

## 'Death to *Videodrome*': Cronenberg, Žižek and an Ontology of the Real

Scott A. Wilson

### Abstract

The closing frames of David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983) show us the protagonist, Max Renn, seemingly in the act of suicide, his mutated flesh-hand-pistol pressed firmly against his head. Looking directly at us, Max utters the phrase 'long live the new flesh' before the film fades to black. This act ends the film, but the end of the film, despite this seemingly conclusive moment, might not mark the end of Max's experience of the diegesis. In a film concerned with bodily transformation in response to media intervention, a film in which our heterosexual male protagonist develops a vaginal opening which generates and transforms objects subject to its own desires and agency, what are we to make of this film's ending (and other similar moments in Cronenberg's work)? What if the vaginal slit that appears in Max's abdomen during the film opens not into his bodily interior but, instead, into a new ontology – the ontology of the Real? What if *Videodrome* ends not with Max's death but with his movement beyond the Symbolic and into the Real, beyond signification, beyond ontology?

This paper seeks to explore a select number of Cronenberg's mid-period works in relation to what Slavoj Žižek refers to as the pre-ontological, a realm of signification that elsewhere links to the abject but which, equally, might provide a glimpse of the unsettling Real that so many of Cronenberg's protagonists hurtle powerlessly towards and which lurks just outside the frame of his narratives, hinted at but always escaping our standard ontological practices.

### Introduction

For those of us of a certain generation or, perhaps, inclination, the cinema of David Cronenberg brings with it specific associations, these necessarily adapting and evolving as his own work has mutated over the course of his career. From his earliest works (*Shivers* [1975], *Rabid* [1977], *The Brood* [1979]) which helped establish the body horror genre,

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Scott Wilson is a Senior Lecturer at Unitec, Institute of Technology in Auckland. He is the author of *The Politics of Insects: David Cronenberg's Cinema of Confrontation* (2011) and has recently edited a volume on extreme and unpopular music, *Music at the Extremes: Essays on Sounds Outside the Mainstream* (2015). He can be reached at [swilson2@unitec.ac.nz](mailto:swilson2@unitec.ac.nz).

though a middle period which saw his focus move towards exploring increasingly interior vistas and pathologies (including *Scanners* [1981], *Videodrome* [1983], *Dead Ringers* [1988], *M. Butterfly* [1993], *Crash* [1996], *Spider* [2002]), into his more mature and, it must be said, commercially successful, offerings (*A History of Violence* [2005], *Eastern Promises* [2007], *A Dangerous Method* [2011], *Cosmopolis* [2012], *Maps to the Stars* [2014]), Cronenberg's cinema has consistently explored a coherent range of narrative and thematic concerns. Throughout his career, cinema has always been for him more than mere entertainment; the film is a site wherein ideas circulate and play, are explored and, especially, are pushed to and beyond their normative limits.

The epithets Cronenberg has been called over his forty-one year career, along with the various accusations made against his perceived attacks on propriety and good taste demonstrate the manner with which his films have always sought to examine ways of experiencing the world that, for many, are better left alone. So, more than just a place where characters, standing in for ideological positions and rhetorical postures, speak in the absence of the mouths of others, Cronenberg's films together represent a career-long concerted examination of the limits of the experiential. In his films, the extents and boundaries of agency – of the subject and, often, of the body of the subject – are microscopically tested, always in order to reveal how little we settle for when we settle for the desires and satisfactions of others.

Before I turn my attention to Cronenberg and specifically the intersection between his 1983 film *Videodrome* and Jacques Lacan's concept of the Real, I think it's worth briefly considering the centrality of Lacan to film theory, broadly, and specifically to that swathe of critical theory influenced by Continental philosophy. Whilst the ideas and directions opened up by semiotics, Marxist and feminist theories, amongst others, have been pivotal to the development of film criticism in the contemporary era, only Lacanian-influenced film theory has managed to achieve some semblance of dominance in the hotly contested arena of cinema analysis. Todd McGowan, in his 2003 article 'Looking for the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and Its Vicissitudes' notes that the editors (Carroll and Bordwell) of the 1996 volume *Post-Theory* simply refer to Lacanian film analysis as 'the theory', so central had it become to analysis of that period. Such theorisation relied, and continues to largely rely, on Lacan's decisive conference presentation (and later essay) from 1949 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience' (Lacan 1988). Here Lacan explores the ways in which an infant's subjectivity emerges in an aggressive relationship to its encounters with its own image which, as a reflection, is always perceived to be more whole, more advanced than the nascent subject experiences itself to be. However, Lacan's identification of the three registers of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real, offers another route for considering cinema in relation to the perceiving subject. Dylan Evans (1996) notes that:

The imaginary, the symbolic and the real are profoundly heterogeneous, each referring to quite distinct aspects of psychoanalytic experience. [...] They are not mental forces like the three agencies in Freud's structural model. However, they are primarily concerned with mental functioning, and together they cover the whole field of psychoanalysis. (135)

It is to these concepts, and particularly to the relationship cinematic representation (as participating in both the Imaginary and the Symbolic) and the perceiving subject might have to the Real, which Lacan identifies as the site of 'that which resists symbolisation absolutely' (Lacan 1988, 66), that this discussion is focused, with particular attention paid to the ways in which these might be represented cinematically as part of the experience of the diegetic characters.

To return to Cronenberg, transformation is central to his cinema and across the development of his career, this focus on transformation is the one stable element that ties his work into a recognisable oeuvre, even as the superficial details and narrative concerns alter and shift across decades and audiences. The focus of individual films may move from the body that develops an alien agency through to the subject who succumbs to nascent desires, but transformation remains the focus of the text. Consequently, Cronenberg's films are filled with people who are changing; sometimes at their own behest but more usually, because of the express will of some other part of themselves not usually considered as a site of agency. As Cronenberg notes, 'I think change itself is fairly neutral, but it contains the potential to become either positive or negative' (Kermode 1992), so that the transformations his protagonists undergo become located on that spectrum of value only as a result of their intersection with the many disciplinary structures that govern our complex social interactions. Elsewhere Cronenberg explains that:

It's my conceit that perhaps some diseases perceived as diseases which destroy a well-functioning machine, in fact change the machine into a machine that does something else, and we have to figure out what it is that the machine now does. Instead of having a defective machine, we have a nicely functioning machine that just has a different purpose. (op. cit. in Newman 1988, 116)

This facet of his cinema has not gone unnoticed. Ramsey and Wilson comment that:

[i]t has been widely observed that what David Cronenberg "disturbs" is the institutional: order, systems, rules. His films thematise the transgression of boundaries of all kinds – biological, psychological, emotional, sexual, social and political. (Ramsey & Wilson 1993/4)

This consistency of focus means that Cronenberg's body of work can be summed and as what Chris Rodley refers to as the 'Cronenberg Project' (Rodley 1997, xv), an undertaking Cronenberg himself defines as a continuous attempt to 'show the unshowable, speak the unspeakable' (Rodley 1997, 43). Of course, while I agree that Cronenberg's project does do these things, suffice it to say that there is more at work in the cinema of David Cronenberg, not least of which is the way such transformation functions to reveal a host of structures that surround, govern, control and, if need be, punish transformation and the transforming individual. Thus, in the face of a dominant cinematic mainstream long wedded to maintaining the most conservative of hegemonic positions, Cronenberg's cinema provides moments where we spectators are asked to break this hold, where we are encouraged to look through the image, look beyond it or, more precisely, look beyond its ideological and disciplinary horizon and towards the very limits of the image's ability to signify.

As a consequence, this article seeks to explore those limits of signification in line with a few slender examples from Cronenberg's so-called 'project' and in relation to Lacan's concept of the Real, in order to understand how and why these films, and *Videodrome* in particular, so trouble the limits of the frame, consistently developing narratives that require representation both at and as the limits of the possible, the showable and speakable.

### **Videodrome**

*Videodrome* is the story of Max Renn (James Woods), director and operator of a small cable television station that specialises in softcore pornography. Bored by the state of his station's content, Max complains that 'It's too soft. [...] I'm looking for something that will break through. Something tough' (Cronenberg 1983). Renn is quickly alerted to the presence of a rogue television signal – the 'Videodrome' – which appears to be a hardcore snuff television show comprised solely of torture and murder. From here, Max's life appears to collapse in on itself as the lines between his lived reality, his developing sado-masochistic relationship with local radio personality Nikki Brand (Debbie Harry), and the sexually violent hallucinations he begins to suffer, collide in a conspiracy-driven sequence of events that results in Max murdering several people before, at the televised urging of the now seemingly dead Nikki, Max puts a mutated gun to his temple, utters the phrase 'Long Live the New Flesh' and pulls the trigger.

