THE CONTAGION OF CINEMATIC VIOLENCE
IN CRONENBERG’S A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

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April 11, 2013
There is something oddly satisfying about the sight of blood on-screen, no matter the context or to which character it belongs. To a significant portion of the contemporary audience, in fact, the use of convincing cinematic violence is intrinsic to any worthwhile film. But there certainly seems to be more to the function of violence in particular films than mere entertainment value, for blood can cause a theater to cringe, cheer, weep or even laugh. While most directors will make it clear which emotion to feel in response to a violent act, Cronenberg, as a director who continually challenges cinematic norms, leaves the value of violence unclear in his film, *A History of Violence*. This exceptionally gory film follows the deterioration of family man, Tom Stall (Viggo Mortensen), after he murders two gangsters in self-defense. Although he is nationally championed as a small town hero, several Philadelphia mobsters from his secret former life track him down to harass him into returning with them to Philadelphia. Amongst the turmoil caused by the revelation of Tom’s former identity as a killer, his wife Edie (Maria Bello) and his son Jack (Ashton Holmes) also become seduced into defending and/or performing violent acts of their own. Although his young daughter Sarah (Heidi Hayes) remains removed from the film’s violence altogether, she becomes instrumental in reaccepting Tom as a violent man into the family during the final scene. In a film that is inherently violent, Cronenberg therefore carefully creates a commentary not only on the way violence functions in society, but also on the casual and excessive use of violence in cinema itself.

Just as the theme of physical contagion and transmission pervades many of Cronenberg’s other works, I will argue that Cronenberg suggests in *A History of Violence*
that violence similarly operates much like an infectious disease, consistently and inevitably spreading in a series of transmissions, from old to young, male to female, city to city, father to son, and so on. This infection, however, does not contain itself within the screen; Cronenberg, rather, through his cinematographic treatment of violence, attempts to trigger our own innate and sadistic desires for screen violence with overly explicit depictions of gore, but then deviates from the typical violent film by leaving every act of violence unresolved and morally ambiguous. Because Cronenberg’s existential worlds often challenge our contemporary perception of morality, or as in the case of *A History of Violence*, the morality of violence specifically, the objective of this essay moreover is to use Cronenberg’s *A History of Violence* to explore a new way of critiquing the function of violence in film, beyond the sense of ‘good’ versus ‘evil,’ or ‘necessary’ versus ‘gratuitous.’

I will begin by defining and illustrating the mechanics of film violence, that is, how a director may choose to depict gore and the corresponding consequences. As with

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1 Other critics, such as Cynthia Freeland, have argued in *The Philosophy of David Cronenberg* that *A History of Violence* is first and foremost a violent American tragedy, and thus able to “educate our moral emotions and prompt activity of moral reflection” (Riches 34). But to arrive at that mere conclusion about a David Cronenberg film is boring, reductive and rather unhelpful. (One might even begin an argument with such a claim, just to disprove it). This essay, rather, does not attempt to assess, or sympathize with, Tom’s violent actions as either “morally good” or “morally bad,” or to quantify the amount of violence in Cronenberg’s film, but rather to analyze why and how a viewer might perceive and value certain acts of cinematic violence.

Another concern for many other critics, as well as for myself, is the destructive influence of violence on identity. Simon Riches, Daniel Moseley, and Brook Pearson all note the ethical questions that are raised, here and in many other Cronenbergian films, by assuming a practical identity. Riches interestingly quotes American philosopher Daniel Dennett to understand the reasoning behind multiple personalities: “we do not consciously and deliberately figure out what narratives to tell and how to tell them. Our tales are spun, but for the most part we don’t spin them; they spin us. Our human consciousness, and our narrative selfhood, is their product, not their source …. They create a boundary so that the horror doesn’t happen to *them*” (Riches 105). Although Tom’s arguable need for self-protection and identity preservation will not be a concern for this essay, I will address how violence essentially deconstructs the identities of Tom and his family.
any other aesthetic or artistic decision, whenever a director decides to portray an explicit act of violence, he encounters a responsibility to justify the function of the violence within his story. I will thus turn to Walter Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” to develop an ethical framework for assessing these directorial depictions of violence. Finally, I will focus more carefully on the contagiousness of violence within *A History of Violence* itself, which in particular strives to reflect the real world as closely as possible, and on how that violence contaminates all facets of life for each character. Along with violence’s effect on sexuality and identity, moreover, the loss of innocence and the entrance into a social system of violence emerge in the film an intricate processes and themes.

