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# BLOOD, GUTS, AND TORAH: AN ARGUMENT FOR JEWISH BODY HORROR

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Rabbinic Ordination

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Graduate Rabbinical Program  
New York, New York

Spring 2024

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## I. Introduction

What does it mean to be a consciousness living inside a fleshy body? Many ask “what is the meaning of life?” or “what is our purpose as humans?,” but fewer are brave enough to confront the gooey, sticky, sometimes repulsive, reality of the physical body in that equation. And yet, the physical body is one of our greatest universal truths. Yes, our individual bodies vary, but we all exist incased in flesh, dependent on messy systems of pumping fluids, and subject to the whims of hormones and nervous impulses. Ironically, two of our most socially prominent explorations of that question take place in media that seem to represent polar opposites: body horror fiction and the Torah.

The subgenre of body horror is defined by Brittany Roberts in *Horror Literature Through History: An Encyclopedia of Stories that Speak to Our Deepest Fears* as “a type of horror focusing on flesh and its transcendence, challenging the concept of the body as a bounded entity and transgressing the limits of the flesh by pushing toward new, transformed corporeal states.”<sup>1</sup> Almost all horror involves the body to some extent, as fear of bodily injury is a typical component of the horror genre. To fall into the subgenre of body horror, the body must subvert its nature as we know it; this could be done by transforming into something or from something that is not flesh, giving independent sentience to certain body parts, growing non-human parts, being rearranged in a new order, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> Roberts, Brittany. “Body Horror.” Essay. In *Horror Literature through History: An Encyclopedia of the Stories That Speak to Our Deepest Fears*, edited by Matt Cardin, 229. Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, an imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2017.

One of the most famous and prominent creators of body horror is filmmaker, writer, and director David Cronenberg (b. 1943). His films include *The Fly* (1986), *The Dead Zone* (1983), *Naked Lunch* (1991), *Scanners* (1981), *Rabid* (1977), and *The Brood* (1979). His films have a bend toward gruesome explorations of the body and meaning. As described by Cronenberg scholar William Beard:

Cronenberg's cinema is full of spectacular elements: bodily disease and mutation, creatures, violent telepathy, video hallucinations, drug addiction, car-crash-sex-cults. Much of the fascination his films exert for devotees and commentators alike lies in the way they seem to require viewers to address the presence of these elements and to divine their meanings.<sup>2</sup>

Just as Cronenberg's films use the body as metaphor to explore existential questions, so too does the book of Genesis. We see bodies formed from dirt and torn apart; family members kill one another; the ground cries for blood; the entire world succumbs to flood; all of humanity is scattered and loses the ability to communicate with one another as a punishment for the Tower of Babel; a human being transforms into a pillar of salt – and that's just the first few chapters.

In my project, I will examine selected stories of Genesis through a Cronenbergian lens, both analytically and midrashically. In each chapter of my analysis, I will pick a different story from Genesis that explores body horror, or violations of the physical body, in some way. I will pair analysis of this story with analysis of those Cronenberg films that

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<sup>2</sup> Beard, William. *The Artist as Monster The Cinema of David Cronenberg*. Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 2006. Px.

explore similar themes. Each analysis will be brought to full fruition through a work of a modern midrash. My tales of biblical body horror will thus propose a more Cronenbergian, transmutational take on our traditional stories. I will argue that the bible and Cronenberg approach the question of the body and meaning with two opposing ideas at their core. What would it look like to draw these stories closer to and further inside the body? Instead of choosing the interpretive route that further spiritualizes these stories, transforming them into a form disembodied transcendence, I aim to bring them to transcendence through the horror itself. How, I ask, might these stories change if we look at their horrific physical implications squarely in the face?

לֹא־תֵלִין נִבְלָתוֹ עַל־הָעֵץ כִּי־קָבֹר תִּקְבְּרֶנּוּ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא כִּי־קָלַת אֱלֹהִים תִּלְוִי וְלֹא  
תִטְמֵא אֶת־אֲדָמָתְךָ אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לְךָ נַחֲלָה :

You must not let the corpse [of a person executed through capital punishment] remain on the stake overnight, but must bury it the same day. For **an impaled body is an affront to God**: you shall not defile the land that your God is giving you to possess.

*Deuteronomy 21:23*<sup>3</sup>

Before I argue *for* Jewish body horror, I feel it is only fair to represent the argument against it. For many people, the idea that horror could be connected to Torah in any way is unthinkable. Realistically, there are potential Jewish ethical concerns with the horror genre. While there are no recorded cases of horror films using real violence

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<sup>3</sup> *The Contemporary Torah*. JPS, 2006. <https://www.sefaria.org/Deuteronomy.21.23?lang=bi&aliyot=0>.

on film,<sup>4</sup> if an impaled body is an affront to God, intentional, realistic depictions of violence and gore could be problematic. Ibn Ezra suggests that this prohibition “has a secret connected to the soul,” implying that the mere sight of a dead body has the potential to impact the soul and psyche negatively.<sup>5</sup> As Rashi explains, our bodies are made in the image of God, and degrading the image of God that we represent degrades God by proxy.<sup>6</sup>

Further, there is even a specific Hebrew word that seems to indicate that we should not be looking upon the grotesque: “תִּבְט” (tibet). Most famously, this word is used as the action that Lot’s wife takes when she looks back on the destruction of Sodom and Gommorah in Genesis 19:26. In Psalms 91:8, it is how the people will perceive the complete destruction of the Jewish people. In I Samuel 16:7, God forbids Samuel from taking to heart the stature of a man he has rejected, and this is the word used to describe what the action would mean. Nearly every time “תִּבְט” is used, it is to describe looking at something horrific, ungodly, or wrong. Repeatedly, this verb serves as either a punishable action, a punishment for another action, or something that God warns humans not to engage in.

And yet, horror is in no way absent from Torah. While it is implied that gore, deformed bodies, and carnage are not what God wants us to look at, it is explicitly

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<sup>4</sup> While there are some documentaries with horrific elements that use news footage of actual violent events, there have been no recorded cases of “snuff” films, or films that capture/stage violence on film explicitly for commercial purposes. Mikkelson, Barbara. “Snuff Films.” Snopes, April 23, 2021. <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/a-pinch-of-snuff/>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibn Ezra on Deuteronomy 21:23. H. Norman Strickman and Arthur M. Silver. Menorah Pub., 1988-2004. [https://www.sefaria.org/Ibn\\_Ezra\\_on\\_Deuteronomy.21.23.1?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Ibn_Ezra_on_Deuteronomy.21.23.1?lang=bi).

<sup>6</sup> Rashi on Deuteronomy 21:23:1. M. Rosenbaum and A.M. Silbermann, London, 1929-1934. [https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi\\_on\\_Deuteronomy.21.23.1?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Deuteronomy.21.23.1?lang=bi).

written into our holiest text. Horror, including horror that violates the image of God, has something to tell us. Horror shows us our own world inverted. Through depictions of our greatest fears, horror tells us about who we are and what we see as integral to our existence. Horror is at its best, has the most staying power, when the scares reflect real anxieties alive in our culture. If *The Exorcist* (1973) can be understood now as a precursor to the Satanic Panic of the 1980's,<sup>7</sup> if *Fatal Attraction* (1987) depicts increasing anxiety about women's presence in the workplace and its impact on the nuclear family,<sup>8</sup> if *Get Out* (2018) reflects racial tension and black pessimism in a post-Obama America,<sup>9</sup> the horrific elements of Torah must have something to tell us about both Ancient Israel and Jews today.

While horror has historically been written off as a genre with a very specific, targeted market, an increasing number of people have begun to understand horror's broader appeal. The market share of profits earned by horror films globally has been on an upward trend since 2016, with its numbers peaking in 2020.<sup>10</sup> Why, at the dawn of a global pandemic, when almost every sector of the film industry is losing money, and humanity has a whole host of new things to fear, would horror films make *more* money? Somehow, as we sat in our homes fearing the threat of coughing strangers and

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<sup>7</sup> Laycock, Joseph P., and Eric Harrelson, *The Exorcist Effect: Horror, Religion, and Demonic Belief* (New York, 2023; online edn, Oxford Academic, 19 Oct. 2023), P4.

<sup>8</sup> BOOZER, JACK. "THE LETHAL FEMME FATALE IN THE NOIR TRADITION." *Journal of Film and Video* 51, no. 3/4 (1999): 20–35. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20688218>. 29.

<sup>9</sup> Poll, Ryan. "Can One 'Get Out?' The Aesthetics of Afro-Pessimism." *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 51, no. 2 (2018): 69–102. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45151156>. 73.

<sup>10</sup> Nash Information Services, LLC. "Box Office Performance History for Horror Movies." *The Numbers*. Accessed March 4, 2024. <https://www.the-numbers.com/market/genre/Horror>.



unsanitized groceries, we were collectively more interested in sitting down to watch deranged killers and bloodthirsty monsters wreak havoc.

The horror question -- “why do people like horror movies?” -- has been an object of academic inquiry since the dawn of the genre. Film scholar Linda Williams identifies horror as one of three “gross” genres: “films that promise to be sensational, to give our bodies an actual physical jolt... the fun of "gross" movies is in their display of sensations that are on the edge of respectable.”<sup>11</sup> Gross here, is not meant in the traditional, physically disgusting sense, but in the behavioral, emotionally manipulative sense. A gross film seeks a physical response: sexual arousal, tears, screams, gasps. Horror, by its nature, is manipulative; it seeks to arouse the feeling of fear in its viewer. It’s aim is to blur to the boundaries between viewer and character, providing a visceral, bodily experience unlike most forms of fiction. Some people find this sort of intrusion to be repellant, and others find it invigorating.

Even though horror has always been a genre that only appeals to a select part of the population, it has something to tell as an art form. The horror genre explores the many fears that define the human experience – and so does Torah. Many of the moments in Torah that resonate most deeply with readers play directly on experiences of fear: Adam and Eve being banished from Eden by God, Noah’s Ark and the great flood that drowned the world, Abraham nearly murdering his beloved son Isaac, the entire Israelite peoplehood wandering the desert without direction to escape their enslavement: the list could go on. Nearly every common theme of horror films (murder,

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<sup>11</sup> Williams, Linda. “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess.” *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1991): 2–13. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1212758>. P2.

monsters, torture, bodily distortion, enslavement) also can be found within the corpus of Torah.

If we look to the academic exploration of the horror question, there is compelling reasoning that can also be applied to the study of Judaism and Torah. Noel Carroll, philosopher of art at City University of New York, theorized in his work *The Philosophy of Horror, or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (1990), that horror provides cognitive benefit. This means that even though fear and disgust are objectively negative emotions, the payout of quenching curiosity and coming to understand the mechanics of monstrosity make horror a worthwhile experience.<sup>12</sup>

Aaron Smuts of Rhode Island College and John Morreall of College of William and Mary develop these ideas in dialogue with one another. Both dare to argue that horror viewers do in fact specifically seek out the experience of fear and disgust, despite the general intuitive sense that these are negative emotions. Each takes a different approach to this idea. Morreall argues that fear and excitement contain many of the same pleasurable physiological experiences: increased heart rate, alertness, muscle tension, etc. When fear can be experienced without the negative real life side effects, viewers can enjoy the positive physical sensations associated with fear while maintaining their overall sense of control. For Morreall, horror film provides us “the ability to start, stop, and direct the experience, so that the discomfort it involves does not pass a certain toleration threshold.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Carroll, Noël. *The Philosophy of Horror or, Paradoxes of the Heart*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

<sup>13</sup> Morreall, John. "Enjoying Negative Emotions in Fictions." *Philosophy and Literature* 9, no. 1 (1985): 95-103. <https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.1985.0118>.

While Morreall believes that fear can be pleasurable, Smuts argues that fear is not pleasurable, but nevertheless can be desirable. Smuts compares the attraction to horror to any kind of painful art. Just like stories of star-crossed lovers and paintings of bloody battle scenes, horror draws in the viewer. "One is seldom as fully engaged intellectually, perceptually and affectively as when experiencing painful emotional responses to art." This allows for an experience that can be desired, despite its lack of inherent pleasure.

Katerina Bantinaki of the University of Crete ties these arguments together through an apt comparison. Bantinaki takes influence from the work of Gary Iseminger of Carleton College, in which he argues that readers respond to sadness in literature with a "moderate hedonic" stance, in that they feel both sadness and aesthetic appreciation.<sup>14</sup> Bantinaki argues that horror fiction allows us to take controlled risk and experiment with our limits, much like children who wrestle their siblings or try to climb to the highest tree branch in the yard. "Through our encounter with horror fiction we are given a chance to confront or learn to cope with fear in a safe environment: we learn to control our fear feelings and display mastery over our reactions to frightening stimuli."

No matter which answer one finds most persuasive, every need that horror could potentially fulfill is a purpose that is shared with Torah. Torah seeks to help us understand the world around us, providing answers to the questions that scare us. If Torah was meant to be a text that engaged generation after generation of readers, the immersion in fear that it provides is a useful tool. And finally, if engagement with fear

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<sup>14</sup> Iseminger, Gary. "How Strange a Sadness?" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 42, no. 1 (1983): 81–82. <https://doi.org/10.2307/429949>.

can be used to test our will and increase our capacity to handle difficult things, this too fits the purpose of our Torah. Our story as a people is repeatedly enduring hardship and striving to continue for many generations. Through horror, the frightening parts of our texts can serve to strengthen and prepare us for the very real horrors we may face.

Even if we can accept a connection between horror and Torah, two questions remain – Why body horror, and why David Cronenberg? As I described in the opening paragraphs of this introduction, body horror is a horror based in violations of the order of physical body. For example, a slasher film typically does not constitute body horror: if a body is stabbed and bleeds, the body is reacting in its normal order, as we would expect. Body horror would involve a magical or supernatural occurrence involving the body, such as a human being turning into an animal, a disembodied limb developing its own sentience, a person growing teeth in their armpit, etc. As compared to more traditional horror, body horror has the tendency toward unsettling the viewer, getting under one's skin in a way that pushes past simple fear.

Our discomfort with the subject matter of body horror can be traced to Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject. The abject refers to anything that was once part of a living being but is no longer a part of that contiguous whole. This can include things as benign as fingernail clippings or discarded hair, as vile as vomit or excrement, or as gruesome as gore and disembodied limbs. As Kristeva theorizes in her seminal work, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*:

The abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to *I*. The object, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for

meaning... what is *abject*, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses.<sup>15</sup>

Body horror blurs this line even more profoundly by making the body itself a combination of subject and abject, pushing us to see ourselves without clear boundaries between ourselves and our environments, or even between ourselves and decay.

Body horror has special significance for sacred literature, in general, and creation literature, specifically, because it speaks to the question of our existence. What do our bodies say about us? What does it mean to live in a body? How do our bodies enable/inhibit our expressions of self and define our realities? As Stuart Gordon describes the experience of the genre in the introduction to his anthology, *The Mammoth Book of Body Horror*, “Body Horror. Not dead bodies. Your own body. And something is going very wrong. Inside. Your body is betraying you, and since it’s your own body, you can’t even run away.”<sup>16</sup> In a way, the reality of life in a body is that our bodies will inevitably betray us: all of our bodies are vulnerable to illness, injury, and death, no matter how invincible or important we may consider ourselves to be. Body horror allows us to explore this relationship through deeply unsettling and visceral, but potentially transcendent and cathartic, metaphor.

It is not quite accurate to say that David Cronenberg created the subgenre of body horror, but nearly every work aiming to define or explore body horror in some way

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<sup>15</sup> Kristeva, Julia, and Leon S. Roudiez. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Columbia University Press, 2024. 1-2.

<sup>16</sup> Gordon, Stuart. “Introduction.” Essay. In *The Mammoth Book of Body Horror*, edited by Marie O’Regan and Paul Kane, 1–4. London: Robinson, 2012.

mentions his name. His films have come to define how we create and understand the genre as a whole. In her definition of Body Horror, Brittany Roberts describes Cronenberg's work as "widely considered to be the apotheosis of the subgenre... celebrating transgressive corporeality and bodily possibility."<sup>17</sup> Beginning with his first experimental art films, the horror of existing in a human body has been a major fascination of his work. As Cronenberg himself reflects in a 2005 interview discussing the graphic nature of his film *A History of Violence*:

For me the first fact of human existence is the human body... to turn away from any aspect of the human body to me is a philosophical betrayal. And there's a lot of art and religion whose whole purpose is to turn away from the human body. I feel in my art that my mandate is to not do that. So whether it's beautiful things—the sexuality part, or the violent part or the gooey part—it's just body fluids. It's when Elliott in *Dead Ringer* says, "Why are there no beauty contests for the insides of bodies?" It's a thought that disturbs me. How can we be disgusted by our own bodies? That really doesn't make any human sense. It makes some animal sense but it doesn't make human sense so I'm always discussing that in my movies.<sup>18</sup>

The question underlying Cronenberg's work is extremely relevant to study of the book of Genesis. In *The Biography of Ancient Israel*, Ilana Pardes theorizes that "Israel has a life story: it was conceived in the days of Abraham; its miraculous birth took place with the Exodus, the parting of the Red Sea; then came a long period of childhood and

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<sup>17</sup> Roberts, 229.

<sup>18</sup> Mikulec, Sven. "'A History of Violence': David Cronenberg's Superb Study of the Basic Impulses That Drive Humanity." *Cinephilia & Beyond*, March 30, 2023. <https://cinephiliabeyond.org/a-history-of-violence/>

restless adolescence in the wilderness; and finally adulthood was approached with the conquest of Canaan.”<sup>19</sup> Genesis is thus the story of a *conception* of a nation. We see foreshadowing of a nation that will be great, but for now, our focus is more individual and granular. We begin with the creation of earth and all living beings. Adam and Eve explore what it means to have freewill and live in a human body that changes. Cain learns about mortality form through the murder of Abel. Humanity repeatedly learns that their actions have consequences and they are vulnerable to a higher power, through the Flood, the Tower of Babel, Sodom and Gomorrah, and so on. Just as the creation of the human being starts with cells, the creation of a nation must start with individual human beings. Genesis, as the conception chapter in the national biography of Israel, lays the foundation for what it means to be a human living in a body, under constant threat of a world they cannot control.

Cronenberg and Genesis both ask the question, what does it mean for us to live in flesh? How do we experience, and live with, our mortal, vulnerable forms? The stories of Genesis are meant to lead us into an answer that becomes fully formed (or, as Ilana Pardes might say, birthed) in Exodus: we, as vulnerable beings, are meant to live in covenant with our divine creator who holds power over us and our environment. If we follow this thread through Prophets, our bond with an eternal Creator can allow us to become eternal souls that exist beyond our temporary bodies. Cronenberg's work proposes a different answer: embrace the body as your ultimate form. All the things that

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<sup>19</sup> Pardes, Ilana. *The Biography of Ancient Israel: National Narratives in the Bible*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. P2.

you might find uncomfortable about their physical form, Cronenberg compels us to stare at directly, and at times, embrace and venerate.

For example, in his first mainstream success *Shivers* (1975), Cronenberg follows an isolated, island community that is ravaged by a contagious parasite. The film is very much an ensemble piece with no true main character. The camera follows whomever the parasite infects next. Each person who is infected becomes overwhelmed by the baser instincts of their body, most notably, their sex drive. Casual sex and sexual assault on the island become rampant, as the parasites pass from one person to another. Eventually, despite efforts to contain it, the island is overtaken by the parasite and arrives by boat to the nearest land mass, apparently to infect the rest of the world. For Cronenberg, this is a happy ending – a victory for his true protagonist, the parasite: “I identify with [the characters in *Shivers*] after they’re infected. I identify with the parasites, basically... [The infected] were bound to resist this new experience. But underneath, there is something else. They look beautiful at the end.”<sup>20</sup>

In *Crash* (1996), Cronenberg follows another group that seeks pleasure toward to the point of their own destruction: car crash fetishists, who experience arousal through watching, experiencing, and being maimed by intentional car accidents. They drive recklessly in public and recreate famous car crashes, such as those that killed Jayne Mansfield and James Dean. Consequently, many of the members of the group have permanent, visible disabilities, such as wounds and amputations. These “disfigurements” develop into marks of pride, highlighted by their choices of clothes

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<sup>20</sup> Cronenberg, David, and Chris Rodley. *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*. London: Faber and Faber, 1997. 82.



rather than hidden, and frequently become integral to their sexual activities. What would ordinarily push bodies into the category of the abject, a reminder of frailty and death, instead makes them more alive and more sexually desirable.<sup>21</sup> Frequently, Cronenberg's presentation of physical horrors depict not a degradation, but an evolution, often incorporating a benefit to the individual through sexual pleasure.

For my first chapter of my theoretical and midrashic analysis of Cronenbergian Torah, I will begin in the beginning – the Creation narrative. My work will focus on the creation of the human form from dirt, followed by the dividing of one body to create two. I explore both what is written directly in Genesis as well as the popular midrashic story of the creation of the *Androgynos*. I analyze this story alongside three Cronenbergian works: *Stereo* (1969), *Crimes of the Future* (1970), and *The Fly* (1986). Each of these narratives is ultimately about creation, and about the relationship between creator and created. In its paired midrash, the initial creation of our story, the Androgynos, grapples with its physical transformation from dirt to human being, and eventually, its second transformation into two separate human beings.

The second chapter analyzes the story of Cain and Abel, aiming to understand this story as an introduction to the human relationship to the abject. I will pair Cain and Abel with Cronenberg's *Shivers* (1975) and *Dead Ringers* (1988). Because much of what happens between Cain and Abel is not portrayed directly in the text, I imagine the tension between the two grew from their need to identify themselves oppositionally to one another. Cain's life is spent learning to understand plants and the earth, while Abel's

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<sup>21</sup> Beard, 390.

is spent amongst animals. Cain strikes Abel out of jealousy and a lack of understanding of the human body. In perceiving a corpse for the first time, Cain desperately tries to revive Abel using his only expertise: his knowledge of plant life.

Finally, I will analyze the story that first led me to idea of body horror in the Torah – the story of Lot’s wife transforming into a pillar of salt. I read the story of Lot’s wife in the spirit of Cronenberg’s “new flesh,” drawing inspiration from *Videodrome* (1983) and *Crash* (1996). In the Torah, Lot’s wife is turned forever into a salt pillar and we never hear from her again – she is not even given the dignity of a name. For my creative exploration of this story, I will pick up where the Torah leaves off and begin Lot’s wife’s journey on her own. If we are meant to find meaning living our lives as flesh, it is now her calling to discover what it means to live in a salt body.

