The late Melanie Wright succinctly summed up a key problem facing the subfield of religion and film with the following syllogism: “(A) films are about ‘life’ and its meaning, (B) religion is about ‘life’ and its meaning, (C) all films are ‘religious.’” Wright argued, correctly in my view, that inasmuch as this syllogism is the unacknowledged operating principle in the religious analysis of film, then said analysis is “effectively meaningless” (Wright 2006: 16). Religion and film continues to be a growing subfield that is showing signs of diversifying in terms of methodologies as well as subject matter (see Lyden 2003, 2009; Wright 2006; Plate 2009; Mazur 2011; Sison 2012). Most religious studies analyses of particular films up until now have come from a Christian theological, archetypal–mythological, and/or normative–ethical perspective, though there is also an important growing body of work on non-Western religions and film (see Cho 2003; Nayar 2012).
Yet the subfield remains ill-defined because it has not yet addressed the question of when theories and methods of religious studies (or theology) are not applicable to film. To better understand the intersection of religion and film, we need to consider what secularism on film looks like. It may seem odd that this is as yet unexplored, as the last few years have seen the publication of a plethora of important works on secularism by religious studies scholars (e.g., Calhoun et al. 2011; Modern 2011) from political, ethnographic, historical, and philosophical perspectives. But in the fields of visual culture and film studies, there is a lack of attention to secularism.

Keeping in mind that the very definition of secularism, and its relation to the category of religion, remains an unsettled question, what would a study of secularism on film look like? Two existing approaches have their uses. One sees film as the secularization of sacred narratives. For example, Conrad Ostwalt (1998) examines films about ecological collapses as examples of “secular apocalypse.” Or one could see superhero films as secularized narratives of deities and saints, etc. The other approach is an analysis of films, and in particular documentaries, which critique contemporary religion. Sophie Sunderland has discussed the Australian documentary God on My Side (2009), and Kathryn Lofton has blogged about Religulous (2009).

What I am proposing here is both a simpler and more substantial approach to the study of film and secularism than those mentioned above. I suggest that we in religious studies need to look at films that wrestle with the same questions of meaning that religion does (questions of sex and death, power and desire, family and society, transformation and transcendence, etc.) but that do so in a uniquely nonreligious, or secular way. Further, we need to look not just at narrative elements of secularism on film, but at thematic and visual elements as well. We need to consider how secularism might inform not only the film as artwork but its production, distribution, and reception. We need to focus not just on individual films, but also on filmmakers. Indeed, the subfield of religion and film might be said to have its own canon of auteurs—filmmakers known for their serious religious engagement (Ingmar Bergman, Robert Bresson, Hayao Miyazaki) or those with more critical or satirical relationships to religion, but still informed by religious upbringing (Federico Fellini, Luis Buñuel, Woody Allen). But are there filmmakers who consistently and self-consciously reject the religious?

One such “secular auteur” is David Cronenberg (1943–), a Canadian filmmaker who has directed some eighteen features. He is known as an originator of the body horror subgenre, and for adapting
difficult works of literature (Naked Lunch [1991], Crash [1999], Cosmopolis [2012]). His films, while serious and often noncommercial, are also brief (seldom exceeding ninety minutes) and restrained. Often considered one of the most important living English-language filmmakers, The Village Voice, the U.S. home of auteurist film criticism, says that Cronenberg “may be the best-reviewed filmmaker in this paper’s history” (Lim 2005).

This review, by briefly and selectively examining themes in Cronenberg’s films and what he has said about them, aims to encourage further research into Cronenberg by scholars of religious studies. It also hopes to model future studies of secularism on film and ultimately to argue that films and filmmakers are not mere data for scholars of religion but can serve as active critics of the field.

THE PUBLIC ATHEIST

Interviewer: Martin Scorsese once said that reading interviews with you, he feels that you don’t understand your own films. Are you comfortable leaving your films open to multiple readings?