The entire first scene, in fact, consistently illustrates the theme of entrance into a social system of violence through a transmission, namely, from old to the young. The opening frame holds on the exterior shot of a sunny motel door, initially evoking a sense of stillness and serenity, which consequently, by the end of the scene, appears bitterly deceptive and ironic. After the momentary pause on this empty first frame, two gangsters of notably different ages emerge, first the older man Leland, then his younger accomplice Billy. Instead of tracking the older man, who seemingly might deserve the most respect, the camera follows the younger man for a markedly long and continuous shot, as the younger man slumps into a light blue convertible and drives to the front of the motel. This privileging and ‘passing off’ of the camera from the older man to the younger man thus establishes the new generation of violence as critical to our understanding of violence in general, that violence is constantly in motion forward. The motion of the camera in tandem with the car, here, left to right across the setting, additionally makes the beginning of the scene feel ironically natural and easy. When Leland returns to the car, he
commands Billy to enter the motel to refill their empty water jug, an item that in itself might represent the end of sustenance and the struggle to survive. The passing of the water jug, therefore, marks the scene’s official symbolic gesture of transferring the violence from young to old, for it signals an evolutionary need for the young man to enter the office and engage in brutality himself, not just a recreational diversion.

The first cut of the film, furthermore, occurs at that moment Billy enters the building, intensifying not only the contrast between the outdoors and indoors, but also the film’s own entrance into a symbolic structure of violence; this moment, that is, indicates to the viewers how violence operates in this world and how graphically acts of violence will be visually portrayed—namely, as realistically as possible. With regards to this scene in particular, the murdered bodies inside are never presented with a cut, but rather with a reveal, either by the young gangster removing an obstruction or by a camera pan. This fluent effect, which replaces the impact of a jarring cut, changes our perception of the immediate temporality of the murders and further establishes violence as an inherently historical act, one which precedes our arrival on the scene and which is destined to persist long after. At the end of the scene, in fact, Billy shoots a little girl, who interrupts his filling of their water jug, but we do not see the act explicitly on screen. Instead, in another setting altogether, a different little girl, Sarah, screams awake from a nightmare. Her scream, through its capacity to effectively transition and connect the scenes, represents the transfer of violence not only from city to city but also dream to reality; we sincerely hope that the first scene was merely just “monsters” in her dream, but are horrified when the gangsters later reappear in her town.

2 Regarding the symbolic meaning of the female scream, film theorist Michel Chion argues that “the screaming point, in a male-directed film, immediately poses the question of mastery, of the
The violence in the first scene, however, through its gradual and hesitant entrance into the film, thereby assumes a very different character than that of a typical violent film. There are a few ways to differentiate between this style of Cronenbergen violence and mainstream violence, but the most apparent way is the literal, heuristic depiction on screen. We can thus define a purely explicit act of film violence as any act of aggression that we as viewers witness, strictly visually. Explicit on-screen violence establishes finality, and because we see them, authenticity and truth. It is necessary to further distinguish that violence is comprised of separately, the act of aggression and the result of impact, both of which contribute independently to the effect of horror. If either a horrifying action or a horrifying result is presented without depicting their respective cause or effect, each is considered horrifying in and of itself because the audience must resort to imagining the unknown piece. The dead bodies that are revealed in the first scene, for example, even though we do not witness their actual murders, are still explicit forms of violence because we have seen and verified their outcome. How they died, however, which is left entirely implicit, is from where most of the scene’s horror is derived. The gunshot directed at the little girl, furthermore, which suggests a violent action, leaves the result implicit, thus generating a greater sense of horror.\(^3\) Explicit acts of mastery of this scream.” If Sarah’s scream here represents the domination of violence over innocence, then this mastery happens incredibly early in this film, further establishing violence as endlessly presiding and pervasive force in society. Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia UP, 1999), 78.

\(^3\) The tension between implicit and explicit violence in film operates similarly to Michel Chion’s description of the acousmatic sound in *The Voice in Cinema*, that is, a sound or voice without a visual source: “Being in the screen and not, wandering the surface of the screen without entering it, the acousmetre brings disequilibrium and tension. He [it] invites the spectator to go see, and he [it] can be an invitation to the loss of the self; to desire and fascination” (Chion 24). The unseen and inexplicit act of violence, much like the not-yet-seen voice, induces an unsettling desire in the viewer, because it makes us feel powerless from our own visual castration. (The only acousmatic sound in the film is that of Tom/Joey’s brother, when he calls him late at night, practically threatening him to visit him in Philadelphia. Although his voice technically is shown to originate
of violence on-screen, therefore, while potentially cringe inducing, generally decrease the overall sense of terror attributed to an act, because there is no doubt about the magnitude of the violence in that particular scenario.