As much as I believe in the transformative power of horror, I recognize that this was a peculiar subject to spend my time researching. I have been asked why on earth I chose to analyze Torah through the lens of body horror more times than I can count. There is a much more practical answer to this question than people expect. As I was applying to rabbinical school in late 2018, the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change published a report finding that without major decreases in carbon emissions, climate catastrophe could be our reality by 2030.<sup>22</sup> I did the math. If I began rabbinical school in 2019, I would likely be ordained in 2024. I asked myself, do I really want to

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<sup>22</sup> Miller, Brandon, and Jay Croft. “Planet Has Only Until 2030 to Stem Catastrophic Climate Change, Experts Warn.” CNN, October 8, 2018.

uproot my life and leave my family for five years, for a career that may only last six years?

Clearly, given that this is my senior thesis, my answer was yes. My passion has never been for climate science, bioengineering, or any practical discipline that could save the planet. But I know how to connect spiritually. I know how to sit with fear. I know how to bring comfort to people in times of need. Perhaps I cannot save the world from climate change, but I can be a Rabbi who influences people toward change, and I can be a Rabbi for the end of the world, if I have to be.

From the moment I made the decision that this was going to be my path, I knew that finding holiness and a sense of spirituality in fear would be integral to my work. The planet has changed due to our own actions in ways that cannot be reversed. We will continue to see temperatures rise, coasts flood, and new erratic weather patterns wreak havoc. There is absolutely no future in sticking our heads in the sand and pretending that the change is not happening. Whether the solution is to adapt to a new way of life or accept that our time on this planet is limited, we must look at the problem in its face. Of course, for all of our sakes, I hope we will find a way to continue human life on this planet. But if we cannot, I hope we can at least find the joy of existing as a human being at the end of the world, as perverse as that may seem.

I do not argue for Jewish body horror simply because I believe it exists. I argue for Jewish body horror, specifically for Cronenbergian Jewish body horror, because I see it as a place of spiritual and pastoral potential. When Max Renn of *Videodrome* (1983) descends into a violent and sexually explicit underground world and declares, “Long Live the New Flesh,” before taking his own life with a shot to the head, we

experience revulsion and fear as an audience. But if we take Max's reality seriously, this is not a sad ending for him. He has found a way to merge with the version of himself that exists through his image on film, the version of himself that he has come to understand as "more real" than his flesh. We experience Max Renn's story as a horror film, but for Max, this is his happy ending, which makes our experience all the more horrific. Though nearly every Cronenberg story could be viewed as a grotesque tragedy, they are never simple tragedies.

How would Cronenberg push us to look at the tragedies of Torah? How can the uncomfortable potential reality of our more gruesome stories force us to reconsider their meaning? There is power in learning to look directly at what we see as an affront: the abject, the distant, the deathly. There is something to be learned when we understand the transformation of the body, however grizzly, however upsetting, as a more neutral place of change and potential. As comforting as it may feel to deny the presence of an ugly truth, that avoidance can only last so long. Cronenberg offers us this unsettling reframe, of change and potential, as a gift. Living in a mortal body, on a warming planet with an unpredictable future, the power to hold what seems impossible to sit with is the key to spiritual possibility. Long Live the New Earth, and may we all find our way toward peace within it.

## II. Creation

Dr. David Adams Leeming, a philologist specializing in comparative mythology from the University of Connecticut theorizes in his *Creation Myths of the World: An Encyclopedia* “Creation myths are as ubiquitous as our need to know where we came from, where and how we began the plot... In the classic psychoanalytic passage, the patient searching for self-identity begins with an examination of the beginnings... The same process applies to cultures in search of identity and significance.”<sup>23</sup> Creation myths are a traditional means for tribal groups to create a collective sense of they are. In contrast to other origin stories of its time and place, there is one glaring difference that is key to Israel’s understanding of itself as a nation – monotheism.

There is one player, God, and when God wants to create it is done. The absence of external powers has a ripple effect on the narrative, as described by Dr. Christine Hayes of Yale University, “the absence of theogony... means the absence of a metadivine or primordial realm from which the biblical god emerges. It also means the absence of the idea that this god is immanent in nature, natural substances, or phenomena. Therefore, the biblical god’s powers and knowledge are not limited by the existence of any superior power or substance. Nature is not divine. The created world is not divine... The line of demarcation [between creator and creation] is clear.”<sup>24</sup>

Within the first two chapters of Genesis, the earth and all living things are created once, but humanity is created twice. In Genesis 1:27-28, we see a simultaneous creation:

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<sup>23</sup> Leeming, David Adams. *Creation Myths of the World: An Encyclopedia*. ABC-Clío, 2010. xix.

<sup>24</sup> Hayes, Christine Elizabeth. *Introduction to the Bible*. Yale University Press, 2012. 48.

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם:

And God created humankind in the divine image,  
creating it in the image of God—  
creating them male and female.

וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וְכִבְשֶׁהָ וּרְדּוּ בְּדִגְתַּי הַיָּם  
וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבְכָל־חַיָּה הָרֹמֶשֶׂת עַל־הָאָרֶץ:

God blessed them and God said to them, “Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and  
master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that  
creep on earth.”<sup>25</sup>

In Genesis 2, we see a staggered creation. In Genesis 2:7, a human being is created  
from soil and God blows life into the human’s nostrils. But several verses later, in  
Genesis 2:18, God observes the human being, determines that the human should not  
be alone, and endeavors to create a counterpart for the human. Genesis 2:21-23 reads:

וַיִּפֹּל יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים תְּרִדָּמָה עַל־הָאָדָם וַיִּישָׁן וַיִּקַּח אֶחָת מִצִּלְעֹתָיו וַיִּסְגֶּר בָּשָׂר תַּחֲתָנָה:

So God cast a deep sleep upon the Human; and, while he slept, [God] took one of his  
sides and closed up the flesh at that site.

וַיִּבְנוּ יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הַצֶּלַע אֲשֶׁר־לָקַח מִן־הָאָדָם לְאִשָּׁה וַיַּבְאֶהָ אֶל־הָאָדָם:

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<sup>25</sup> Genesis 1:27-28. *The Contemporary Torah*. JPS, 2006. <https://www.sefaria.org/Genesis.1.27-28?lang=bi&aliyot=0>.

And God fashioned the side that had been taken from the Human into a woman, bringing her to the Human.

וַיֹּאמֶר הָאָדָם זֹאת הַפֶּעַם עֵצָם מֵעֵצָמִי וּבָשָׂר מִבָּשָׂרִי לְזָאת יִקְרָא אִשָּׁה כִּי מֵאִשׁ לָקַחְתִּי זֹאת:

Then the Human said, "This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.

This one shall be called Woman, for from a Human was she taken."<sup>26</sup>

Those who adopt the Documentary Hypothesis would likely note that the tetragrammaton is not present in the text from Genesis 1 and is present in the text from Genesis 2, and see this as evidence that these origin stories are from two separate sources. But in early commentaries and rabbinic texts, our sages struggled to piece these two disparate narratives into one story – how could human beings have been made simultaneously male and female in Genesis 1, and then in Genesis 2 femaleness seemingly created again through divine surgery? Breishit Rabbah 8:1 posits an explanation that gained quite a bit of popularity, with fans ranging from Rashi<sup>27</sup> to contemporary American playwright John Cameron Mitchell:<sup>28</sup>

רַבִּי יִרְמְיָה בֶּן אֶלְעָזָר בִּשְׁעָה שֶׁבָּרָא הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֶת אָדָם הָרִאשׁוֹן, אֲנִדְרוּגִינוֹס בְּרָאוּ  
הָדָא הוּא דְכֶתִיב (בראשית ה, ב): זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָאם. אָמַר רַבִּי שְׁמוּאֵל בֶּר נַחֲמָן, בִּשְׁעָה שֶׁבָּרָא  
הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֶת אָדָם הָרִאשׁוֹן, דִּיּוּ פְרָצוּפִים בְּרָאוּ, וְנִסְרוּ וַעֲשָׂאוּ גְבִים, גַּב לְכָאן וְגַב  
לְכָאן. אֶתִּיבּוֹן לִיהּ וְהֶכְתִּיב (בראשית ב, כא): וַיִּקַּח אֶחָת מֵעֲלֵתָיו, אָמַר לְהוֹן מִתְרִין סְטְרוֹהִי

<sup>26</sup> Genesis 2:21-23. *The Contemporary Torah*. JPS, 2006. <https://www.sefaria.org/Genesis.2.21-23?lang=bi&aliyot=0>.

<sup>27</sup> Rashi on Genesis 1:27. M. Rosenbaum and A.M. Silbermann, London, 1929-1934. [https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi\\_on\\_Genesis.1.27.3?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Genesis.1.27.3?lang=bi).

<sup>28</sup> John Cameron Mitchell wrote the Broadway musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, which tells an approximate account of Breishit Rabbah 8:1 through the song "The Origin of Love."

Rabbi Yirmeya ben Elazar said: When the Holy One blessed be He created Adam the first man, He created him androgynous. That is what is written: “He created them male and female” (Genesis 5:2). Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahman said: When the Holy One blessed be He created Adam the first man, He created him with two faces, and [subsequently] He sawed him in two and made [for] him two backs, a back here and a back there. They raised an objection to him: But is it not written: “He took one of his ribs [tzalotav] ... [and the Lord God built the rib that He took from the man into a woman]”? (Genesis 2:21–22). He said to them: [It means that He took] one of his two sides.<sup>29</sup>

This midrashic explanation conforms to the general pattern of creation set forth in Genesis 1. God begins with formless chaos and repeatedly separates and distinguishes parts of creation from one another, steadily shaping that chaos into the world as we know it. The myth of the *Androgynos* adds this to human beings as well – they began as a singular human being, possessing all potential qualities for a human, and then were differentiated by sex and divided into two separate entities.

Once our human beings are created and differentiated, we have the beginnings of human interaction. After awaking from their separation, there does not appear to be any grief or pain associated with their new state of being. The two creations seem to pay little attention to their sexual difference, as stated in Genesis 2:25:

וַיִּהְיוּ עֲרוּמִים הָאָדָם וְאִשְׁתּוֹ וְלֹא יָתַבְּשָׁשׁוּ:

The two of them were naked, the Human and his wife, yet they felt no shame.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Bereshit Rabbah, 8:1. The Sefaria Midrash Rabbah, 2022. [https://www.sefaria.org/Bereshit\\_Rabbah.8.1?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Bereshit_Rabbah.8.1?lang=bi).

<sup>30</sup> Genesis 2:25. *The Contemporary Torah*. JPS, 2006. <https://www.sefaria.org/Genesis.2.25?lang=bi&aliyot=0>.



ב-ו-ש, the root of the of the word “תִּבְשָׁשׁוּ” which is translated here as shame, is used many times throughout Torah. Notably, this is the same root as מִבֶּשַׁשׁ, which literally translates to “a thing that causes shame,” but is used as a euphemism for genitals.<sup>31</sup> This verse describes a habitual state of being for Adam and Eve prior to the Fall of Man: they are habitually naked, and though a hypothetical reader might expect that this would cause them to feel shame, they do not feel shame. “Shame” here could mean two different things. Given that the two of them are naked, Adam and Eve would be privy to the information that their bodies bare some physical differences. This could potentially be distressing point of disconnect for them, especially since our midrash indicates they once occupied a shared body. However, the text reassures us that they do not feel distress, or shame. Or, if we are understanding that the feeling caused by genitals is understood as “shame,” this verse connotes that they do not experience sexual desire for one another. In either case, this verse implies that in the time before the fall, the distinction between their bodies does not seem to have much of an impact on their relationship.

But of course, this does not remain the case for long. After Adam and his wife eat of the forbidden fruit, we see something shift in their relationship to each other's bodies and physical differences. In Genesis 3:7:

וַתִּפְקְחֵנָה עֵינֵי שְׁנֵיהֶם וַיֵּדְעוּ כִּי עֲרֹמָם הֵם וַיִּתְּפְרוּ עָלֵה תְּאֵנָה וַיַּעֲשׂוּ לָהֶם חֲגָרֹת:

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<sup>31</sup> An example of this used in Torah can be found in Deuteronomy 25:11, where a woman is seen reaching inappropriately for her husband's privates -- בְּמִבְשָׁיו .

Then the eyes of both of them [Adam and his wife] were opened and they perceived that they were naked; and they sewed together fig leaves and made themselves loincloths.<sup>32</sup>

Rashi points out that most human beings can tell they are naked even when they cannot see, and questions why opening their eyes would cause them to realize this.<sup>33</sup>

Sforno answers Rashi that this has nothing to do with literal vision, rather that they had realized through understanding good and evil “that they needed to cover their genitals which in future would serve mainly as organs designed to gratify their physical urges.”<sup>34</sup>

Sforno elaborates further in his commentary on Genesis 3:11 that specifically due to Adam and his wife’s “familiarity with evil [they] felt the need to cover [their] genitals.”<sup>35</sup>

If we take this commentary to heart, this indicates that the discovery of good and evil led the human beings to suddenly regard a part of their physical body, which previously caused them no distress, was a physical embodiment of evil. While this may not seem like body horror on its face, psychologically, this is a distressing transformation. The body itself is not changing, hypothetically, but in their own realities, Adam and his wife move from contentment in their bodies to suddenly feeling a need to fear and conceal what they previously regarded as natural. God sees this transformation immediately, in that Adam and his wife now clothe their bodies and hide

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<sup>32</sup> Genesis 3:7. *The Contemporary Torah*. JPS, 2006. <https://www.sefaria.org/Genesis.3.7?lang=bi&aliyot=0>.

<sup>33</sup> Rashi on Genesis 3:7:2. M. Rosenbaum and A.M. Silbermann, 1929-1934. [https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi\\_on\\_Genesis.3.7?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Genesis.3.7?lang=bi).

<sup>34</sup> Sforno on Genesis 3:7:2. Eliyahu Munk, HaChut Hameshulash, Lambda Publishers. [https://www.sefaria.org/Sforno\\_on\\_Genesis.3.7.2?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Sforno_on_Genesis.3.7.2?lang=bi).

<sup>35</sup> Sforno on Genesis 3:11:2. Eliyahu Munk, HaChut Hameshulash, Lambda Publishers. [https://www.sefaria.org/Sforno\\_on\\_Genesis.3.11?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Sforno_on_Genesis.3.11?lang=bi).

their nakedness, indicating to God that they have disobeyed. Now the human beings perceive their sexual difference as significant, and the dynamic between God and creation has changed.

While other creation stories create drama through conflicting personalities of deities, proxy-wars of the divine through natural phenomena, romantic entanglements, and the many other plot devices available in the metadivine, the Torah begins with the one God of infinite power and literal nothingness. The action in this early stage of the story must be derived from God alone. Genesis 1 and 2 follow God as God creates, observes, reacts, and repeats. In Genesis 3, we come to the end of God's period of creation, but God continues to observe, react, and manipulate the environment of God's subjects as necessary. As David Adams Leeming describes, the creation myth of Genesis "attempts to show the [God] as something of an experimenter... [God] creates as [God] sees need, for instance the animals and then women."<sup>36</sup> Experimenter is an apt term for our deity in multiple ways. The depiction of God as an experimenter establishes God as both independently powerful and deeply invested – the ability to manipulate with a clear goal of achieving a vision of creation as a thriving system. Not only is God learning from creation and creating responsively to manipulate the world into God's conception of an ideal environment, God is differentiating, categorizing, dissecting, combining, converting: processes that we as contemporary readers might associate with a doctor or scientist.

This characterization establishes God as having a lot in common with a Cronenbergian protagonist. Initially, before Cronenberg found his artistic passion as a

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<sup>36</sup> Leeming, 128-129.

storyteller and filmmaker, David Cronenberg was drawn to science. As a child, he found himself “fascinated by the way that people dig around to discover how things work, and the way they codify and organize that knowledge.”<sup>37</sup> His work in horror seems to come from a somewhat scientific place, rooted in a desire to codify, organize, and understand by taking the human experience apart, piece by piece. In his own words, “People ask me, ‘Why horror movies?’ Well, this is the serious part of it... The real question has never been the existence of God. If God is a totally abstract force in the universe with no understanding for human beings, then it doesn’t really matter. It’s only if God is interested in the affairs of man and cares what you morally do that it makes any difference.”<sup>38</sup> For Cronenberg, God and the concept of creation are at the very core of what it means to be horrific.

Through his theological defense of horror, Cronenberg sets up two opposing horrific approaches to creation: a creator that is cold and uninvested in the affairs of human beings, and a creator that is present and deeply invested in the affairs of beings. His first two films, *Stereo* (1969) and *Crimes of the Future* (1970)<sup>39</sup> seem to each take one of these alternate, horrific approaches to creation. They are both somewhat short (about an hour each), experimental films with a very loose narrative structure focusing on controversial scientific studies. In both films, there is no dialogue or recorded sound that matches the action taking place on screen. They are done in the style of found

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<sup>37</sup> Cronenberg, David, and Chris Rodley. Cronenberg on Cronenberg. London: Faber and Faber, 1997. 4-5.

<sup>38</sup> Cronenberg and Rodley, 4.

<sup>39</sup> David Cronenberg recently directed another film that is also called *Crimes of the Future* (2022). The 2022 film is not a remake of the 1970 film, Cronenberg has explicitly stated that these two films are unrelated despite having the same title. Wise, Damon. “David Cronenberg Breaks Silence on His Fleshy Return to Cannes with ‘Crimes of the Future’ – the Deadline Q&A.” Deadline, May 20, 2022.

footage, with the scientist's log read as a voiceover played over what appears to be film taken for scientific documentation. Both films imply that they are set in the near future, but their characters are dressed in strangely old, almost medieval, attire.

*Stereo* focuses on a project created by the fictional Canadian Academy for Erotic Inquiry, pioneering telepathic communication that is strengthened by sexual connection between participants. Dr. Luther Stringfellow is the director of the study, but he is never seen on screen. While we do not know the identities of the voiceover narrators, the voices (multiple occur throughout the film) speak in the collective and refer to Stringfellow in the third person. The audience can infer that their perception of the footage is guided by a team of researchers. The visuals are all focused on the participants, while we only hear the words and perspective of the researchers. The participants' actions on screen make less and less sense to the viewer, as the voiceover deduces that they now occupy a psychic realm with each other that the viewer cannot understand. The study slowly falls apart as the subjects lose the ability to differentiate, begin to take on maladaptive coping mechanisms to maintain a sense of identity, and eventually multiple participants take their own lives.

*Crimes of the Future* does not follow an experiment, but instead the observations of a dermatologist based out of a different fictional organization, called The House of Skin. *Crimes* is set in a dystopian future in which all adult women have died off from skin-based plague that originated in cosmetic procedures and has spread to the general population. Our protagonist, Adrian Tripod, suspects that the origins of the plague and cure can only be found if he locates his mentor, Antoine Rouge, who created and released this plague. As Tripod searches for Rouge, he encounters groups of men

adjusting to the new social reality of a world without women. Some men begin to explore their feminine side, while others obsess over what they have lost through fetishism and sexual objectification. A group of predatory men obsessively seek out the select few young girls who remain alive because they have not reached puberty. The film ends with Tripod attempting to induce puberty in a five year old girl in order to impregnate her and continue the human race, but the induction of puberty causes both the girl and Tripod to be infected with the virus and die.

In both *Stereo* and *Crimes*, we have a powerful scientist who acts as the driving force behind the events of the film, but never appears on screen: *Stereo*'s Stringfellow and *Crimes*' Rouge. The world of *Stereo* feels very much like Eden. The subjects are exploring a new way of existing. They do not possess complete understanding of their circumstances and engage with their newfound abilities in an almost playful manner. Stringfellow, while invisible, has a team of researchers carefully tracking the progress of his subjects. But of course, despite Stringfellow's best efforts, his subjects do fall from their utopian, Eden-like state.

Rouge, on the other hand, resembles a more absent god. He releases a horrific contagion into the world, killing many and forever changing society. When our protagonist, Tripod, actively seeks him out in an attempt to improve the living conditions of the masses, Rouge is nowhere to be found. The structures humanity came to rely on crumble and fall apart, and the being who set this in motion has no response or reaction. For Cronenberg, these two potential realities represent different kinds of horror: the horror that everything humans do matters, and nihilistic horror that nothing we do matters. Stringfellow, the careful, watchful scientist, represents a depiction of the

first, and Rouge, the absent, destructive force who released his creation on the world and disappeared, the latter.

We see a yet another approach to the relationship between creator and created in Cronenberg's 1986 masterpiece, *The Fly*. *The Fly* was originally written as a short story by George Langelaan in 1957, and faithfully adapted into film by Kurt Neumann in 1958. In the short story and 1958 film adaptation, Quebecois scientist Andre Delambre attempts to test his newly invented matter transmitter on himself and accidentally combines his DNA with that of a fly, resulting in Delambre coming out the other side of the device with the head and left arm of a fly, and presumably, somewhere the fly is buzzing around with the head and left arm of a human. Delambre attempts to enlist his wife's help in finding the fly and correcting his mistake, but they fail, and Delambre ultimately crushes his head and left arm in a hydraulic press to cover the grotesque truth of what he became. His wife falsely confesses to his murder so that the cause of his suicide will not be investigated.

As Mary Ferguson Pharr argues in her essay "From Pathos To Tragedy: The Two Versions of The Fly," the Neumann version of the film presents "a perfect domestic unit - husband, wife, and son - loving not just one another but the world. And the [Neumann] world is worth loving: it is ordered, cultured, fair in every sense of the word."<sup>40</sup> In discussing the purpose of his invention, Delambre describes the matter transmitter as a miracle, stating that "humanity need never want or fear again," and emphasizes the device's potential to end famine. When Delambre's wife accuses him of playing God, he says "God gives us intelligence to uncover the wonders of nature. Without the gift

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<sup>40</sup> Pharr, Mary Ferguson. "From Pathos To Tragedy: The Two Versions of The Fly." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 2, no. 1 (5) (1989): 37-46. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43310207>. 39.

nothing is possible.” Delambre’s fusion with the fly is a horrible accident, and he chooses to take his own life rather than live continue to live his life as something less than human, which he feels would burden his family and the world. The film ends on his wife making a similar sacrifice out of love for the world: giving up her freedom to keep the police from discovering the motivation behind Delambre’s suicide.

While Neumann’s *The Fly* and Cronenberg’s *The Fly* share a few central plot points, their worlds and themes are nearly polar opposites. Cronenberg’s protagonist, scientist Seth Brundle (Jeff Goldblum), is an ambitious, single man, who works alone as a contractor for Bartok Labs. We are introduced to Brundle at an industry party, flirting with science reporter Veronica Quaife (Geena Davis). He takes her back to his personal laboratory to show her his new teleportation device, which works by disassembling and recombining matter. In this stage, Brundle is still experimenting with animal and object trials, and Quaife chooses to work with him in hopes of reporting on the story of his new technology once it is released. Brundle states that he is preoccupied with flesh because he himself knows so little about it; in accordance with his combined scientific and sexual curiosity, his flirtation with Quaife grows into a sexual relationship.

