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Indocile Bodies: Bodily Transgressions in Selected Canadian Movies

Abstract: The article looks at the representations of corporeality, desire and transgression in selected films by David Cronenberg, Guy Maddin and Bruce LaBruce. The body acquires some kind of independence in these films, and the forces of excess that work in/though it (drives, desires) push the modern subject into various acts of transgression, thus threatening its propriety and stability. At a cultural level, this phenomenological instability of body- and self-boundaries may be linked to the Canadian sense of a "weak" national identity, rephrased by some as a positive case of "queer" nationality.

Key words: Body, desire, sexuality, transgression, excess, queer, Canadian cinema.

A large number of thinkers and cultural theorists have asserted, on different grounds, that transgression is culture's most fundamental question, or even its constitutive principle. Many possible genealogies could be drafted for this modern Western preoccupation with transgression; one of them could choose to see the first major modern transgressor in the Enlightenment's *enfant terrible*, Marquise de Sade. The second important moment was, unquestionably, Nietzsche's (in)famous declaration that God is dead. Sigmund Freud's body of theory comes to mind as yet another breakthrough, despite the Viennese doctor's carefully protected image of middle-class respectability and scientific integrity. In Chris Jenks's useful account, for example, Freud's work is discussed somewhat reluctantly: almost like a poltergeist, Freud "will not go away" (Jenks, C., 2003: 45), as if to insist on his rightful place. While no single trajectory can be delineated to explain the concept's multifarious presence in contemporary culture and cultural theory, Freud has been an undeniable influence on many 20th-century theorists as well as practitioners of transgression, most notably Georges Bataille. It could even be argued, as the *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* does, that "real and fantasized transgression is at the heart of

all psychological mechanisms, as the result, or source, of a conflict" and that psychoanalysis itself, as a "scientific corpus," is predicated on a "transgressive epistemological curiosity" (Kipman, S.-D., 2005: unpaged). The latter point may, in fact, be extended beyond the level of epistemology and cautiously applied to some postmodern theorizations of transgression (following, for instance, the thought of Michel Foucault or Gilles Deleuze), which are not simply concerned with analysing the phenomenon in a positivistic manner, but often posit themselves as culturally transgressive in their own right. A different tradition derives from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and his followers, with their insistence on culture's materialistic foundations. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's classic *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* continues and critically expands the Bakhtinian perspective, while carefully avoiding its own self-romanticization as an instance of transgressive practice.

Although relatively easy to define as "that conduct which breaks rules or exceeds boundaries" (Jenks, C., 2003: 3), transgression involves a complex compound of psychological, social, legal, religious, and other aspects. All boundaries are of a symbolic nature, and so is necessarily transgression (which entails, among other things, that any transgression is context-specific, defined as such only in relation to a particular symbolic system). Assuming, after Mary Douglas, that the body "provides a basic scheme for all symbolism" (Douglas, M., 1966: 202), one may argue that the "primary stage" for any subsequent kinds of transgression lies in the (symbolically mapped-out) materiality of the human body. Says Douglas, "[t]he body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious" (1966: 142). Because "all margins are dangerous" (1966: 150), anything that is corporeally marginal becomes heavily invested with "power and danger," and thus subjected to the most intense and violent boundary policing. At the same time Douglas very carefully distances herself from a theoretical framework in which the body *determines* a culture's symbolic structure in any particular way. As she says, "[e]ach culture has its own special risks and problems. To which particular bodily margins its belief attribute power depends on what situation the body is mirroring" (1966: 150). Consequently, Douglas insists that "we should try to argue back from the known dangers of society to the known selection of bodily themes" (1966: 150). In my own methodological practice, however, the movement is bidirectional: the otherwise known fears and desires of a culture help read the body's mappings and uses, but equally well the representations and conceptualizations of the corporeal help identify the culture's fears and desires. Thus, in studying Canadian culture I look at its heavily policed margins that mark the most intense sites of "danger," while one of the most fruitful ways of "looking at the margins" is investigating the representations of the body and its excesses (keeping in mind that particular excesses are perceived as such differently in different cultures). In other words, one may

be able to delineate the contours of a culture (however ragged, discontinuous or paradoxical) by concentrating on the transgressions that it performs on its own symbolic boundaries.