Central to my discussion is the manner with which *Videodrome* ends. This film concretely links the blurring of lines between the protagonist's experience of the film's diegesis, and an audiences' understanding of that experience as either subjective or objective, to the presence and then removal of the various formal mechanisms used to indicate the protagonist's experiential status. Thus, by the time we arrive at the final gunshot, the certainty of this event is undermined and, as I will explore, the end of the film might not be the end at all.

Similar cinematic and narrative devices are at work in a number of Cronenberg's films where the structure of the diegetic reality of the cinematic world is, somehow, rendered permeable and the boundary between representations of objective and subjective experience is breached. For example, as the protagonists of *eXistenZ* (1999) move through the various nested diegeses that constitute the game spaces that must be traversed, the framing shots of the game pod technologies that make these shifts possible are removed as the narrative progresses, the better to help us, alongside the protagonists, lose track of what might constitute 'diegesis zero'. *Spider* (2002), which seeks to replicate the protagonist's movement away from a stable experience of reality, similarly undermines the impermeability of the diegesis by collapsing Spider's fantasies of his childhood into his experience of adulthood, without providing visible framing mechanisms to keep the audience located, even as the protagonist is increasingly lost. This means that *Videodrome* both launches and is engaged in a refining of the project that Cronenberg increasingly explores from this point forwards: rather than simply utilising the frame in order to report the experiences of the protagonist, he seeks to provide his audience with an experience that matches that of the protagonist (and, necessarily, the protagonist's encounter with their Symbolic, Imaginary and Real).

Thus Cronenberg's project does more than simply use story elements of character positions as a way of politely exploring the limits of representation. The use of formal techniques of editing, cinematography and sound design – in effect the ontological devices of cinema itself – disrupts any positioning of audience members in a stable ideological position, forcing them to become aware of the variety of devices at work in the production of the text they are consuming. This is never so simple as just revealing the cinematic apparatus at work, although the effect, a disruption of the conditions of suture, is similar. So with *Videodrome*, we see the convenient fictions of narrative linearity, causality and full resolution – the material substance of cinema fantasy – dispensed with altogether, entirely in keeping with Max's own experience. As a consequence, prior to the point at which the filmic text – if not Max's journey – ends, *Videodrome* has provided its audience with a series of increasingly troubling moments; troubling insofar as what is troubled is our ability to understand the stability of the film's own sense of its diegetic boundaries and the manner with which the story it is seeking to tell can be represented within the ontologies of that world and of ours.

### **The Pre-Ontological and the Real**

Necessarily, unavoidably, this discussion of the ways in which Lacan might provide insight into the work of David Cronenberg must detour into a consideration of Slavoj Žižek, described by some as 'the most formidably brilliant exponent of psychoanalysis, indeed of cultural theory in general, to have emerged in Europe for some decades' (Eagleton 2005, 200). Žižek needs to be mentioned because it is through his interpretations of Lacan's ideas

– chiefly in the volumes *Enjoy Your Symptom* and *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan... But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock* (both 1992) – that the role of Lacanian psychoanalysis in relation to popular culture was (re-) invigorated and, especially, focused on the manner with which cinema, as a social object, reflects, generates and circulates conditions of knowledge and subjective formations as naturalised parts of the viewing and consuming experience.