Quaife later spends a night away from Brundle, and out of jealousy and impatience, he chooses to put himself through the teleporter without consulting Quaife. He emerges out the other side apparently unharmed, but slowly his body and mind begin to change. He feels stronger, more intelligent, more energetic, he develops super human abilities. Short, bristly, fly-like hairs begin to appear on his body but seem benign. His sexual appetite increases and becomes insatiable, leading him to be unfaithful to Quaife. As the changes continue, Brundle’s conception of himself begins to



change; his thoughts become more primitive and self-centered, and he speaks about himself in third person as “Brundlefly.” Even as his body visibly deteriorates, with parts of him oozing and falling off (including his penis), he insists that this is an evolved form of himself. In the tragic end of the film, Quiafe shoots and kills Brundle in an act of self-defense and cries over his dead, disfigured body.

While Neumann’s *Fly* features a wholesome family with utilitarian goals, Cronenberg’s *Fly* centers on a man with no family, who self describes as having no life outside his work, and is only motivated by sex, knowledge, and power. The film itself opens with Brundle saying “What am I working on? I'm working on something that will change the world and human life as we know it.” He never mentions a humanitarian goal and repeatedly emphasizes the great amount of power his invention will provide, both in its ability to influence and reshape human life and in its potential improve his own physical body. Brundle expresses no ethical strife over meddling with things humanity should not have power over or the potential harm his creation could bring. Brundle’s concerns are primarily located within himself and his body. In the final act of the film, Quiafe discovers she is pregnant, and Brundle attempts to thwart her attempts to abort the baby, as she fears it may carry Brundle’s compromised DNA. Brundle insists that once the baby is born, all three of them should go through the teleportation device together: “We'll be the ultimate family. A family of three joined together in one body. More human than I am alone.”

Cronenberg’s protagonist is a truly mad scientist standing in contrast to Neumann’s tragic hero, not only actively pursuing, but celebrating a state of compromised humanity. The ending of Cronenberg’s *Fly* is the ultimate reversal of

Neumann's *Fly*. Delambre kills himself, and his romantic interest, his loving wife, sacrifices her own freedom by pretending to have killed him, so as to save the world from knowing his true fate. Brundle tries to kill his romantic interest, his lover, with whom he has a strained relationship at this point, but she kills him in the end – not for altruistic reasons, but to save herself from the monster he has become. While the ending of Neumann's film is concerned with concealing Delambre's mutated body, Brundle's mutated body is on full display as Quiafe grieves the loss and trauma of their relationship. Notably, she is a science reporter who has been working to create a complete account of Brundle's scientific discovery. As a foil to Delambre's loving wife who sacrifices her freedom preserved her husband's legacy, Quiafe ends the movie poised to fully expose Brundle's corruption and death for her own gain as a reporter.

Brundle, unlike Stringfellow and Rouge, is not an aloof character. The film is almost entirely from his perspective, we get to know a great deal about his motivations and inner world. Of these three protagonists, Brundle is the most human. Playing the role of both scientist and subject, he becomes both God and Adam. Cronenberg's *Fly* is something of an undoing of our creation story. Genesis' creation is divine, *Fly*'s is human. For Genesis, sexuality follows the fall, in *The Fly*, sexuality is ever present. Where Genesis seeks to contain power, *Fly* seeks to unleash and gain it at any cost. Where Genesis seeks to separate, *Fly* seeks to combine. Nearly everything that the biblical creation myth establishes about humans, separation between male and female, humanity and God, humanity and animal, ethical and unethical, *The Fly* attempts to recombine and blur.

Origin stories seek to answer some of the most universal questions. Where do we come from? What makes us special? What is our purpose? Genesis answers these questions through the development of a powerful, singular creator-God who designs and experiments with creation. This God created humanity as distinct from all other living things insofar as they are in the image of the Creator, and all other creation is meant to add to the flourishing of humanity. The experimenting, creating God develops humans with intentionality and investment, and delivers punishments and changes as correctives, ultimately for the human's benefit.

Our Cronenbergian creators defer from this purpose in a critical way – just as Cronenberg himself believes that “to turn away from any aspect of the human body is a philosophical betrayal,” his mad scientists have similar goals. Like the God of Genesis, Dr. Stringfellow of *Stereo* is invested in the fate of his subjects. However, he completely removes linguistic communication from his participants and forces them only into their physical bodies, intensifying their telepathic connection through sexuality. He seeks to blur the distinction between human beings and take away something that distinguishes them from most other creatures – spoken language. Dr. Rouge of *Crimes of the Future* does not possess this caring nature. An indifferent creator, he changes humanity forever and disappears without a trace, leaving humanity to decay physically and morally with no apparent hope. His contribution to creation removes sexual distinction from society, which results in some people attempting to reintroduce an androgynous state to bring balance, and some moving past their own sense of morality to sate their biological hunger for procreation.

Seth Brundle of *The Fly* serves as the ultimate inversion of Genesis' experimenter God. While the God of Genesis creates outside of godself, Brundle's locus of creation is his own body. Brundle does not care much for anyone or anything around him. While his initial recombination of himself with a non-human entity is accidental, he stands by the changes he has made to his physical form and chooses to re-enter the device repeatedly in hopes of amplifying its effect. His goal becomes to absorb many things into himself, opposing Genesis' God who stands clearly and distinctly separate from creation. As he discards the physical and emotional attributes that make him distinctly human, he celebrates himself as "beyond human" or "more than human."

Genesis, as the story of humanity's creation, has a clear point of view: humanity is the pinnacle of God's creation. Humanity possesses special intelligence and the ability to communicate with God, which places them as above animal. However, when human beings listen to their own bodies and minds above the word of God, this brings about their demise. Cronenberg, on the other hand, believes that to ignore the body is a philosophical betrayal. All of Cronenberg's creators, in some way, drive humanity away from their sense of higher self and forces them into contact with their baser drives. Genesis creates bodies as a vehicle for human souls, and no more. Cronenberg destroys the sense of human exceptionalism to recognize the horrors of our own bodies.

*Midrash: Body of Dirt*

I remember when I was dirt. I liked how shapeless and vast I used to be. I liked that nothing could avoid me. I was a part of everything and everything would eventually be a part of me.

I liked it when The One started making plants and grew them inside me. Their squirmy roots would push into my formlessness, they were kind of sharp but I didn't mind. They took what they needed from me, they didn't make too much of a fuss. I could feel them sucking, sucking out the best things I had to offer. I didn't know those were the best things I had to offer until they took them.

Animals – those were really fun. They were sharp and pointy and imposing like the plants were. So needlessly insistent about their shapes, plants and animals. But animals started eating the plants, and eating each other, they used their fleshy bodies to mash them all together and give them back to me.

And then sometimes, the animals would stop. When they stopped moving, they stopped being so insistent about their shapes. They would leak and puff and fall apart, gloriously break all their lines, and join me. I loved that most of all.

But I guess The One decided I wasn't good enough the way I was, all feeling and formlessness. So I have lines now. I have lines and so many more ways of perceiving. The way air moves through me and saturates my being feels the same somehow, which is nice. The edges though, the edges were so uncomfortable. When something pushes into me it never just melts and becomes part of me, the way it used to.

The first thing I saw was my hands. I didn't know what saw was, I didn't know what hands were, and then I saw hands and I thought hands. They upset me at first, so many

lines, they seem designed just to remind me that I was now something separate.

Sometimes I still put my fingers in my mouth and I try to remember what roots felt like.

The One said "Hello"

I said "Hello"

He said "Do you like it?"

"What?"

"Your body, you have a body now, do you like it?"

"Ummm... I don't know? I liked how I was before?"

"You couldn't do anything before, this is better."

"Oh, okay."

"You can talk, and think, and move around, and make stuff, and know stuff. We can hang out. I made all this stuff, can you name it?"

Another voice called out, "Sure!"

Something pulled me, and with no effort on my part, I was moving backwards. In that moment I became aware of him, my other half. My body was not one body, but two bodies, his and mine together. I could feel my feet dragging softly in the grass, but somehow I could also feel his feet, pumping up and down, running us into the garden. I could not control his feet, but they were present, a distant part of me.

"Hello?" I called out to the other body.

"Oh, hi! I'm Adam!"

"How long have you been Adam?"

"Since just now! I just started being, so I found out that I am. And then you started talking. I knew if *someone else* was, then I was Adam."

“How did you know? Am I also Adam?”

“Well, you know how when you first looked down and saw these... you know, big root things and knew they were arms?”

“Yes!”

“So it’s like that, I thought me and then I thought Adam.”

“Huh... when I look down, I know I have arms, and I know that those are trees, and I know I used to be dirt, but I don’t know what I am.”

“You used to be dirt? I used to be dirt!”

“You were dirt too? Well, if we were both dirt, than we must both be Adam.”

“Of course! Hello, Adam.”

“Hello, Adam.”

It felt good that Adam was there. It was like how when I was dirt and I was so many all at the same time, not one quiet existence, but a loud, low hum. A singularity. Adam was like that only less. It wasn’t everything I needed, but it was good. Adam and I wandered around the garden naming, elated at the simple glee of looking and just knowing the names of everything. The joy of poking and prodding and seeing how things work.

We tried for a long time to try and see each other, but we can’t see much. If he pushes his arm or his leg way back I can see it a little, and if I do the same he can see mine. Somewhere behind my belly stops feeling as much like me and starts to feel more like him.

We sit in the grass with our feet in the dirt. I push back towards him, then him toward me, then me toward him. We fall over and we laugh. We take turns curling our arms and

legs up tight while the other runs. We reach back and touch each other's faces. We laugh more. It is fun to have a body.

We talk about what we can see on our body. It seems like Adam's side of the body is almost the same as mine. Two big legs, with knees and feet and five toes on each foot, arms that are thinner and shorter than our legs, with elbows and hands each with five fingers, necks and heads on top with round bellies in the middle. Everything is soft with hard underneath. The soft is called flesh and the hard is called bone. Flesh and bone, flesh and bone, all of us is flesh and bone.

We only have two differences, my breasts are round like our bellies and his are flat, and between his legs is called a penis and mine is a vagina. But the parts that are different don't do very much anyway, so we've decided we're basically the same. We are both Adam.

We name things and eat food and play games and talk to Him and fall asleep in the grass. When I sleep I see things behind my eyes, fantastical swirling colors, trees that grow upside down, I climb fruits as big as mountains and take giant bites from them. Adam and I separate and recombine. We wake up, eat food, play games, talk to Him, fall asleep, and do it again.

"So... can you answer me now? Do you like the body I made you? Is it good?" The One asked again.

"I think our body is fun? It's new and different? I still don't really understand what it's for." I said honestly. How can I know whether or not the body is good when I don't even know why The One put us in it.

"I made your body special, I made it in my image. Don't you like it?"



“Of course! Of course, we love the body. It’s very special,” says Adam.

“What about when you made dirt? Was dirt special?” I ask.

“Well... Yes, the dirt was special too. I crafted you, my finest creations out of it!” The One replies.

“But what about when it was dirt? Is dirt special because you used it to make the body or was it already special before then?” I ask again.

He sighs. “I don’t want to talk about dirt anymore, I made dirt on the second day. I didn’t even think about it, just boom, dirt. It was easy. Look at you! You are incredible! Let’s name things, or try a new food, or invent a new game or something. I want to watch you experience all this stuff I made, I want to see what else you can do! Wait – have you been in the water yet because let me tell you it is something else!”

The One was right, we loved the water.

We let the river push our body downstream, we moved so fast and I didn’t have to think any of the moves. I wonder if the water thinks its moves or it just goes. Water flows around me so close it almost feels like it flows through.

I wonder if I can flow like water. I lean my head back on to Adam’s shoulder. He leans on to mine.

“*Adam?*” Instead of keeping my thought still I push. I know how to think a move, I try to move my thought.

“*Yes, Adam?*” I don’t hear it with my ears, I feel it in my body. Like we’re touching each other with our thoughts, somewhere in the space where our bodies connect.

“*You can feel it, when I do this? Do you always feel my thoughts?*”

*"I can feel when you think a move, or when something is really loud in your brain, like when you eat sour fruits, or hit your foot on a rock, or you see something new that I can't see. But those are just sensations, I've never felt you think this clearly before."*

*"Do you like it?"*

*"It's nice. It feels like..."*

*"Like before?"*

*"... Do you think The One knows what we're thinking?"*

*"I don't know."* Neither of us think. I can feel Adam tense up, as if he has stopped breathing. I want to help him. *"Do you remember mud, Adam?"*

*"Ohhhh, right. Mud. I liked being mud."*

*"There was something so nice about letting all the water in, being so smooth and slick and floaty."*

*"There were no rules when we were mud. All our little bits could just bounce and dance until the water got lighter and lighter and left us. Or the plants took it."*

*"It was so peaceful, when we were dirt, wasn't it?"*

*"Adam... Adam, don't."*

*"It's just us in here, in the body. I don't think The One knows."* Adam is tense again.

*"Okay, The One, I am inviting you to join our inside conversation. If you can feel our thoughts like we can feel our thoughts, send us a thought."*

Our brains are quiet. All I feel is rushing water, Adam's shallow breath, mine slow and steady, to compensate. We wait. No thoughts come. Adam pushes a thought across our ribs.

*“I miss being dirt too.”* The thought feels raw. Like it’s been sitting in his brain wishing to be heard so long it’s almost painful to push out. More thoughts quickly follow. *“Don’t get me wrong, I like our body. I think The One did a really great job and their image is great. I don’t want them to be sad. It’s just...”*

*“It’s exhausting, isn’t it? To perceive so much, to have so many lines and separations, to have all these needs?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“Do you think we can be both? Maybe we can be dirt again, for just a little while, and then come back? If The One made us a body out of dirt before, it shouldn’t be too hard.”*

*“It seems really important to them that we live in the body, that we think, and move, and tell them about all the thoughts we move and the moves we think.”*

*“We could tell them about being dirt?”*

*“The One wants to know about bodies, The One wants to see what bodies can do.”*

*“So what if we can use our bodies to make ourselves dirt?”* ☺

Adam’s mind spins, his thoughts are not words. Images, flashes of scenes, fragments and sounds. I can feel the electric pulses across his brain working to find an answer. He’s starting to see it, I can tell.

*“I think The One would be really impressed if we could make ourselves dirt again. But we can’t tell. It has to seem like an accident, like it’s something The One is learning as we’re learning about it. Then they would have to let us stay dirt, at least for a little while.”*

Yes, yes, yes, yes.

We emerge from the river and let the sun lighten the water and pull it from our skin. I get to work.

“I want to play a new game” I announce to The One.

“I love games!” The One says, “What did you think of this time, Adam?”

“Yes Adam, what do you want to play?” Adam asks with bated breath.

“I liked being in the water. Usually we’re in the air and on top of the ground, in the water was different. I want to see if we can be in the ground now.” I don’t say dirt. I’m worried he’ll understand if I say dirt. I’m worried he’ll understand either way.

“In the ground? I hadn’t thought you would do that. Fascinating, fascinating, go ahead. I’ll watch.”

I push my hands into the earth and feel it, home. My other body. You can’t really feel your own body when you’re living in it. I learn new things this way. The rich smell fills my senses, it is wet and dry, it crumbles between my fingers, alluringly shaped and unshaped all at once. It’s bittersweet, the joy of remembering my other form and the contrast between the dirt and my hands. I feel warmth flow in and out of my hands. I feel my hands smash the dirt instead of elegantly recombining with it. I sigh. We keep digging.

We keep digging until we stand in a hole in the ground big enough that only our heads pop above the surface when we stand tall. There is dirt stuck to my skin, under my nails, mingling with my sweat. It’s intoxicating.

“Whoa there, whoa there, Adam. You should stop digging now.” The One cautions.

“But that’s not the game. The game was to be inside the ground like we were in the water.” I respond.

“Yes Adam, but when you were in the water, your head had to poke out the top. Your head needs air. Here, just stand still in the middle of the hole and I’ll help.”

We stand still like The One asks. Suddenly all the dirt we took from the ground comes rushing back down on us. I can remember a little better a little now the loud low hum of singular existence in the dirt, but I still can't hear it. I can feel the sensation of the sound on my skin but I don't have the right ears anymore to hear.

I stretch my arms legs out like roots, I feel weightless. If I can plant myself in the dirt, maybe that will help bridge the gap between the way I am and once was. I breath in and hold, hoping the air will learn to leave through my fingers, but it stubbornly coughs back out.

"Do you like it in there? How is it going?" The One asks.

"It's good! It's peaceful. It's kind of like the water only... quieter. Stiller." says Adam.

Adam can always tell what He wants us to do. I am thankful to Adam, as I keep thinking about how to get closer. I push my fingers around the loose dirt, looking...

"Quieter, stiller..." The One replies, trying to internalize our experience.

The edge of my finger hits a rock. Rock, rock might help. I pull it in toward the center of my hand, wrapping my soft lines around its hard lines. What would happen, I wonder.

I roll the rock in my palm until I find its sharpest point, I line the point up with the soft fleshy muscle below my thumb and press hard. I thought it would feel like when roots push their way through me and I move and we both exist in that space.

It feels like something new, something awful, like my lines are fighting to be preserved.

My body is crying out for me to stop. I don't. I push harder. Resistance builds and breaks, a warm, thick liquid pours out of me into the dirt.

Maybe this is like when the animals would stop and leak. Maybe this is how I start becoming dirt again. The liquid keeps escaping, my lines don't have anything left to fight. The break has been made. And my body still cries.

*"Adam what's happening to you?"* Adam thinks in a panic.

*"I think this is just the process, I know it doesn't feel good. Let me try."*

"Adam, what's happening to you?" The One asks, curious with a hint of concern, "You don't look so good. Does the dirt feel bad?"

"Um..." Adam doesn't know what to do.

"No, no, the dirt feels good. I just found a rock." I try to cover.

"Rocks should also feel good, Adam. I'm going to get you out of there. Hold on." The One pulls us from the earth with a rush. We are briefly in the air and then seated on the ground. "Oh Adam, you cut your hand!"

I look down. Dirt still sticks to my skin. My hand has a hole, like the dirt did. My skin is loose and open, the liquid is still pouring out. Sticky, warm, thick, dark, dark red, in that moment I know its name.

"Blood." I say.

"What is blood?" asks Adam.

"Let me show you," I say. "Do you see any rocks?"

"Adam, Adam! No. Do not cut yourself again," scolds The One, "I haven't even fixed your first cut yet. Cutting is bad, don't do it again."

"Why?"

"Because you'll hurt yourself."

"Hurt?"

“Hurt is that bad feeling that happened. Hurt happens when you make your body work less well, so that you know not to do those things again.”

“What happens when my body works less well?”

“Then you disrespect my greatest creation!” the words burst out. The One takes a breath and speaks slower, “I made you so that I can take care of you, see what you can make, what you can accomplish. All my other creatures just exist, they care about staying alive, but you also care about what your life means to you, and you care about creating things too. My little mini-me.” By the end The One seems happy again, like they had forgotten the way I betrayed them.

“Adam, lift up your bloody hand,” The One says.

The blood and dirt disappear. The skin folds back into place, the hole seals.

“There, there,” The One says, as though I need to be calmed down, but it is clearly for them. “Adam, your blood needs to stay inside your body. If your blood comes out again, try to keep dirt out of it. Lots of little things live in the dirt and they can take root if you’re not careful. Next time just let me help you fix it.

“Dirt can root in a body? Like plants root in dirt?” I am so excited I cannot contain the question.

“Well, not exactly, but kind of. The stuff in dirt is more like little animals than little plants. If you put dirt in your body, then it’s like letting little creatures inside.”

*Letting little creatures inside.*

The thought rattles between us with no clear source. I was thinking about this all wrong. I was trying to put our body inside the dirt to change us from the outside in, when I needed to put the dirt inside our body to change us from the inside out.

We communicate in electric pulses, back and forth across our ribcages. They're becoming less and less verbal. The urge is so strong we cannot resist. Simultaneously, we reach our hands back into the ground and shove fistfuls of dirt into our mouths. The dirt tastes... not like fruit, not like vegetables, not like water, not unlike water. Dirt tastes like a feeling. Dirt tastes like nothing and is also all consuming. The edges combining with my spit and become mud, the thicker clumps are sticky, wet dirt. It doesn't feel good like eating feels good. It feels like a different kind of eating. It's hard to swallow. I imagine the little creatures streaming down my throat, spreading their creature roots, growing dirt.

"ADAM! What did I just say?"

"I like creatures," Adam says muffled through a mouthful of dirt.

The One is exasperated. I feel a pressure on our stomachs. The muddy, spitty dirt shoots out of our mouths

"Creatures are fine and good Adam, but they don't go inside you. Your body goes all by itself. Creatures live outside your body."

"Why?" Adam asks. The One sighs.

"It's been a long day, Adam. You feel tired, don't you? You should go to sleep."

My eyes grow instantly heavy, our body drifts into sleep effortlessly.

The images behind my eyes are not the same as usual. Adam and I drift in space and a giant, sharp rock flies toward us. I send *Adam, watch out* across our body but the thought is interrupted. The rock stabs in between our ribcages.



My mouth cries out as I'm gripped by the hurt. I mean to expel air and sound, dirt pours from my lips. Thick sticky clumps catch in my throat, blocking the flow of my breath. I gag, trying desperately to expel them.

The space behind my stomach throbs with a sensation beyond hurt. Loose skin hangs. Hot sticky blood drenches my legs.

*Adam, where are you?*

I can barely think it. I try to move the thought but I can't figure out how.

*Adam, where are you? Adam, where are you? Adam, where are you?*

I wake up from my horrible vision, disoriented, covered in sweat. My back is cold and sore.

*Back.*

I didn't know this word, back, but just like arms and feet, I suddenly do. I wrap my arms around my body. The skin on my new back is rough, and hurts to the touch.

"Adam, where are you?" I yell this time. I look around, and there he is, lying in the grass next to me.

I see him. I've never seen him before. But there he is. We were right, we are mostly the same. His chest is flatter, my vagina is flatter than his penis, but otherwise the same. It's different to see him than to feel him. I miss feeling him.

I reach out my hands and put them on his arms.

"Adam."

He wakes up. He opens his eyes. His eyes are lovely. When his eyes look into mine it feels almost like the electric pulses crossing our ribcages.

