Cronenberg Adapts (Us to) McLuhan: Watching *Videodrome*, Reading *Understanding Media*

Cronenberg (nos) adapta a McLuhan: viendo *Videodrome*, leyendo *Understanding Media*

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Abstract: This article argues that *Videodrome* and the film's novelization can both be said to adapt McLuhan's account of television in *Understanding Media*. Cronenberg's film adopts McLuhan's style of thought by rendering figurative language as visceral cinematic image; Martin's novelization, in turn, uses the literary device of ekphrasis to depict the protagonist's TV-possessed inner world. *Videodrome* the film and *Videodrome* the novel express, respectively, the cinematic imaging and the synesthetic verbal description of media as «the extensions of man». The essay concludes that attending to the ways in which both the film and the novel adapt McLuhan's writing not only attests to the intermedial nature of the interpretive act, but helps delineate the contours of the contemporary media landscape.

Palabras clave: David Cronenberg, Marshall McLuhan, adaptación, los medios, metáfora, écfrasis

Resumen: Este artículo sostiene que *Videodrome* y la novelización de la película pueden considerarse como una adaptación del análisis de la televisión en *Understanding Media*. La película de Cronenberg adopta el estilo de pensamiento de McLuhan al convertir su lenguaje figurativo en imágenes cinematográficas; la novelización de Martin utiliza la écfrasis para representar el mundo interno del protagonista poseído por la televisión. Expresan, respectivamente, la imagen cinematográfica y la descripción verbal de los medios como «las extensiones del hombre». Prestar atención a las formas en que tanto la película como la novela adaptan la escritura de McLuhan, no solo atestigua la naturaleza intermedial del acto interpretativo, sino que ayuda a delinear los contornos del paisaje mediático contemporáneo.

Key words: David Cronenberg, Marshall McLuhan, adaptation, media, metaphor, ekphrasis

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We become what we behold.
(McLuhan, 2001: 20)

1. INTRODUCTION: CRONENBERG TAKES MCLUHAN AT HIS WORDS

In *Understanding Media*, his landmark study of media as «the extensions of man», Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan first coined the catchphrase so dear to the world of advertising: «the medium is the message» (2001: 7). The publication of his next book with the tongue-in-cheek title *The Medium is the Massage* transformed McLuhan into a media «guru», as he became a fixture on television panel shows discussing the impact of media on popular culture, politics and personal psychology, even giving an extended interview to *Playboy* magazine. McLuhan argued that the impact of communications media on our lives is omnipresent: «All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the massage» (2008: 26). Media, McLuhan maintained, «massage» our thinking into quiescence by encouraging us to examine their content rather than their nature *qua* media, thus putting critical reflection on their unforeseen consequences to sleep. Media's very omnipresence blinds us to their influence on life and thought; media's impact, McLuhan believed, tends to remain unperceived and *un*thought.

It is no exaggeration to say that McLuhan's work had a major impact on his compatriot, the film-maker David Cronenberg. This is not surprising for two reasons. The first is that Cronenberg attended the University of Toronto at the same time that McLuhan taught there. Though Cronenberg didn't attend McLuhan's lectures, he certainly did fall under the media scholar's spell as he recalls: «suddenly Marshall McLuhan was the guru of communications and was on all the TV shows and in all magazines» (Grünberg, 2006: 66); in another interview, he admits he «read everything [McLuhan] wrote» (Browning, 2007: 64). The second reason concerns the film-maker and theorist's shared conception of technology: for both McLuhan and Cronenberg, technology plays an inseverable part in our make-up as a species. Technology endows us with what McLuhan called vital «extensions» of our senses only by *severing* (a verb with obvious Cronenbergian connotations) us from old ways of perceiving and thinking about the world (2001: 4). These techno-extensions alternately expand and contract consciousness as they «shift the ratios among all the senses» (McLuhan, 2001: 71).

«I don't believe anybody is in control», Cronenberg told Chris Rodley, «That's what McLuhan was talking about when he said the

reason we have to understand media is because if we don't it's going to control us» (Rodley, 1992: 67). Cronenberg was referring to McLuhan's conception of media as «minor religions» at the altars of which we worship each time we direct attention towards screen-content through which the new gods talk to and «control us»:

> To behold, use, or perceive any extension of ourselves in technological form is necessarily to embrace it. To listen to radio or to read the printed page is to accept these extensions of ourselves into our personal system and to undergo the «closure» or displacement of perception that follows automatically […] By continuously embracing technologies, we relate ourselves to them as servo-mechanisms. That is why we must, to use them at all, serve these objects, these extensions of ourselves, as gods or minor-religions. (2001: 50-51).

The notion of technology as something that we come to serve, even something to which we willingly submit, would inspire some of Cronenberg's best work, not least *Videodrome*, the director's most «McLuhanesque» film. The insectoid talking typewriter in *Naked Lunch*; the organic video game console in *eXistenZ*; the diary written in hieroglyphics mirroring the protagonist's arcane mind in *Spider*; the breathing voluptuous TV set in *Videodrome*—these are among the most obvious incarnations of the film-maker's philosophical concerns. For if Cronenberg's oeuvre can be said to embody a philosophical position, then one could do worse than describe it as a kind of phenomenology of the media subject. To watch a Cronenberg film is to «become interwoven with the «I» of the characters» (Pearson, 2012: 166), who are all too often subjected to an impressively vicious form of psychic and physical malaise of technological origin. In this sense, many of Cronenberg's films can be seen as case studies of technology-induced disease: «David Cronenberg», as Gabriel Bortzmeyer aptly puts it, «presents a nosology of the media subject» (my translation, 2021).