It is in the books mentioned above that Žižek develops and expands on his notion of the pre-ontological and his mobilisation of Lacan's register of Real in relation to cinema. These two concepts differ in their action, function and purpose, but together they offer a way of understanding why *Videodrome*, alongside a large number of Cronenberg's other films, features moments where there is a gap, elision or caesura where we might ordinarily have expected narrative, character development or spectacle. For Žižek, the cinematic pre-ontological is that conceptual filmic space from which disruptive forces, however realised, emerge, into which they descend and in which, so long as they remain there, are contained and unthreatening. Thus a primary difference in Žižek's formulation between the pre-ontological and the Real, as he translates and develops Lacan's discussion of this register, lies in the manner with which material from the pre-ontological, once present, can be accounted for by the design of the diegesis into which it has intruded. Pre-ontological irruptions are troubling because they are unexpected but once present they are or can be accounted for, in essence 'ontologised'. For example, Žižek utilises the sudden appearance of the Mother Superior in the bell tower at the end of Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) as such an example. Nothing in the narrative prepares us for her appearance, yet once there, she can be retrospectively understood as part of the diegesis that has, in effect, closed around the hole of her emergence, providing post hoc evidence for her role. This is not to suggest that the pre-ontological realm is simply a part of the diegesis, an off-screen space waiting to be realised; it is, instead, a way of comprehending the relationship of both diegetic and narrative material to the frames of reference that allow meaning to be made of them.

This means that our experience of the pre-ontological in relation to diegetic events is one of interpretation within the diegetic frame already provided. With the example above, the audience is forced by the narrative drive for resolution to provide a post hoc explanation for the Mother Superior's appearance, quickly using the fact that the film's climax takes place at a convent as the justification for the presence of a character whose presence at which had not previously been diegetically hinted.

In comparison, the Real, when compared to the other registers of the Symbolic and the Imaginary,

is also the most unfathomable because it is fundamentally impenetrable and cannot be assimilated to the Symbolic order of language and communication

(the fabric of daily life); nor does it belong to the Imaginary, the domain of images with which we identify and which capture our attention. (Wieczorek 2000, viii)

To draw this diversion back to Cronenberg, we now have two ways of conceiving of his demand to 'show the unshowable, speak the unspeakable'. The first of these uses Žižek's notion of the pre-ontological and can be thought of as a means of accounting for devices (be they diegetic or formal) that irrupt into the text from beyond its 'normal' boundaries. These irruptions, while unexpected, unwelcome and difficult to fathom, can nevertheless be made meaningful, regardless of how uncomfortable that meaning might be. The pre-ontological material is therefore political insofar as its appearance on-screen forces the spectator to forego pleasurable immersion (suture) and become aware (often painfully so) of the material actions of the film apparatus that has positioned her as a spectator. Extra-diegetic material from the Real, in contrast, cannot be signified and can only be approached obliquely. Yet the Real haunts the Cronenbergian text and, indeed, often functions as the point at which his narratives must close.

For *Videodrome*, the beyond – by which I mean beyond a normative cinematic ontology located at the intersection between the Symbolic and Imaginary – is accessed via the vaginal slit that appears in Max's abdomen. Narratively, this slit, which we are led to believe occurs as a result of the Videodrome television signal, is the means by which Max is programmed by the directors of Videodrome, who insert video cassettes containing what are presumably instructions, routines, discourses of narrative and diegetic action to be played out by the now subservient Max. However, the first interaction between Max and his newly developed abdominal vagina is also the moment at which the standard diegetic boundaries between subject and object and, especially, between the diegetically ontological and pre-ontological are troubled. This scene has Max, shirtless, watching the pirated Videodrome signal and scratching an inflamed welt on his stomach with the barrel of the pistol he carries with him. In a series of cascading shots, the welt flexes and opens and Max, initially horrified, cannot but – at the same time – succumb to the desire to explore this new opening, eventually pushing his entire forearm into the pulsing slit. This sequence, coded as a subjective experience of Max's through the use of score, camera angles and editing pace, reaches a crescendo when Max realises that he cannot remove his arm before suddenly managing to pull it free – at which point the film's form similarly settles back into a calm place of objective spectatorship. However, and to Max's horror, the gun has gone, the vagina has vanished and the diegesis is now apparently short one object.

The gun eventually returns, however, if we are to assume that the fleshy and moist 'hand-gun' that Max pulls from the vaginal opening is the same gun, transformed, that went into it. The fact that Max's neo-vagina seems to be fond of puns and word play is significant here. Indeed, in the scene before Max's assumption of the new flesh at the film's conclusion,