"It's you?" Adam says, shocked, confused.

“Good morning, humans! I realized yesterday that I made a mistake, I put you both in one body and that was no good. It’s better to have you in separate bodies, you can do so much more with two different bodies than you can with one. It will be easier for me to observe you and see what you can do. I had to cut the two of you apart, so it will hurt for a little while, but soon it will feel okay. Anyway, there are two of you now! You can keep each other company, it will be good. Are you excited?”

“I guess so,” says Adam, “Are we still both Adam?”

“Hmmm... I guess that will be a little too confusing. You can be Adam, you should name the other half something else.”

“We’ll call you woman, because you came from man!” Adam says, genuine excitement beginning to return. He always loved naming.

“Man? I thought you were Adam?” I asked.

“Ah, yes. I am Adam. I am also a human, and I am also a man. I am many things, I think. Time to find out!” he runs off, I don’t know where. He grows smaller and smaller. And I am alone. My thoughts stay inside my brain, there is nothing to harmonize with, no hum, no surge of life, just me. Adam thinks he is many things, I have never been fewer things. I have never been so alone as I am now, now that I have company.

I lie back, I feel the dirt against my skin, just mine now. A creature slithers through the grass toward me. I remember when I was dirt. And I’m not done trying to go back.

### III. Cain and Abel

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-קַיִן אֵי הֶבֶל אָחִיךָ וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יָדַעְתִּי הֲשֹׁמֵר אָחִי אָנֹכִי:  
וַיֹּאמֶר מָה עָשִׂיתָ קוֹל דְּמֵי אָחִיךָ צֹעֲקִים אֵלַי מִן-הָאֲדָמָה:  
וְעַתָּה אָרוּר אַתָּה מִן-הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר פָּצְתָה אֶת-פִּיהָ לְקַחַת אֶת-דְּמֵי אָחִיךָ מִיָּדְךָ:

Yi said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" And he said, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" "What have you done? Hark, your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground! Therefore, you shall be more cursed than the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand."

*Genesis 4:9-11*<sup>41</sup>

רַק חֲזֹק לְבַלְתִּי אֲכֹל הַדָּם כִּי הַדָּם הוּא הַנֶּפֶשׁ וְלֹא-תֹאכַל הַנֶּפֶשׁ עִם-הַבָּשָׂר:

But make sure that you do not partake of the blood; for the blood is the life, and you must not consume the life with the flesh.

*Deuteronomy 12:23*

"The abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder"

- Julia Kristeva, "*Powers of Horror*"<sup>42</sup>

When God begins giving law to the nation of Israel at Sinai, God instructs that "if one strikes a man and the man dies, [the perpetrator] shall be put to death."<sup>43</sup> But curiously, in the case of the first murder, God does not encourage this response. God not only spares Cain, but marks Cain as a means of protecting him from any sort of human retaliation. The verb used in Cain's banishment, לָגַרַשׁ, is the same verb used in

<sup>41</sup> Genesis 4:9. *The Contemporary Torah*, JPS, 2006. <https://www.sefaria.org/Genesis.4.9?lang=bi&aliyot=0>.

<sup>42</sup> Kristeva, Julia, and Leon S. Roudiez. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Columbia University Press, 2024. P13.

<sup>43</sup> Exodus 21:12. *The Contemporary Torah*, JPS, 2006. <https://www.sefaria.org/Exodus.21.12?lang=bi&aliyot=0>.

the previous chapter to describe Adam and Eve's banishment from the Garden of Eden. While Cain's punishment bares some similarities to that of his parents, in that they both live in a physical exile and must learn to live a new kind of life, Cain's exile is layered by presence of society. He is cut off from his land and his passion of tilling the soil, but he is also forced to leave his family and he is marked in a way that compromises his social standing. Cain is left with a peculiar status. The life he had before Abel's murder effectively ends, but he remains alive to witness the world without him: socially abject from the world he once lived in.

The abject is a concept defined by Julia Kristeva in her seminal text, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Her definition of the abject begins as the theoretical opposite of Lacan's *objet petit a*, or unattainable object of desire. Where objects of desire can help an individual create meaning and find purpose, Kristeva's abject draws the individual ever closer to "the place where meaning collapses."<sup>44</sup> Kristeva defines the abject first as anything that is jettisoned from the physical body: feces, blood, urine, loose hair, fingernail clippings, disembodied limbs. Anything that could have once been a part of the self, but has been disconnected and now represents its own independent object qualifies as abject.

The unsettling nature of the abject can sometimes be explained through the evolutionary theory of disgust. As Darwin himself theorized, as our ancestors reproduced, perhaps those who were naturally repulsed by things that could cause them harm if eaten, such as rotting food, dead bodies, or human waste, were more

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<sup>44</sup> Kristeva, 2.

likely to continue their genetic lines.<sup>45</sup> But this fear seemingly goes far beyond what we will and will not eat. Kristeva explains that what we refuse to eat is a protection of the limits of the self: “‘I’ want none of that element, sign of their desire; ‘I’ do not want to listen, ‘I’ do not assimilate it, ‘I’ expel it.”<sup>46</sup>

When we observe things that do not attempt to transgress this border, but merely exist in our presence, the threat is entirely philosophical. “Refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being... The border has become an object. How can I be without border?”<sup>47</sup> Kristeva expands this concept into the social abject. Just as we define ourselves physically from that which disgusts us, such as sour milk and body fluids, we define ourselves by separating from what disgusts us socially. The social abject can include the rejection of deviant behavior as well as illegitimate bias, such as sexism, racism, fatphobia, etc.

In this chapter, I explore the abject’s role in the story of Cain and Abel. Cain and Abel’s story contains both the physical abject, represented through blood, corpse, and the mark of Cain, and the social abject, Cain’s separation from society. Cronenberg is no stranger to the abject, and I choose to analyze his films *Shivers* (1975) and *Dead Ringers* (1988) to explore his use of physical and social abjection. For Torah and Cronenberg, body horror is used as a tool to contextualize the abject. Cronenberg’s

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<sup>45</sup> Darwin, Charles. “The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals.” Google Books. Accessed February 18, 2024. 257-258.

<sup>46</sup> Kristeva, 3.

<sup>47</sup> Kristeva, 3-4.

body horror re-integrates the abject, serving to question why it repulses us in the first place, and whether or not that repulsion serves us. In Torah, body horror further separates abject, reaffirming the need to create boundaries between self and abject. In reading the two side by side, I ask what it might look like for Cain to take a deeper, more explicit dive into the abject.

i. The Physical Abject

The story of Cain and Abel introduces the presence of the physical abject in human life through Cain's murder of Abel. While the abject is typically defined as something that has been jettisoned from the body, Kristeva absolutely includes the corpse in her concept of the abject. For Kristeva, the human corpse is not just an abjection, it is *the* abjection, the pinnacle of physical disgust. As Kristeva explains, "the corpse represents fundamental pollution. A body without soul, a non-body [is a] disquieting matter."<sup>48</sup> Kristeva elaborates that the corpse represents a mixing of life and unlife, making it the ultimate in abjection – the whole of a human body with no human present.

In other parts of Torah, especially Leviticus, the corpse's unsettling combination of life and non-life brings it front and center. But in our first narrative mention of death, the text seems to take great lengths to avoid speaking about the corpse as much as possible. Within Genesis 4, we move from Cain and Abel's births (Genesis 4:1-2), through their lives (4:2-7), Abel's death (4:8), Cain's punishment (4:9-16), and the next five generations of Cain's offspring (4:17-24). From the single verse about Abel's death,

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<sup>48</sup> Kristeva, 109.

we learn only one detail about his murder: Cain struck Abel in a field. A close read reveals that the text is littered with lacunae relating to the murder and corpse. What does Cain use to strike Abel? What part of Abel's body did Cain strike? How did Cain react to the corpse? What did Cain do with the corpse? Our sense of unknowing is heightened by a literal gap in the text in Genesis 4:8: "Cain said to his brother Abel ... and when they were in the field, Cain set upon his brother Abel and killed him." The text teases us, letting us know that Cain did say *something* to Abel, but does not grant us access to the conflict itself. It seems that the more gruesome and grizzly details of this moment are not for us, as readers, to know.

While we as readers are not necessarily privy to his specific motivation for the violent act he commits, for at least a fleeting moment, Cain desired to bring harm upon his own brother. The disgusting reality of that desire is manifested physically through its result: his brother's blood, his brother's dead body, and his own changed body. The text obscures the abject in a literal sense through the use of body horror, but heightens its emotional and metaphorical significance. We do not know how much Abel bleeds, or what part of his body bled, but we know that the blood is weighing so heavily on Cain that it "cries out from the ground."<sup>49</sup> We do not know how Cain reacted to the vision of his brother's corpse, or what he did with the body, but we know that God interrogates him about the location of the body and deforms Cain physically as a punishment. Just as any person would be forever changed by this kind of trauma, Cain is given a mark that alters how every person he meets will subsequently treat him.

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<sup>49</sup> Genesis 4:10. *The Contemporary Torah*, JPS, 2006. Accessed on Sefaria.org.

What the text lacks in salacious detail about murder, it compensates for in attention to Cain's punishment – the murder takes up one verse of text, while eight verses are devoted to Cain's punishment, a third of the whole chapter. The use of body horror as metaphor and the pacing of the chapter seemingly instructing the reader that our concern is Cain's journey as a character, rather than the gory details of what occurred. We should not look too closely at Cain's vile act, and the text does not allow us to do so. Body horror maintains our focus on the pain Cain experiences in the aftermath of his terrible action, the crying out of the blood, and the way that his life is irreparably damaged, the mark of Cain.

Cronenberg, on the other hand, could be accused of dwelling too much on salacious detail. Cronenberg's *Shivers* (1975), a film absolutely rife with gore and sex scenes, plays on the physical abject as its primary source of terror. *Shivers* tells the story of Starliner Towers, luxury, all-inclusive apartment building located on its own private island. Starliner Towers descends into madness after a contagious parasite takes hold over the population. The parasite, which is primarily transmitted through sexual contact, gives its host a seemingly unslakable drive to commit acts of violence and sexual violence. Instead of following the journey of a single character, the narrative of the film is passed from character to character, much like the parasite itself. The film ends with the infected departing from the ruined island, bound for a more population-dense city on the coast.

*Shivers'* parasite is the very definition of abject. It is constantly transgressing the boundaries of the body: we see the parasite vomited out of an infected host, convulse in hosts' abdomens, and crawl in and out of mouths, genitals, and flesh. Even when the



parasites exist independently, they have an abject quality. As described by film critic Robin Wood, “The parasites themselves are modeled very obviously on phalluses, but with strong excremental overtones (their color) and continual associations with blood.”<sup>50</sup> The parasite looks less like its own independent creature, and more like a disembodied organ dragging itself around the island.

The parasite’s unsettling appearance actually harkens back to its origin. Two scientists living in Starliner Towers, Emil Hobbes and Rollo Linsky, intended to develop synthetic human organs to be used in transplant surgeries. But eventually, the doctors shifted their focus. Instead of engineering an organ that could mimic an existing human organ, they made one to serve function they personally believed in. After Hobbes’ death in the opening scene in the film, Linsky says this of their joint purpose:

“Hobbes thought that man is an animal that thinks too much, an animal that has lost touch with his instinct, his 'primal self'... in other words, too much brain and not enough guts. And what he came up with to help our guts along was a human parasite that is... lemme find it here... 'a combination of aphrodisiac and venereal disease.’”<sup>51</sup>

The abject nature of the parasite is a perfect expression of its messy duality. Prior to infection, the hosts presumably possessed physical desires that they did not always act on. When the parasite takes over, it entirely suppresses the host’s desire for social

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<sup>50</sup> Grant, Barry Keith. “An Introduction to the American Horror Film.” Essay. In Robin Wood on the Horror Film: Collected Essays and Reviews, 159. Detroit, MI: Wayne State U.P., 2018.

<https://www.everand.com/read/387469349/Robin-Wood-on-the-Horror-Film-Collected-Essays-and-Reviews>.

<sup>51</sup> Cronenberg, David. “Shivers - Shooting Draft.” The Internet Movie Script Database. Accessed February 4, 2024. <https://imsdb.com/scripts/Shivers.html>.

order, focusing only on the desires of the body. But without the parasite, Hobbes and Linskey seem to argue, the pressure to maintain social order suppresses the host's ability to be in touch with the desires of their body. Following that logic, the parasite could be seen as a force allowing human beings to live in authenticity with their desires.

It is difficult to completely support Hobbes and Linsky's argument, given that the end result of the parasites is a complete breakdown of social order through rampant violence and sexual assault. But the very existence of their argument, and the apocalyptic parasite it birthed, serve to trouble our understandings of ourselves. What does it mean that our own desires have the potential to disgust us, and even ruin us? What happens when we allow ourselves to live in reality with, and potentially integrate, our most disgusting truths? The Torah's adamant distance between subject and object is more comfortable to live in. The boundaries of self are reaffirmed and maintained; the things we detest about ourselves remain on the outside. In all the ways that Torah glosses over the gore and humanity of violence, Cronenberg revels in them. Cronenberg's reintegration of the object through body horror forces us to see what disgusts as inherently entangled with what makes us human.

At the end of Genesis 4, we as readers are left with more questions about Cain and Abel than answers. The text omits their fuller life stories, the inciting emotional incident of the murder, the violent act itself, and Cain's reckoning with the corpse. The lack of detail allows Cain and Abel to exist as a cautionary tale. The biblical body horror of crying blood and the mark of Cain direct us to focus on the didactic piece of this story: murder is bad. The missing pieces could have given us a much blurrier, more horrific,

Cronenbergian story. If we read Cain and Abel's story in full, we might need to sit with the uncomfortable reality that murder is also, unfortunately, human.

## ii. The Social Abject

The lack of attention to Abel's death and corpse reflects a broader phenomenon: a lack of attention to Abel. As Joel Lohr of Hartford Seminary argues, "Abel is spoken of only in relation to Cain... and the reader cannot help feeling that his role is only a foil to Cain's. The story, without a doubt, is about Cain and God. Abel takes part but is, apart from the act of offering, passive."<sup>52</sup> We can see Lohr's argument play out in the pacing of Genesis 4: in the first eight verses, a lifetime unfolds, in the last eight verses, five generations pass, but in the middle eight, God and Cain have a single conversation. Time seeming stops to allow us to witness, in detail, as God punishes Cain.

God's curse to Cain includes three primary tenets: that he will no longer be able to till the soil (Genesis 4:12), that he will be a "ceaseless wanderer" (4:12), and that he will bear a mark, "lest anyone who met him should kill him" (4:15). The first two elements of Cain's curse bar him from participating in life as he knew it. He cannot stay in one place, he cannot develop community. He cannot perform his former life's work, tilling the soil, which is also a task serves as the focus for much of humanity.

He is also distinguished from humanity through his invulnerability to attack. Due to his horrible crime of violence against his brother, he now cannot succumb to violence, and presumably, will only be able to continue existing through violence against animals

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<sup>52</sup> LOHR, JOEL N. "Righteous Abel, Wicked Cain: Genesis 4:1-16 in the Masoretic Text, the Septuagint, and the New Testament." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (2009): 485–96. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43709808>.

(hunting, since he can no longer farm). There is a good reason that Cain claims his “punishment is too great to bear” (Genesis 4:14). In many ways, he has now become unhuman, a foil used to define the very things that bind society together. Cain is not going to be killed for his disobedience. He is not going to lose his life. He will still be a living human being, but in many ways, he will no longer function as a living human being. He blurs the line between living and non-living, between part of society and outcast.

Much like loose hair, clipped fingernails, and blood remind us of the border of our physical selves, the abject can apply to how we define ourselves in terms of morality, behavior, and culture. As Kristeva explains, most people would spit out sour milk upon experiencing its foul taste and texture, physically removing it from the body and rejecting it from the self. Similarly, certain human behaviors and attributes can motivate people to oppress or exile those who they see as outside the boundaries of society.<sup>53</sup> Social abjection frequently applies to those who are understood to pose a danger to society, such as carriers of infectious disease, people commit violent crimes, or people who are shown to lack empathy.<sup>54</sup> But as Kristeva theorizes, this can expand beyond the preservation of safety into prejudicial bias. Specifically, she points to the treatment of Jews and birthing bodies as examples of the social abject. Because Jews share common traits with Christians but do not worship Jesus, from the perspective of Christians, they create a sense of blurring boundaries and invoke the abject.<sup>55</sup> Because the maternal body bares physical attributes and abilities that the cisgender male body

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<sup>53</sup> Kristeva, 2-4.

<sup>54</sup> Kristeva, 4.

<sup>55</sup> Kristeva, 181.

does not, abilities that frequently involve the generation of physical abject (blood, tissues, placenta, breast milk), it also becomes a source of disgust and fear.<sup>56</sup>

The text of Torah takes no issue with Cain's new status as socially abject. In fact, his narrative arc climaxes with his abjection. Cain is not given complex and understandable motivations for his actions, nor is he ever given relief from his status as abject. Cain's new abject form, the mark of Cain, serves to represent what sets Cain apart socially. Again, body horror is used to reaffirm the boundaries around abjection, and justify keeping those who violate social order at arm's length.

As one would expect, Cronenberg has a much messier take on social abjection in *Dead Ringers* (1988). The film features twin identical brothers, Beverly and Elliot Mantle, who are both gynecologists and run a medical practice together. They take advantage of their identical appearance to switch places in both their personal and professional lives. The brothers begin the film grossly entangled – Elliot, as the more confident brother, dictating the actions of Beverly, the submissive brother. Their status quo is disturbed when Beverly develops a romantic relationship with their celebrity patient, actress Claire Niveau. Suddenly, Beverly has a world outside of Elliot's control. As Beverly falls in love with Claire and Elliot becomes obsessed with her abnormal uterus, their already twisted reality devolves into drug-addled delusion and mania. The film ends in the death of both twins, via murder suicide by Elliot.

The Mantle twins as a pair embody the concept of social abjection. Being identical twins, there is already a blurring of separation between the two – they are

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<sup>56</sup> Kristeva, 77.

genetically the same, they have the same job, they are even portrayed by a single actor (the film is, after all, called *Dead Ringers*). But despite their uncanny level of similarity, or perhaps because of it, Elliot must maintain a hierarchy over Beverly. Between the two of them, Elliot is always in power – Elliot is their spokesperson, Elliot tells Beverly when to switch places, Elliot seduces women and hands them off to Beverly.

Before Elliot and Beverly meet Claire, Elliot says to Beverly “If we didn't share women, you'd still be a virgin. You'd never get laid on your own.”<sup>57</sup> While an outsider might perceive Beverly as dependent on Elliot, the plot repeatedly confirms that the opposite is true – Beverly wishes to escape what he feels is an oppressive relationship, while Elliot attempts to make Beverly feel small to preserve the necessity of their all-consuming bond. Elliot treats Beverly as socially abject specifically by staying in proximity while also disempowering him. Elliot defines himself through this relationship, and specifically through his superiority in it.

This tension makes Claire and Beverly's relationship impossible for Elliot to accept. Again, while an outside might perceive Elliot as a womanizer based on his behavior, “actual women for [Elliot] seem very much a kind of medium through which to achieve an ever-greater intimacy with his brother.”<sup>58</sup> If Beverly can indeed “get laid” without the help of his brother, Elliot's connection to, and superiority over, Beverly is called into question. Elliot's abjection of Beverly begins to come apart at the seams.

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<sup>57</sup> Cronenberg, David, and Norman Snider. “Dead Ringers (Twins: Provisional Title Only).” The Script Lab. Accessed February 18, 2024. <https://thescriptlab.com/wp-content/uploads/scripts/10280-Dead-Ringers-by-David-Cronenberg-and-Norman-Snider.pdf>. 16.

<sup>58</sup> Beard, 238.

While this aspect of the socially abject impacts much of the underlying tension and character motivation in this film, aesthetically, the film is much more focused on a different form of social abjection. The opening credits play alongside black and white, classically styled, almost medieval drawings of archaic looking medical tools and cut open, abnormal pregnant bodies. These images serve as something of an aesthetic overture to the film: we will repeatedly see brutalistic medical procedures and tools, recklessly experimental approaches to patient care, an emphasis on “abnormal” bodies, and the colors red, black, and white throughout the film.

The Mantle twins are shown to be obsessed with the bodies of cisgender women<sup>59</sup> even from childhood. We see a flashback of the brothers as children, in which Elliot explains the purpose of sex to Beverly: “It’s because human beings don’t live under water... Fish don’t need sex because they just lay eggs and fertilize them right in the water. Humans can’t do that because they don’t live in the water. They have to internalize the water. Therefore, we have sex.”<sup>60</sup> Both brothers are equally fascinated by the concept of sex, but their reaction to this conversation is extremely telling. Beverly expresses that he wishes human beings could procreate without touching, the way that fish do, and asks Elliot if he’s heard of scuba diving. Elliot turns to a neighbor girl and asks her if she would like to have sex with him and his brother. After Elliot’s rejection by

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<sup>59</sup> Technically, we do not know the identities of all people treated at the Mantle twins’ clinic. Gynecologists treat many people who are not cisgender women. However, we experience this story through the imperfect perspective of Beverly and Elliot. I would argue that Beverly and Elliot *believe* all of their patients are cisgender women, as they repeatedly refer to their patients as women and focus on the treatment vulvas and uteruses specifically. If I were to decouple their attitudes toward bodies with uteruses and vulvas from their attitudes toward women as a social class, my analysis would miss the greater context of misogyny in the film. For this reason, I will be describing the gynecological patients of the Mantle twins as “cisgender women” even though it is an imperfect description.

<sup>60</sup> Cronenberg & Snider, P1.

the neighbor girl, the two brothers marvel over how different women are from them, and that the only way to solve their gap in knowledge is dissection.

Just as Kristeva demonstrates in her original work, the bodies of cisgender women serve as the abject to the male viewer, motivating the social abjection of women as a class. Elliot and Beverly each abject-ify women in their own distinct ways. For Elliot, women seem to begin and end at their reproductive organs. The only in depth connection Elliot is shown to have is with his brother, a being who literally looks exactly like him. Elliot feels comfortable objectifying and abusing his patients, lying to his patients and lovers alike, and treating all women as essentially interchangeable. Women are only as valuable to Elliot as they are usable, for either sex or dissection.

Beverly, though he has the capacity to connect on a deeper level with women than Elliot, is just as preoccupied with the “internalize[d] water” as an adult. During their childhood discussion of sex, Beverly moves immediately from discussing the internalized water of the womb to scuba diving. He wishes to imagine a world where he could participate in this fish-like, external procreation, immersing himself entirely into the vessel of conception. Essentially, this desire to be wholly inside the process of conception becomes his life’s work as gynecologist specializing in fertility issues.