McLuhan's influence on Cronenberg is no secret and virtually all major studies of the director's oeuvre to date recognize this fact. Such recognition, though, typically amounts to little more than the aforementioned acknowledgment of shared concerns about the fact that, in McLuhan's words, «Whole cultures could now be programmed to keep their emotional climate stable» via the manipulation of communications media and/or the implementation of technological prostheses for nefarious ends (2001: 30)[1]. What is

[1] Mark Browning's monograph on Cronenberg, for instance, devotes just over two pages (2007: 63-65) to a discussion of McLuhan's influence on the film, and no study of the director's oeuvre to date has, to my knowledge, dealt with this question in any detail.

missing in Cronenberg studies, and certainly in discussions of *Videodrome*, is an examination of the ways in which Cronenberg actually *adapts* the account of television in *Understanding Media*, as well as in its bestselling sequel, and of how McLuhan's two books can be seen as source texts informing the film's dialogue, motifs and even plot points.

In an uncharacteristic first person aside, McLuhan reflects: «I am curious to know what would happen if art were suddenly seen for what it is, namely, exact information of how to rearrange one's psyche in order to anticipate the next blow from our own extended faculties» (2001: 63). I want to suggest that *Videodrome* presents the viewer with the spectacle of *just this*: it unveils in visceral cinematic imagery the concealed nature of media that McLuhan's text discloses by means of aphorism and figurative image. In doing so, the film foreshadows «the next blow» to our collective psyche, this time in the guise of tactile interactive screens fitted onto globally connected gadgets (i.e. smart phones, smart watches, smart glasses, Neuralink implants) anticipated by the nominally tactile television medium as theorized by McLuhan[2].

From the point of view of adaptation, *Videodrome* is unique in Cronenberg's oeuvre, because, unlike the director's adaptations of literary texts (*The Dead Zone*, *Dead Ringers*, *Spider*, *Cosmopolis*), the film is a bona fide cinematic adaptation of—and not merely, as I aim to show, a work «inspired by»—McLuhan's writing. The article begins by drawing on the relevant literature in adaptation studies in order to provide a suitable framework for this atypical case of cinematic adaptation. What further complicates and enriches matters is the fact that there exist not one but two «Videodromes»: after Cronenberg completed the first draft of the original screenplay (which would undergo further revisions during filming) he agreed for the novel adaptation to be released at the same time as the film. He invited the respected fantasy writer Dennis Etchison, then writing under the pseudonym Jack Martin, to Toronto; Martin, working with the original script, completed the novel in time for the film's release in 1983 (Lucas, 2008: 119). What this means, in fact, is that Martin's novel is as close as the viewer can get to the film's original text: by comparing the ways in which *Videodrome* the film and *Videodrome* the novel both differ from and echo each other, this article seeks to demonstrate the significance of McLuhan's work for a richer understanding not only of Cronenberg's chef-d'oeuvre, but of the process of cross-media adaptation itself.

[2] «It's always been the artist who perceives the alterations in man caused by a new medium, who recognizes the future in the present, and uses his work to prepare the ground for it», McLuhan told *Playboy Magazine* in 1969 (2009). Few artists have captured media-induced «alterations in man» more memorably than Cronenberg.

This article is inspired by a provocative remark made by Steven Shaviro in *The Cinematic Body*. In the chapter devoted to Cronenberg, Shaviro writes: «The brutally hilarious strategy of *Videodrome* is to take media theorists such as Marshall McLuhan and Jean Baudrillard completely at their word, to overliteralize their claims for the ubiquitous mediatization of the real» (2006: 138). A discussion of Baudrillard's idea of media-created simulations becoming more real than flesh and blood is beyond the scope of the present essay; as far as McLuhan is concerned, Shaviro's remark reveals more than he intended by it. Cronenberg's film not only makes palpable the claims made in *Understanding Media* about the nature and cultural impact of media: it actively adapts and appropriates McLuhan's style of thinking and *manner of expression*. Cronenberg literally takes McLuhan at his *words*.

2. ADAPTATION, DIALOGUE, APPROPRIATION

Considering *Videodrome* through the lens of adaptation poses a challenge. Unlike other Cronenberg adaptations, we are not dealing with a transposition of a literary text to the big screen. Instead, the film adapts the argument and metaphors deployed in *Understanding Media* as disturbing *mise en scène*. The film's novelization by Jack Martin too sheds light on Cronenberg's adaptation of McLuhan's work, in that it gives the viewer access to the film's «original» text: reading *Videodrome* the novel, that is, allows us to glimpse elements of the original screenplay that informs the imagery we see, thereby attesting to the intermedial nature of the interpretive act.

Setting aside the ambiguous and rather unhelpful notion of fidelity to a source text, Robert Stam proposes that we instead think of adaptation practice as translation, or what he also calls «intersemiotic transposition» from one sign system to another (2000: 62). Since we are concerned with a cinematic transposition of theoretical ideas, this is a more promising way of understanding how one kind of metaphor (conceptual) can become another (visual). «Imagery is important to me, ultimately because of the metaphor», Cronenberg remarks, «In a way, imagery is not even imagery. It has a metaphorical weight» (Grünberg, 2006: 70). Indeed, the metaphorical imagery in *Videodrome* is «weighty», as we will see, precisely because it enters into dialogue with the oracular conceptual language used to describe the nature of television in McLuhan's text.

Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva, Stam suggests that a fruitful way to characterize intermedial adaptation is the notion of «dialogical process», an ongoing contestation of verbal meaning and intertextual exchange (2000: 64). However, intertextuality and its kindred notions of «a tissue of texts», the palimpsest, and so on, tends to minimize specificity, inferring as it does a nebulous galaxy of texts

as potential sources of allusive meaning. This fact prompted Gérard Genette to constrain the concept of intertextuality to mean the co-presence of two texts, for example in the form of quotation, allusion, or even plagiarism (Stam, 2006: 65). A related concept introduced by Genette is «hypertextuality»: here, Genette distinguishes between a «hypotext», defined as a clearly identifiable source or proto-text, and a «hypertext», a new work based on the source text (1997: 5). *Videodrome* thus seems to commit us to a triangulation of concepts: the film's key hypotexts, I have suggested, are *Understanding Media* and *The Medium is the Massage*, because a close reading of these texts promises a fuller understanding of the film's themes and plot. But McLuhan's works also act as hypotexts for *Videodrome* the novel (which, incidentally, opens in a paratextual signalling of its hypotext with the epigraph «the medium is the massage»). Our third adaptation vector, then, is the relationship between the film and the novel as both relate to their source texts.