David Cronenberg: Well, Marty is a Catholic. He believes in the devil. He believes in evil and the apocalypse. I think he thinks that’s what my movies are about. And I, as a sort of existentialist atheist, do not believe in those things. So we have a disagreement. (Phipps 2003)

Like Martin Scorsese, scholars of religion impose their own interpretations on films and other cultural productions. Indeed, how can we not? Like Scorsese seems to do, one could easily interpret Cronenberg’s films as parables of evil, of the overreaching of prideful humanity resulting in a cosmic fall. But this interpretation ignores Cronenberg’s own take on his films. Some artists, whether through reticence or inarticulateness, leave interpretation up to others, but Cronenberg does not. It was easy to track down two book-length interviews, dozens of substantive shorter interviews, and full-length audio commentaries on many of the DVDs of his films. In addition, I spoke with him in person at his home in Toronto.

His own critical perspectives are not just copious but of high quality as well. One film scholar writes that “his opinions are indeed insightful intellectual exercises in sophisticated interpretation—if nothing else, Cronenberg is certainly the most learned and astute filmmaker” (Mathijs 2008: 5), and Salon.com’s film critic calls him “a genuine intellectual in a realm crowded with poseurs and pretenders. He can talk
easily about almost any topic you bring up; if he hadn’t turned out to be one of the premier cinematic visionaries of his generation, it’d be easy to imagine him as a writer or philosopher or historian” (O’Hehir 2011).

Cronenberg would not appreciate a theological reading of his films because he is an atheist, a fact that he has publicly stated many times. He has also called himself a “card-carrying existentialist” (AFI 2000) and a “Darwinian” (Grunberg 2006: 174). Cronenberg’s public atheism is all the more notable considering his association with horror, a genre often analyzed as fundamentally religious. Charles Derry is a scholar of film studies, not religion, yet in his classification of the horror film, two of his three major categories are religious (or more specifically, Christian): demonic horror and apocalyptic horror (2009). In Sacred Terror, religious studies scholar Douglas Cowan’s tour-de-force analysis of religion in horror films, he mentions common tropes including the dead displaced, satanic cults, covens, possession, exorcism, ghosts, and curses. Further, Cowan analyzes the metataxis of horror in which religious symbols such as the church, the cross, and the clergy become sites of terror which Cowan links to our “deeply embedded cultural ambivalences about the church as a place of safety and the clergy as peerless guardians of decency and morality” (2008: 7).

So it is significant that none of Cronenberg’s films have any religious or supernatural elements. This is not coincidence, but his conscious choice. The deliberateness of this choice becomes clearer when we consider the films he has chosen not to make. Cronenberg “has acquired a reputation over the years as an actor’s director,” “who not only makes inexpensive movies but who also brings them in on time and under budget” (Dee 2005). Indeed, in the mid-1980s, after releasing two critical and commercial successes (The Dead Zone and The Fly), he was offered the director’s chair on what would be some of the biggest Hollywood films of the last thirty years including Flashdance, Top Gun, and Total Recall (Mathijs 2008: 142). And he has been asked to direct many horror films, most of which he has turned down. As he told The New York Times:

I’m an atheist, and so I have a philosophical problem with demonology and supporting the mythology of Satan, which involves God and

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1Some of these public statements have been collected on the Celebrity Atheist website.
2With the possible exception of Johnny Smith’s psychic powers in The Dead Zone: “The only supernatural aspect of any of my movies was The Dead Zone but Johnny Smith could have been a psychotic with good instincts,” Cronenberg told me (2012).
heaven and hell and all that stuff. I’m not just a nonbeliever, I’m an antbeliever—I think it’s a destructive philosophy. But the people who send this material out, all they know is that you’ve done some stuff that they think is supernatural, which is actually not something I do either. I was asked to do “Dark Water,” [a 2005 remake of a Japanese horror film] and it was a nice script, but the reason I didn’t want to do it was the ghost thing. The movie posits that ghosts do exist. That suggests that there is some kind of afterlife. I’m philosophically opposed to that view. (Dee 2005)