But instead of simply revering the organs he studies, or showing respect to the people who possess them, Beverly heavily scrutinizes the object of his fascination. As he explains to a patient early on in the film, “why is it that a beautiful woman would induce revulsion in a man if he saw the inside of her thoracic cavity? Why don't we have standards of beauty for the entire human body, inside and out?... You have the most



exquisite uterus.”<sup>61</sup> As Beverly is pulled deeper into prescription drug abuse and paranoia, this appreciation of biological beauty becomes an obsession with biological abnormality. He becomes convinced that all his patients are “mutant women” with “deformed genitalia”<sup>62</sup> and creates bizarre, brutal looking medical tools that resemble metallic bones and spiders to perform unauthorized experimental procedures. In his heart of hearts, just like his brother, Beverly ultimately seeks to dissect the women around him.

The film pushes this point home through its use of color. Repeatedly, the Mantle twins are shown operating in unsettling, bright red scrubs, mimicking the background color of the opening credits. The red is especially striking because it is such an unusual color for scrubs. According to multiple popular scrub distributors and academic studies on patients’ perceptions of physicians, red scrubs are not advised because they have a social connotation with alarm, warnings, and blood.<sup>63646566</sup> On a light color, blood stands out, and it is clear to the patients whether a provider is wearing clean scrubs or not. The red color seems to suggest that blood is welcome and expected; their primary concern is the physical experience, the body, rather than the patient that lives inside. Operating scenes are heavily laden with the medieval aesthetic presented in the

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<sup>61</sup> Cronenberg & Snider, 8-9.

<sup>62</sup> Cronenberg & Snider, 77.

<sup>63</sup> Kurihara, H., Maeno, T. & Maeno, T. Importance of physicians’ attire: factors influencing the impression it makes on patients, a cross-sectional study. *Asia Pac Fam Med* 13, 2 (2014). <https://doi.org/10.1186/1447-056X-13-2>

<sup>64</sup> Barco. “Are There Different Meanings for Scrub Colors?” *Grey’s Anatomy Scrubs | Professional Wear by Barco*, October 25, 2021. <https://www.greysanatomyscrubs.com/blog/2019/10/15/are-there-different-meanings-for-scrub-colors/>.

<sup>65</sup> Robson, David. “How the Colour Red Warps the Mind.” *BBC News*, February 24, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20140827-how-the-colour-red-warps-the-mind>.

<sup>66</sup> Care+Wear. “The Ultimate Scrubs Color Meaning Chart.” *Care+Wear Community Blog*, April 16, 2021. <https://www.careandwear.com/blogs/community/scrub-color-guide>.

opening credits, resembling something closer to a ritual than a medical setting. Everyone in the operating room is clothed in the exact same color. The scrubs are long and flowing like a monk's robes, some even include hoods. The set suggests that surgery, for the Mantles, is a ritual. Their objective is not to heal, but to discover, uncover, and of course, dissect.

In comparing these two tales of brothers and fratricide, social abjection looms large over both. We do not get to fully understand how Cain and Abel connected as brothers. The text provides a single insight into their relationship: Cain provides crops as offerings to God while Abel provides animal sacrifice, and God prefers Abel's offerings. Hypothetically, this could build into a murderous tension between the two brothers, but that requires assumption on behalf of the reader. In contrast, *Dead Ringers* provides an uncomfortable level of detail about the Mantle twins' messy, codependent dynamic. Elliot absolutely sees himself as the stronger, more powerful brother, and uses the weakness he observes in Beverly to build this case. In the end, he murders Beverly to affirm that Beverly is weaker, and he dies immediately after because he cannot live without Beverly as his abject companion.

Beyond each pair of brothers, both stories point to a larger, systemic forms of social abjection. Social abjection in Torah is a force for good, for the preservation of safety and social order. Cain becomes abject because humans should not tolerate murder. Cain's status is not questioned or changed. *Dead Ringers* depicts an abjection that is unjust and not based in reality. Repeatedly, the Mantle twins treat their patients as subhuman, as mutant curiosities that bare the power of reproduction. They put the lives of women in danger repeatedly. Their actions are so reckless that they lose their

licenses to practice medicine and are fired from their own clinic. No surrounding characters, from their coworkers, to patients, to the people that manufacture their bizarre medical tools, condone their actions. Social abjection, for Cronenberg, is unequivocally a force for evil.

### iii. A Cronenbergian Cain and Abel

The Cain and Abel we read in our text includes the physical abject, but more than anything, it is a mediation on the social abject. Of the 24 verses in Genesis 4 that describe six generations of human life, a third of them are dedicated to explaining Cain's punishment and transformation into a marked human abjection. This focus makes sense for the sake of Torah in this moment. If we revisit Ilana Pardes' argument in her *Biography of Ancient Israel*, narratively, Genesis is the conception of the nation of Israel. In this moment, when community itself is a new development, understanding what happens when one violates the safety of the community is extremely important. Genesis has a vested interest in establishing simple and effective social boundaries that can contribute to the continued flourishing of the nation of Israel.

But this focus does leave several incredibly important, incredibly human details of this moment unexplored. We do not get to understand how this relationship between brothers grew over time and ended in murder. We do not get to know who Abel is as a living person, rather than a murder victim. We do not get to understand what it means for Cain to see a human corpse. We do not know how this impacts his knowledge of human life and his own mortality. We do not know why God asks Cain about the location of his brother. Is this referring to Abel's soul? Is this implying that Cain hid or buried the body? Either way, wouldn't God know the answer to this question? Thousands of years

after this text was composed, we as human beings remain unsettled and uncomfortable with visions of the abject, whether they are social or physical. We are still uncomfortable with the concept of our mortality and the truth that our bodies will betray us. While we may know more than Cain in this horrible, private moment, we are also stumbling in the dark.

When Cronenberg confronts similar questions – relationships that end in murder, humanity's darkest impulses, the concept of mortality, the reality of social division – he zeroes in on these messy, important, human places. Cronenberg allows his narratives to relish in ambiguity, disgust, and confusion. But of course, both of Cronenberg's abject body horror narratives end in complete ruin and social disorder. *Dead Ringers* ends with the murder-suicide of its main characters, and *Shivers* ends with the implied beginning of the apocalypse.

In my Cronenbergian Midrash, I hope to seek medium between expelling the abject for the preservation of order and absorbing the abject for the end of order. Much of my narrative will focus on the exact details Torah leaves out, such as Cain and Abel's relationship, Abel's death, and the immediate aftermath of the murder. I explore Cain's encounter with the physical abject and social abject in much more explicit terms. Similar to the Mantle twins, my Cronenbergian Cain seeks to understand what he is witnessing and process his feelings through a means that is horrible and tragically effective – dissection.

*Midrash: The Hevel Tree*

I am the ground's keeper.

That's what I've always been. When I was a boy, Ima said "Cain, I came from the dirt. The dirt does not differentiate, does see less or more, the way people do. We have to remember where we came from."

She scooped a handful of fresh, wet earth in her hands, held it up to her nose and breathed it in deep. She held it to my face too.

"Have you ever smelled something so pure? Like rain and creation. I used to smell like that all the time," she said wistfully.

From the moment I experienced that fresh earth smell I was enchanted. Ima told me everything she remembered from the time before she was in a body. We tilled the soil together. We made sure the earth had the right amount of water for that perfect smell. We helped the plants thrive.

When Ima's belly grew round she told me she was growing again, just like she did with me, just like she grew plants when she was dirt.

"What will you grow this time, Ima?" I asked, "Will it be another person? Or a tree? Or maybe a sheep?"

"Silly boy! Why would I grow a tree or a sheep? It will be another little baby, just like you. Aren't you excited to be a big brother?"

"But when you were dirt, you used to grow trees. Didn't trees grow right inside of you all the time when you were dirt?"

"Well, I suppose I did! What a smart little boy you are. We'll just have to wait and see, won't we?"

We put our hands on her belly. Ima said she felt a head, arms, and legs, like a baby. I felt strong branches and supple roots, like a tree. I closed my eyes and felt all around her belly. I wanted to know Ima's tree before she birthed it. I made a picture of Ima's tree in my mind. I would take such good care of it and it would grow the biggest, roundest, sweetest fruits. I picked a spot on the hilltop where we would plant Ima's tree. A place of honor, a high place, closer to The One.

When Ima fell to the ground and screamed with pain, I begged Aba to take her to the hilltop. I wanted to plant the tree right away, right after it came out, to make sure it was safe. Aba said no, we needed to do what Ima wanted.

There was so, so much blood. I thought Ima would be full of water and sap, clean like a tree.

"What does it look like! What does it look like!" I shouted over Ima's grunts. I was so excited to finally see my tree.

"Settle down Cain, we need to focus," Aba said calmly. Ima kept screaming. I hopped around Aba, trying to get a better view. Finally, I caught a glimpse of something fuzzy and round coming out of Ima. I thought it would come out roots first.

"Is that the tree's trunk? Or maybe it's a bulb, and we still have to plant it?" I asked Aba.

"It's a baby, Cain," Aba said, "I'm telling you, it's a head. It looks just like yours did."

I held Ima's hand. Aba didn't understand.

Ima pushed again and I saw. It was unmistakable now. The round, fuzzy thing was a head, sticking straight out of Ima. I was horrified.

"Ima, it's a baby! It's a baby!" I shouted.

Ima screamed as the tiny human body tore it's way out into Aba's hands. It had one long root hanging from the middle of its belly.

"Is that the tree, Aba? Is the baby attached to a tree?"

"No, Cain," Aba said, "You had one of these too. Just wait."

Aba pulled at the long, slimy tube. It was attached to... something? Soft, fleshy, dark like wine. At first I felt sick inside, like when I smelled sheep dung or tasted rotting figs.

"What is that?"

"We don't know, Cain. It looks kind of like the parts of the sheep that don't taste so good. After you were born, we buried yours. I'm not sure where."

Aba cut the long root. I walked up to the deep red blob. What could it be? Big, thick lines reached out from the center root, and then smaller and smaller lines off of those. Just like a tree trunk with a vast system of branches, some kind of blood and flesh tree.

Mesmerized, I picked it up carefully in my hands.

"Ima, Ima, is this your tree?" I asked excitedly.

"Don't play with that Cain. Leave Ima alone and go play," Aba said. He couldn't look away from the baby. He had tears in his eyes as he brought him up to Ima's chest.

Ima started crying too. She took the baby in and held it close. She wouldn't look at the tree I found. Ima and Aba stared at him with wide eyes and cooed. They both loved the little baby from the moment they laid eyes on him.

I sighed and picked up my flesh tree. Aba told me to leave it alone, but he was too busy with the baby to notice. I had dreamed and dreamed of my tree, if this was all I got, I would still try. I buried it on the highest point on the hilltop, and said a quite prayer to The One for my tree to grow big and strong.

As I walked back down the hillside, Ima called to me.

“Cain! Cain! Come here, love.”

Aba and Ima cradled the baby, smiling at the ugly little thing.

“Cain, dear, this is your little brother. Aba and I got to make this baby together, just like we made you. But we want you to feel just as connected to your little brother as we do.”

Ima smiled and turned to Aba.

“When The One made all the animals and plants and things, they let me name all the creations myself. That way I got to be part of the process, and the world felt like it was also mine. So we decided that you will get to name your little brother, because we want him to be created by you just like he was created by me and Ima.” Aba sounded so proud, like he was offering me some amazing gift. Aba and Ima kept smiling at me with tears in their eyes. Ima gestured for me to sit down, and handed me the little baby.

I sat there with the baby in my lap, all wrinkly and fleshy. Why was everyone so excited? A tree could make stuff, could help us in the harvest season. The baby probably couldn't do anything. It couldn't talk, it couldn't walk, I wasn't even sure it could eat. The baby made weird little sounds. Every sound made Ima and Aba so happy. I didn't know why. He didn't even say anything.

“Okay Cain, what's his name?” Aba asked excited.

I tilted my head and furrowed my brow. I watched him carefully and thought hard.

“Hevel.”

“Hevel?” Aba asked as though he had misheard me.

“Yeah, Hevel. Little pointless breathy thing. All he does is breathe. What else would I call him?”



“Well, maybe you could name him something that you hope he might become. Like strong? Or brave?” Ima had so much hope that I would change my mind.

“No, his name’s Hevel. Can you take him off my lap now so I can go play?”

Aba look dumbstruck and picked Hevel up off my lap. I ran away to the garden.

Hevel didn’t stay a little baby for long, he grew fast like a weed. He ran around the sheep with his sticky hands and loud cries. Once he got a little bigger, he wasn’t completely pointless. He learned to do things, like talk and feed the sheep. Sometimes he could even make me laugh. But he was still Hevel. We tried to teach him how to grow plants but he killed everything he touched. He couldn’t plant seeds right, he couldn’t water right, he could never tell which fruits were ready to pick.

Eventually we had to kick him out of the garden. He helped Aba with the sheep instead. He would come back every night for dinner smelling like wool and blood and sheep dung, just like Aba did. Not clean like the earth, like Ima and me. Hevel started to insist that shepherding was better than farming. He always, always thought he was better than me. But he couldn’t do what Ima and I do.

We watch the roots and fruit trees and grains sprout, take note of their growth, tend to them with the same level of care as we do the ground. We pay attention to the patterns of the seasons. We watch the plants shrivel and die and grow back again the next season. We are like The One.

I still wish I could create with my body, like Ima or the ground. I wish I could grow grains out of my arms, little trees from my shoulders. I nestle seeds in my hair and pray, but my body remains barren. So I am just the ground’s keeper, and I content myself with that.

Sometimes the sheep try to eat of our plants, so I watch them too. When they run about the fields their limbs are taught and strong like trees in their prime. Then Aba holds the sheep back and Hevel takes a sharp knife to its neck. Blood pours and pours from them, then they hang limp. It looks like their flesh would give easily like overripe fruit. Aba and Hevel smell the worst right after they cut the sheep for eating. The smell of them makes my stomach turn.

I've tried to explain to Aba and Hevel the virtue of creation and growth. Aba says "The One gave me reign over all the animals of the earth. I named them, they belong to me. I watch them like you and Ima watch the ground, and I reap them the way you and Ima harvest the wheat. We all have our roles."

I think Hevel and Aba are probably full of hot, stinky blood. They kill and eat so many animals, how could they be full of anything else. Even when they've come straight from the river, I can still smell it on them. I smell like fresh dirt, like rain and trees.

Aba and Ima eat the plants the animals, but I try to only eat the vegetables. Hevel noticed and now he tries to only eat meat. Aba and Ima call us stubborn. Sometimes they wear us down and make us eat other things. But I eat mostly plants we grow in the ground. I think it makes my body more like the earth.

I know I have a little blood around the edges. I've seen it when I prick my finger on sharp thorns. But at my core I must have water and sap inside, like a thick-trunked tree.

If I keep eating nothing but vegetables, maybe I'll get rid of all the blood.

This morning I looked about at mine and Ima's garden. I told her the fruits and grains were looking more beautiful than I had ever seen.

“Cain, you have learned so well, the plants thrive because you kept them diligently and pay respect to the ground,” Ima blessed me with her kindness, “Perhaps now is the time to show The One what you can offer as a fellow creator.”

My eyes grew wide with possibility. I wanted to show The One what a masterful creator I’ve become. Maybe The One would bless me and my fingers would sprout buds that bloom into fruits. Or my belly would grow round like Ima’s and I could birth the tree I’ve been waiting for all these years.

I picked the plumpest fruits with brightest colors, I ground the wheat into the finest flour and baked breads. I spent the whole day selecting and arranging them in a basket to offer to The One the next morning.

“Where are you going, brother? What do you have?” asked the pointless child. He had grown tall and broad like Aba. He could slaughter and butcher a sheep all by himself now.

“I’m going to offer this to The One, to seek The One’s blessing. You wouldn’t understand. You’re not a creator.”

“Haven’t you noticed how many more shekels come in for the sheep Aba and I raise from lambs, from the wool we make and the meat we butcher? You and Ima’s garden is a nice hobby, but you’re making garnish. We make the meal.”

“You don’t make anything, you destroy. The One would not respect your contribution.”

“Well, let’s see about that,” Hevel scanned his eyes over the flock, “Here, my choicest firstling.”

He grabbed it by the neck and followed me. He grunted and snorted as we walked up to the hilltop, his hot breath wreaking beside me. I don’t know what smelled worse, him or

the sheep. My fruits and breads were a thing of beauty, no dirty, smelly creature could compare.

I placed my basket on the hilltop, stepped back, and bowed before it. I pushed my nose into the dirt and breathed in that holy scent. I heard a muffled yelp, followed by a gush. The sweet smell of dirt was overwhelmed by that foul odor. Hot, wet, and sticky. No, not just the smell. Something viscous bubbled into my nostrils. I open my eyes to red. Blood spilled all over the hilltop, gushed like a river out of the sheep's neck, splattered on my offering, streaked on my brother. His eyes were filled with glee, the sheep's eyes were empty and soft like grapes rotting off the vine. Its neck coursed, straining to pump blood, only to empty it into the ground. The dirt soaked the blood in, a willing host. Hevel dropped the sheep with a sickly thud next to my once beautiful basket, now stained with filth from the sheep.

"Now we wait," Hevel said smugly, and sat down beside me.

A break in the clouds shone light upon the foul, limp creature, glistening in the deep red droplets and its still open glassy eyes. The light spread out to my filthy brother, that sweaty, bloody, pointless creature.

"Well done, my son," boomed a voice from above, "I appreciate your offering. Keep up the good work."

The light expanded into a blinding glow and disappeared. The sheep was gone. The blood that had been steadily trickling down the hillside absorbed into the ground. My basket remained, still stained with the sheep's blood. Little red droplets stuck to the skin of my fruits, sparkling in the sunlight.

Hevel raised his eyebrows at me and smiled. He started laughing. I couldn't stand the sound. I couldn't stand that Hevel might be right.

"Be quiet Hevel, give it a minute. The One just needs to come back for mine, they probably wanted to get rid of yours because it smelled so bad."

Hevel kept laughing. "Oh, yeah, that sounds right. No chance The One was more interested in my sacrifice, it's a timing thing. I'll wait with you until they come back."

"Good, I'm glad you'll be here when The One tells me my gift is better than yours," I tried to put some force behind my words. I tried to make myself believe them.

Hevel and I sat there and waited. We waited until the sun began to lower in the sky. I wanted to cry and scream, but I didn't want to give Hevel the satisfaction. When I couldn't hold back any more, I yelled.

"What about me, The One? What about my offering?"

I heard nothing. Hevel stared smugly.

"I grew these myself, I grew them for you!" I grabbed a fig and hurled it at the sky. It arced into the air and plopped softly back down on the earth. The droplets of blood had dried into tiny brown spots on my fruits and vegetables.

I fell to my knees, baffled "What is wrong with my offering?" I said to myself, in shock.

"Ah, that's the problem, isn't it Cain? You've spent so much time learning from Ima, you've missed Aba's wisdom," Hevel stated plainly, "You were so ready to believe I was worthless, that blood is dirty, I should have been a tree. But blood is life, Cain, blood is life. Blood is what The One values above all else."

"Why would The One want you to destroy what The One created? Why wouldn't The One want us to create?"

“The One values what we’re willing to forego for ourselves. I sacrificed the lifeblood of this sheep. What sacrifice do you give with your little fruits? Where’s the blood, Cain?”

I knew where the blood was.

Without thinking, I jumped on Hevel. I pushed my hand into his face, his scream muffled by palm. He desperately tried to bite and lick my hand, anything to get me off. I pulled the butchering knife from his hand, caked with dry, brown blood. I sliced across his throat.

A single stream of blood shot straight out into the sky like it was running into the heavens. The rest poured out of his neck like a waterfall. The blood kept pouring heavily, the stream shot shorter and shorter. Hevel gulped and gulped, desperately trying to take in air.

The blood pooled at the base of my basket and over the hillside. Hevel had even more blood than the sheep. I knew it, I knew he would be full of blood. Flies began to swarm at the mess, the blood-soaked loaves of bread, streaked and splattered fruit skin, the red river flowing down the hillside. I waited for the light to envelop us, for The One to honor my sacrifice.

Hevel gurgled and grunted, until he was silent.

No light. No voice. No appearance from The One.

“Hevel?”

Hevel’s face looked different. Grape soft eyes, rotting branch limbs.

“Hevel?”

I’ve never touched a sheep after Aba and Hevel let the neck bleed. I knew they chopped up their bodies and cooked them. But where does the sheep go? The sheep, that wakes

up in the morning and blinks and decides whether it's going to munch on grass or chase another sheep or break into me and Ima's garden. Does it fall out with the blood? Or stay in the bones? Or does it feel each chunk of flesh get ripped apart, stewed and eaten? How many sheep might have lived in Hevel's belly...

"Hevel."

It wasn't a question anymore. I slapped his face. No response. Something about his skin looked different. The color, maybe the shine... Was the light finally coming for him? I looked up, no light.

I grabbed his arm and pulled.

"Hevel, Hevel."

I dropped his arm and it fell limp. A sickly thud, just like the dead sheep.

What do I do, what do I do, what do I do, I can't bring him home like this, all limp and quiet and wrong. Hevel without Hevel. Ima and Aba can't see him like this.

When a plant rots it grows new plants. The plant falls apart into the ground and the seed takes hold and grows there, the plant comes back. The truth of the plant, the continuity of the plant is in the seed. That's where the sheep must go, they must have sheep seeds. That was how I could fix Hevel. I had to find the seeds. Where were the seeds? When we plant the wheat, we take wheatberries from the fluffy spikes at the top of the stalk. I root around in Hevel's curls, looking for... something. They're sticky and matted with blood, but no Hevelberries. Hevel must not grow like wheat. Grapes, olives, figs, pomegranates, the seeds are deep inside, protected by the flesh.

I pushed my fingers into the slit in his throat and feel around. A little more blood trickled out. It was soft inside his neck, it gave way easily to my fingers. I thought I would have

to use more force to push my way in. Hevel's neck was soft when he was a baby, but as he grew into a man it became solid, thick. All the blood must have made his neck look solid. The blood was gone now, he was baby soft again.

There was a hard, wet tube in the middle of his open neck. I didn't find anything solid, round, and small, like a seed. In figs and pomegranates, you can find seeds almost anywhere below the surface. Olives and grapes are more specific. Only in the middle. I pulled my hand out of his neck. Something about the new shape of the wound, the shine of blood on my hand, made me lurch as if I've eaten something bad. But I had to find Hevel's seeds.