A purely *implicit* act of violence, on the other hand, remains visually unsymbolized and often left in the realm of dialogue, but implicit screen violence in many ways is more terrifying also because it always inherently contains a threat of becoming explicit. The story Fogarty, the main hit man stalking Tom, tells Edie about the cause of his damaged eye, for example, is a crucial implicit representation of violence in the film:

**FOGARTY**

Oh, he [Tom] knows Carl Fogarty all right. He knows me intimately. See?

(points to his clouded left eye)

This isn't a completely dead eye, it still works a bit. The problem is, the only thing I can see with it is Joey Cusack, and it can see right through him... right through your husband, Edie. I see what's inside him, what makes him tick. He's still the same guy. He's still crazy fucking Joey! And you know it, don't you? How much do you really know about your husband, Edie? Where he's from, where he's been, his life before he met you some 20 years ago?

**EDIE**

I know that my husband is Tom Stall. That's what I know. That's all I need to know.

from the phone, the effect is similar, for we feel in a way doomed to encounter the brother in person.) The acousmatic voice always threatens to become inscribed in the visual field, but once it is given a visual source, it loses its power, because “*embodifying the voice* is a sort of symbolic act, dooming the acousmetre to the fate of ordinary mortals”(Chion 27-28). In a similar fashion, the moment blood first breaks literally and realistically on screen, violence finally becomes realized in the sense of the narrative; it may be superfluously grotesque and disturbing but is ironically more satisfying, because it has a visual representation, a source, and most importantly, an end to the chain of deferred violent acts. That certainly is not to say that a film must portray violence as graphically as possible to be emotionally compelling; in fact, the most effective films probably withhold explicit violence, until it is absolutely necessary.
FOGARTY

Yeah? Well, why don't you ask "Tom" about his older brother Ritchie in Philadelphia? Ask "Tom" how he once tried to rip my eye out with barbed wire. And ask him, Edie... ask him how come he's so good at killing people.

Fogerty’s assertion about, and Edie’s subsequent resistance and denial of, Tom’s ambiguous past certainly contributes to the effect of the horrifying and unquantifiable history of violence, one which lives close to home and inevitably runs in the family. Interestingly enough, in fact, it seems that Fogerty, as one who has experienced the effects of violence firsthand, nevertheless is the only person for most of the film that can ‘see’ the truth about violence at all, that it cannot be suppressed and will inescapably recur. The impetus of the scene, however, is derived from the implicit violence in this story, namely Tom’s using barbed wire to rip out his eye, which further portrays an unquantifiable history of violence that surpasses the domain of the film. Because the gruesome act remains visually unsignified to us, and to Edie, the violence that originally triggered the act therefore appears displaced and threatens soon to manifest itself again at a much greater capacity.

Analyzing implicit and explicit depictions of violence alone, however, cannot provide enough context to make any conclusions about the nature of violence in a film; instead, we must establish an ethical framework, by which we can evaluate the director’s treatment of violent acts. As for the nature of violence in society, philosopher Walter Benjamin argues that fundamentally within any legal system, “a cause, however
effective, becomes violent, in the precise sense of the word, only when it bears on moral issues,” and further that “violence can first be sought only in the realm of means, not of ends.” It is imperative then to consider why certain styles of film violence, the means, accomplish particular moral objectives, the ends. To persist with Benjamin’s initial critique of violence, in order to moralize violence in film, we might consider two cinematically analogous systems of thought to that of Benjamin’s analysis: that is, *natural* and *positive* law. Both forms assume that violence always operates as a means to achieve some end, but their fundamental approaches oppose: “Natural law attempts, by the justness of the ends, to ‘justify’ the means, positive law to ‘guarantee’ the justness of the ends through the justification of the means.”

