one of *Crimes of the Future*' key themes once we shift our gaze from what is literally shown on screen to a consideration of its deeper meaning for contemporary audiences. To this extent, the film's treatment of gender is inseparable from its exploration of embodiment. Closer consideration of this point reveals an equally close connection with everything going under the heading of the 'new sex'. The reason for this inseparability is that *Crimes of the Future* is informed by a radical vision in which bodies, sexualities, and genders are involved in a process of mutual transformation in which no one element has priority. Scholars in queer and gender studies have worked hard to disabuse us of the assumption of

essential links between body, gender, and sexuality, and Cronenberg's film should not be read as reverting to essentialism of this sort. The alternative the film presents – dispersed throughout its imagery, mise-en-scène, characterisation, dialogue, soundscape, mood, and the various scenes we have considered – is partly captured by a remark made by Gilles Deleuze during his remarkable preface to Guy Hocquenghem's classic 1974 study *Gay Liberation After May '68.* Reappropriating the then dominant medico-juridical category of homosexuality, Deleuze queers the term by stretching it far beyond the concept of same-sex attraction: 'Wouldn't the homosexual be, not the one to stick to the same sex, but the one who discovers countless genders that we have no idea about?' (Deleuze 2022, 2). Making allowance for Deleuze's by now dated use of the term 'homosexual', this fascinating observation conveys something of *Crimes of the Future*'s ethos of speculative queerness. 'An organism,' one of the biotech agents says of Saul's rapidly changing body, 'needs organisation' if it is to avoid becoming 'just a designer cancer.' Against this pathologising and dehumanising view, the film envisages the possibility of a polymorphous field in which new affects, experiences, and forms of collaboration are charted across, between, and beyond the familiar categories of body, sexuality, and gender. What Deleuze's reconceptualization of the figure of the homosexual as the one who 'discovers countless genders' helps to attune us to is the way in which Cronenberg's film likewise leads beyond the consolidation of preexisting identities – whether queer or otherwise – in order to start to imagine the conditions and relations through which entirely new ways of being might be brought into being.

Speculative Queerness

In Muñoz's much-cited formulation, 'we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality' (Muñoz 2019, 1). The affinities between this utopian conception of queerness and the queer speculation of *Crimes of the Future* will be apparent from everything said here about the film. Whereas Muñoz's 'queer futurity' represents a queerness that is always yet to come, and which arguably serves chiefly as a regulative ideal, however, Cronenberg's queer speculation is more concerned with the embodied, local, contingent encounters

between specific bodies, habits, and technologies. Drawing on and adapting André Carrington's concept of speculative blackness (Carrington 2016), this could be understood as a form of 'speculative queerness'. This would be a term for works of speculative fiction – in any medium – that either respond to or take as their starting point the specific needs, concerns, and hopes of a contemporary queer audience. Such works think queerness in a way that resembles Muñoz's 'queer futurity' in its utopianism, but which tries to locate the roots of that futurity more in the here-and-now than in the 'then-and-there' (Muñoz 2019, 1). Speculation is, as the name suggests, speculative – but all speculation takes off from the historical moment in which it arises. In the case of *Crimes of the Future*, this means attempting to envision queer possibility at a time when it is all too clear that 'the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture' (Sedgewick 2003, 149).

[1] The argument of the present article raises the question of how much of Cronenberg's back catalogue might also be productively read through a reparative queer lens. Although the speculative queerness of *Crimes of the Future* is not to be found in earlier work by Cronenberg, it seems clear from analyses by various scholars – most notably Beard (1994), Williams (1999), Creed (2000), Loren (2011), McLarty (2015), and Wood (2018) – that it is sometimes anticipated by elements of his previous films, even if only falteringly and self-contradictorily. A pair of potential exceptions here may be the two short films Cronenberg directed at the very beginning of his career: *Stereo* (Cronenberg 1969) and *Crimes of the Future* (Cronenberg 1970). Although both are highly abstract art films and *Crimes of the Future* bears no resemblance to the later film of the same name beyond its title and some allusions to a 'creative cancer', Wood notes that the latter is characterised by a 'pervasive homoeroticism' (Wood 2018: 249) while *Stereo* contains 'an explicit lecture on "omnisexuality" of quite extraordinary radical import' that may indicate 'a direction [Cronenberg's] work might have taken and didn't' (ibid: 249–250). This suggests the interesting possibility that the second *Crimes of the Future* represents Cronenberg coming full circle and returning to some of his earliest thematic preoccupations.

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