one of the Videodrome conspirators pushes his fist into Max's opening, only to have it similarly transformed so that, when withdrawn, it has become a 'hand grenade'. These examples demonstrate that whatever lies beyond the opening of Max's uniquely masculine vagina might not constitute the pre-ontological, insofar as these objects, once brought forward, are unprecedented or without analogue in the diegesis that must then find a standard Symbolic ontology (through the use of word play) that explains their presence. Instead, I suspect that the reason these objects are so transformed – the gun and hand into 'hand-gun', the empty fist into 'hand grenade' – is that the passage into the ontological structures of the film's diegesis (and necessarily our own interpretive activities) and which in effect 'ontologises' them, renders them comprehensible by locating them within a representational schema that allows us to make sense of them, to recognise them as objects with a narrative function, shrinking these irruptions from the overwhelming totality of what Žižek refers to as 'the Thing' (and which might correspond to a Real for the diegesis) to the more manageable and residual '*objet (petit) a*'. The passage into the diegesis, in effect, tames the objects, renders them sensible for once they are ontologised they can function as objects of desire (and of interpretation). Yet they remain horrifying, covered in fleshy pulp and moist reminders of Max's interior and it is this remainder that suggests that Max provides the corridor from the Real to the ontological.

So, the hand-gun and hand-grenade are all pulled raw and bloody from Max's neo-vagina which is, it must be said, not the only neo-genital extrusion in Cronenberg's corpus. One of these objects, the gun, whose function is literalised by whatever lies within the abdominal slit, is transformed in a manner that links its function inexorably to the person who possesses it; the second – the hand grenade – is an entirely new object grafted onto – or into – the diegesis by the actions of the neo-vagina and whatever it opens into, through Max. Consequently we can see that those objects that are transformed by, or which emerge from, Max's wound, are granted an ontological status by the demands of the film's standard diegesis and are as such utilised by the narrative. As with items or events from the pre-ontological, once present in the Symbolic and Imaginary, they can be 'ontologised', sutured into representation and effectively, if temporarily, solved. However, unlike Hitchcock's *Mother Superior* they have no precedent, which leads me to suspect that they serve, and represent, another function – that of the Real or, at the very least, that of Max Renn's Real<sup>1</sup> which, as it enters the structures of representation, can only be partially glimpsed and contained, and which consistently avoids definitive ontological solutions.

### **Other Ontologies**

Other glimpses of ontological structures that might attempt to represent the Real (or, at the very least, a Real for the diegetic ontology of the films they occur within) are present in Cronenberg's cinema, the most obvious of which is that status of being Seth Brundle, in

Cronenberg's adaptation of *The Fly* (1986), refers to as 'the politics of insects'. In the film's centerpiece, Brundle asks:

Have you ever heard of insect politics? Neither have I. Insects . . . don't have politics. They're very brutal. No . . . compassion. No . . . compromise. We can't trust the insect. I'd like to become the first insect politician. (Cronenberg 1986)

Here, Brundle is drawing attention to the simultaneous existence of other ontological systems beyond that of our own; possible registers that appear cruel only insofar as they are so comprehensively alien as to be unrecognisable, and unrecognisable not because they have no ontology but because their ontology is not ours and cannot be 'ontologised' in the way the *objets (petit) a* of *Videodrome* can, however partially, be understood and made sensible. Thus, as Brundle transforms into the Brundlefly, subject to an alien agency given voice by the malfunctioning teleportation pods that are the film's MacGuffins, the expressions of Brundle's desires become harder to comprehend; they are certainly expressed by the narrative's protagonist, but as Brundle drifts towards the alien ontology of insects which, for this film at least, I argue, occupies the space of the Real for the participants in its diegesis, these desires become less and less recognisable to the human subjects of the film and, therefore, to us. In this vein it is important to note that the narrative of *The Fly*, the film that follows *Videodrome* in Cronenberg's career trajectory, ends with the narratively justified mercy-killing of Brundle at the point where he might otherwise have sloughed off the shackles of this ontology for another order of representation. The narrative approaches the complexity of *Videodrome*, only to retreat from it in the final moments, thereby restoring the fantasy of the original narrative's conditions. And while other Cronenberg films have explored similarly transformative themes and utilised differently transgressive formal methods, the threat to the overarching fantasy structures of western cinema that *Videodrome* might have represented has, by and large, not been repeated since. McGowan explains this more fully by noting that:

... no film, even the most vehemently anti-Hollywood movie, can avoid fantasy altogether. In its very form, film necessarily involves recourse to fantasy. However, films do vary in their relationship to fantasy because film is not equivalent to fantasy but rather employs it. Hence, the ideological valence of a film depends not on whether or not it employs fantasy-one cannot entirely opt out of it – but on its relationship to fantasy. (37)

Necessarily, in my attempt to suggest that the beyond-representation of the Real has form of some kind, I must content with Žižek himself who categorically states:

... in effect, [...] there is no ontology of the Real: the very field of ontology, of the positive order of Being, emerges through the subtraction of the Real. (Žižek 2013, 958)

Yet, in due deference, we must also note that the evidence from *Videodrome*, at the very least, suggests that the ontology of that sector of the Borromean knot that the cinematic subject is aware of is not negatively defined by the subtraction of the Real; instead, the addition of material – the hand gun, the hand grenade, Max's own actions as a result of his vaginal programming – forces the ontology of the diegesis to expand in order to incorporate these small intrusions into itself and that these irruptions – which are not pre-ontological because of their lack of diegetic or narrative precedent – come into the ontology of the diegesis from that sector which remains outside the direct access of the film's subjects. As a consequence, the word-play inherent in these irruptions suggests a structuring presence that, for Cronenberg's films at least, exists to provide a mechanism by which the material intrusions from the Real might better be incorporated; still troubling, still unexpected, but able to be at-least partially ontologised. Such hints are present in *The Fly's* suggestion of an insect politics and, equally, in the way Cronenberg's *Crash* (1996) finishes with the promise that the next, almost certainly fatal, automobile accident will be the one to push the protagonists beyond representation and into new forms of desire and satisfaction that have no representational languages or ontologies that we might recognise.

### **In Conclusion: I Am the Video Word Made Flesh**

By way of a conclusion, what then might be made of *Videodrome's* deliberately inconclusive ending? Many commentators favour a more decisive ending in which Max's suicide is unquestioned, while also supporting the plain fact that, as Rodley makes clear:

*Videodrome* all but abandons a complex and fascinating conspiratorial plot some forty minutes in, for a relentlessly first-person point of view. As Max begins to lose any sense of reality or the ability to control his situation, so the movie willfully disintegrates along with its confused protagonist. (94)

It seems to me that such a negotiation – locking the film into a decisive conclusion despite the increasingly ambiguous narrative that leads to Max's supposed suicide – works to limit what is truly disruptive about this film: the fact that it forces its audience to the very limits of interpretation and intelligibility, confronting them with the possibility for and of transformation beyond the ability of discourse to recount, represent and, hence, contain.

To assume that Max has died effectively locks out any other interpretation, including any discussion of what the 'new flesh' might be and how it fits into what we have seen. If Max commits suicide, then his hallucinations are reduced to being merely that, when the formal devices utilised by the film to deliver them to us indicate that they have a far greater

importance. What is at stake, then, in supporting an ambiguous ending, is any chance of understanding the manner with which we might usefully view the film's exploration of those Borromean boundaries it so effectively troubles. Thus, within the discussion developed above, the material that intrudes on the Symbolic and Imaginary of *Videodrome* comes into the film's diegesis from the Real bearing traces of an ontology – a politics of insects perhaps – such that it can be partially ontologised upon contact with the representational structures at work in the continuous construction of the cinematic text.

And as for Max? Armed as we are with this manner of interpreting the film, we can see now that Max's story does not finish with the fade to black and gunshot that ends the film; Max's narrative and the film text of *Videodrome* part ways because what occurs next as Max assumes his 'new flesh' and continues his assault on the structures of the Videodrome cannot be represented in this ontological framework. The film ends not because there is nothing left to say, but because what is uttered next is spoken through the unspeakable, shown through the unshowable. Max transcends our ontology, that which we share with the diegesis of the film, and moves into the ontology of insects, the ontology of the new flesh and, perhaps, an ontology of the Real.

## Notes

1. It is worth considering the fact that what we are encountering in *Videodrome* is Max's encounter with his Real, not our encounter with our own. Max's Real is constructed for him within the film by the ontological structures that generate *Videodrome* meaning that his Real – that which cannot be represented for him, is represented for us by our Symbolic. What we encounter in *Videodrome* is the Real of *Videodrome*. That Real might hint at our own, and provide discomfort as a result, but it is not the same as an encounter with our own Real.

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