Natural law, which views violence as “a product of nature,” thus argues that if the ends are justified, then the violence as a means to achieve that end are also just; positive law, on the other hand, which demands that each type of violence to be judged separately, argues that if the means of enacting the violence are justified, then the ends should also be deemed just. Although Benjamin eventually dismisses natural and positive laws as myopic, he deems the philosophy of positive law as a meaningful approach to his critique “because it undertakes a fundamental distinction between kinds of violence,” which are “historically acknowledged, so-called sanctioned violence, and unsanctioned violence.” Because *A History of Violence* concerns itself with the pervasiveness of violence across history, as suggested by the title alone, it seems

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5 Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 58.
6 He notes, “if positive law is blind to the absoluteness of ends, natural law is equally so to the contingency of means.” Benjamin, "Critique of Violence,” 58.
7 Benjamin continues for the rest of his critique with a “historico-philosophical view of law,” which for him must stand “outside positive legal philosophy but also outside natural law”(58), but because he becomes more concerned with the relationship of violence to law and justice, for the purpose of this argument, I will only use his initial framework.
suitable to continue to focus on these distinctions between historically-based “sanctioned” and “unsanctioned” acts of violence in film.

The best place to start, consequently, might be the history of violent genres, which tend to mimic at least one of these systems of natural and positive law. Directors in fact generally (but not always) become bound to one of these systems of thought, both within a particular film and throughout an entire career, in order to remain predictable and consistent with audience expectations of how violence operates within their particular genre. Most frequently associated with the action film, such as any James Bond movie, cinematic natural violence feeds into our vulgar desire for casual violence and action, and often deemphasizes the gravity of individual deaths. The camera in fact oftentimes captures the violence with long shots, to remain at a distance and prevent conveying any trace of inherent solemnity about the action. Implicit acts of violence also remain at a minimum, to reduce any anxiety over the unknown, and explicit acts of violence thereby become shamelessly more and more extravagant, sacrificing believability for cheap thrills. Because death of the ‘evil’ character is already justified at the outset of these types of films as a righteous end, to the audience Bond can use any and all (violent) means to achieve so-called justice. The film director therefore justifies natural violence for the ends it produces, namely, the triumph of ‘good’ over ‘evil’ in the film, but also at the same time, an entertained and thrilled audience, comforted by a fictitious sense of justice and distracted from all moral questions of violence by their own adrenaline rush.

The horror film, which on the other hand may seem a lot more serious and intense in nature than the action picture, nevertheless, also generally follows the system of cinematic natural violence, because of the clearly defined and pre-determined ‘justified’
ends it pursues. Characterized by seemingly excessive depictions of physical brutality against the protagonists, the horror genre relies heavily on violence, not to evaluate the morality of each individual act, but rather for the sole purpose of emphasizing the evilness of the antagonist, whose demise (successful or not) we consequently applaud as a rightful act of justice. The objectives of these movies thus are clear even before the movie begins, namely, to escape the inherently evil character by any and all means, because the ends are already justified. Although there certainly are horror films that do not behave exactly in this fashion, violence in the horror film, as in the action film, also functions to sadistically arouse the audience’s desire for, and thrill at the sight of, violence.8 Cronenberg in fact has traditionally been considered as a horror director, particularly in his earlier work, especially because of his obsession with images of disease and of things penetrating the skin and crawling underneath.9 Blood and gore, however, operate very differently in his more recent works, such as A History of Violence or Eastern Promises, and thus point to an evolution in Cronenberg’s style.

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8 To those other than fans of horror, this genre might seem baffling as a form of entertainment. There might a correlation, however, to Freud’s analysis of the fort-da game, in which a boy throws away his toy but then pulls it back. This boy’s foregoing of immediate satisfaction, as Freud argues in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, provides the boy with a sense of control over his negative feelings of loss: “He [the boy] was in the first place passive, was overtaken by the experience, but now brings himself in as playing an active part, by repeating the experience as a game in spite of its unpleasing nature. This effort might be ascribed to the impulse to obtain the mastery of a situation (the ‘power’ instinct)”(14). Viewers of horror may undergo the same experience, but with respect to violence, vivid depictions of which are repetitively pulled towards them and thrown away; the difference, however, is that at the end of the film, the violence is “thrown away” for good, as the screen shuts off. This genre, thus, provides viewers a means of confronting and controlling their fear of violence, without any lasting consequences (unless, of course, an unstable viewer cannot separate fantasy from reality and becomes emotionally traumatized by the violent movie; but that is an entirely different discussion altogether). Sigmund Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, trans. C. J. M. Hubback (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2010).