A distinction could be made between "transgression" — which is always performed by a subject from *within* the boundaries of a norm, a law, a rule, and as such it is known or felt to be a transgression (whether premeditated or in hindsight) — and another phenomenon defined as an "external" intrusion of excess (akin to the Lacanian Real) into the symbolic realm. On second thought, however, this distinction may turn out to be purely theoretical: when we say "subject" we tend to think of the Cartesian, or liberal humanist, subject, the self-conscious initiator and performer of actions; yet when we take into account *drive* and *desire*, the picture becomes much more problematic. Who is the "I" of desire? Or in other words, how can a subject claim any degree of unity and reasonableness, when it is driven by forces that by far exceed its capacity for self-control and threaten the very "core" of its identity? In this sense, at least, certain acts of transgression are performed simultaneously from *within* and *without* the symbolic limits; desire is the "secret agent" of the excess that, from within the subject, crosses the boundary, or pushes the subject to cross it. But it would be clearly a mistake to simply dissociate desire from the subject as an "alien element," because desire clearly helps constitute the subject in its "subjecthood." What I am grappling with here is the tenability of the notion of some sort of "agency" that could be ascribed to excess in general, and corporeal excess in particular. It is a notion wrought with theoretical dangers that I do not have the space to address properly in this short paper. Let me only point out that both excess and desire-inflected subjectivity are constituted in the act of drawing the boundary; and that just as the subject's agency is constantly undermined by the workings of drive and desire, so the (non-subjectified) excess is, arguably, endowed with a certain form of agency, a "semiotic" kind of agency, to borrow Julia Kristeva's term.

The body occupies a similarly ambiguous position in relation to the subject. Apparently possessed, contained, and controlled by the subject, insofar as it seems to coincide with the boundaries mapped onto it by the Symbolic, it is never free from its excesses. Those excesses become more pronounced when uncontrollable urges or changes are experienced or perceived in the corporeal realm. When struck with a disease, or simply when maturing or aging, "my" body becomes less "mine," its fundamental materiality (and thus foreignness) comes to the foreground. (As Linda Ruth Williams remarks in her discussion of David Cronenberg, "[t]hat the body has an agenda of its own, quite separate from the conscious concerns of the moral self, makes it more alien than the aliens"; Williams, L.R., 1999: 33). Desire, capable of "capturing" the body and hijacking it from the control of the subject, has an equally alienating effect. Unsurprisingly, due to a powerful modern association of masculinity with

self-control (and, conversely, femininity with the lack of it) the process through which the male subject's grip on its body and identity lessens is often perceived as a process of "feminization" and, consequently, "monstrosification." Again, in what sense and in what cases we are entitled to talk about the body's agency, rather than simply "forces and processes of nature," is a complex question which I intend to address elsewhere. Here, just as the Foucauldian pun in my title suggests, I will base my discussion of selected Canadian films on the proposition that the body (as an instance of self-organizing matter) can indeed be attributed with some sort of agency. Bodies may be regulated and policed into docility, as Foucault had it, but not without resistance, a revenge, a revolt.

In many ways Canada may be described as a land (and a culture) of excess. There is an excess of space and of extreme weather conditions, but also an excessive interest in the perverse, the sexual and the corporeal. At the aesthetic level, Canada could be said to move back and forth between its "official" aesthetics of the "scenic," and its not-so-hidden fascination with the obscene. This distinction generally corresponds to that between legitimate and normative representations of the body (clean, healthy, attractive — Bakhtin's "classical body") and abject, grotesque, monstrous bodies deemed "obscene" and unfit for the public eye.