More succintly, he told me he does not “want to promote supernatural thinking” (Cronenberg 2012). His opposition to religion goes beyond supernaturalism; he turned down Witness because it romanticized the Amish. More significantly, Cronenberg eschews the thematic underpinning of so many horror films, and Hollywood films in general: the battle between good and evil. Cronenberg’s films do not provide the visual and aural clues that conventional Hollywood cinema uses to denote good and evil. His heroes are not particularly altruistic or, indeed, heroic. The protagonists of several of his films, including Videodrome (1983), The Fly (1986), and Dead Ringers (1988) die—but their deaths are neither redemptive nor sacrificial, nor do they result in any kind of triumphant return, symbolic or otherwise.

Many of his films do not have traditional villains. Even his seemingly conventional antagonists, from the sex parasites in Shivers (1975) to the multinational corporation Spectacular Optical in Videodrome to Naked Lunch’s Dr. Benway, are sinister and scary, but function as necessary agents of change. Shivers, for example, Cronenberg’s first commercial feature, is the story of the residents of an apartment complex infected by phallic parasites that propagate through sexual contact and thus cause their hosts to become sexually voracious. The parasites, as they emerge from people’s mouths and abdomens, are viscerally repulsive, but seen in the context of the antiseptic, isolated high-rise apartments, they could represent sexual liberation and joyful community. In short, Cronenberg does not “believe in Evil with a capital E,” as he told me.

When I asked him about the apparent theme of transcendence in his films (thinking about the car crash fetishists in Crash or “The New Flesh” in Videodrome), he denied it and asked me: “What would we transcend?” When transcendence seems to be achieved in his films, the results may be merely another system of control. While the word “transcendence” itself plays an important role in eXistenZ (1999) (it is the name of a virtual reality video game, developed by the game
manufacturer PilgrImage), this nomenclature serves as parody, as Cronenberg told me, of both virtual reality as a new religion and religion itself. But this critique is not limited to one film; for Cronenberg: “All the reality is virtual. In a sense that’s the theme of many of my movies. There is no absolute reality” (Grunberg 2006: 166).

THE EMBODIED AUTEUR

If it is clear what Cronenberg does not believe in, then what does he believe? What for him is the ground of existence? Just as there is ample evidence for his atheism, so too is there an overabundance of data for naming his primary concern: “The first fact of human existence is the body—that is the human drama,” he told me, as he has told many interlocutors over the years.³

His early films literalize the body as the stage where the human drama takes place, by graphically depicting the relationship between primal sexual or aggressive urges and bodily mutations. These body horror films include Shivers (also known as Orgy of the Blood Parasites, and They Came from Within) and Rabid (1977), about a woman who undergoes an experimental skin graft and develops a blood-sucking appendage that gives its victims a form of rabies. In The Brood (1979), Nola Carveth, undergoing experimental psychotherapy, manifests her rage by giving birth parthenogenetically to mutant children who murder those who anger her. His later films are less overtly grotesque. The film scholar Serge Grunberg writes that in Cronenberg’s more modern style “overused special effects have no place at all” (2006: 168). But the body remains the site of conflict and creator of meaning, whether seen in the Russian mafia’s elaborate tattoos in Eastern Promises (2007) or in psychoanalytic patients’ physical contortions in A Dangerous Method (2011). Claiming that Cronenberg’s films investigate and problematize the body is hardly original. Much scholarly work on his films has focused on this embodied quality (see Lindohf 2005 and Trigg 2011 for two recent examples).

