

# The Imagination of Deterioration: Human Exceptionalism, Climate Change, and the Weird Eco-Horror of David Cronenberg's *Crimes of the Future*

M. Keith Booker

Volume 6, Number 1, June 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1101387ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1101387ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Montréal Monstrum Society

ISSN

2561-5629 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Booker, M. K. (2023). The Imagination of Deterioration: Human Exceptionalism, Climate Change, and the Weird Eco-Horror of David Cronenberg's *Crimes of the Future*. *Monstrum*, 6(1), 28–45. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1101387ar>

© M. Keith Booker, 2023



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

**The Imagination of Deterioration:  
Human Exceptionalism, Climate Change, and the Weird Eco-Horror of  
David Cronenberg's *Crimes of the Future***

M. Keith Booker

To an extent, David Cronenberg's *Crimes of the Future* (2022) represents a rousing return to the body horror with which its director exploded onto the independent-film scene in the 1970s and 1980s. In this case, though, the film updates Cronenberg's earlier concerns via an especially strong focus on the impact of environmental deterioration on human beings and human society, placing the film in the realm of eco-horror as well. The action of the film occurs in a decaying near-future world in which climate change and other worsening conditions have led not only to a general decline in the quality of life (both material and emotional) but also to strange (and sometimes macabre) mutations in the human body itself. The strangeness of these climate-related mutations places *Crimes of the Future* in the realm of ecological horror, and especially of the recent turn toward the "weird" in eco-horror. Nature seems to have been almost obliterated in this future world, but these weird mutations, beyond the control of any of the human forces in the film, challenge the notion that humans stand apart from a nature that they can easily understand, dominate, and control. These mutations also contribute to a growing sense in the future world of the film that things are getting out of hand and that there is no identifiable fix for the general deterioration of conditions, a sense that resonates with widespread attitudes in the world of the early 2020s.

**Climate Change, Evolution, and the Myth of Human Exceptionalism**

Although Cronenberg's film gives us very few details regarding the social and political organization of the society in which *Crimes of the Future's* action takes place, it is clear that that conditions are rather grimly dystopian, a fact that is largely conveyed through the depiction of decaying material conditions in this future world, where virtually everything seems seedy and rundown, in a state of total decay. There also suggestions of nefarious workings of official power in

this world, especially via the activities of the rather sinister New Vice Unit, primarily represented in the film by Detective Cope (Welket Bungué). However, what is “new” about the “vice” that this organization is meant to combat is that it is less about the conventional violation of officially accepted codes of conduct and more about a revolt of nature against the human systems and conduct that have done so much damage to the natural world during the period of the Anthropocene.

Importantly, this revolt includes even human biology. The film’s central character, Saul Tenser (Viggo Mortensen), is suffering from an increasingly common condition known as “Accelerated Evolution Syndrome,” in which individuals experience a variety of unexplained mutations, leading to biological changes in individuals that might otherwise take place over many generations of evolution<sup>1</sup>. In particular, Tenser has started growing new internal organs, which his partner Caprice (Léa Seydoux), a former trauma surgeon, then surgically removes before spectators as a form of performance art. Individuals with conditions such as Tenser’s are clearly believed to be a threat to the status quo, though it is also the case that Tenser is working as an undercover agent for the New Vice Unit, which is seeking to suppress these new forms of mutation, beginning with the work of their subsidiary, the supposedly top-secret “National Organ Registry,” which has been charged with tracking the epidemic of mutations such as Tenser’s. This registry is staffed by the investigators Wippet (Don McKellar) and Timlin (Kristen Stewart), who serve as important characters officially charged with attempting to squelch, or at least administer, the phenomenon of accelerated evolution.

The film also features underground resistance forces—led by Lang Dotrice (Scott Speedman)—that embrace accelerated evolution and even hope to further it through surgical modifications that give them the ability to digest plastics and other pollutants—and thus to help cope with the environmental contamination that is perhaps the single most important defining characteristic of this future world. However, far from serving as advocates for the natural environment, Dotrice and the rebels of the film are proponents of thorough modernization. Thus, Dotrice declares their commitment to the notion that it is time for “human evolution to sync up with human technology,” envisioning a human future “at peace and harmony with the techno world that we’ve created.”

---

<sup>1</sup> Evolution doesn’t really occur during the lifetimes of individuals, of course, but *Crimes of the Future* is not the sort of film that is concerned with scientific accuracy. It is essentially a satire and is willing to stretch the science in order to make satirical points.