To see Canada's "official" face one only needs to glance at a random selection of Canada's promotional materials, such as documentaries or photo albums, or an equally random selection of images googled up when the search term is simply "Canada." It is no coincidence, either, that the artistic Group of Seven, which "claimed to find in the local landscape a distinctive national identity, and claimed to have found a uniquely Canadian style for expressing it" (Francis, D., 1997: 141), achieved the status of Canada's major showpiece, a "national wallpaper," as Robert Fulford put it (Francis, D., 1997: 135). On the other hand, the fascination with the obscene and the (bizarrely) sexual has also been an element of Canadian self-definition for some time. As early as in 1945 Earle Birney described Canada, with an evident gender and colonial bias, as an adolescent boy who "keeps his prurience stealthy" (Birney, E., 1995: 18). The trope of Canada's persistent immaturity that Birney employs here is characteristically linked with both the country's alleged inability to achieve a mature form of nationhood and its inordinate interest in sex. Over the 1980s and 1990s, with the work of many artists and writers (such as David Cronenberg, John Greyson, Guy Maddin or Bruce LaBruce in film), Canadian prurience has become much less stealthy. So much so that Katherine Monk's 2001 book on Canadian film prominently features "weird sex" as characteristic of Canadian cinema (*Weird Sex and Snowshoes*), whereas Thomas Waugh's 2006 volume *The Romance of Transgression in Canada* is an impressive 600-page history of Canadian queer cinema.

To say that much of (mainstream) Canadian cinema is "famously intrigued by unusual, atypical sexual practices and identities" (Allan, J., 2001: 138) has, indeed, become something of a commonplace. Following some earlier usage Ja-

son Morgan calls this genre "perversion chic," as characterized by "a preference for narratives originating at the margins of society" and featuring necrophiliacs, pedophiles, and homosexuals, among others (Morgan, J., 2006: 211). In Katherine Monk's oversimplified account Canadian films' preoccupation with bodily and sexual excesses result from the society's general repressiveness: "The French-Canadian soul is haunted by the Gothic complications of sex and the Catholic Church, while the English Canadian soul by Victorian codes of physical denial. Sex = Guilt in Canadian society […]" (Monk, K., 2001: 120). To avoid a paradox that seems inherent to this logic (with so much repression, how come the cinema does indeed produce such a remarkable excess of sex?) it seems much more reasonable to use a Foucauldian perspective, in which the workings of discourse and power do regulate sexual behaviors and representations, even as they enable the production of new kinds of behaviors and representations. Over the last decade or so, "weird" sexualities, as represented in film, literature and other media, have been providing new metaphors for (postmodern) conceptualizations of Canadian nationality as somehow "queer." Jason Morgan, for example, asserts that "in the perversion chic films, Canadian nationalism is demonstrated to be queer because it transgresses the normative basis of the nation" (Morgan, J., 2006: 223). In this and similar accounts "Canadianness" is construed as inherently "queer" and "transgressive."

Set in a mountain village, perennially surrounded by the snow- and ice-bound Alpine landscapes, Guy Maddin's queer and neo-gothic tour de force *Careful* may be read as a parable of Canada itself. The village owes its existence to the "carefulness" of its inhabitants, who must never raise their voice lest they trigger an all-destroying avalanche. Moderation, discipline and the habit of "hushing up" are believed to save the village from the otherwise certain annihilation. Yet descents into the "mines" of the unconscious are unavoidable and, in the end, they expose the dark undercurrents of incestuous desire and murderous intentions that shake the very fundaments of the villagers' social life. In this Freudian parable Maddin exposes the precariousness of culture, whose main purpose is to regulate and police social and familial relations. Unreliable like the layer of mid-spring ice on a lake (one cannot but think of the famous scene from Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter* when the school bus sinks slowly into the icy lake), culture is constantly threatened by an excess of the physical. In Canada, whose name stems from the Iroquoian word for "village," a perceived excess of land, together with the infirmity of a national consciousness, translates culturally into a set of gothic anxieties over the uneasy relationship between culture and the (excessive) body. It may be generally true that Canadian society cultivates an official ethos of moderation in the face of very immoderate physical conditions, but, as Justin Edwards points out, "underlying the Canadian taste for order and stability, beneath a culture systematically advocating and practicing moderation and consensus" there lies "an extremely subversive streak — a sort of northern

grotesque" (Edwards, J., 2005: 164). This "subversive streak" explores those transgressive acts that challenge the well-policed boundaries of a moderate culture, particularly the excesses of corporeality and sexuality.