I take off his clothes.

Where was Hevel's center? What part of his body was the core of him? Where did he keep his seeds?

Probably somewhere in his chest or his belly, safe and protected from the outside.

His chest was hard, too hard to cut. So I chose his belly. I pulled his skin as taut as I could, despite the blood and the sickly sheen, and begin to cut. I told myself I was cutting something else, a grapevine, a big, weird vegetable. Once the smell hit, I couldn't pretend anymore.

I was overtaken by the wretched scent. It was like the smell he and Aba always had but worse, like I had opened up the core of it. I dropped the blade and turned before I got sick into Hevel's open belly. It felt like something inside me was clawing its way out of my neck to run from the smell. Once I let it out, the smell was even worse. The smell of Hevel, of the blood, of my sick on the side of the hill comingled and made my eyes water.



What can I do, what can I do. I grabbed a fig from the basket and shoved my nose directly in the center. There was no body, no blood, no sick, only the sweet, sticky fig smell. I pulled jagged chunks of fig flesh and shoved them into my nostrils. I breathed through my mouth, the grip of the putrid smell left me.

I looked back down at Hevel, naked and bloody. His soft belly hung open.

Aba used to tickle Hevel's belly when he was a baby. It used to puff out when he'd eaten too much stewed meat or drank too much beer. It would contract when he laughed. I pretended again that I wasn't cutting Hevel. This is the inside of some strange plant, or a pit of mud. I pushed my hand inside.

A little more blood eked out. It was slimy like the inside of a fig, but smooth. Wet, slimy sacks of different sizes and shapes. I still didn't feel any pits, or seeds. As I move my hand around the sacks shift. They could be seed pods, like peas. I squeeze them, no lumps.

I wondered, "Is this what I feel like inside?"

That lurch rose inside me again, but there was nothing more for me to throw up. My mouth filled with a hot, vile liquid. I spit it out next to Hevel's body. I pulled my hand out of the core.

Out of Hevel's belly.

For the first time, I look at what I've done, really look. That breathy creature isn't breathing any more. He is lying limp on a hillside covered in his blood, I sliced open his neck and his belly and felt around inside him. Inside him.

I put my hands inside the belly that Aba tickled, that moved with Hevel's laughter, and looked round, full, and ripe after a meal of beer and stew. Will he do those things again?

I didn't used to like looking at him very much. I tried to convince myself he only looked like Aba, not like Ima, not like me. We had to look different because we were different inside, he kept sheep and I kept the ground. He destroyed and I created.

But we were alike after all, weren't we? Just like Aba said. I look at those eyes, Ima's eyes, the very same as my eyes. Rotting-grape soft, no focus, no movement, empty.

I reach my fingers down and gently push on the side of one eye. The resistance gives and the eye pops out, a perfect orb. Pink, bloody roots descend from the orb back into Hevel's face, just like the flesh tree. I pop out the other orb and sever their ties, like Aba did with Hevel's flesh tree. These must be him, these must be his seeds. I couldn't know for sure, but this would have to do.

I picked up my basket, soaked through with Hevel's blood. I dug a hole in the ground in its place, and I buried Hevel's eyes there. I wondered if this had been the spot I had buried Hevel's flesh tree, all those years ago. The excess blood saturated the ground as I covered the eyes back over with dirt.

"Where is your brother?"

The voice boomed from the sky. No light, no glow, but it was unmistakably the voice of The One. This was what I had been seeking all along and my heart fell with sorrow. All The One had to say was the question I had been asking myself all along.

Where was Hevel? Was he in the body beside me, ripped open and bloody? Was he in the ground where I buried his blood and his eyes? Was I supposed to know how to do this?

"I don't know," I answered back.

My words hung heavy in the air. The One did not respond. I sat next to Hevel's body.

His eyelids hung eerily open with nothing behind them. Just empty red holes. My carvings at his neck and stomach looked jagged and messy, not like the clean, precise lines that Aba and Hevel cut when they butcher sheep. I couldn't even give Hevel the dignity he gave to animals.

A fly landed in Hevel's open eye socket. I swatted it away. More and more flies began to appear. I stayed guard. I wouldn't let them have him, no, not my brother. I wrapped my arms under Hevel's shoulders. His skin felt cold and clammy. I pulled him up across my lap so I could get to the flies faster.

Ima taught me to keep the ground because it cannot keep itself. The plants, the earth, they can provide us with so much. But they need our protection, our guidance, our help. Otherwise they'll just take whatever comes to them. Whatever seeds happen to fall there, whatever rain soaks the soil, they will receive.

Is that how Hevel would be now? I imagined Hevel laying weak and open like this forever. I felt like I was falling and falling, even though I was sitting still. All my life, I had looked after the ground with reverence, honor, and respect. I believed my work was sacred, that the ground deserved all the attention and presence I had to give.

And yet the fruits and vegetables I gave meant nothing to The One. Just like Hevel said they would, they didn't care about my offering until I offered blood.

I have been the ground's keeper, but was that what I was meant for? Did The One create me to do this all along?

"Am I my brother's keeper?" I sobbed, my tears fell from my eyes on to Hevel's grayish cheeks. I wished they would tell me. I would rather know the truth.

“What have you done? Your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground!” The One’s voice boomed from the sky “Therefore, you shall be more cursed than the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand.”

I listened closely, hoping to hear Hevel’s blood. If he could still cry out to The One, why couldn’t he say something to me? In my head, I begged and pleaded for Hevel’s blood to cry out to me too. All I could manage were heavy sobs. The One continued.

“If you till the soil, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. You shall become a ceaseless wanderer on earth.”

I thought that Hevel was useless and I was meant to do something great. I thought I could create from the ground, that I was like The One. Now I’ve lost my brother, cursed the soil with his blood. The ground I kept will no longer keep me.

I think I kept speaking. I think I said my punishment was too great to bear, I think I worried that someone would kill me. I don’t remember. The feeling had already begun, something stirred inside me, in my belly and my neck. I started coughing and coughing, something inside me desperately wanted to claw its way out. I tried to vomit but nothing came up.

My flesh burned on my neck. I fell to the ground. I touched the part of me that burned, there was no fire, no creature biting me, just a raised, uneven ridge of skin. The touch of my fingers brought searing pain. I screamed and writhed until the sensation stopped. Once I finally caught my breath, I dared to explore my body with my fingers once again. I winced, but it was tolerable. I found the ridge again, a messy, but somehow familiar shape. The ridge was only the start: it had three slightly smaller ridges branching up

across my face and neck, and each of those ridges had smaller ridges and smaller ridges branching off of that.

The One's voice came through again, this time in a whisper "I promise, if anyone kills Cain, sevenfold vengeance shall be exacted."

Hevel never came back. The Hevel tree never grew. The soil never yielded to me again.

Aba and Ima couldn't look at me the same way anymore, so I left my home. Our home. I became a ceaseless wanderer, just like The One said.

I used to grow things, so many things, from the ground. I used to wish that I could grow with my body instead. Now I would give anything, to uncreate what my flesh has made.

#### IV. Lot's Wife

וַיְהִי כְהוֹצִיאֵם אֹתָם הַחוּצָה וַיֹּאמֶר הַמַּלְט עַל-נַפְשְׁךָ אֶל-תְּבִיט אַחֲרֶיךָ וְאַל-תַּעֲמֹד

בְּכָל-הַכְּנָר הַהִרָה הַמַּלְט פֶּן-תִּסָּפֶה:...

וַתֵּבֶט אִשְׁתּוֹ מֵאַחֲרָיו וַתְּהִי נְצִיב מֶלַח:

When they had brought them outside, one said, "Flee for your life! Do not look behind you, nor stop anywhere in the Plain; flee to the hills, lest you be swept away"... Lot's wife looked back, and she thereupon turned into a pillar of salt.

*Genesis 19:17, 26*<sup>67</sup>

"Long Live the New Flesh."

- *David Cronenberg, "Videodrome"*

The Torah gives us precious little information about this haunting and visceral scene. Lot's wife, who remains unnamed in Torah, is mentioned a total of three times, in Genesis 19:15, 16, and 26, and then never again. She is taken outside her home with her husband and daughters, she is instructed not to look back, chooses to look back, and she is lost to her family in one of the most tragic and baffling bodily transformations in Torah.

Despite occupying only three verses in our sacred text, Lot's wife seems to have made a lasting impression on our collective imaginations. Her story is elaborated on in Rabbinic texts. She is even given a name by our sages, though there is debate as to

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<sup>67</sup> Genesis 19:17, 26. *The Contemporary Torah*, JPS, 2006.

whether that name is meant to be Idit or Irit.<sup>68</sup> In the past century, she has become a subject of poetic fascination. Anda Pinkerfeld Amir,<sup>69</sup> Galit Hazan Rokem<sup>70</sup>, Estelle Gershgoren Novak<sup>71</sup>, Anna Akhamatova<sup>72</sup>, and Angela Bickham<sup>73</sup> have all penned poems named for Lot's wife. These works are either written in first person from Lot's wife's perspective or third person omniscient focusing on her journey, to contrast the lack of attention she receives in Torah. The poets use our lack of information about her, especially her namelessness, to reflect the reality of women civilians impacted by war and violence in their communities. Just like Lot's wife, these women became silenced, nameless, and known only for the worst things that have happened to them, rather than their own character.

In Genesis, the story of Lot's wife ends with her transformation into a pillar of salt. There is nothing left to tell; strange and horrific as it is, it is a death like any other. However, there are a couple rabbinic texts that seem to trouble this notion that Lot's wife simply died. As taught in Niddah 70b, “אֲשֶׁתוֹ שָׁל לוֹט מְהוּ שְׁתֵּטְמָא אֲמַר לֵהֶם מֵת מְטָמֵא / What of Lot's wife, [does] she transmit ritual impurity [as corpse would, although she became a pillar of salt? Rabbi Yehoshua] said to them: a corpse transmits ritual impurity, a pillar of salt does not.”<sup>74</sup> This case is compared to the

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<sup>68</sup> Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 25:11. *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, trans. Rabbi Gerald Friedlander, London, 1916. [https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei\\_DeRabbi\\_Eliezer.25.11?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_DeRabbi_Eliezer.25.11?lang=bi); Rabbeinu Bahya, Bereshit 19:17:1-4. *Torah Commentary by Rabbi Bachya ben Asher*, trans. Eliyahu Munk, 1998. [https://www.sefaria.org/Rabbeinu\\_Bahya%2C\\_Bereshit.19.17?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Rabbeinu_Bahya%2C_Bereshit.19.17?lang=bi); Ramban Bereshit 19:17. *Commentary on the Torah by Ramban (Nachmanides)* trans. Charles B. Chavel. New York, Shilo Pub. House, 1971-1976. [https://www.sefaria.org/Ramban\\_on\\_Genesis.19.17?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Ramban_on_Genesis.19.17?lang=bi).

<sup>69</sup> Pinkerfeld Amir, Anda. “Eshet Lot,” *Gadish: Shirim* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1949), pp. 17-23

<sup>70</sup> Rokem, Galit Hazan. “Kemo Eshet Lot,” *Eshet Lot* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1989), p. 13.

<sup>71</sup> Novak, Estelle Gershgoren. “Lot's Wife.” *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, no. 6 (2003): 182–182. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40316743>.

<sup>72</sup> Akhamatova, Anna. “Lot's Wife.” *Poets.org*, March 20, 2017. <https://poets.org/poem/lots-wife>.

<sup>73</sup> Bickham, Angela A. “Lot's Wife.” *Obsidian* 10/11 (2009): 163–64. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44489120>.

<sup>74</sup> Niddah 70b:6

resurrected son of the Shunnamite woman in II Kings 4:33-36; his body, as a body that was once dead and has resumed living, does not transmit impurity as a corpse would.<sup>75</sup>

The other midrashic moment that seems to point to greater possibility for Lot's wife comes to us in Berakhot 54a: "אמרי: יאניסא דרבים – כולי עלמא מיחייבי לברוכי" [The Sages] say: with regards to a miracle [performed for] the multitudes, everyone is required to say a blessing." Immediately after, a list of places where historic miracles is included for reference as to where this collective blessing is required. Among these events are the crossing of the Sea of Reeds, the Jordan, and the Arnon, the rock that King Og intended to throw at the nation of Israel, the rock where Moses sat during the war against the Amalekites, the Walls of Jericho, and of course, the pillar of salt that was once Lot's wife.<sup>76</sup>

With the exception of Lot's wife, all of these events clearly point to a moment of victory or freedom for the nation of Israel. Certainly this moment is miraculous – transformation into a pillar of salt is not a thing the human body generally does. But what does it mean to say that it was a miracle *for the multitudes*? Was the miracle her loss of personhood, meaning that Lot's wife's crime of looking back upon Sodom and Gomorrah so repugnant we continue to feel blessed her journey with her family did not continue? Or does the miracle inhere in her metamorphosis? Are we, as a collective, somehow blessed by her transformation and enduring presence in this transformed state, a kind of geological witness to the miracle?

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<sup>75</sup> Niddah 70b:7. *The William Davidson Digital Edition of the Koren Noé Talmud*, trans. Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. <https://www.sefaria.org/Niddah.70b?lang=bi>.

<sup>76</sup> Berakhot 54a:13. *The William Davidson Digital Edition of the Koren Noé Talmud*, trans. Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. <https://www.sefaria.org/Berakhot.54a.13?lang=bi>.



If Lot's wife had come to life through Cronenberg's lens rather than the pages of Torah, her transformation would not have been the end of her story, it would be the beginning. In fact, two of his most famous films, *Videodrome* (1982) and *Crash* (1996), follow the journey of a protagonist in their transformation as they descend into a Sodom and Gomorrah-like world of sex and violence. In this chapter, I will analyze Cronenberg's approach to horrific bodily transformation. After explicating the Cronenbergian approach, I will return to Lot's wife and give her the same treatment. By exploring the midrashic texts that elaborate her story as well as the greater cultural and lexical context of what it means to be a pillar of salt, I aim to create a more realized vision of what it meant for Lot's wife to inhabit her own "new flesh."

i. The Body as Technology

Though *Crash* and *Videodrome* are not similar films in terms of viewing experience, their plots unfold in similar arcs. Both films focus on the journey of a single main character: Max Renn, the president of a Toronto television station in *Videodrome*, and James Ballard,<sup>77</sup> a film producer in *Crash*. Both characters have found themselves bored or underwhelmed with the lives they are leading, until a chance encounter with an attractive woman begins to pull them into a new and exciting underground subculture. This world, though enticing, has a markedly dark side, and each of them are steadily pulled into this darkness at the cost of the lives (and bodies) they had before.

The other critical similarity between these two films is their attitude toward their protagonists. Max and James are both treated with an unflinching, unsettling attitude of neutrality. As both characters descend into immoral territory in pursuit of their desires,

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<sup>77</sup> This character is named for J.G. Ballard, the author of the novel of the same name *Crash* is based on.

the viewer is kept close to their point of view. There is no moral voice of reason condemning their actions for the comfort of the audience. As viewers, we are forced to sit with the grotesque, abject feeling of coming to know a reality that has been warped by overwhelming desire.

In *Videodrome*, Max Renn (James Woods) is underwhelmed by his life at work. He specializes in creating sensationalist programming to expand the bounds of what television can be and to attract new viewers. He seems especially drawn toward uncensored content that would not ordinarily be aired on cable television. In an early scene of the film, Max is shown on a talk show and asked to defend his programmatic choices:

*Host:* Your television station offers its viewers everything from soft-core pornography to hard-core violence. Why?

*Max:* Well, it's a matter of economics... In order to survive we have to give people something they can't get anywhere else. And we do that.

*Host:* But don't you feel such shows contribute to a social climate of violence and sexual malaise? And do you care?

*Max:* Certainly I care. I care enough, in fact, to give my viewers a harmless outlet for their fantasies and their frustrations. As far as I'm concerned, that's a socially positive act.<sup>78</sup>

After this interview, he is introduced to a radical new program called *Videodrome*, a plotless broadcast of extreme sexual violence. Max quickly finds that *Videodrome* has not only changed his life and his tastes, it has changed his reality. He frequently

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<sup>78</sup> Cronenberg, David, director. *Videodrome*. Alliance Communications, 1983. 9:58-10:36

hallucinates that he is committing acts of violence against those around him or behaving in sexually aggressive ways. His hallucinations also begin to blur the lines of his physical body: his abdomen opens up into a sexually suggestive slit in which he is able to hide a handgun, and at one point he kisses a television screen and finds himself physically sucked in.

Max eventually discovers that *Videodrome* is actually a movement against the kind of violent and sexual content he claimed was a “socially positive act.” The program itself is a weapon, infecting its viewers with hallucinations (just like those Max is experiencing) that lead to their deaths. Max kills the creators of *Videodrome* using his stomach handgun, but becomes convinced that the only way to defeat *Videodrome* entirely is to transition into an existence solely on screen. Max declares this film’s most famous line, “Long live the new flesh,” as he pulls the trigger on himself and abandons his physical body.

Though *Crash*’s James Ballard (James Spader) also works in film, his primary frustrations take place in his personal life rather than his professional life. He and his wife, Catherine (Deborah Kara Unger), have decided to open their marriage in order to re-invigorate their sex life. However, James still finds himself uninspired by his exploits, both within and outside of his marriage. After expressing his disappointment with his latest encounter, his wife halfheartedly encourages him to continue seeking what he looks for, saying “maybe the next one.”<sup>79</sup>

He finds the novelty he seeks in an extremely unexpected moment. On his drive home from work, James gets into a head on collision with another vehicle. His leg is

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<sup>79</sup> Cronenberg, David. “Crash: Based on the Novel by JG Ballard, Shooting Draft.” The Internet Movie Script Database. Accessed March 4, 2024. <https://imsdb.com/scripts/Crash.html>.

shattered from the impact of the crash, he looks up to find two passengers in the other car: a man, who has died, and a woman, who seductively looks toward him and exposes her breast. James is taken to the hospital, where his shattered leg is reconstructed with a metal brace. While he is in the hospital, he begins an affair with the women in the other car, Helen (Holly Hunter), fueled primarily by their shared memories of the crash.

Helen introduces James to an underground scene of people aroused by car crashes, led by a man named Vaughn (Elias Koteas). Vaughn photographs and fetishizes the injuries created by these car crashes, including braces, scars, deformed body parts, and prosthetics. He also stages re-enactments of famous car crashes, specifically those that took the lives of Hollywood stars (James Dean, Jayne Mansfield, etc.), for the purpose of sexual arousal by both the participants and an audience. James engages in all kinds of experimental sex acts involving crash-transformed bodies like his own, regardless of their gender. He eventually pulls Catherine into this scene and convinces her to participate in staged crashes with him. The film ends with the two of them, hurled from their vehicle after a particularly violent crash, injured but apparently still alive. Catherine looks to James with disappointment, and he says “maybe the next one,” implying that the ultimate aim of their fetish is death.

Both *Videodrome* and *Crash* are, at their core, cautionary tales of insatiability. Max and James are in an endless quest for more of their desired stimulation. They have no concern about the consequences or cost, and seemingly no awareness that no matter how far they go, they are still left wanting. Though both of these characters

represent a far extreme in terms of their obsession, their desires and transformations are both grounded in real-world experience.

Max's particularly brand of excess and insatiability is made clear from the start of the film. Many people choose to partake in television and film that has violent and sexual content that others would find despicable. When *Videodrome* was made in 1983, screen depiction of violence and sexuality had already been a concern for many years. Over four decades later, we still see this culture of concern about the effects of violence on screen. Regardless of the hard facts, movies, television, and video games continue to be blamed for acts of violence and sexual violence in the real world.<sup>80</sup>

Logistically, before the dawn of streaming, film was easier to regulate based on age. One can limit the ability of a minor to buy videotape or enter a movie theatre. However, television existed in the home. The only protection offered to aid families who wanted to shield their children from content they deemed inappropriate was to air those programs later at night, which, while somewhat helpful, was not a perfect fix. The inspiration for the film itself actually came from Cronenberg's own childhood, recalling that he would stay up late as a child in Toronto to pick up television signals from Buffalo and watch racier American late-night programs.<sup>81</sup>

William C. Wees of McGill University argues in his analysis of *Videodrome*, that "Cronenberg gives literal expression to the psychological basis of cinematic realism... Cinema re-presents objects, spaces and events that existed earlier in front of the camera. Physically, cinema's images are grounded in pro-filmic reality, and

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<sup>80</sup> Sternheimer, Karen. "Do Video Games Kill?" Contexts 6, no. 1 (2007): 13–17.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41802732>.

<sup>81</sup> Cronenberg, David. "Director's Commentary," *Videodrome*, Criterion Collection DVD. August 24, 2004.

psychologically, the viewer is expected to respond to the images as if they were reality.”<sup>82</sup> When Max watches more violence and sex in *Videodrome*, his reality (albeit, through hallucination) literally becomes more sexual and violent. *Videodrome* creates an opening in the center of his body, a portal in which Max is able to physically take in and fuse with, of all objects, a videotape and a gun.

In a world where people have concerns, realistic or not, that television viewers will recreate the violent or sexual things they see enacted on screen, or will react to people they see in real life based on impressions they have received from television, television wields an immense amount of power. *Videodrome* takes that concept and turns it into a body-horror-inspired metaphor – television not only literally changes the reality of viewers, it alters their physical bodies. They become more receptive to representatives of ideas (videotapes) and violence (guns). Their actions are not their own, but those scripted for them by people who television-based weapons, meant to physically infect and carry out their own political goals.

There is no denying that the invention of automobiles has radically changed the world we live in. In some ways, cars are a representation of the insatiable appetite for stimulation at the core of both *Videodrome* and *Crash*: they allow humans to travel at inhumanly fast speeds, do and see more than they ordinarily would in a single day, and as demonstrated by the many crashes in this film, have an immense power of destruction at their fingertips or foot-pedal. As explained by Gordon M. Sayre of University of Oregon in his work on the humanity of cars, car itself represents a sort of

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<sup>82</sup> Wees, William C. “From the Rearview Mirror to Twenty Minutes Into the Future: The Video Image in ‘Videdrome’ and ‘Max Headroom.’” *Revue Canadienne d’Études Cinématographiques / Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 1, no. 1 (1990): 29–35. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43611348>. 32.

body horror: “Humans may believe cars to be objects, machines, tools, or technologies, but they often function more like living organisms, whether prosthetic extensions of human bodies or monstrous distortions of the human form.”<sup>83</sup> There is a good reason why films like *The Car* (1977), *Christine* (1983), *Maximum Overdrive* (1986), and *Death Proof* (2007) cast cars as the primary modality of their villains. Cars grant their drivers a whole host of superhuman abilities every time they put the key in the ignition.