Now, it might be objected that, unlike in customary adaptation practice where a film-maker adapts a literary text and where there is an unambiguous relationship between hypo- and hypertext (i.e. the characters, and sometimes even the titles, have the same names, the plot is more or less similar), an adaptation of a theoretical text risks diluting the specificity of the concept «adaptation»[3]. Recognizing the many pitfalls to be negotiated when trying to talk about adaptation, Julie Sanders suggests the concept of appropriation. Appropriation refers to a more diffuse kind of adaptation, where «the appropriated text or texts are not always as clearly signalled or acknowledged as in the adaptive process. They may occur in a far less straightforward context» (Sanders, 2006: 27). The lack of such clear signalling in *Videodrome* would seem to qualify it as a case of appropriation, rather than adaptation proper. There is a further important distinction between appropriation and adaptation: an appropriation does not seek to retell or reproduce the same content as the original text; instead, it presents a reworking, a reinterpretation and even a critique of the source text (Sanders, 2006: 28). *Videodrome*, from this perspective, is certainly not a mouthpiece for McLuhan's ideas about modern communication media; in fact, the film often playfully satirizes the «guru» of media studies. And yet, if we fail to consider how much the film owes to *Understanding Media* and *The Medium is the Massage*, we risk not seeing all that the film has to show us. To appreciate the full extent in which Cronenberg employs McLuhan's writing, it is perhaps best to see his film as an appropriation of a style of thought carried out by

[3] «Adaptation», however, becomes problematic whenever it is defined too rigidly, and the critical goal of specifying what adaptation is, and what it *isn't*, seems to be constantly up for revision; see, for instance, Leitch (2012: 87-89).

means of the visual adaptation of the language in which this thought is expressed. That is to say, in appropriating McLuhan's pronouncements about media Cronenberg's film adapts (us to) the media theorist's figurative language as cinematic image.

3. THE VOICE OF THE MEDIA PROPHET

Before examining the film's imaging of McLuhan's concepts, it seems apt to begin with the figure of the man himself (see fig. 1). McLuhan's stand-in in *Videodrome* is of course Professor Brian O'Blivion, whom we meet early on in the story. Max Renn (James Woods), president of CIVIC-TV, a channel specializing in risqué television programmes, has been invited to participate in a panel discussion on a late-night talk show hosted by Rena King (Lally Cadeau). He is joined by Nicki Brand (Debbie Harry), a pop psychologist with masochistic tendencies, and the famous media expert Professor O'Blivion, who joins the panel via what we assume is a live television broadcast. Having O'Blivion appear throughout the film only on television is an ingenious representation of the heavily mediatized persona of McLuhan (who would himself go on to make a famous cameo appearance in Woody Allen's 1997 classic, *Annie Hall*). According to Tim Lucas, the original script describes O'Blivion «as a cross between Marshall McLuhan and Andy Warhol» (1983: 35), though it must be said that casting Jack Creley in the role certainly gives him more of a McLuhan look (see fig. 2). King asks O'Blivion whether he thinks that erotic and violent TV content lead to the desensitization and dehumanization of its viewers; his response is nothing short of McLuhanesque: «The television screen has become the retina of the mind's eye»—a clear echo of McLuhan's statement in *The Medium is the Massage*: «In television, images are projected at you. You are the screen» (2008: 125).

McLuhan's overt representation in the film is certainly not without irony. Later in the story, Max learns from O'Blivion's daughter, Bianca (Sonja Smits), that her father has been dead for over a year and that all his television appearances were pre-recorded on videotape. Max then plays one such recording and watches O'Blivion deliver another volley of seemingly connected statements, beginning with a repetition of the aforementioned comment that left the talk show host understandably nonplussed:

> The television screen is the retina of the mind's eye. Therefore the television screen is part of the physical structure of the brain. Therefore whatever appears on the television screen emerges as raw experience for those who watch it. Therefore, television is reality and reality is less than television (Cronenberg, 1983).

The film cuts to a close up of Max, who snorts in contempt. In the novel's rendition of this scene, narrated in free indirect style, we read: «The way he put it, it sounded eminently logical. Or did it? […] He's a pro. Media prophet, isn't that what they call him? It's a little spooky» (Martin, 1983: 100). The «spookiness» Max refers to is the fact of listening to a dead man address you on videotape. But the «spookiness» also points to more than this: in the novel, O'Blivion is given the following extra lines of dialogue: «For those who have a natural propensity for its imagery, [television is] a kind of bio-electric heroin. Your brain has already become an electron gun. Your retinae have become video screens» (Martin, 1983: 101). In one sense, these lines can be read as a parody of McLuhan's portentous style of writing; to read them as such, however, is to miss the fact that they are a paraphrase of McLuhan's actual concepts. When watching television, McLuhan (*not* O'Blivion) writes: «You are the screen. The images wrap around you. You are the vanishing point» (2008: 125); elsewhere, he describes the content of a medium as «the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind» (2001: 19).

McLuhan's media theory is filled with language of this kind, with imagery suggestive of invasion, mutation, transformation, building up a picture of a body under constant bombardment by information signals coming from without, even as it is made to extend its faculties of sense perception without acquiescing to do so.

4. TELEVISION AND THE BODY

If there is a single passage in McLuhan's work that might be taken to be representative of Cronenberg's oeuvre, and that could well be read as its unstated motto, it is this one:

> With the arrival of electric technology man extended, or set outside himself, *a live model of the central nervous system* itself. To the degree that this is so, it is a development that suggests a desperate and suicidal *autoamputation*, as if the central nervous system could no longer depend on the physical organs to be protective buffers against the slings and arrows of *outrageous mechanism* (my italics, 2001: 48).

«A live model of the central nervous system», «autoamputation», «outrageous mechanism»: one struggles to find more fitting phrases to characterize Cronenberg's cinematic universe. Cronenberg's cinema often presents us with visions of «outrageous mechanism» (*Crash*, *Crimes of the Future*) assaulting and altering the human body, and it repeatedly shows us how the extensions of «the central nervous system», made possible by technology, lead to grotesque bodily transformations and the consequent mutation of identity (*The Fly*, *eXistenZ*, *Scanners*).