Often associated with the melodramatic, Maddin's films contain enough transgressive elements (e.g. a son eating the corpse of his father, incestuous love, or simply Count Dracula) to deserve the "Canadian Gothic" label. True, the transgressions featured in his work are highly stylized and clad in a lot of humor, but I do not believe that this fact makes them in any way less "serious." One may recall, in this respect, a very short story by Margaret Atwood, "Horror Comics," in which two girls neutralize their very real fears, and distance themselves from their own latent "vampirism" or hate, by mock-dramatizing cheap and obviously exaggerated horror comics. In social life transgressions *are* real, just as avalanches *do* happen. (Reportedly, Maddin's intention was to endow the themes of *Careful* with "real avalanche potential"; Toles, G., 2001: 329). Steven Shaviro, who identifies yearning and humiliation as the two powerful, central emotions organizing Maddin's cinematic universe, points to a number of "excesses" particular to Maddin's art: an excess of narrative, an excess of display, an excess of emotion. The critic goes on to explain that the campy ludicrousness permeating Maddin's work "is the mask under whose cover the cultivation of extreme feelings becomes possible. We cannot help looking ridiculous when we are overcome with passion, or driven by desires that have no hope of success and no rational grounding" (Shaviro, S., 2002 : 217). Again, the excessiveness at the level of aesthetics, narrative and visual representation is made to both expose and emotionally contain the excesses of the body and of desire.

Interestingly enough, the film has been (half-jokingly) called by its makers (Guy Maddin and George Toles) both "pro-incest" and "pro-repression." Or, as Maddin explains, "It started out as pro-incest. […] I went and shot it and the pro-incest kind of got lost and I think it ended up being that whenever anyone did act on their impulses, they were punished in an Old Testament fashion instantly. […] So it ended up being a pro-repression movie […]" (Beard, W., 2005: unpaged). It seems that the offhand humor with which Maddin uses the "pro-" and "anti-" labels undermines their ultimate adequacy. Rather, it is the interplay between (illicit) desire and repression — dramatized as real or fantasized transgression of some sort or another — that lends vitality to social life as well as to artistic creation. The effect Maddin achieves by escaping as far as possible from "psychological realism" into excessive and campy melodramatization is not only some emotional detachment that makes the "horror" of the body (with its drives and desires) more bearable, but also a perspective that — if not exactly "post-" or "inhuman" — could at least be dubbed "parahuman." The human subject (at least in its liberal humanist version) is not the centre of attention; it proves to be secondary to the primacy of corporeality, which always exceeds any social norms and forms of repression.

Through eerie settings, contrived narratives, histrionic performances and anti-naturalistic aural effects (e.g. poor synchronization) Maddin achieves an oneiric mood in which, just as in a dream, human subjects become decentered, displaced and secondary to some uncanny logic beyond the characters' (and pretty much the viewers') reach and comprehension, a logic of excess and desire. A similar effect, although with much less humor attached to it, may be found in the films of David Cronenberg, a master of the "biological horror." Particularly *Videodrome*, *Naked Lunch* and *eXistenZ* blur the line between what is commonly experienced as "reality" and worlds created by hallucination. The protagonists of many of his films are (traditionally male) subjects "torn apart" by uncontrollable desires and/or bodily transformations. It could be argued that, like Maddin's *Careful*, Cronenberg's art is pro-repression and thus, apparently, anti-transgression; some critics (notably the fellow Canadian Robin Wood) accuse him of a fundamentally conservative bias that forecloses any "liberatory" potential. Thomas Waugh is very adamant in his condemnation: Cronenberg is an "obsessive homophobe" who is "[t]raumatized by the penetration of the male body" and "resolves the stress by littering the landscape with dead queers" (2006: 397). Along similar lines, some feminist critics point to his films' misogyny, or at least their phallocentric sexual politics (Barbara Creed's analyses are particularly revealing in this respect). Others, however, advocate a different interpretative stance; Kelly Hurley, for example, recognizes a "posthuman" potential in Cronenberg's work and calls for a correspondingly posthuman politics of interpretation.