9 cf. Cronenberg’s Shivers, or Videodrome
The problem of cinematic natural violence, as in reality, is its alacrity to glorify violence, based on solely the ends it seeks. To evaluate any film in such a context, though, “can only lead to bottomless casuistry,”\textsuperscript{10} as Benjamin says of natural law. Although positive law tends to oversimplify the ends in place of criticizing the means, Benjamin seems to prefer it to an extent, for it demands a differentiation between the various types of violence, as historically sanctioned or non-sanctioned: “positive law demands of all violence a proof of its historical origin, which under certain conditions is declared legal, sanctioned.”\textsuperscript{11} Under positive law, violence must be evaluated based on the distinct historical event and set of circumstances, which originally caused it. Films that operate under the system of cinematic positive violence, accordingly, often take the form of crime dramas, in which nearly every violent act and its consequence holds significance. In such a film, like \textit{A History of Violence}, there is furthermore a steady balance between implicit and explicit violence, and more importantly, an apparent history of violence within that fictional society, which not only remains somewhat obscure and implicit but also crucial to the plot.\textsuperscript{12} The concern for the director of cinematic positive violence, therefore, is the \textit{means} by which the characters respond to the presence of violence within his or her fictional world; what justifies its use is the very existence of a human history of morality, with and against which the audience accordingly must align themselves over the course of the film.

The duality of these systems of cinematic violence thus exposes how significantly the function and treatment of violence within a film defines the overall ethical character

\textsuperscript{10} Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” 58.
\textsuperscript{11} Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” 58.
\textsuperscript{12} Other examples of films that operate under cinematic positive violence might include \textit{The Godfather}, \textit{Taxi Driver}, and \textit{Schindler’s List}. 
of the film itself, most of which naturally rests in the hands of the director. Wherever films of cinematic natural violence expose everything immediately, those of cinematic positive violence slowly reveal; where the former spans countries and decades, the latter spans one room in one night; where the former distracts, the latter concentrates; where the former tortures, the latter drops dead. And the latter is exactly where A History of Violence situates itself. The types of violence in the film, on one hand, are typically very concise and for the most part immediately fatal. The implements of violence, moreover, are restrained to everyday objects, such as a fist or a coffee pot. Handguns and the shotgun, though maybe not used everyday by the average man, are immediately accessible, as opposed to, say, a death ray. The violence that occurs in the scene in Philadelphia, however, may borderline as cinematic natural violence because the violent actions are deliberately drawn out and highly explicit, but such a directorial choice might serve as a specific means to contrast the types of violence in Tom’s former life to that of his present one: ‘Joey,’ that is, Tom’s former identity, followed a more sadistic system of natural violence ethics, but when he became Tom, he assumed a more civilized code.

Tom as a reluctant hero, or rather, anti-hero, further confirms Cronenberg’s use of violence here as primarily cinematic positive. Although the resistant hero is a favorite archetype throughout all genres, in A History of Violence, this protagonist’s identity constantly remains malleable and in flux, and his actions consistently are left morally ambiguous; although each of his violent actions appears necessary for survival, that is, his immediate impulse to kill the gangsters in the diner, for example, is reactionary and impulsive, and thus challenges whether or not he is using violence for just means of self-protection or for his innate drive to kill. Whereas the identity of the ‘retired’ Bond
character might be enhanced by his reentrance into a life of violence, Tom’s identity becomes destabilized as a consequence. Cronenberg, in fact, accentuates grotesque depictions of violence not just to intensify the consequences of violence, but also to illustrate this dissociative effect on the identity of the aggressor. The deliberate close-up of the gangster’s mangled jaw in the diner scene, for example, not only creates intimacy between the audience and the acts of violence, but also accentuates a displacement between Stall’s identities before and after the specific frames of his pulling the trigger.

While the cinematic close-ups of violence serve as a means of highlighting the deterioration of identity, so do the cinematic conventions for portraying authority. Philosopher Hannah Arendt defines authority as a clear, hierarchical relationship, marked by respect: “Its hallmark is unquestioning recognition by those who are asked to obey; neither coercion nor persuasion is needed.” If we think of this in terms of film, though, ultimate authority is granted to the camera, which forces us to watch what it tells us to; whoever gets the most visual attention thus gains the most importance. As for authority between characters, though, according to the same principal, the authoritative figure should never need to move, for all other characters should move freely to and around this character; stasis thus is the cinematic symbol of authority.

The staging to the “Questions and Answers” scene, for example, which precedes the second sex scene, best illustrates the relative degrees authority through the relative amounts of the characters’ movements. In this scene, Sam approaches Tom for a second time to question him about his involvement with the Philadelphia gang. Edie returns home and deceptively insists to Sam that Tom is innocent, even after her own nauseating discovery about Tom’s former identity. The character with the least amount of motion,

here and throughout the film, nevertheless, is Tom, who barely moves, even during the fight sequences. Because he epitomizes stasis, at least for the majority of the film, he also possesses the most cinematic authority, and thus Cronenberg establishes the most violent character as the most powerful and initially the most stable.