One might compare here the “New Humans” of Paolo Bacigalupi’s award-winning 2009 novel *The Windup Girl*. These genetically-engineered humans have been designed to serve various human needs and function virtually as slaves, though they are identified in the text as a possible key to a better future in which the challenges posed by climate change and resource depletion have been overcome, because they can also be designed to function better than conventional humans in the new climate-changed world. Thus, unlike the mutations of *Crimes of the Future*, the possible changes in the human race envisioned in this novel are intentional and controlled, adding stronger energies to the text, though it is not entirely clear how these changes would benefit the natural world.<sup>2</sup>

The natural world in *Crimes of the Future* doesn’t just lack advocates: it has been virtually obliterated, leaving only a completely manmade world of the kind Fredric Jameson has associated with postmodernism and late capitalism, when “modernization triumphs and wipes the old completely out: nature is abolished along with the traditional countryside and traditional agriculture” (Jameson 1991, 311). However, whereas Jameson envisions a completely modernized post-natural world of superficial “glittering simulacra” that cover up a rotten capitalist core (recalling the “society of the spectacle” of Guy Debord), *Crimes* is set in a post-postmodern world in which modernity, its emergence having been completed, is now in a state of decay, the rot of this core moving outward, reminding us that the “abolition” of nature is likely to have dire ultimate consequences. Thus, rather than the dazzling (but deceptive and alienating) consumerist spectacles discussed by Debord, this society is reduced to the degraded spectacles of public surgery as performed by Tenser and Caprice (and others).

One sign in the film of the separation between humans and nature is the fact that there are absolutely no nonhuman animals in the film. In such a decaying urban environment, one might expect to find scurrying rats or cockroaches, but there are none. In the few exterior scenes, there are not even birds. No one has pets, as far as we can see. The film does not stipulate that nonhuman animals have literally been obliterated in this future world, but this lack of animals can be taken as a sign of the separation between humans and nature in the world of this film, a separation of the kind that any number of environmentalist scholars have seen as a major reason that humans have done so much damage to the climate and the rest of the natural world. In particular,

---

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed discussion of the relationship between these New Humans and climate change in *The Windup Girl*, see Booker (2023b).

Donna Haraway (2016) has emphasized an aspect of this phenomenon that involves the human lack of a sense of kinship with other animal species. The absence of nonhuman animal life in *Crimes of the Future* can be taken as an indication of this lack.

Instead of animals, what we do see in the film are lots of examples of technological devices whose parts look like weirdly distorted parts of the bodies of animals, as if to signify the complete colonization of the world of animals and nature by humans and their technology. This sort of transgression of the boundary between the biological and the technological has something of a Gothic feel (and has occurred frequently in the films of Cronenberg). But the clear environmental emphasis of *Crimes of the Future* places this transgression in this particular film within the specific context of environmentally conscious writing, as in Rune Graulund's description of the "Southern Reach" trilogy of Jeff VanderMeer as exemplifying "a general trend in environmental humanities responding to the conceptual and concrete problems of the Anthropocene with a recognition of the necessity to shed former supposed boundaries between nature and culture, human and nonhuman, individual and environment" (Graulund 2022, 60).

VanderMeer's work, of course, has generally been associated with the burgeoning genre of "weird" fiction, a speculative genre that has built on the earlier work of writers such as H. P. Lovecraft in such distinctive waves to have attracted the label "New Weird" from critics. In his introduction to the anthology that solidified the notion of the New Weird as a genuine literary phenomenon, VanderMeer himself suggests that the New Weird can be defined as

a type of urban, secondary-world fiction that subverts the romanticized ideas about place found in traditional fantasy, largely by choosing realistic, complex real-world models as the jumping off point for creation of settings that may combine elements of both science fiction and fantasy. New Weird has a visceral, in-the-moment quality that often uses elements of surreal or transgressive horror for its tone, style, and effects. (VanderMeer 2008, xvi)

This description clearly applies to *Crimes of the Future* quite well, even though the designation "New Weird" was originally associated mostly with literature, and especially the novels of writers such as VanderMeer, M. John Harrison, and China Miéville.