McLuhan's discussion of the impact of media on consciousness hinges on a distinction he makes between «hot» and «cool» media (2001: 24-26). A «hot» medium, like radio or photography, tends to discourage active audience participation: it presents its content in a relatively straightforward, «high definition» manner. A «cool» medium, on the other hand, allows for greater participation and interpretive scope, and McLuhan considered television to be exemplary in this regard. Before the advent of high-definition TV, television presented a grainy low quality image shown on a relatively small screen. Unlike the crisp image projected on the cinema screen, the image emitted by TV is low in visual data, requiring the viewer to «fill-in» missing details; the TV image is, moreover, «closer» to the viewer in space so that you can even touch it. Cinema is, then, a «hotter» medium than television[4].

This is how McLuhan describes the nature of what we see on TV: «The TV image requires each instant that we "close" the spaces in the mesh by a convulsive sensuous participation that is profoundly kinetic and tactile, because tactility is the interplay of the senses, rather than the isolated contact of skin and object» (my emphasis, 2001: 342). *Videodrome* portrays this kind of tactile impact on consciousness by the sensory «extension» of television. The film opens with an extreme close-up shot of a TV screen: we see the face of a young woman addressing the camera; it is Max's secretary, Bridey (Julie Khaner), calling him with a scheduled wake-up call. The establishing shot does two things: first, the close-up of the TV screen foregrounds the film's concern with mediation: Bridey's face speaking directly into the film's camera via a television screen is like the director's way of saying, with McLuhan, that «no medium has its meaning or existence alone, but only in constant interlay with other media» (2001: 28). Second, the opening scene places the viewer within the same space inhabited by the protagonist: we feel as though we too are being addressed by the speaker, whose grainy image seems more tangible than the cinema screen on which it appears. As Gorostiza and Pérez write, the opening scene «provoca que el espectador se convierta en un personaje que, como Max, tiene delante una pantalla que podría en cualquier momento interactuar con su vida» (2003: 167)[5]. From this point

[4] McLuhan's distinction is not meant to be applied rigidly. A «hot» medium like cinema, for example, can be «hot» or «cool» to varying degrees: Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979) is a «cooler» film (no pun intended) than John McTiernan's *Die Hard* (1988), because it asks a lot more of its audience while the blockbuster requires less active interpretation on the part of the viewer. In the same way, *Videodrome* is a «cooler» film than *Maps to the Stars* (2014).

[5] González-Fierro Santos also points to this key feature of Cronenberg's aesthetic: «El cine de David Cronenberg—sobre todo a partir de *Videodrome*—ha demostrado una especial predilección por reflexionar sobre el espacio

onward, the television set becomes a living and breathing character in its own right, interacting vicariously with the viewer.

In the history of cinema, there is perhaps no other film that has portrayed the tactile aspect of television quite as memorably as *Videodrome*. Throughout the film, we see Max stroke, caress, kiss, grope, whip and finally shoot the television set. The film's iconic moment is the scene where Max kisses Nicki Brand's televised lips: the scene begins with the point of view shot of Brand speaking to Max as she invites him to join her «inside» television, signalling the beginning of his becoming a slave to the «Videodrome» signal. Next, there's the medium shot of Max kneeling before the set as he bends forward, his face making intimate contact with the screen's fleshy exterior[6]. Finally, we see a close-up of Max's face buried inside the TV screen as his fingers prod its pliable surface (see fig. 3).

McLuhan stressed television's tactility: «TV is, above all, an extension of the sense of touch, which involves maximal interplay of all the senses» (2001: 364); «In television there occurs an extension of the sense of active, exploratory touch which involves all the senses simultaneously, rather than that of sight alone» (2008: 125). The reason McLuhan identifies television with the sense of touch, rather than sight or hearing, is to underscore the fact that the TV image, unlike the projected image of cinema, is *emitted from within*: «the viewer is the screen» (McLuhan, 2001: 341). The old CRT screen produced static so that when touching it you would occasionally receive a not unpleasant sensation of shock, making physical contact with the electronic signal of the cathode ray tube. This is why television, more so than cinema, speaks of humanity's intimacy with media, of its welcome occupation of our most private living spaces and of its serving our most secret, even shameful desires (we are concerned here with the age before the global home invasion by smart phones). In another flight of mixed metaphor, McLuhan writes: «The TV viewer […] is bombarded by atoms that reveal the outside as inside in an endless adventure amidst blurred images and mysterious contours» (2001: 357). The violent opening image shape-shifts into the metaphor of «an endless adventure» across a topography of «blurred images and mysterious contours», conveying the implicit eroticism of TV, what McLuhan also refers to as «the indomitable tactile promptings of the TV image» (2001: 344). Martin's novelistic rendition of Max kissing

interior de los personajes, adoptando frecuentemente una narrativa estructurada en torno a un único punto de vista» (1999: 112).

[6] See Lucas (1983: 44-46) for a fascinating account of the how the special effects team, led by prosthetic make-up artist Rick Baker (responsible for creating the iconic bodily transformation in John Landis' *An American Werewolf in London*) built the fleshy TV set.

Brand's televised lips portrays the symbiosis between the virtual world of television and the corporal world of the viewer very effectively:

> As he grasped the breathing sides of the set, her larger-than-life lips distended to meet his forehead, the glass of the tube melting and ballooning outward to touch his skin [...] Max's eyes closed. He no longer needed them to see. Nicki Brand fired through his eyelids as though they were no longer there, a mere technicality. He licked the screen, the soft screen, distorting the plastic face of Nicki Brand as he strained toward the possibility of acceptance and release in her, caressing her, sinking deeper into the pores and pulsing veins, the wet membranes of her flesh. The mouth widened in response. Her teeth opened, revealing the glistening sea of her tongue, the video scan lines growing wider, separating horizontally and opening to receive him between their strobing, deeper and deeper into the swelling red lips, until he was totally engulfed by the darkness in her throat (Martin, 1983: 102-3).