But of course, in reality, driving a car does not often feel like tapping into limitless potential. *Crash* emphasizes this by repeatedly panning outside the window of James and Catherine’s apartment to a massive highway packed with barely moving cars. When we are spending hours sitting in bumper-to-bumper traffic, waiting at endless stoplights, or pouring money into maintenance, our relationships to our cars can feel more draining and mundane than exciting or powerful. With the ease of travel that widespread access to cars provide, we become dependent on them to access work, healthcare, and our other needs. We spend more and more time in transit, frequently alone, guarded from the people around us by walls of metal and glass.

Vaughn’s underground scene of car crash fetishists find a way to re-emphasize the power of the car. In seeking the adrenaline-pumping feelings of speed and loss of control, and they pay the price through the destruction of their own bodies. But instead of mourning this loss or physical modification, they embrace, celebrate, and eroticize the car’s potential for destruction. To them, it is not destruction at all, but the creation of new opportunities: new appendages, new orifices, new erogenous zones. They prioritize novelty, excitement, and stimulation over predictability and safety. In this

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<sup>83</sup> Sayre, Gordon M. “The Humanity of the Car: Automobility, Agency, and Autonomy.” *Cultural Critique* 107 (2020): 122–47. <https://doi.org/10.5749/culturalcritique.107.2020.0122>. P123.

underground culture, sitting in traffic for an hour twice a day to spend eight hours sitting behind a desk, never experiencing the true potential of what the car and the human can do, would be the real tragedy.

The impact these choices have on the body is not only tolerated, but celebrated and revered. Cult member Gabrielle (Rosanna Arquette) wears a chest brace that mixes elements of medical gear, fetish wear, and car interior: while this brace appears to support her broken body, it is made from black leather and silver metal, rivets attaching the shoulder strap to the bodice, a seatbelt-like feature over her abdomen, and a cut-out section over her breast. James' bodily transformation takes the form of a leg brace. The brace is made of metallic silver pins that extend out past James's leg at the knee. While external metal pins are a far more common feature in early 20<sup>th</sup> century leg braces, James' brace is nothing if not modern – resembling something closer to the pistons in a car's engine than a treatment for polio.

The pins frame James' leg like garters on a pinup girl, and Cronenberg's camera pans over James' body as if that were so. As *Crash*'s intention is to fuse the physical body with technology, James' transformation takes place in the very part of his body that the car augments: his leg. Reckless use of his vehicle has caused him to compromise his own natural ability to move himself. Consequently, he is even more dependent on his car. His body is becoming physically less useful in the world he once occupied and exclusively suited toward appreciation in Vaughn's crash fetish subculture.

His tastes have changed from that of a straight man to someone who is aroused by car crashes and all things that evoke car crashes. The gender of his partners, his own role of dominance or submission, or even the achievement of orgasm, are no



longer the focus of his sex life. The throughline of his sex acts is his fetish: he tattoos himself with a car insignia as foreplay, he has sex inside cars, with people injured by cars, and most importantly, after watching or participating in a car crash. “As Cronenberg makes explicit, the car crash is to the traditional road movie what the sex scene is to the classical romantic comedy—the unspoken culmination, the hidden act toward which all others tend, the secret, implicit, concealed finale.”<sup>84</sup> The car crash subsumes the role of orgasm in its complete immersive state, allowing the body and technology to at long last, come together.

Both of Cronenberg’s transformed protagonists enter a transformative state, because they were unhappy with their lives and dared to desire an alternative that exceeds the socially acceptable or safe. Their bodily modification manifests as a response to their desires and ultimately removes them from the life they lived before. And in some way, each of their modifications represented what they needed to do to leave the mundane. Max Renn’s open stomach cavity reflects his new state of acceptance and permeability toward ideas about sexuality and violence. Likewise, James’ shattered leg and brace represent his preference for his newfound home in crash fetish subculture, allowing him to be objectified by his new sexual partners and incorporate technology as a part of his physical form.

## ii. Why Did She Look Back?

The key to understanding a transformed Cronenbergian protagonist lies in understanding their desire. Inappropriate desire leads the protagonist toward the act of transformation and allows them to see this new state of existence as one that is livable,

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<sup>84</sup> Brottman, Mikita, and Christopher Sharrett. “The End of the Road David Cronenberg’s ‘Crash’ and the Fading of the West.” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2002): 126–32. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43797082>. P127.

or potentially preferable, to their previous state. From that place of understanding, we must look to the transformation itself. What does the transformed body tell us about the protagonist's wants and needs? What does it tell us about our own fears and discomfort around the protagonist's desires? all these questions with respect to the the protagonist's desires need to be approached, in the Cronenbergian context, with no sense of judgment or moral prescription.

What leads Lot's wife to transform is her desire to look back upon the destruction of Sodom. In the traditional reading of this text, that choice constitutes at best, a miscalculation and at worst, an act of insubordination, as it defies the directive of the angels sent to save Lot and his family.<sup>85</sup> But if we approach Lot's wife as a Cronenbergian protagonist, we must assume that looking back is of the utmost importance to her. Looking to the text, there is ample evidence that Lot and his family have no desire to leave Sodom. The agents inform Lot of the city's impending doom twice (Genesis 19:13, 15) and then physically "seize the hand[s]" of Lot, his wife, and his two unmarried daughters to pull them out of Sodom (19:16). Even at this point, Lot bargains with the angels so that he and his family can at least take refuge in a town nearby, rather than flee the area entirely (19:19-20).

We do not know much of Lot's wife's backstory, but it seems likely that Sodom is her place of origin. When Lot is first introduced as Abram's nephew and travelling companion in Genesis 11 and 12, he is not described as having a wife or family. When

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<sup>85</sup> Rashi on Genesis 19:26:2. *Pentateuch with Rashi's Commentary* trans. M. Rosenbaum and A.M. Silbermann, 1929-1934. [https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi\\_on\\_Genesis.19.26?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Genesis.19.26?lang=bi); Ibn Ezra on Genesis 19:17:2. *Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch*, tran. and annot. by H. Norman Strickman and Arthur M. Silver. Menorah Pub., 1988-2004. [https://www.sefaria.org/Ibn\\_Ezra\\_on\\_Genesis.19.17?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Ibn_Ezra_on_Genesis.19.17?lang=bi).

Abram takes off on his journey, it is said that “Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot, and all the wealth that they had amassed.”<sup>86</sup> If Lot had a wife previously, it does not appear that she left Haran with them. Lot leaves Abram to settle in Sodom, and when we pick up with Lot’s story in Genesis 19, he is still living in Sodom, now married with children.

Despite the fact that Lot and his family are chosen to be saved, we have ample evidence that this is not due to any good qualities on their part. When Lot chooses to live in Sodom, the text states plainly that “the people of Sodom were wicked sinners against God.”<sup>87</sup> In his commentary on this verse, Rashi elaborates, “and yet Lot did not refrain from living with them. Our Rabbis learned from here how the text (Proverbs 10:11) “and the name of the wicked shall rot” should be applied.”<sup>88</sup> Rashi continues in his commentary on Genesis 19, stating “You [Lot] sinned with them [Sodom and Gomorrah] but art saved through the merit of Abraham.”<sup>89</sup> It is perhaps telling that in Genesis 18, when Abram attempts to bargain with God to save Sodom and Gomorrah, he asks if God will spare the city if he can find a certain number of innocent people— he never offers up Lot and his family as among those who are innocent.

So from what we can gather, Lot’s wife was likely born and raised in Sodom. Culturally, she lived like anyone else in Sodom. She does not jump at the chance to leave this wicked place when the agents told her family the city would be destroyed.

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<sup>86</sup> Genesis 12:5. *The Contemporary Torah*, JPS, 2006. Accessed on Sefaria.org.

<sup>87</sup> Genesis 13:13. *The Contemporary Torah*, JPS, 2006. Accessed on Sefaria.org.

<sup>88</sup> Rashi on Genesis 13:13:1. *Pentateuch with Rashi's Commentary* trans. M. Rosenbaum and A.M. Silbermann, 1929-1934. [https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi\\_on\\_Genesis.13.13?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Genesis.13.13?lang=bi).

<sup>89</sup> Rashi on Genesis 19:17:1. *Pentateuch with Rashi's Commentary* trans. M. Rosenbaum and A.M. Silbermann, 1929-1934. [https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi\\_on\\_Genesis.19.17.2?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Genesis.19.17.2?lang=bi).

And when she is commanded not to look back upon their departure, she defies the command and looks back. There is an argument to be made that from her point of view, she was leaving her lifetime home. Whatever tendency toward wickedness existed in Sodom may well have been the only kind of society she has ever known.

To understand the appeal of what Sodom had to offer, we will have to be a little more specific than “wicked.” Though historically, there has been an association between the wickedness of Sodom with queerness or sexual immorality, this is based on an interpretation of one phrase in Genesis 19:5, “bring them out so that we may know them.”<sup>90</sup> However, this interpretation has been debated by modern scholars.<sup>91</sup> Given that God had already determined that Sodom and Gomorrah would be destroyed by the time this line occurs, and there are other less ambiguous descriptions of life in Sodom and Gomorrah, I will give preference to those other texts in my interpretation.

Sodom and Gomorrah are frequently referred to in Torah as an example of a place that has sinned and been punished by God, either as a warning to others who sin or an example of God’s power.<sup>92</sup> We see fewer examples of specific sins, but they do occur. Jeremiah 23:14 associates Sodom and Gomorrah with “adultery and false dealing.” Ezekiel 16:49-50 gives very explicit detail: “Only this was the sin of your sister Sodom: arrogance! She and her daughters had plenty of bread and untroubled tranquility; yet she did not support the poor and the needy. In their haughtiness, they committed abomination before Me; and so [God] removed them.” Pirkei Avot 5:10

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<sup>90</sup> Genesis 19:5. *The Contemporary Torah*, JPS, 2006. Accessed on Sefaria.org.

<sup>91</sup> MacDonald, Nathan. “Hospitality and Hostility: Reading Genesis 19 in Light of 2 Samuel 10 (and Vice Versa).” In *Universalism and Particularism at Sodom and Gomorrah: Essays in Memory of Ron Pirson*, edited by Diana Lipton, 179–90. Society of Biblical Literature, 2012. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt32bz0d.18>. P184.

<sup>92</sup> Deuteronomy 29:21–23, Isaiah 1:9–10, 3:9, and 13:19–22, Jeremiah 49:17 and 50:39-40, Amos 4:1-11, Zephaniah 2:9. *The Contemporary Torah*, JPS, 2006. Accessed on Sefaria.org.

summarizes the attitude of Sodom and Gomorrah simply as “what is mine is mine, and what is yours is yours.”

The combination of these descriptions seem to point to Sodom and Gomorrah as a culture of unbridled selfishness. The norm is not to care for the needs of others or look out for those around you. If we were to imagine Lot's wife as a person who grew up in this kind of individualistic and egotistical culture, perhaps hospitality and social niceties would have felt to her like an imposition. Perhaps she enjoyed being in an environment where those around her unapologetically took exactly what they wanted and assumed everyone else would do the same.

In multiple rabbinic texts, the biblical anonymous wife of Lot is given a name. The name provided for her seems to point to this place-based desire. There is debate as to whether this name is intended to be Idit (עִידִית) or Irit (עִירִית), but either variant holds relevance to her affiliation with the place and culture of Sodom. Idit (עִידִית) is a word commonly used in halachic texts, meaning “choice land;” it typically comes up in damage cases refers to the very best portion a defendant might have to offer to a victim.<sup>93</sup> Irit (עִירִית) has the root ע-י-ר, meaning “city,” followed by a common feminizing suffix found in Hebrew names.<sup>94</sup> In her final act of turning back to look upon her home, perhaps Lot's wife simply expresses a wish to cling to what she still views as her “choice land” or that she is a city girl at heart.

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<sup>93</sup> Jastrow, Marcus. A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature, (1903), s.v. “Idit (עִידִית).”

<sup>94</sup> Such as Dorit, Galit, Shulamit, Danit, Ravit, Amit, Tovit, Ronit, Chagit, etc.

### iii. The Body as a Pillar of Salt

Often this story is understood as an etiological legend, meant to explain the origins of an actual pillar of salt overlooking the Dead Sea in modern-day Israel, on the appropriately named Mount Sodom.<sup>95</sup> While the physical presence of a geological outcropping primarily made of salt is an indisputable fact, the exact description, “נָצִיב מֶלֶח,” and its affiliation with this story, are poetic and narrative choices that leave room for interpretation.

The word “נָצִיב” is especially atypical here. According to my own lexical review of the words “נָצִיב” and “מֶלֶח,”<sup>96</sup> this is the only time the root “נ-צ-ב” is read as meaning something like pillar. There are other Hebrew words that are very often used to refer to pillars, like “מַצְבֵּה”<sup>97</sup> (from the same root נ.צ.ב.) or “עַמּוּד.”<sup>98</sup> The following chart gives a percentage breakdown of all ways this root is used throughout Torah:

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<sup>95</sup> Hirsch, Emil, M. Seligsohn, Solomon Shechter, and Joseph Jacobs. “Lot.” In *The Jewish Encyclopedia* 8, 8:185–87. Funk & Wagnalls, 1906.

<sup>96</sup> This data in its entirety can be found in Appendix A, portions will be displayed in this chapter for reader’s convenience.

<sup>97</sup> Genesis 28:18, Genesis 31:13, Deuteronomy 16:22, II Samuel 1:19, Hosea 3:4. *The Contemporary Torah*, JPS, 2006. Accessed on Sefaria.org.

<sup>98</sup> Exodus 13:21, Exodus 27:11, Numbers 14:14, Judges 20:40, Psalms 99:7. *The Contemporary Torah*, JPS, 2006. Accessed on Sefaria.org.

Verb, to stand or be positioned	53.13%
Official (Prefect, Courtier, Garrison, Viceroy)	32.81%
Noun Form of Standing (Position, Stability)	4.69%
In Charge Of	3.13%
Meaning Unknown	3.13%
Place Name	1.56%
Hilt of a Sword	1.56%

*Fig. 1: Uses of “נ-צ-ב” found in Torah in order of percentage of instances found*

Given the majority usage of this root in active, verb form, the word “נָצִיב” seems to connote more action or activity that implied by the English word pillar. One could just as easily translate “נָצִיב מֶלַח” as an attendant or prefect of salt, giving the implication that Lot’s wife continues to serve some sort of guardian role even in her guise as an inanimate object. She is not just an outcropping of salt, she is positioned in the salt, watching over from within the salt as a protective and stable presence.

Place Name (Yam HaMelach, Gei HaMelach, Ir Melach, Tel Melach, M'lecha)	48.72%
Salt	43.59%
Barren	5.13%
Refined	2.56%

*Fig. 2: Uses of “מ-ל-ח” found in Torah in order of percentage of instances found*

“מ-ל-ח” is a bit more straightforward in terms of its meaning. The word very clearly means salt, but by looking at context, we can understand exactly what salt meant to

those in the Ancient Near East. Salt is most commonly used to refer to places that are barren and lifeless, such as the Dead Sea,<sup>99</sup> the Valley of Salt,<sup>100</sup> Hill of Salt,<sup>101</sup> or Salt Land.<sup>102</sup> When salt appears as an object in the text, its uses are varied. Frequently, salt is something affiliated with death or barrenness. In Deuteronomy 29:22 and Judges 9:45, military leaders “salt the earth” of their enemies’ territory, stunting their ability to grow crops. In Ezekiel 47:11, Psalms 107:34, and Job 30:4, salt describes plants and fluids that are not fit for human consumption.

But salt can also connote something positive and preservative. As in modern times, salt in the bible is used to flavor food<sup>103</sup> and has medical applications.<sup>104</sup> Most critically, salt is used in burnt offerings – as stated in Leviticus 2:13 “you shall not omit from your meal offering the salt of your covenant with God; with all your offerings you must offer salt.” In fact, salt is so important that our relationship with God is referred to as a “salt covenant.”<sup>105</sup> There are many potential reasons why salt is identified with covenant: Rashi says that it harkens back to God’s promise to the water of the ocean that it would someday be offered on the altar,<sup>106</sup> Ibn Ezra says that salt provides flavor to our offerings,<sup>107</sup> Ramban says that salt preserves us.<sup>108</sup> Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish

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<sup>99</sup> Genesis 14:3. *The Contemporary Torah*, JPS, 2006. Accessed on Sefaria.org.

<sup>100</sup> II Samuel 8:13. *The Contemporary Torah*, JPS, 2006. Accessed on Sefaria.org.

<sup>101</sup> Nehemiah 7:16. *The Contemporary Torah*, JPS, 2006. Accessed on Sefaria.org.

<sup>102</sup> Job 39:6. *The Contemporary Torah*, JPS, 2006. Accessed on Sefaria.org.

<sup>103</sup> Job 6:6. *The Contemporary Torah*, JPS, 2006. Accessed on Sefaria.org.

<sup>104</sup> Ezekiel 16:4. *The Contemporary Torah*, JPS, 2006. Accessed on Sefaria.org.

<sup>105</sup> Leviticus 2:13, Numbers 18:19, Chronicles II 13:5. *The Contemporary Torah*, JPS, 2006. Accessed on Sefaria.org.

<sup>106</sup> Rashi on Leviticus 2:13:1. *Pentateuch with Rashi's Commentary* trans. M. Rosenbaum and A.M. Silbermann, 1929-1934. Accessed on Sefaria.org.

<sup>107</sup> Ibn Ezra on Leviticus 2:13. *Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch*, tran. and annot. by H. Norman Strickman and Arthur M. Silver. Menorah Pub., 1988-2004. Accessed on Sefaria.org.

<sup>108</sup> Ramban on Leviticus 2:13. *Commentary on the Torah by Ramban (Nachmanides)*, trans. Charles B. Chavel. New York, Shilo Pub. House, 1971-1976. Accessed on Sefaria.org.



explains that the covenant is connected salt because “the salt sweetens the taste of the meat and renders it edible, so too is the covenant.”<sup>109</sup>

Salt is a substance of infinite potential in Torah. Salt serves as a metaphor for all the joys and bitterness that life has to offer, for the things that sustain us and the things that destroy us. When Lot’s wife chooses to turn back one final time, looking over the complicated place she calls home, she becomes forever crystallized. She is the pillar of salt, the prefect of barrenness, stability in the wasteland. She refused to give up on her homeland, and physically transformed into the stuff of the covenant, the very thing that makes life bearable.

When Max Renn is transformed from an ordinary television producer into man who’s body and reality have been warped by his taste for dark content, the viewer experiences horror and disgust. We live in a world where bodies and mind are not physically permeable as they are in *Videodrome*. But we can see the parallels in our own world, the fear of explicit television and its power exists outside of its body horror incarnation. Max’s transformation is the culmination of our fears, but for Max, it is transcendence and evolution.

When James Ballard is disfigured by his life-changing car accident, at first, the viewer experiences pity. He is clearly in pain; he is unable to walk as he did before. As the disfigurement becomes a source of sexual pleasure, the film wanders into an unsettling territory. An injured body is not typically an idealized or sexualized body, as the presence of the abject (wounds, stitches, braces) evokes disgust in many. The

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<sup>109</sup> Berakhot 5a. *The William Davidson Digital Edition of the Koren Noé Talmud*, trans. Rabbi Adin Even-Israel. <https://www.sefaria.org/Berakhot.5a?lang=bi>.

horror and discomfort only increases as James immerses himself further and further in this foreign, fetishistic culture. An ordinary viewer can resonate with the experience of seeking stimulation to counter the mundane of everyday life. But Cronenberg's body horror approach elevates this experience to something nearly unrecognizable.

Transformation in body horror capitalizes on this space between the familiar and the unimaginable. Cronenberg chooses to approach that transformation in a way that is completely morally neutral to emphasize the part of the change that is understandable. It would be easier to not look at people who choose to transform, in a way that most would call disfigurement and but the subject would call evolution. Cronenberg's work asks the viewer to consider what it might mean if they were wrong, if the repulsive "new flesh" truly was evolution.

To look at Lot's wife through a Cronenbergian lens would be to approach her transformation as morally neutral. Though unsettling to us as outsiders, we must be able to consider how this might feel to Lot's wife herself, and potentially serve as an evolved form. In my midrash, I read Lot's wife's act of looking back upon Sodom as purposeful defiance. I look at the course of her life, and how she likely had very little agency within it. To transform into something solid and unmoving immediately after she refused to leave the only home she had ever known, to be made of something crystallized, something that has both beneficial and destructive properties, has redemptive possibility for a woman in her situation. She lives on without the pain of her trauma, serving as an eternal witness to the wasteland she knew.

*Midrash: The Last Memories of a Pillar of Salt*

I don't know how many thoughts I have left.

It's harder to think now than it was before, back when I was a thing that lived and breathed. Back when I was squishy inside, and changing, always changing. I could never trust what I was going to be from one moment to the next. My cells were blobby and multiplying all the time, so unstable. I never thought about my cells back then but that's the closest I can come to explaining what feels different.

Words feel less and less natural this way. Words moved so easily in my blobby, shifty body. My new rigid shape craves stillness. But I want to tell my story, one more time, before the stillness settles it.

One more time, I want to remember my life as a human.

The place where I was born isn't far from here. I'm not sure what my name was anymore. I used to think my name was important, but it was so arbitrary. It was the first thing I used to tell people about myself and somehow, the way I am now, it means nothing to me.

I lost a lot of memories in the change, at least I think I did. When I think about my life as a human now, I experience it as flashes of feeling, one cascading into the other.

The first feeling was being small. Small is an overwhelming thing to be, no feeling is bigger than small. When I was small, I experienced the new best and worst moments of my life every day. The map of what I knew was constantly reconfiguring, adding new concepts, new worlds. If being a human means being blobby and squishy and changing, a small human is the blobbiest and squishiest and most changing.

My small face was round and soft. I had dark, curly hair that I loved to play with. I had a mother and sisters and brothers. Small has a lot of other feelings attached to it – sad, mad, happy, frustrated, giggly, excited. But no matter what other feelings came up, you were small, first and foremost. Small keeps all those other feelings right at the surface. The feelings are clearer when you're small, later they get trickier and start hiding.

Small faded. It never left completely, it came back when I least expected it. But my cells kept multiplying, more cells layered on top of the others. My face narrowed and hardened, the shape of my body changed, my hair grew longer, my curls changed from perfect rings to a tangled mess. I smelled different, I sounded different, I thought differently. Slowly, so slowly, small slid into scared.