Criticized, on the one hand, by conservatives for bold representations of sexuality, corporeality, abjection and various sorts of monstrosity, and, on the other hand, by some progressives for an underlying "reactionary" agenda, Cronenberg claims, interestingly, an unusual ability to see a problem "from all sides" at once, without having to choose a particular stance (Rodley, C., 1992: 118). This is probably what allows him to say: "It seems very natural for me to be sympathetic to disease" (Rodley, C., 1992: 84), and at the same time harbor a clear nostalgia for the (male) human subject, doomed to some inhuman transformation, disintegration, and/or self-annihilation (William Beard stresses this nostalgia in *The Artist As Monster*, particularly in the chapter on *Videodrome*; Beard, W., 2006: 121—164). The pathos of the last scene of *The Fly* depends largely on the monster's proof of its very last vestige of humanity when the human-fly-machine hybrid begs for death. (It is a suicidal drive, ultimately, that seems to be constitutive of the human subject, as opposed to a non-human monster which "has no politics," as Brundlefly puts it; Veronica's humanity is also tested and confirmed through the act of "mercy-killing"). It could be argued that the "radical" potential of Cronenberg's films lies not so much in a deliberate strategy of transgression, but largely in the very immediacy of the cinematic image and its ability to "infect" the mind of the viewer, in a virus-like manner. Even if one interprets

his movies as essentially "pro-repression" (which is usually understood as coterminous with "conservative"), the images — once unleashed — do not simply go back to the dark recesses of the mind; they might begin to breed, multiply and parasitically dominate the "host body." One may recall, in this respect, fiery condemnations of carnal sins as well as detailed descriptions (or visual representations) of infernal sufferings in pre-modern Europe which, quite contrary to their stated intentions, bred a Western sado-masochistic imaginary for centuries to come. This is how I understand the subversive power of images, even if they are not made to serve the purposes of an overtly pro-transgression narrative. (The quasi-viral quality of images was, of course, thematized and fleshed out in *Videodrome*, where recorded images have the ability to invade and transform not just human minds, but also — if not primarily — human bodies).

A man losing control of his body (which entails its, and his, feminization) is one of the most consistent motifs in Cronenberg's films. It is the relative independence of the body that fascinates the director, as he explains in this oft-quoted passage:

> I don't think that the flesh is necessarily treacherous, evil, bad. It is cantankerous, and it is independent. The idea of independence is the key. It really is like colonialism. The colonies suddenly decide that they can and should exist with their own personality and should detach from the control of the mother country. At first the colony is perceived as being treacherous. It's a betrayal. Ultimately, it can be seen as the separation of a partner that could be very valuable as an equal rather than as something you dominate.
>
> Rodley, C., 1992: 80

The colonial analogy sounds quite relevant, given Canada's past and its post-colonial present. The kind of rebellion Cronenberg describes, however, rather fits the American Revolution, against which the Canadian regime eternally defines itself. In a psycho-political reading, then, Cronenberg's enduring fascination with "rebellious" flesh could be related (but certainly not reduced) to Canadians' ambiguous feelings towards their powerful southern neighbour; obviously intrigued by Americans' clamorous claims of independence, many Canadians embrace a more conservative tendency that emphasizes balance, moderation, and evolutionary change. At least at some level, then, Cronenberg's "message" about the transgressions could be read as a Maddinian admonition "Careful!" — a fascination that goes together with a warning against the dangerous excesses that may result from the uncurbed drive to transgress. Indeed, most theorists agree that transgression, though ostensibly challenging the authority of a law or a border, in fact secretly affirms the law or the border and confirms its validity; or in other words, the law *depends* on its transgression and (secretly) demands it, which provides a classic example the so-called "double-bind" situation (a self-contradictory message), possibly inherent in all law-making and law-enforcement.