Visualizing this scene, we no longer distinguish the seam between the virtual and the real as the world of TV engulfs the world of flesh: as one commentator puts it, in Cronenberg's world «los medios son cuerpos virtuales de las imágenes tanto como transformadores de la percepción corporal subjetiva» (Russo, 2017).

5. THE VERBAL SCREENING OF VIRTUAL IMAGES

As the above excerpt illustrates, Martin's adaptation captures the film's imagery in words exceptionally well—especially considering the fact that Martin did not get to see the film and only had Cronenberg's script to work with when writing the novel. But perhaps this is not that surprising: it is safe to assume that most readers of Martin's adaptation of the original screenplay of *Videodrome* come to read the novel only after watching the film. McLuhan liked to reiterate that «the "content" of any medium is always another medium» (2001:8) and «no medium has its meaning or existence alone, but only in constant interplay with other media» (2001: 28). This kind of media «interplay» is most apparent when we engage with adaptation, where a particular text/film acts as the grain against which critical reading must rub. «As we read», Stam writes, «we fashion our own imaginary mise-en-scène of the novel on the private stages of our minds» (2000: 540). Stam is describing what we do when we read a literary text, but when it comes to *Videodrome*'s plot and characters, the privacy of our minds' «stages» is somewhat compromised. Reading the novel, it is a challenge *not* to imagine James Woods' engrossing portrayal of the protagonist and not inwardly picture Debbie Harry as Nicki Brandt: the film's iconography provides the viewer with the visual aesthetic according to which the novel's success, as an adaptation, is measured. As one reads (assuming one has seen the film before reading the novel) one's recollection of

the film's scenes continually contests one's visualization of the novel's restaging of them.

And yet we do see something in the novel that we did not see in the film. Consider the excerpt above: Brand's teeth open, revealing «the glistening sea of her tongue, the video lines growing wider, separating horizontally and opening to receive him between their strobing, deeper and deeper into the swelling red lips». If the film is distant in memory, one might well imagine that this special effects widening of video lines was something that we actually saw on the screen, though we did not. Similarly, when reading a descriptive passage like the following one, it is easy to misremember the film:

> As [Max] watched in disbelief, a TeleRanger console TV set rose up out of the water, out of the blue Algemarin foam *like a hulking electronic Venus on the half-shell*. The set swelled, breathing and snorkling as befitted a marine creature of its substantial size.
>
> On its screen was a close-up of a woman, an anguished expression wracking her features, a leather strap tight around her wrinkled neck.
>
> Masha (my italics, Martin, 1983: 166).

At the time of reading Martin's novel, having last watched *Videodrome* several years ago, I could not say whether this scene was in the film or not (it is not). It certainly felt like it should be[7].

The metaphor in the passage above has been italicized to draw attention to the virtuality that is inherent in a verbal description to a much greater degree than is possible in film; as Stam puts it, «The words of a novel […] have a virtual, symbolic meaning; we as readers, or as directors, have to fill in their paradigmatic indeterminacies» (2000: 55). Like the preceding example of the scene of Max kissing the fleshy television set, this scene is another instance of the literary device known as ekphrasis. Though it is often used in the more restricted sense of a verbal description of a visual artwork, ekphrasis designates, in Bolter's definition, «the description in prose or poetry of an artistic object or striking visual scene; it is the attempt to capture the visual in words» (1996: 264). Ekphrasis is synonymous with an intensely visual and emotionally resonant description, bringing to the fore the «interplay» between media which is always a key part of adaptation criticism. Hence, Liliane Louvel describes ekphrasis as «an intermedial

[7] According to Lucas (2010), this scene was included in Cronenberg's original screenplay but was left out of the film due to budget constraints. As Lucas (1983: 35-38) writes in his original piece covering the filming of *Videodrome*, Cronenberg continued to revise the script right up to the last day of shooting, and even into postproduction.

mixture of word and image» (2018: 246) while Claus Clüver defines it as process of «intermedial translation» (2017: 465).

Perhaps the most important recent critical contribution to the study of ekphrasis is Ruth Webb's *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice*, where Webb traces the earliest known uses of ekphrastic speech and writing, showing the heuristic value of ekphrasis for modern cinema, media, and literary studies. Most simply, ekphrasis can be defined as «a speech that brings the subject matter vividly before the eyes» (Webb, 2016: 1). As the two examples from Martin's *Videodrome* attest, the most effective way of conveying visuality verbally is by means of descriptive metaphor, particularly if said metaphor happens to be intermedial: «like a hulking electronic Venus on the half-shell», the striking comparison that personifies and estranges its object (an '80s TV set) by invoking Botticelli's Venus, allows the reader of the novel to experience the sensation of «seeing» an animate TV rising out of Max's bathtub through his eyes, such that this image conveys «the imperceptible and almost ineffable: the speaker's state of mind at a precise moment in the past» (Webb, 2016: 191).

What is crucial about ekphrasis, then, and what makes it a valuable tool when considering cinematic adaptation and/or novelization of film, is the fact that it immerses us inside the mind of the protagonist. Ekphrasis is impossible without a distinct point of view: what we see in ekphrasis is «not so much an object or scene or person in itself, but the effect of seeing that thing», Webb notes (2016: 127)[8]. Indeed, all that we see when we read *Videodrome* is focalized through the eyes of Max Renn: the novel is narrated in a free indirect style at times almost taken over by first person narration, as Max's voice vies for dominance with the voice of the third person narrator. The following passage illustrates how focalization is used throughout the text: «Now I've done it, thought Max forlornly. Caffeine nerves, insomnia . . . look what happens to you. Get a grip on yourself, boy» (Martin, 1983: 38). Martin's decision to use free indirect style is true to Cronenberg's own conception: Lucas, who interviewed the director on set during filming, observes that «Cronenberg had the notion of making a first-person film that would show an audience the subjective growth of the hero's madness» (1983: 34). As Cronenberg himself described it: after the first 40 minutes of conspiratorial plot, the viewer suddenly finds himself within «a relentlessly first-person point of view» (Rodley, 1992: 94). The use of free indirect speech, together with ekphrastic

[8] On the ways in which ekphrasis immerses the reader within the point of view of the protagonist and how this kind of immersion relates to memory and media, see Bilmes (2023: 13-15 and *passim*).

visualization, thus ensure that the reader is continually exposed to the contagion of Max's hallucinatory world.