Edie, on the other hand, never sits still and, through her constant neurotic motion, exudes a perpetual lack of authority. When Edie first enters this scene, she momentarily resists granting full authority to either of the men by turning away from them to hang her coat; but she then comes closer and eventually sits down next to Tom on her line, “the truth, I’ll tell you the truth.” Of course, her answer is a lie defending Tom, but more importantly, Edie enters his frame, a symbol of his authority over hers. She of course runs out of this frame (and then again after the subsequent sex scene), but Tom always remains as the camera’s focus. Although Tom’s expressions and crooked physicality after the sex scene make him seem helpless here, his deliberate and steady movements throughout the movie actually grant him the most authority of any character. By the final third of the film, however, Tom becomes the most active, thereby destabilizing our perception of his authority and identity.

The destabilizing effect of violence upon the identity of the entire family, furthermore, also is implied in this scene. Before Sam finally fumbles out of the door, we are given a close-up of the photograph of the once stable and happy family, which haunts
us in a very Derridian fashion. Derrida was particularly bothered by the relationship between a photograph (or other videographic representation) and the subject’s sense of self, for as he argues in *Echographies of Television*, “once it [the picture] has been taken, captured, this image will be reproducible in our absence, because we know this *already*, we are already haunted by this future, which brings our death. Our disappearance is already here.”\(^\text{14}\) The picture on the table thus represents the very sinister death of the Stall family, as it *once was and never will be again*. At the same time, however, Derrida would argue that the self, as well as the family unit, always inevitably is changing; the photograph merely makes this transformation visible and transparent. This picture, in a way, thus functions as a foreshadowing of the inevitable dissolution and permanent destabilization of the Stall family.

The shifting symbolic and literal meanings of their family name, Stall, “to halt” or “to (temporarily) come to a stop,” further suggest the instability of the family’s identity in the face of violence. During Tom’s second hospitalization, following the death of Fogarty, Edie actually confronts Tom about the authenticity of their family name:

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EDIE
(crying)
And our name … Jesus Christ, my name … Jack’s name … Sarah’s name … Stall? Tom Stall? Did you just make that up? Where did that come from?
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TOM
I mean, it was available.
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EDIE
Yeah. I guess I was available, too.
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Tom chooses this name, because “it was available,” not only to literally replace his former identity but also to figuratively discontinue or ‘stall’ his violent lifestyle. Although Edie laments the feeling of being “used” by Tom, her fixation on their name evokes more so a sense of loss, that is, the loss of personal and familial identity. Outside of its practical function, however, the last name for Tom does not seem to carry much meaning at all, which consequently reveals his surprising insensitive and callous side. ‘Stall’ furthermore also holds connotations of the “caged animal,” and as with any imprisoned animal, there nevertheless comes the expectation, or even, the inevitability, of escape. But when that repressed secret reveals itself, and Tom presents this explanation for the first time, the family name entirely changes its meaning.15

The physical manifestation of their ‘diseased’ and violent identities, moreover, permeates all sexual discourse in the film. Sexuality in A History of Violence, as in nearly all Cronenberg films, further complicates the identities of his characters; desire and lust, moreover, become practically inseparable from his characters’ innermost conflicts and fears. The characters use their sexuality as a means of resolving violence, which fails to be expressed in any other way. In the beginning of the film, for example, Stall enters his diner to find the cook and the customer Pat discussing the craziest women they have ever dated:

15 In many ways, Edie’s dread over the change of meaning for their name perhaps exemplifies the effect of Freud’s ‘uncanny.’ This feeling, in short, arises from the opposite word, “heimlich,” meaning “familiar” or “belonging to the home.” The feeling of fear that derives from the “uncanny” thus depends significantly on one’s loss of familiarity with the person/object more so than on one’s gained difference with that person/object; what was once known as truth, that is, is shockingly rendered unfamiliar. Freud, of course, attributes this sensation to the subconscious, and how concealing certain things from oneself eventually causes the repressed thought to emerge in even more forceful ways. As a result of Tom’s repressed violent identity, therefore, a very nuanced type of fear accompanies their loss of identity of their “now-unfamiliar” family name.
PAT
He [the Cook] once dated a girl, who used to attack him in the middle of the night.