I knew eventually, I would stop being small and start being scared. Everyone told me that I would grow up and start feeling scared of so many things. And I thought, how bad can it be? I had been scared before. When I was small, I got scared all the time. Now that I was less small, now that I knew more things, wouldn't that be less scary? Perhaps I was just different than everyone else. Maybe scared was worse for everyone else, and I was just better, braver, stronger. I didn't understand yet that slow change was still change.

Small scared is a different type of scared. Small scared cries and begs and asks to be spared. Small scared is scared of pain, but pain will go away and small will be something else again. Scared, scared proper, scared by itself without small, is scared to lose.

After small began to fade, I was expected to know who I was and know how to do things. People laughed and judged if I failed in one of these two ways. When I was

scared, judgment was the worst thing that could happen. I was convinced that judgment would take everything from me.

Scared was so insidious because it was the first feeling that learned to hide. I didn't want everyone to know I was scared, I wanted them to think I was still the exception, the brave, the strong. But I was just like all the others, I was scared. Scared that my hair was wrong, that my body was wrong, that my brain was wrong. I wanted everything to be just right without trying or correcting it. I used to worry so much about my hair, at the time I must have thought my hair had a much bigger impact on my life than it ultimately would.

I wanted everyone to like me, especially how I looked. I wanted people to just look at me and like me. But when they just looked at me and liked me, somehow I felt more scared. I was dancing that careful dance, of wanting to be liked but not too much, of wanting to be liked but not being sure what to do when it happened, when I met him. There were other boys before him, other starts and stops and nervous, happy, tingly feelings. But the boys before him were like feelings when I was small. They would come and go and I would stay the same. My whole world changed with him, and it wasn't slow change, it was sudden, immediate, stark.

Lot. Lot, Lot, Lot.

I don't remember my own name but I remember his. Everyone in town was saying his name, everyone was talking about him. Sodom didn't get a lot of visitors. And here was this new man, with all this livestock and wealth. He was a traveler. He had been all over the world with his aunt and uncle. He knew things about kings and queens and gods.

Everyone in the town hung on his every word. I think he loved that about Sodom. He loved how much we loved him. It wasn't just me, we all loved him.

The first time I came to listen to one of his stories I was just as transfixed as everyone said I would be. We sat around the fire and his face just glowed as he talked about all these far-flung places and wild adventures. He made me feel small again, but safe small. Small like my mother carrying me and telling me folktales of goddesses and magic and love. I felt like he was taking me somewhere I wanted to go, like I wouldn't have to be scared with him. As the fire faded and the crowd dispersed, he picked me out. He asked who my father was. I said I didn't have one. He asked who I belonged to. I didn't know what this meant.

Belong wasn't always so simple where I was from. It was easy to lose things. If someone wanted something, they took it. If you wanted something to belong to you, you had to be ready to fight for it. I was never very good at fighting, so not much belonged to me. My brothers fought enough to help our family get by, but it was hard.

If I had to belong to someone, I supposed it was my mother, so I told Lot I belonged to her. Lot laughed, his big, deep, throaty laugh. Lot laughed with his whole body. His laugh always made me smile. He didn't seem to believe I could belong to my mother but he humored me. I brought him to speak with my mother. My mother sent me away to play with my sisters, and then called me back to her.

She told me I was going to be married to Lot, that from now on I would live with him. I understood the words but I needed her to say them again. They didn't feel real. When small faded into scared it happened so slowly. When I found out I was marrying Lot I

knew scared was over. It's not that I didn't feel scared, I felt very scared, but scared in a way that was new again.

When I was scared before it was like I was always looking for the loss that was on it's way. My messy hair, the pimples on my face, the stupid thing I accidentally said, they were all harbingers of the horrible, horrible loss that would soon arrive.

The loss was here now and I would have to live with it. She smiled. She said the words again. "You're going to marry Lot and go away to live with him. This will be good for our family, he's offered a good price for you and he can take care of you. He's a good man, aren't you excited?"

I stared blankly at my mother after she said it a second time. Her smile faded, slowly. "Ungrateful girl. Well, you're his problem now." She walked away and left me with my new feelings.

Her words echoed in my head. Aren't you excited, aren't you excited, aren't you excited, the question repeated so many times until I couldn't refuse it anymore. Small slowly faded into scared and scared suddenly flipped to... excited?

I was, I was excited. Somewhat. Lot wasn't what I expected from a husband. I thought I would marry one of the boys from Sodom. I thought I would marry a simple boy, a boy who helped us get by, who knew my family and I knew his. A boy who grew in the same place I did, who could understand the cascade of feelings I had been through and where I was now.

Lot was better than a boy. He was a man. He was older, bigger, stronger, wealthier, more impressive. Everyone in Sodom looked at him like he was the greatest man they had ever seen. Wasn't I excited, to call a man like that my husband? I must be excited.

Everyone loves him. I would love him too. I was excited. It was just an adjustment period, I told myself, I needed to get used to being excited.

Our wedding day was hard to explain. I wanted to feel excited. I felt like, if someone had been telling me a story, and the main character of that story was me getting married to Lot, I would have felt so excited *for* me. She's going to be rich, she's going to be happy, what a good match, I would say. But somehow, I didn't feel excited when I thought about it as me. As me, I felt shaky in the knees and like my stomach was turning. I was just a girl. I wanted my face to feel soft again, I wanted my mother to pick me up and hold me, I wanted to sit with my sisters and fantasize about my wedding day instead of living it. But here I was. My sisters were doing my make-up and brushing my hair. Wasn't I excited?

Change didn't have to happen slowly this time. I could change into a wife. Me marrying Lot, this is what should happen, and more importantly, it was what WAS happening. We would say the words and I would be a wife. Even if I wasn't excited, it was going to happen, wouldn't I rather be excited?

As I went out to meet Lot, my sisters giggling behind me, I left my body. I wasn't ready for this to be happening to me. I needed this to be happening to a girl in another story. He was not a bad man, this was a good thing, I reminded myself. I was given to him in marriage, he grabbed me in his huge arms and kissed me on the mouth, hot breath and coarse stubble. I'm so happy for her, that girl he's kissing, that girl who isn't me.

I knew what was coming on the wedding night. My mother prepared me for that. But I don't remember how it happened. I think I left my body again. Once I learned how to leave, it just felt easier a lot of the time. Bodies have so many facets to them, so many



different ways of feeling things at once. It amazes me, how much time I spent managing the different parts of my body and their various needs. Eating, sleeping, bathing, even breathing, all the time, just sounds exhausting to me now.

Things stayed blurry for me, for a bit, after the wedding. Lot would work, I would stay home, he would come back and lie with me, ask me how my day was, ask if I thought I was pregnant yet, go to sleep and repeat. It wasn't bad. I still got to see my family, I had a lot of time while Lot was out, when things felt almost normal.

I didn't have to convince myself to be excited about the children. I swear I knew she was there the moment I conceived her. I felt her growing inside me. When I told Lot, he picked me up and spun me around. He was so happy to be a father. He told me every day what important work I was doing, growing his son for him. He rubbed my feet for me at night and sang songs to my burgeoning belly.

My mother and sisters tended to me when the time came for her birth. I remember screaming, I know that it hurt, but I can't remember the pain. It happened that way for each of my children, even when I still had my body. Birth was magic. I was constantly growing and changing, but I had never grown someone else before – and suddenly there she was. This perfect little thing. Round, soft, small. I loved her right away.

I worried Lot would be disappointed I had grown him a daughter rather than a son. But it didn't matter. He melted in her presence, he loved her right away, too. He held her and cooed and cried. I had four daughters this way, four pregnancies, four births. All four times, Lot wanted a son, and all four times, he loved his new daughter. We knew we were meant to have only girls.

Somewhere between pregnancies becoming babies, babies becoming toddlers, toddlers becoming children, I became something else again. I wasn't excited anymore, I was something new. This was the first time a new feeling came without warning. Everyone had told me what would happen before, small, scared, excited... and then what? The stories seemed to stay in excited.

I was worried. Worried about the girls, the harvest, livestock, Lot. About Sodom, about the weather, about the girls finding husbands, about the boys that could be their husbands, everything and anything that could be worried about I worried about. I worried so much I became exhausting to be around; even I was tired of it. But every time I opened my mouth, worries poured out, whether I wanted them to or not. It felt like the love I had for my girls was so all-consuming that everything else just felt like a threat. Like I had no more love energy, it all just had to be worries.

When I was excited, I was worried about my own story. My life, my choices, what would become of *me*. Now that I was worried, everything I wanted was dependent on other people. It all felt so ironic. Every time I entered a new feeling I wanted a different one. Whatever I was feeling was never right, never what I wanted.

I watched my girls grow. Lot was a good father, most of the time. He protected and provided. He never hurt our girls. Sometimes he came home drunk and yelled. But he was better than most the men in Sodom. At least he stayed; that was more than could be said for my own father. Our oldest daughter got married, to a nice boy from our town, like I always wanted. The second one did, too.

The nights all blur together, like so much of my time as a person. But I remember one night, Lot came home drunk again. Not yelling drunk, but contemplative drunk. Sensitive drunk. We sat in the field and looked at the stars.

“The people in Sodom are different, you know that, right?” he asked

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, back when I was travelling with my Uncle Abram. I went all over the place, met all kinds of people. I don’t know. People *take* here. They tell you what they want, and they take it.”

“That sounds normal to me... what do other people do?”

“I mean, they still take stuff; it’s just not the same. Maybe not so much? It’s like, they think about what everyone else wants and needs, not just what they need.”

“I don’t know about that. Are you saying that I only think about what I need?”

“No... not you. I don’t think you *ever* take what you need. I don’t know if you even *think* about what you need.”

His words hung in the air, the silence was thick. I couldn’t speak, so he continued.

“Why are you like that? I mean, any time someone tries to take something from you, you just give it to them. There’s no fight in you, you just crumple. Why?”

My face burned. Everything in me burned. How could he possibly ask me that? How could he possibly think those words and say them out loud? I remember thinking that if I told him, if I explained it to him, he would break into a thousand pieces.

But I don’t remember what I wanted to say. All I remember is what I did say.

“You’re drunk.”

And I walked back into the house alone.

After that night I was angry. I don't know how long it would have lasted. I don't know if it was a new feeling, or just a subset of worried. I avoided Lot for the next few days, and then he brought the agents home. I didn't who they were, I was just glad he was talking to someone else.

But things are never simple with Lot. It starts as a couple friends coming over for a beer, then it's a couple friend staying over, then one thing leads to another and it's him and a couple friends fighting some ridiculous turf war with the whole town.

I don't know who started the fight. I don't know what the other people wanted. I know he went out to bargain with the hoard and I had to sit with his weird friends while our children slept. I know at some point I heard him say "Take my youngest daughters instead!" and I just lost it. I screamed at the men to pull him back inside and they cooperated.

"What was that offer, Lot? What are you trying to do here?"

"Oh come on, they're good guys! I just needed to buy..."

"No." I cut him off. "I don't want your excuses. I don't want your reasons. No. I want these men out of our house. I want you all out of our house. You will not put our daughters in that kind of danger, you will not make them, make me, live through that kind of heartbreak. I will not let you do that to them."

Lot went off to talk to the men, they went back and forth, back and forth. Lot said we all needed to leave, I said no. He said we have to. I said I wouldn't. Back and forth, back and forth. At some point I left my body again, just like I used to. My body was yelling, screaming. I woke up the girls. I was shaking, sweating from the anger.

But I wasn't. It was someone else advocating for me. And I was safe. I was walking around on rooftops, looking at people's gardens. I was safe.

The next thing I knew one of the men's hands was wrapped around my wrist. All four of us, Lot, me, the two daughters who still lived at home. They were dragging us out of town, telling us the town was about to be destroyed, we had to run, we had to run and not look back.

My girls were crying. Lot was desperately bargaining. I was silent.

My whole life was a series of moments that other people chose for me. Some of them I liked, some of them I didn't, but I was never the one choosing. I did what was convenient for others. Lot was right. I never thought about what I wanted, what I needed.

"Are you coming?" Lot asked

Lot and the girls had moved ahead. I hadn't moved.

"Come on we have to go!" he yelled

"No."

"NOW!"

"NO."

I turned back and...

It was over. My body was gone. I wasn't dead, but I wasn't alive either, at least, not the way I was before. This change was at all once, and it's also been slow. The physical part happened all at once. I crystallized, so balanced, so perfectly still. Sometimes, little pieces of me crumble off or break away but it's not like before. You can pick the pieces up and taste the saltiness. But I can't. I cannot reorganize the details of what I know, or

reconfigure who I am. I don't have to. I still try to think, to have consciousness the way a living thing does, but I think I'm getting ready to let that go, too .

I need less now. No need for food, sleep, or stimulation. It's enough for me just to be.

I'm never dreaming of the next great thing, wishing I was in a different stage of life, or living an alternate version of myself. I don't wish my life or anyone's were different.

I've never felt more at peace.

## **V. Conclusion**

Even as a person who would consider myself a Cronenberg fan and a Cronenberg scholar, I must admit, watching a David Cronenberg film is frequently a deeply unpleasant experience. Cronenberg's unflinching attention to a disgusting level of detail, his neutral depictions of repugnant ideologies, are inherently unsettling. In my experience, repeat viewings do not always desensitize the viewer to the point of enjoying, or even feeling comfortable bearing witness, to what is on screen. Horror in general, and Cronenberg in particular, are often easier subjects to approach academically. Visceral metaphor that explore the human experience of the body, and manages to have a lasting cultural resonance, has so much to tell us about who we are, what we value, and what we fear.

I have always been something of an apologist for Eve, Cain, and Lot's wife. All three characters are understood by the mainstream narrative to have made bad choices and that led to severe punishment: eating from the Tree of Knowledge, killing Abel, and turning back to look at Sodom one last time. We may know events that took place in their stories, but we hear very little of their own perspectives. Torah never truly gives us "their" stories. It is narratively simpler, emotionally easier, for each of them to exist as two dimensional, cautionary tales.

The Cronenbergian approach to body horror allows us to enter into strange, horrifying, and ethically ambiguous territory with curiosity. We consider what it would mean for these characters to be human beings with agency, who made the best choices they could given the options in front of them. What if the stories we tell ourselves to feel

comfortable with their tragic ends do not line up with their stories? What Torah can be found from visiting the scary places these characters call home?

In my retelling of their narratives, I weave a throughline of tension between my each of my protagonists and their physical forms. Eve did not choose to be in a body, she preferred existing as a dirt. She explores and pushes up against the boundaries of her new form, trying, but ultimately failing, to claim agency and exist as she chooses. As her child, Cain carries Eve's belief about the power of the dirt. He does not know the physical experience of being dirt as Eve does, but he valorizes the ability to generate and create. However, this is ultimately his downfall: his singular focus on becoming a creator forces him to lose sight of the greater good.

In a twisted way, Lot's wife is my only character that receives a happy ending. As a woman in Sodom, she must constantly compromise to the will of those more powerful than her. She experiences life as something that happens to her, a "cascade of feeling," rather than a path she gets to carve out for herself. Finally, at the end of all these compromises, she stands her ground and refuses to leave Sodom without looking back. Existing as a pillar of salt finally gives her what she's been missing: peace, quiet, stability, and connection to her homeland. Lot's wife completes the mission that Eve and Cain could not, she successfully transcends beyond her flesh.

My biblical characters share this tension with their Cronenbergian counterparts. *Stereo*, *Crimes of the Future*, and *The Fly* all tell stories of people who attempt to experiment with the human form, to create some sort of superior, evolved human with new abilities. In *Dead Ringers* and *Shivers*, the body is brought into uncomfortable contact with the abject, forcing the viewer and subject to reckon with the boundaries of



the body and identity. And, just as Lot's wife brings the unresolved desires of Cain and Eve to fruition, the questions Cronenberg begins toying with in his earliest works are brought to crescendo in *Videodrome* and *Crash*. His protagonists actively choose to abandon the lives and bodies they had before to seek a new vision of existence.

This project was always meant to be somewhat unsettling. The concept alone, comparing Torah to the work of director who has been dubbed "The King of Venereal Horror,"<sup>110</sup> has baffled and disgusted many of my Torah study learners. But inevitably, every time I present my work, even those who doubted the approach are able to engage in meaningful dialogue. Once the initial "ick" has subsided, we can look at body horror like any other metaphor we find text. Taking the time and the patience to sit with discomfort was not an accident, but by design. At its core, this project was my own attempt to look at fear as a friend, a teacher, and a spiritual practice. Quite literally, the fate of our planet depends on our ability to learn how to have frank conversations about terrifying and unimaginable realities.

I argue for Jewish body horror because Torah is bodily. Torah is messy, bloody, frightening, painful, and transformative. I argue for Jewish body horror because if we only learn from things that fit inside the lines of what feels comfortable, we lose too much. I argue for Jewish body horror because now more than ever, fear and discomfort cannot deter us from learning. The more we are willing to look past our biases, sit with the fear, and really see what we have in front of us, the more likely we are to continue this beautiful journey: learning to live in the strange, vulnerable, fleshy bodies we inhabit.

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<sup>110</sup> Cronenberg & Rodley, xv.

## VI. Appendix A: Concordance Work on “נָצִיב מֶלֶח”

### 1. Uses of “נ-צ-ב” Across Torah

Citation	Meaning
Genesis 18:2	verb, standing
Genesis 19:26	Pillar of Salt
Genesis 24:13	verb, standing
Genesis 24:43	verb, standing
Genesis 28:13	verb, standing
Genesis 37:7	verb, standing
Genesis 45:1	attendants
Exodus 5:20	verb, standing
Exodus 7:15	verb, standing
Exodus 15:8	verb, standing
Exodus 17:9	verb, standing
Exodus 18:14	verb, standing
Exodus 33:8	verb, standing
Exodus 33:21	verb, standing
Exodus 34:2	verb, standing
Numbers 16:27	verb, standing
Numbers 22:23	verb, standing
Numbers 22:31	verb, standing
Numbers 22:34	verb, standing
Numbers 23:6	verb, standing
Numbers 23:17	verb, standing
Deuteronomy 29:9	verb, standing
Yehoshua 15:43	place name
Shofetim 3:22	hilt of a sword
Shofetim 18:16	verb, standing
Shofetim 18:17	verb, standing
I Samuel 1:26	verb, standing
I Samuel 4:20	verb, standing
I Samuel 10:5	prefects
I Samuel 13:3	prefect
I Samuel 13:4	prefect
I Samuel 19:20	verb, standing
I Samuel 22:6	courtiers
I Samuel 22:7	courtiers
I Samuel 22:9	courtiers
I Samuel 22:17	verb, standing
II Samuel 8:6	garrisons
II Samuel 8:14	garrisons

II Samuel 13:31	courtiers
I Kings 4:5	prefects
I Kings 4:7	prefects
I Kings 4:19	prefect
I Kings 5:7	prefects
I Kings 5:30	prefects
I Kings 9:23	prefects
I Kings 22:48	viceroys
Yeshayahu 3:13	verb, standing
Yeshayahu 21:8	verb, standing
Amos 7:7	verb, standing
Amos 9:1	verb, standing
Zechariah 11:16	n/a, meaning uncertain
Psalms 39:6	n/a, meaning uncertain
Psalms 45:10	verb, standing
Psalms 82:1	verb, standing
Psalms 119:89	verb, standing
Mishlei 8:2	stand/position
Ruth 2:5	in charge of
Ruth 2:6	in charge of
Eikhah 2:4	verb, positioned
Daniel 2:41	stability
Divrei HaYamim I 11:16	garrison
Divrei HaYamim I 18:13	garrisons
Divrei HaYamim II 8:10	prefects
Divrei HaYamim II 17:2	garrisons

### Overall Analysis of Usage

Verb, standing/positioned	34	53.13%
Official (prefect, courtier, garrison, viceroy)	21	32.81%
Noun Form of Standing (position, stability, pillar)	3	4.69%
In Charge of	2	3.13%
Unknown	2	3.13%
Place Name	1	1.56%
Hilt of a Sword	1	1.56%
Total	64	

## 2. Uses of “n-l-n” Across Torah

Citation	Meaning	Context
Genesis 14:3	place	dead sea
Genesis 19:26	salt	PILLAR OF SALT
Exodus 30:35	refined	
Leviticus 2:13	salt	salt your offerings
Numbers 18:19	salt	covenant of salt
Numbers 34:3	place	dead sea
Numbers 34:12	place	dead sea
Deuteronomy 3:17	place	dead sea
Deuteronomy 29:22	salt	used to kill lands of the descendants of those who questioned God in the wilderness
Yehoshua 3:16	place	dead sea
Yehoshua 12:3	place	dead sea
Yehoshua 15:2	place	dead sea
Yehoshua 15:5	place	dead sea
Yehoshua 15:62	place	city of salt
Yehoshua 18:19	place	dead sea
Shofetim 9:45	salt	Abimelech salted the earth
II Samuel 8:13	place	valley of salt
II Kings 2:20	salt	Elisha asks for salt
II Kings 2:21	salt	Elisha purifies the water with salt and a blessing (salt is supposed to spoil water according to Rashi, this means it is a double miracle)
II Kings 14:7	place	valley of salt
Yeshayahu 51:6	verb, tear away	
Yirmeyahu 17:6	barren	
Yehezkel 16:4	salt	Jerusalem was not salted at its birth (per Rashi, a baby is meant to be salted so that its flesh hardens)
Yehezkel 43:24	salt	salt a burnt offering
Yehezkel 47:11	salt	swamps and marshes will not be pure, they will supply salt
Zephaniah 2:9	salt	Moab and Ammonites will be like S&G, clumps of

		weeds and patches of salt (IE barren)
Psalms 60:2	place	valley of salt
Psalms 107:34	salt	salt marsh, God will turn a fruitful land into
Iyyov 6:6	salt	can what is tasteless be eaten without salt
Iyyov 30:4	salt	saltwort, a food the suffering eat
Iyyov 39:6	place	salt land, a bad place
Ezra 2:59	place	salt hill
Ezra 4:14	barren	
Ezra 6:9	salt	offering
Ezra 7:22	salt	offering
Nehemiah 7:61	place	salt hill
Divrei HaYamim I 18:12	place	valley of salt
Divrei HaYamim II 13:5	salt	covenant of salt
Divrei HaYamim II 25:11	place	valley of salt

### Overall Analysis of Usage

Place Name (Yam HaMelach, Gei HaMelach, Ir Melach, Tel Melach, M'lecha)	19	48.72%
Salt	17	43.59%
Barren	2	5.13%
Refined	1	2.56%
Total	39	

### Analysis of Salt as an Object

Positive (flavor, offering, ensure baby's health)	8	50.00%
Negative (salt earth, ruin or kill something)	8	50.00%
Total	16	