If Cronenberg has been accused of making films that sometimes border on the pornographic (*Crash*, most notoriously), in the films of another Canadian director, Bruce LaBruce, pornography is an ever-present element, or one of their constitutive elements. LaBruce situates himself as far as possible from a "pro-repression" bias and the "celluloid transgressions" that Cronenberg and Maddin may be associated with. Instead, LaBruce adopts the role of an eternal and unregenerate transgressor: his is a cultural "politics of transgression" par excellence. Using homosexuality as some sort of cultural capital, he declares boldly: "Homosexuals are, by definition, outlaws and criminals. That's what makes it so exciting" (LaBruce, B., 1997b: 63). He defies not simply the general heteronormativity of Western culture, but — with an equal zeal — the homonormativity represented by some LGBT organizations (for instance, he calls the US Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation "a quasi-Stalinist organization which attempts to police gay imagery in Hollywood movies"; LaBruce, B., 1997a : 25). Like Cronenberg, LaBruce vehemently denounces external censorship of any sort, yet his self-imposed limits of the "representationally proper" lie much further than Cronenberg's: as a self-proclaimed porn-star he acts out outrageous sex scenes with a literality that transcends any overt or metaphorized sexual perversions featured in Cronenberg's works.

LaBruce came to international prominence as a representative of the Toronto queercore movement and the New Queer Cinema of the 1990s. But, as one can learn from Thomas Waugh, "LaBruce's work has never been financed by public agencies" and "not a single of his four or five […] video features is available from Canadian distributors" (Waugh, Th., 2006: 221). In a sense, then, he is Canada's "dispossessed child," almost a *persona non grata* who chose to take permanent residence in Berlin (just like another fellow Canadian transgressor, the electro-punk vocalist Peaches). The Canadian gay writer Stan Persky (strangely enough also a part-time resident of Berlin, apparently a perceived promised land for an assortment of Canadian rebels and non-conformists), places LaBruce in the tradition of Canadian film-making that I referred to earlier as "perversion chic":

> If Canada is typically all about moderation, reticence and compromise, the Toronto filmmaker is all about homosexual excess. Oddly enough, his sexually extreme movies can be said to be fairly typical of Canadian cinema. Although LaBruce's films intentionally verge on porn, deal with homosexual fascism, and graphically, as they say, feature full-frontal S&M sex, right-wing homo skinheads, and various other obsessions […], their preoccupations aren't all that different from Atom Egoyan's *Exotica*, Denys Arcard's *Love and Other Human Remains*, John Grayson's *Lillies* or Lynn Stopkowich's Barbara Gowdy-inspired paean to necrophilia, *Kissed*. Canadian films have a tendency to be kinky and, in that sense, LaBruce is simply working in the tradition.
>
> Persky, S., 2003: unpaged

Still, of all the directors mentioned by Persky, LaBruce is probably the most radical in pushing the boundaries of the proper, the acceptable and the licit in the sphere of aesthetic representation and the sexual politics behind it.