TOM
What?

COOK
She used to have these crazy goddamn dreams where, instead of her boyfriend, I was some kind of demented killer. I woke up one night, she stuck a goddamn fork in my shoulder.

TOM
You’re kidding me.

COOK
Nope. I’m spurtin’ blood, she’s sittin’ there cryin’, “baby, I love ya, I love ya.”

TOM
What happened? You broke up with her, right?

COOK
(smugly)
No, I married her.

Pat LAUGHS hysterically.

COOK (cont’d)
Hey, it lasted six years. Nobody’s perfect, Tom.

TOM
I guess not.

The implement of violence used here, a fork, symbolizes the intimate relationship between violence and food, a theme that appears later in the diner scene and again in the last dinner scene; the suggested amalgamation of violence and nutritional ingestion therefore, in a way, invokes a spiritual communion that these characters have with violence. In a similar fashion, sexuality is used on a visceral level as a means of
assuaging the tension caused by violence. The cook seems at ease with symbolically resolving the violence in his life with his sexuality, and so violent acts are established early on as a force inevitably wedded with sexuality, and thereby normalized. That his marriage does not last, however, suggests that violence obviously enough is not a concrete foundation, on which to base a relationship, and might further suggest that Tom’s marriage and family is doomed to fail as well.

Stall and his wife similarly use physical sexual acts to symbolize their growing differences and deteriorating identities. Their two contrasting sex scenes, in fact, serve both to falsify the perceived innocence of Stall and his wife and to simultaneously illuminate both of their perversions to violence. In the first of the sex scenes, Stall’s wife dresses up as a high-school cheerleader, asserting, “We never got to be teenagers together. I’m gonna fix that.” While this role-play may appear innocent, it confirms how truly alienated they are from each other’s real identities. Not only does this particular role-play symbolize their loss of innocence, but also it reveals a desire for a revision of history, paralleling that of Stall’s repressed past.

The second sex scene, though much more aggressive, similarly functions as means through which Stall and Edie work through their troubled senses of self. By this point, Stall’s former identity has been exposed, and his latent violence translates into what seems like the rape of his wife. The sex scene takes place on the staircase, which visually evokes callousness but symbolically represents metamorphosis for both characters. Although Edie initially fights off his advances, she eventually seems to participate in the act, and even enjoy it. Her expression later, during which she is exposed naked after showering, not only shows her disgust for Tom, but also for herself and her
enjoyment, as well as her disappointment that she also has fallen sick with violent attractions. Prior to this moment, after all, to protect her husband from the sheriff, she defends his false identity, a symbol of her enduring devotion. Perhaps her ambivalent affection here merely indicates the residual love and longing for the-man-she-thought-he-was, but nonetheless her own identity is thrown into question during this sexual act. Sex thereby becomes tied not only to Stall’s loss of identity, but also to that of his wife.

The final third of the movie, following this scene, establishes Tom and Edie’s identities as even more unstable. When Tom’s brother eventually calls him, thereby forcing Tom to finally confront the past, Tom suddenly gets set in motion, while Edie remains practically motionless at home, (which is especially apparent when he later returns for dinner). While the reversal of their physicalities further suggests Tom’s loss of identity and Edie’s paralysis by the truth, the final scene in its bleak sobriety essentially undermines the stability of the film yet again, and for good. The absence of words, in fact, represents the failure of language to signify the family’s current emotional paralysis.16 The entire scene, furthermore, is shot almost entirely from low-angles, which heightens the gravity of the scene and further deprives the viewer a sense of resolution. In the frame showing Tom’s return, furthermore, the walls behind him are sickly green and his

16 In one sense, the purity of silence symbolizes the potential rebirth of Tom and his family, but in another, the silence possesses as much tension as an ascousmatic sound, which destines to be broken but never does; the effect, thus, is the failure of resolution. (See Footnote 3)
backlight is a dirty yellow reminiscent of a disease halo, all of which visually translate as a moment of tainted reincarnation; it does not seem that he has returned to the identity of either Tom or Joey, but rather to that of someone new and impure.