What we in religious studies need to take note of, however, is that when Cronenberg says that “the body is the first fact” he continues with “everything comes out of that: philosophy, religion” (Grunberg 2006: 39). Thus, the body is essential not just to his conception of film, but of reality. In a book-length interview with Cronenberg, Serge Grunberg

³He also said the body “is the first fact” (AFI 2000) and “the primary fact of human existence” (Dee 2005). He says the same thing in a book-length interview (Grunberg 2006: 39) and it is reprinted as a blurb on the back cover.
shows him a print of Caravaggio’s painting *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (c. 1601–2) (Figure 1). Cronenberg calls the painting “beautiful” and analyzes it thus: “I think ultimately you have to go the body for verification of anything. You go to the body for verification of life. You go to the body for verification of death. This is a painting of *Doubting Thomas* being convinced of Christ’s physical resurrection by being able to actually put his finger into the wounds. It makes perfect sense. It makes body sense. . . . You have to go the body for truth. I suppose, in a sense, that’s what I’m doing in my moves, constantly” (Grunberg 2006: 70–71). I would argue that here, Cronenberg demonstrates his films and interviews are not just data for scholars of religion, but that he is an active critic and conversation partner.

The body is always changing and mutating in Cronenberg’s movies but also in life as he sees it. In our conversation, he told me “we don’t accept reality as it is” and gave trepanning (the earliest form of surgery for which we have evidence; it involves boring holes in the brain) as evidence. We are always creating new extensions of the human body, from weapons such as clubs and knives to cell phones. Two of his most
original (in both senses of the word) screenplays are thoughtful exami-
nations of these “extensions of man”: Videodrome and eXistenZ.

Videodrome is “the quintessential, comprehensive Cronenberg—the
crux to cracking the code of the ‘Cronenberg Project’” (Mathijs 2008: 105). Max Renn, a programmer for a local television station that broad-
casts soft-core porn at night comes across a mysterious television signal
of a torture porn show called “Videodrome.” The signal is designed to
create tumors in the viewer’s brain. Once Renn becomes infected with
these tumors, the rest of the film is a hallucinatory journey where vide-
otapes get inserted into a slit in his abdomen. EXistenZ can be seen as
a kind of sequel. Allegra Geller is a video game designer whose virtual
reality games are played with an organic game console that one plugs
into a hole drilled into the base of the spine. She becomes trapped in
her own creation, while being pursued by hostile forces, and must travel
between different levels of dream reality.4

In these two films, new media (videotape, television signals, video
games, and the consoles they are played on) become “extensions of
man,” altering our bodies and thus our realities. These films, then,
embody quite astutely the ideas of Canadian communications theorist
Marshall McLuhan, who as Brent Plate has argued (2011), is an unac-
knowledged progenitor of the field of religion and media. Indeed,
Cronenberg was a student at the University of Toronto in the mid-
to late 1960s, when McLuhan, a professor there, achieved his notoriety.
And although he did not take classes with McLuhan, Cronenberg
recalls feeling his influence (Grunberg 2006: 66). McLuhan’s fame led
to the stereotype of the “pop culture guru” spouting one-liners like “the
medium is the message.” (McLuhan recognizes and parodies his status
in his beloved cameo in Woody Allen’s Annie Hall.)

Videodrome’s depiction of McLuhan critiques this image in the
character of “Professor Brian O’Blivion,” who looks and sounds like
McLuhan and appears only on a television screen uttering gnomic
non sequiturs. In the scene set in O’Blivion’s office, crammed with
tapestries, statues, and religious paraphernalia, Cronenberg visually
acknowledges that McLuhan was in fact a conservative Catholic and a
trained medievalist. Indeed, McLuhan was a critic of new media as
much as he was their champion, and was not always happy about how
his ideas were popularized by the media and advertising industries.
Videodrome slyly references this popularization by showing O’Blivion
being kidnapped by the forces of international capitalism and rampant

4Over a decade before Inception (2010).
consumerism (represented in the film by the corporation Spectacular Optical) and also dying from a tumor induced by exposure to the very Videodrome signal he theorized. Here, again, Cronenberg is an interlocutor as much as a research subject.