In his most recent film *Otto, or Up with the Dead People* LaBruce plays with the figure of gay zombies. (As I am writing these words, his next zombie movie, *LA Zombie*, is to be released shortly). The title hero believes he died and came back from the grave. As he needs money to "unlive," he agrees to take up a part in a movie which actually tells his story. The movie is directed by Medea Yarn, who at the same time shoots a film about a gay zombie revolt against consumerist society. When alive, Otto was a sensitive gay boy and a vegetarian son of a butcher. After he comes back, he craves for meat, preferably human meat. And thus a compulsive escape from meat — both *being* and *eating* meat — is necessarily haunted by a *craving* for meat. The figure of a zombie itself comes closest to the idea of an "acting body" without soul, flesh endowed with some strange agency, a human being reduced to meat; in fact, both death and sex seem to have that reductive effect. Commenting on the films of Bruce LaBruce, David McIntosh asserts: "Of all our industrially exploitable selves, the eroticized meat self is the most authentic, the most renewable and the most liberating" (McIntosh, D., 1997: 151). Meat desires meat, matter desires matter — beyond our conscious, self-policed selves. Meat wants to eat meat, just as it wants to be eaten. And since there exists in our culture a strong ban on eating human flesh (man should NOT become meat to fellow human beings, nor to other living creatures), perhaps our refusal to participate in what the writer Barbara Gowdy calls "the obscene food chain" gets compensated for by the excesses of our sexuality. In *Otto* there is a provocative scene in which one zombie copulates with a wound in the abdomen of another, then pulls out and consumes his intestines. (In all fairness, it must be said that a wound-copulation scene appeared earlier in Cronenberg's *Crash*). Sex, eating, cultural consumption (of cinematic images) and capitalistic consumerism are all implicated in one another.

LaBruce never ceases to be aware of the constant interplay between sexually-ridden transgression and the mechanisms of capitalistic co-optation and commodification; even political and/or sexual radicalism gets caught up (perhaps inevitably so) in desire's "general economy" dominated by the forces of modern-day capitalism. LaBruce's iconoclastic turn to pornography is quite significant, as pornography occupies a very nodal position, culturally and politically; it is perennially the target of the regulatory aspirations of the state; it is always situated close to the borders of legality and legitimacy; and it is exploited extensively by capitalism's logic of (easy) profit. Unlike many other artists, who shun associations with pornography, LaBruce insists that his work is, indeed, pornographic (yet irreducible to pornography alone); he avoids the conventional tendency to redeem sexual representations in art by making references to some "higher artistic values," which of course is not to suggest that his work is *de-*

prived of artistic values. Simultaneously, his work diverges from standard commercial pornography primarily in that it self-consciously and critically *investigates* the connections between the free market, money, media, sex and desire. One of his main preoccupations as an artist, then, seems to be how to "produce transgression" without falling into the pitfalls of commodification, nor claiming to be radically *separated* from capitalism's circulation systems.

The three directors whose work I have briefly discussed have each a different way of dealing with and representing transgression, especially bodily transgression. In Maddin's work, the alienating and traumatizing effects of transgressive desires are softened aesthetically by campy stylizations and a great deal of humor, whereas the overall "politics" of his films oscillates uncannily between a "pro-transgression" and a "pro-repression" perspective. The latter point may also hold true for David Cronenberg's cinema, despite the visual excesses, based on an aesthetics of disgust, that he employs to investigate the vexing "fleshiness" of human existence. Still, it is possible to claim, as some critics do, that certain elements of his oeuvre, such as the sheer visual force of his images or the posthuman sympathy for the disease, the virus, and the parasite (all serving as apt metaphors of the body's fundamental independence) give his work more transgressive potential than is often acknowledged. Finally, Bruce LaBruce may claim the honor of being the most transgressive artist of the three, and the only one with a deliberate queer agenda, where "queer" is understood broadly as the constant use of sex, body and desire to destabilize existing economies, norms and aesthetics. Bodies, with their own economies and their strange kind of agency, are not utopian sites of escape from the social and political realm, as some might think, but are always intimately tied up with the general social economies in which they act and desire. By and large, the work of these three directors clearly attests to the continuing transgressive tradition in Canadian cinema and culture, a tradition that challenges the "scenic aesthetics" through which mainstream Canada often chooses to represent itself.

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