6. THE MEDIATED REAL

«After all there is nothing real outside our perception of reality», O'Blivion's video-ghost tells Max. As we read the novel and as we watch the film, it is difficult to say at what exact moment Max's hallucinations begin to seep into the narrative world, turning reality into television-dream. After Max watches the first «Videodrome» transmission recorded by his assistant, he begins to experience a series of visceral visions. A suggestive example is the scene, early in the novel/film, where Nicki Brand arrives at Max's apartment and they watch a videotape recording of «Videodrome».

A woman is being tortured by two masked men in a basement-like room with a red clay wall; while the muted violent imagery plays in the background, «as ubiquitous now as electric wallpaper», Max and Brand have sex, and something strange begins to happen:

> He lifted from her and saw now the pools of condensation forming like heat mirages around the cushions. The floor *melted* and *sloshed* with electrified water. The dark walls of his apartment seemed to close in, the ceiling lowering, reflecting the *flickering* of the candles like the phosphors of a television image: *warm*, deeper than orange, and finally red as a darkroom. The sofa and furniture *blurred* into insubstantial shadows, then fell away completely, leaving them naked under the *light* of the red room (my italics, Martin, 1983: 71).

So strong is this sensation of finding himself inside the room shown in the «Videodrome» recording that Max expects to hear «the slogging approach of heavy boots [of the torturers]. But they did not come. Not this time» (Martin, 1983: 72).

In Webb's characterization, ekphrasis «evokes sights, sounds and sensations of absent things that, moreover, have the power to make us feel "as if" we can perceive them and share the associated emotions» (2016: 168). The ekphrasis of Max's hallucinatory vision, with his bedroom taking on the quality of a televised image, is similarly synesthetic: words like «heat», «melted», «sloshed», «flickering», «warm», «blurred» and «light» invoke touch, hearing and vision, imitating verbally the multisensory immersion of TV. «Television», McLuhan writes, «demands participation and involvement in depth of the whole being» (2008: 125), which is exactly what ekphrasis tries to make possible in the novel.

In the film, Cronenberg portrays this kind of «involvement in depth» characterizing this scene by a juxtaposition of two distinct images. First, we see a long shot of Max and Nicki Brand in bed, with the TV set showing the «Videodrome» imagery in the background.

Then the scene changes: Max and Brand are no longer in his bedroom but in a room resembling the «Videodrome» torture-chamber. The dark crimson floor and black rectangular space upon which the figures lie, accompanied by Howard Shore's brooding soundtrack, create an eroticized, threatening atmosphere: we're inside Max's mind, in a cinematic equivalent of ekphrastic visualization, for what we are here given to see is the world fallen prey to, and dominated by, the iconography of televised reality. As if to underscore the point, the film then cuts, briefly, to a long shot of the same space but now without the two bodies: the room is shown through the mesh of the CRT screen, which, in effect, tells us that Max's world belongs to television (see fig. 4). Shaviro captures the idée fixe expressed in this scene, which also characterizes *Videodrome* as a whole: «The point at which subjective reality becomes entirely hallucinatory is also the point at which technology becomes ubiquitous, and is totally melded with and objectified in the human body» (2006: 141).

We begin to see more clearly how the effect of ekphrasis, as it is used in Martin's adaptation of the film, mirrors McLuhan's account of the impact of television, as it is portrayed cinematically by Cronenberg. The conception of communication upon which ancient rhetorical practice was based—and which, I claim, is shared by McLuhan—is one where language is conceived «as a quasi-physical force which penetrates into the mind of the listener, stirring up images that are stored there» (Webb, 2016: 128). When reading ekphrastic prose, Webb observes, we experience «language passing like an electrical charge» between the text and the reader; ekphrasis, moreover, can even lead to the temporary «enslavement» of the listener by the speaker (2016: 129). If all these points are taken together, it would seem as if antiquity's conception of ekphrasis foreshadowed McLuhan's theory of media as the «extensions of man», not least his account of television as «the most recent and spectacular extension of our central nervous system» (2001: 345).

Videodrome the novel and *Videodrome* the film express, respectively, the visualization made possible by synesthetic description and the cinematic rendering of conceptual metaphors. In doing so, they point to how the two media, writing and cinema, form an inseverable part of our picture of the real and the space we occupy within it via their mediation.

7. A MCLUHANESQUE PLOT

Having examined how *Videodrome* can be said to have appropriated McLuhan's theoretical concepts, both in dialogue and cinematic image, I would like to address my claim that the film's plot echoes the discussion of television in *Understanding Media*. The chapter McLuhan devotes to TV is by far the longest in the book; it is also where his

language is most Cronenbergian. Beginning the chapter with an image of a child gazing raptly at a TV screen and concluding with the grisly broadcast of the murder of Lee Harvey Oswald by Jack Ruby, McLuhan portrays television as an uncanny medium-intruder into the home that affects society insidiously and unawares. Contrasting the more linear thought-processes associated with print culture, he writes: «The introspective life of long, long thoughts and distant goals, to be pursued in lines of Siberian railroad kind, cannot coexist with the mosaic form of the TV image that commands immediate participation in depth and admits no delays» (2001: 354). In McLuhan's depiction, we are presented with the full immersion of consciousness «inside» TV, with the mind enveloped in and touched by its bluish glow. It is important to emphasize here that McLuhan does not consider television to be pernicious qua medium; media, after all, are tools which can be used for both virtuous and vicious purposes. McLuhan's point is that media, conceived as «extensions» of the central nervous system, necessarily *alter* «our sense-lives and our mental processes» (2001: 362).