Whereas Tom seems to have lost all sense of personal identity in this scene, his son Jack, on the other hand, demonstrates his complete independence and full maturity. Until now, acts of violence for Jack had functioned as a means of self-discovery. Before he resorts to physical violence, he relies on self-demeaning language alone to deflect the jocks’ aggression. But almost as an immediate reaction to his father’s killing of the robbers, language alone does not suffice for Jack’s anger and he submits to physically beat up the jock. Although Jack’s father actually rejects his first attempt to become violent, his father’s great symbolic gesture of acceptance, the hug on the front lawn, occurs only after Jack shoots Fogarty, “something that I [Tom] should’ve done years ago.” The hug furthermore conveys the literal and symbolic transfer of the hit man’s blood from Tom onto Jack, with the shotgun also held intimately between them in the tight frame. Not only does Jack save his father, but he also completes the violent act his father has failed to do; Jack, in a way, thus must outperform his father, before he can be accepted as a respected violent member of society.

In the final scene, moreover, although Jack initially looks at his mother for approval, when his father returns, he essentially deems her opinion irrelevant, and passes his father food, which not only signifies the acceptance of his father but also Jack’s
complete acceptance of, and submission into, the social structure of violence. The food, in fact, is meatloaf, which depicts in itself an implicit act of violence, namely, the death of an animal. It is almost, in fact, a complete reversal of the older gangster’s passing of the empty water jug in the beginning scene; the circularity of violence thereby completes itself here, for in the end, the young returns the needed sustenance back to the old. Cronenberg therefore suggests that violence, through transmission and reciprocity, continuously perpetuates itself.

The transference of violence from father to son, though, represents something more significant than merely another substitution of violence in a chain; it represents, rather, the entrance into a genealogical system of violence. If one can enter into violence, however, then one must first be able to exist outside of violence, as Jack once had. Benjamin argues, interestingly enough, that “there is a sphere of human agreement that is nonviolent to the extent that it is wholly inaccessible to violence: the proper sphere of ‘understanding,’ language.”17 What Benjamin means here is that language is inherently nonviolent in and of itself, and though language might fail, as a system alone, language cannot perform violent acts.18 Benjamin, however, would argue that a nonviolent individual enters the system of violence whenever he or she enters society and submits to their code of laws, because law itself is inherently violent. But if we are to characterize the social system of violence more precisely, as something that exists independent of laws and language and necessarily challenges identity, we can say, therefore, that a

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17 Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” 64.
18 In Lacanian terms, it seems that entrance into the language of the father, like entrance into the language of violence in this film, opens the child to self-discovery and the formation of identity, under the critical eyes of the enigmatic Other. The system of violence, though also subject to the Other, thus provides an individual with a new means of understanding his identity. For a thorough analysis of Lacan’s “Other,” see Bruce Fink’s *The Lacanian Subject.*
nonviolent individual enters the system of violence once language (and law) alone can no longer suffice as an adequate symbolization of internalized conflict and difference.

Sarah, on the other hand, resists entrance into this system of violence, arguably throughout the entire film. Her complete disregard for the threat of violence in the shopping mall, in fact, best illustrates her freedom from adult concerns and laws; whereas her mother must confront the rules of the storeowner to remove her shoes before leaving to find her, Sarah seems to wander uncaringly through the mall. The final scene, however, complicates Sarah’s role in the film. Her placement of Tom’s plate and silverware, though backwards, may represent a clumsy first act of acceptance; but if we are to consider entrance into the language of violence as characterized by a discovery of identity and the failure of language, then she never really seems to enter her father’s system of violence at all. The setting of solely the placemat, in fact, represents her very placement outside of violence, for a plate alone does not provide nourishment, as does the pan of meatloaf. The alternating high and low angle shots of her throughout the scene, however, might suggest her inevitability to someday fall into the same system of violence, into which her father, mother and brother all fell.

The conclusion of the film, therefore, confirms in its ambiguity that once one becomes infected by violence, there is no possibility for complete atonement or resolution, because the impulse for violence permeates so deeply into one’s history and identity. Although every violent act in the film may seem necessary for survival, by failing to provide any moral resolution in the final scene, Cronenberg consequently does not allow the audience to get away with the simple pleasures of cinematic natural violence without confronting the consequences. Because Cronenberg furthermore
exploits cinematic conventions to cause his viewers to applaud a type of violence that destroys towns, families, and childhoods, in a way, the contagion of violence that spreads from person to person in the film also penetrates through the screen and infects us too. Each graphic and excessive depiction of gore, which might appeal to fans of cinematic natural violence, induces additional uneasiness in the world of the film, and thus also in that of audience. It is not that Cronenberg is attempting to either condemn or condone cinematic violence, but rather that he is warning audiences to consume cinematic violence with caution and awareness of the contagious and destructive nature of violence itself, as it truly operates in reality.
Bibliography