A SECULAR PANTHEON

McLuhan is not the only important writer referenced in the Cronenberg project. In conversations, in his films, and in the critical context, Cronenberg is frequently linked with philosophers and writers. In our conversation, he mentioned Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre. On the DVD commentary track for eXistenZ, he references Arthur Schopenhauer and other philosophers. He has often spoken about the influence of his favorite author, Vladimir Nabokov. William S. Burroughs and J. G. Ballard’s transgressive fictions were sources of inspiration and comparison even before he adapted their best-known works into memorable films (Naked Lunch and Crash, respectively). The characters, themes, and setting of his 2002 film Spider invoked comparisons to Samuel Beckett. What these writers have in common is not hard to discern: at least the absence of conventional religiosity and spirituality, if not a deliberate critique of them. Cronenberg’s literary references make up a pantheon of secular thinkers and artists, one might say. One author would be at the head of any such pantheon, and in fact, he is also the most consistent influence on Cronenberg: Sigmund Freud.

His 2011 film, A Dangerous Method, based on Christopher Hampton’s play “The Talking Cure,” centers on Carl Jung, his clinical work, and his relationship with Sabina Spielrein, his patient, lover, and eventual fellow psychoanalyst. But the intellectual center of the film is Jung’s conversations with Freud. The costume drama was seen by some reviewers as a departure for Cronenberg, a move toward gentility after so many decades of transgression and horror. As Cronenberg himself remarked: “I have heard the occasional comment, ‘it’s rather theatrical,’ or ‘it’s like Masterpiece Theatre’” (O’Gehir 2011). In fact, A Dangerous Method crystallizes the themes Cronenberg has been dealing with since his very first film: the six-minute Transfer (1966), a surrealistic sketch of a therapist–patient relationship. More specifically, Freud has appeared, in word or image, in many of Cronenberg’s early films. In the original script of Shivers, Nurse Forsythe, recently infected by the

5An entire monograph was written about his literary influences. See Browning (2007).
parasite, says to the protagonist, before she attempts to transmit the parasite via a kiss: “Sometimes I have a recurrent dream. Have I ever told you about it darling? I guess you could call it a Freudian dream, because in this dream I find myself making love to Sigmund Freud. But I’m having trouble because he’s old and dying . . .” (Cronenberg 2002: 96). The filmed scene replaces “Freud” with “strange man.”

In his next film, Rabid, a character in a hot tub is reading Ernest Jones’s biography of Freud, and in The Brood, a photo of Freud is taped to the wall of Nola’s room. In Videodrome, Max Renn, flirting with a fellow panelist dressed in a seductive red dress on a TV talk show, says, “You know what Freud would have said about that dress.” A later film, Spider is in some ways a classic Freudian puzzle replete with symbolic objects (gas, shoes, spider web patterns), displaced memories, and Oedipal guilt. So A Dangerous Method is not an aberration but a consummation. Freud’s appeal to Cronenberg is not hard to fathom. Again, Cronenberg puts it best: “Freud insisted on the primacy of the human body. At the time people were wearing high white stiff collars and corsets and were all covered up and we were all rationality. He was saying the body still has to have its say. You can see the Freudian revolution: though it had such a high intellectual content, its center was the human body” (Penner 2012). The visuals of A Dangerous Method may seem to contradict Cronenberg’s lauding of Freud’s embodiedness—it is Jung whom we see hiking, sailing, and making love, whereas Freud is portrayed as a housebound family man, mostly seen sitting stiffly behind a huge desk.

And yet it is clearly Freud who has the director’s sympathy. One of the main subjects of the conversations between the two founding figures of psychoanalysis is whether it would make room for the religious. Freud tells Jung psychoanalysis should not “stray into any kind of mysticism” and must avoid the “black mud of superstition.” “I’m not a Jungian,” Cronenberg told me unnecessarily, adding that he cannot follow Jung in “turning the collective unconscious into a religious concept” and that Jung came from a long line of pastors, and functioned as one himself.