If the chapter devoted to television in *Understanding Media* can be said to have plot, then it might be summed up as follows: the story begins (like *Videodrome*) in the intimate interior of the home: a child is mesmerized by the moving pictures on the tube which come to affect the way the child processes information, even how she perceives space. Television is then shown to influence the grown-ups' world: fashion, clothing, cars, lifestyle, politics, even daily routines. From the time of the Renaissance—a period encompassing the invention of the printing press as well as the perfection of perspective in painting—the Western mind was encouraged to conceive the world *visually*: one beheld a uniform space upon which objects appeared in various configurations and, crucially, one remained separate from this space in beholding it. Television, on the other hand, in projecting and extending the sense of touch, «is total, synesthetic, involving all the senses», immersing the viewer in what she is watching (McLuhan, 2001: 365). Television is so involving, in fact, that it can compel the viewer to lose his own individuality as he identifies with ritualized audience participation: the television viewer is content to commit to the «tribe» of the audience (McLuhan, 2001: 366). It would be wrong, however, to suppose that TV breeds passivity; as McLuhan argues: «TV is above all a medium that demands a creatively participant response. The guards who failed to protect Lee Oswald were not passive. They were so involved by the mere sight of the TV cameras that their lost their sense of their merely practical and specialist task» (2001: 368). McLuhan is being ironic, of course: the guards did not act appropriately precisely because they were already «acting» in the spectacle of the scene that the TV cameras were in the process of creating.

In *Videodrome*, Max's trajectory as a character can be seen to mirror the story of television as sketched by McLuhan. His is a transformation from somebody who programmes (and, of course, avidly consumes) late-night television content to somebody who becomes programmed by the «Videodrome» signal. O'Blivion reveals to Max (via television) the hidden truth behind «Videodrome»: it turns out that being exposed to the transmission induces a brain tumour, which causes the visceral hallucinations. After watching «Videodrome», Max begins seeing a series of increasingly violent visions, eventually acting them out and murdering two colleagues at CIVIC TV, his assistant Harlan, and ultimately Barry Convex, CEO of Spectacular Optical, a nefarious enterprise which seeks to use «Videodrome» to control society. («We make inexpensive glasses for the Third World and missile guidance systems for NATO. We also make *Videodrome*», Convex blithely informs Max.)

In a suggestively titled chapter, «The Gadget Lover», McLuhan writes: «Man becomes, as it were, the sex organs of the machine world, as the bee of the plant world, enabling it to fecundate and to evolve ever new forms» (2001: 51). McLuhan's reproductive metaphor is given memorable expression in the film's visual aesthetic, obsessed as it is by the idea of coupling with technology and losing the ability to distinguish between self and medium, so that the self *becomes* the medium through which those in control can act (see fig. 5). In such imagery as Max's infamous flesh gun, the breathing video cassette, the vein-streaked TV set, and, most spectacularly of all, the animate vaginal slit in Max's belly, *Videodrome* gives flesh to McLuhan's metaphor-fuelled concepts by «overliteralizing» them, in Shaviro's phrase; in doing so, the film makes palpable for the viewer what the reader of *Understanding Media* and *The Medium is the Massage* is left only to imagine. «The TV image», McLuhan writes, «is […] a ceaselessly forming contour of things limned by the scanning-finger. The resulting plastic contour appears by light through, not light on, and the image so formed has the quality of sculpture and icon, rather than picture» (2001: 341). As we have seen, McLuhan repeatedly emphasized the tactility of television[9] and the way in which Cronenberg conveys this in the film is i) by means of ingenious prosthetic make-up such as the scene of Max's kissing the television lips of Nicki Brand, or the explosive shot of the flesh-gun stretching the TV screen as Max shoots himself by shooting at the screen; and ii) by filming the TV screen in extreme close-up and simulating the effect of sitting «in front of the tube» in one's own living room.

[9] Cronenberg says much the same thing about cinema: «To me the cinema, I feel, is very tactile. It's not just visual. It's sensual in many, many ways» (Grünberg, 2006: 95).

Seeing a giant close-up of a TV screen in a movie theatre is not a little disconcerting. One reason for this is the fact of being confronted with the medium itself: in seeing a close-up of Bridey's televised face, at the beginning of the film, or in looking at the close-up of Max pointing the flesh-gun at his temple through the mesh of TV, we attend to the texture of the medium as much as, or even more so, than we do to the content of what we are shown. What is significant about these scenes is precisely the fact that they show televised-images lending their content a kind of patina of tactility. The film's closing scene presents us with two versions of the same shot: we first see a close-up of Max's face with the flesh-gun raised to his temple on the «Videodrome» TV set; then, in the final shot, the same close-up is used but this time without the «filter» of the TV screen[10]. The unexpected effect of this is that, instead of the latter shot seeming more «real» than the former, it is actually the televised close-up that bears the weight of the tangible: in seeing Max shoot himself on the «Videodrome» set, which explodes in a spray of guts, we feel as though his fate has already been sealed. Max has become television: the living word, the film's metaphor for the human, has become the New Flesh.

8. CONCLUSION: AN ADVENTURE IN «THE UNIFIED SENSORIUM»

McLuhan insisted that what distinguished the image on television from the cinematic image is the former's low resolution: the TV image, unlike the light captured on film stock, is an easily discernible «mosaic mesh of light and dark spots» (2001: 342). He believed that should television one day improve to the point of what we now know as HD-quality, we will no longer be dealing with the medium of television. Yet McLuhan's account of the television of the 1960s is arguably even more fitting as an anticipation of the medium's evolution into the interactive touchscreen that presently dominates the globe. «In television there occurs an exploration of the sense of active, exploratory touch which involves all the senses simultaneously»: if we substitute «smart phone» for «television» here we can see how prophetic McLuhan could be, however inadvertently.

[10] The film's closing sequence illustrates perfectly Guy Debord's diagnosis of alientation in the age of «the society of the spectacle»; in the following passage, Debord is describing precisely the kind of self-estrangement conveyed by *Videodrome*: «The spectacle's estrangement from the acting subject is expressed by the fact that the individual's gestures are no longer his own; they are the gestures of someone else who represents them to him. The spectator does not feel at home anywhere, because the spectacle is everywhere» (2005: 16). A comparison of the ways in which McLuhan and Debord's critiques of mass culture both complement and depart from each other in *Videodrome* would be a welcome addition to Cronenberg scholarship.