6The scene is available on YouTube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-sfmiadv40k.
7One clue to this can be found in the casting: Freud is played by Viggo Mortensen, who starred in Cronenberg’s two previous films. Mortenson is the latest in a line of detached, intelligent leading men (e.g., James Woods, Jeff Goldblum, Jeremy Irons, and Peter Weller) who may be read as stand-ins for the director himself.
CULT FILMS

Despite his decades-long engagement with Freud’s ideas and persona, Cronenberg is “not an adherent of the Freudian theory,” he said to an interviewer (Phipps 2003) and one reason is what he calls the “cult of psychotherapy” that arose after Freud’s death. Cronenberg parodied this institutionalization of psychotherapy in *The Brood*: the Somafree Institute, headed by the charismatic Dr. Hal Raglan (played by Oliver Reed), exaggerates a type of isolated retreat center where Gestalt therapy was practiced that Cronenberg was personally familiar with in the mid-1970s. In fact, the appeal and danger of several types of “cults” are one of the principal thematic unities of Cronenberg’s films. It should be made clear that his films never depict actual religious groups often labeled cults, or even fictionalized versions of them. Nor is the word “cult” ever used in his dialogue.

And yet secretive, isolated communities with authoritative, charismatic leaders and dangerous ideologies are constant features in most of his original scripts. Many of them are fancifully named: besides the aforementioned Somafree Institute of Psychoplasmics, his early experimental film *Stereo* (1969) features the Academy of Erotic Inquiry, and *Crimes of the Future* (1970) was set at the Institute of Neo-Venereal Disease.

In *Videodrome* and in *eXistenZ*, the plots advance because of warring “cults”: Spectacular Optical versus the Cathode Ray Mission, and Antenna Research versus Cortical Systematics, respectively. Do these institutions represent Cronenberg’s typically secularist disdain for organized religion? Perhaps, but these “cult-like” institutions could also be read as a critique of any authoritarian structure. Indeed, Cronenberg called them “smaller versions of government” that are all “selling something.” And these institutions also serve as a locus of horror in his films, where other directors might use ghosts or demons. This “cult horror” is evoked not just narratively, but visually. *Dead Ringers*, based on a true story of twin gynecologists’ descent into madness and addiction, includes examination scenes set in the Mantle Clinic, their medical practice. The clinic functions as a kind of cult and the scenes are terrifying (even though this is not at all a traditional horror film), inasmuch as they show the power that doctors have over patients, and that men have over women (Figure 2). Cronenberg also uses the “cult” mise-en-scene more playfully, as in the opening scene of *eXistenZ*, where guests beta-test a new video game in a church as if they are starting a new religion (Figure 3).
FIGURE 2. JEREMY IRONS IN DEAD RINGERS.
NOT A SCENE FROM THE BORGIAS, BUT RATHER THE POWER AND THE GLORY OF THE MAD GYNECOLOGIST.

FIGURE 3. JENNIFER JASON LEIGH IN EXISTENZ.
ALLEGRA, THE GODDESS/DEMONESS, GETTING HER TWELVE DISCIPLES TO PLAY THE GAME OF EXISTENZ, AND TO PLUG INTO A NEW REALITY.
CONCLUSION

Is it not time for religious studies scholars to pay attention to the rare filmmaker whose films do not replay the struggle between good and evil, or fulfill the hero’s quest, or seek transcendence? Who uses religious imagery to symbolize systems of control, but who has no interest in religion per se? Who is, in short, secular?

Though one could argue Cronenberg’s philosophically sophisticated, morally curious, and artistically rich films are by those very qualities religious, I believe that argument is ultimately counterproductive: I hold with Melanie Wright when she wrote that “by declaring any secularism to be merely apparent, virtually nothing of substance is added to an understanding of either religion or film” (Wright 2006: 16).

In other words, for a greater understanding of religion, of film, and of their relationship, we must take secularism on film seriously. And we must allow secular directors to speak for themselves. The words and films of David Cronenberg are a starting place.

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