Today, the Internet, encompassing social networks and data streaming services, is something we consume (and something that consumes us) bodily, as we cradle screen-content in our hands and touch it with our fingers. «Cronenberg was able to foretell our electronic evolution», Nick Ripatrazone argues, «the quasi-Eucharistic way we «taste and see» the Internet [...] *Videodrome* shows what happens when mind and device become one» (2017). Recent advancements in communications media bespeak the contemporary relevance of McLuhan's vision of the impact of television on consciousness. However, as eloquent and far-seeing as that vision is, it is constrained by its own medium of expression: the linear printed word which houses this thought. Cronenberg, I have argued, translates that linearity into cinematic image, hyperbolizing McLuhan's metaphors of sensory extension as grotesque *mise en scène*. In this way, Cronenberg's film «adapts» the viewer to McLuhan's picture of the violent impact of media on consciousness.

When Max is taken to see Barry Convex at the headquarters of Spectacular Optical, he is shown the enterprise's latest invention (see fig. 6): a glowing helmet contraption that looks like an eerie prototype of a contemporary VR headset (recently rebranded as a «mixed-reality» spatial computer). The helmet, Convex explains to Max, does two things. First the wearer is shown scenes of violent and/or sexual imagery intended to overstimulate the nervous system: the violent footage triggers hallucinations, which the helmet then records. The helmet thus becomes a repository of its wearers' most secret desires and dreams, dreams that become the property of Spectacular Optical, which broadcasts them via the «Videodrome» signal. What may have seemed like wide-eyed dystopian fantasy in 1983 has become reality. Contemporary AI technology is already capable of reproducing high quality images from an MRI scan of brain activity: a subject is shown a picture of an animal, for example, and the AI system translates the neuronal glow detected by the MRI into a more or less accurate digital reproduction of the original image[11].

As impressive as the film's imaginative anticipation of technological innovation is, it does not capture what is most significant about Cronenberg work. Recall the director's remark: cinematic imagery is important, he says, when it has «metaphorical weight»; for McLuhan, similarly, «All media are active metaphors in their power to translate experience into new forms» (2001: 63). Showing us how one medium (television) impinges on consciousness, Cronenberg's film has metaphorical weight in precisely this sense: it shows the viewer how

[11] See, for instance, the following *NBC* article by Sara Ruberg and Jacob Ward: https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/brain-waves-ai-can-sketch-picturing-rcna76096.

media translate and adapt sensory experience and thereby change us into new forms—often in the most brutal and perversely stimulating way possible.

Cronenberg, I think, would be sympathetic to McLuhan's claim that «not even the most lucid understanding of the peculiar force of a medium can head off the ordinary "closure" of the senses that causes us to conform to the pattern of experience presented» (2001: 359). «Print asks for the isolated and stripped-down visual faculty», whereas today we find ourselves within «the unified sensorium» (McLuhan, 2001: 336) of the world of haptic screens. If ekphrasis sought to make the reader a virtual witness to what was being described, as if the reader could forget the language-screen making the description possible in favour of the visions immanent within it, then the image in *Videodrome* asks the viewer to remember the living word before, or even as, it becomes the New Flesh. It may be impossible to extricate ourselves from the media which compose the texture of reality, yet it is possible, as both *Videodrome* the novel and *Videodrome* the film attest, to portray the texture's weave.

IMAGES

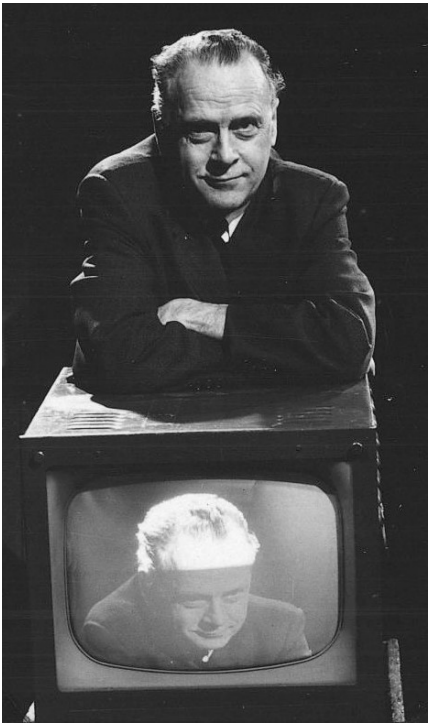

Fig. 1. Marshall McLuhan leans on his own televised image.
Photograph by Bernard Gotfryd, 1 January 1967. Public domain.

Fig. 2. Jack Creley as Professor Brian O'Blivion, McLuhan's stand-in in *Videodrome* (David Cronenberg, 1983).

Fig. 3. Max Renn (James Wood) kisses and fondles the television screen (David Cronenberg, 1983).

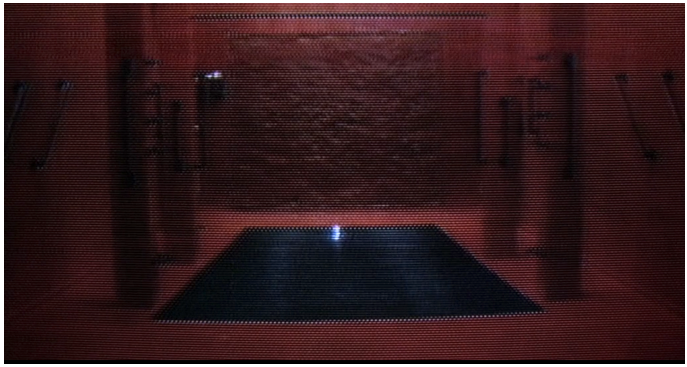

Fig. 4. Max Renn's bedroom portrayed as a televised image of the torture-room in the «Videodrome» transmission (David Cronenberg, 1983).

Fig. 5. The flesh-gun suicide on the «Videodrome» TV set shown in the film's closing sequence (David Cronenberg, 1983).

Fig. 6. Max Renn wearing the helmet that records dreams (David Cronenberg, 1983).

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