In point of fact, though, the success of the New Weird in fiction has helped to fuel a recent surge of weirdness in film and television, as well. For Roger Luckhurst, works of the weird are tied together by an ability to disorient their audiences, partly through combining the energies of science fiction, horror, and fantasy in a single work. Noting that the recent surge in the weird includes works of film and television, as well as fiction, he points out that filmmakers such as Yorgos Lanthimos and Athina Rachel Tsangari have particularly been associated with a “Weird Wave” in Greek film, while weirdness has become prominent even in popular television series, such as *Stranger Things* (2016) and the first season of *True Detective* (2014) (Luckhurst 2017, 1041–42; forthcoming). Discussing this Greek Weird Wave in film, incidentally, Wilson Holzhaeuser lists Cronenberg, along with David Lynch, Leos Carax, Todd Solondz, and Lars Von Trier, as directors who have long been considered “weird” because of the unsettling nature of their films, while acknowledging that Lanthimos and Tsangari have taken weirdness in some exciting new directions. It might also be worth noting that one of the most striking weird films of recent years is *Infinity Pool* (2023), directed by Cronenberg’s son Brandon Cronenberg.

Weird fiction has often focused on environmental themes, where its popularity as a form reflects the “weird reality” of the changing climate of our contemporary world (Weinstock 2022, 15). Indeed, as first popularized in a 2010 *New York Times* Column by Thomas Freidman, the term “global weirding” has sometimes been used as a substitute for the once-popular term “global warming.”<sup>3</sup> A key aspect of this (often Gothic) weirdness is the recognition that “anthropocentric beliefs in endless progress and the rightful dominance of the human species” need to be re-examined (Graulund 2022, 45). Weird fiction thus serves to undermine the centuries of rationalist attitudes that have convinced modern humans that knowledge of the natural world gives them the ability to dominate it<sup>4</sup>. Recent films such as Alex Garland’s *Annihilation* (2018, an adaptation of VanderMeer’s 2014 novel of the same title) and Ben Wheatley’s *In the Earth* (2021) take the weird into this environmentalist direction, featuring strange natural realms that humans cannot dominate with their logic and technology.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> For a collection of essays on weird fiction and global weirding, see the special issue of *Paradoxa* edited by Gerry Canavan and Andrew Hageman (2016).

<sup>4</sup> For representative essays on eco-horror with a Gothic inclination, see the collections edited by Smith and Hughes (2013) and by Edwards, Graulund, and Höglund (2022).

<sup>5</sup> For a reading of Garland’s *Annihilation* as an example of weird eco-horror, see Booker (2023a).

The virtual elimination of nature from the world of *Crimes of the Future* would appear to run contrary to this tendency in weird fiction. However, in this film nature re-emerges with a vengeance via the weird mutations that are occurring *inside* humans, thus completely deconstructing the notion that humans are the lords and masters of a natural world that is other to them. These mutations, in general, are the central driving force behind the action of the film. They are also completely out of the control of humans. In general, the mutations seem to occur at random, and even Tenser (regarded in the film by Timlin as a sort of artist of extra organ growth) admits that he has absolutely no ability to anticipate or control the emergence of his new organs, which can then be seen as nature's response to human-caused climate change, suggesting the way in which the results of climate change are so difficult to control or even predict.

Even the intentional "mutations" of Dotrice and the rebels ultimately get out of control when, in a surprising Lamarckian development, Lang's son Brecken (Sozos Sotiris) has apparently inherited the special digestive abilities that his father had attained through surgery. Brecken thus functions for the rebels as a sort of Chosen One, the Miracle Child who has the potential to change everything. When we learn that Brecken only eats "plastics and other synthetic things," the implication that the products of modern industrial technology have invaded his biology seems clear: plastics, after all, are the iconic form of a manmade material that is damaging to the environment. It is also not insignificant that synthetic plastics are made from crude oil, natural gas, and coal, the very fossil fuels that are the main drivers of climate change.

Brecken's inherited mutation (which actually involves a whole series of systemic mutations) was not an expected result of his father's surgeries. In fact, Brecken's unprecedented condition was a complete surprise to his father and the other rebels, illustrating the way in which the fundamental upheavals in this future world are not controlled (or even understood) by humans at all. Instead, they represent a turn toward the weird that has become an important current in recent eco-horror. Weirdness such as the novel mutations in *Crimes of the Future* suggests that, in fact, nature is far richer and stranger than is dreamt of in the rationalist philosophies of capitalist modernity. Indeed, Brecken's startling transformation is perhaps the weirdest turn in the entire film.

Of course, not everyone welcomes the sort of transformation represented by Brecken. Indeed, the authorities have formed the New Vice Unit because they are alarmed about mutations in general, and especially about the kind of changes being promoted by the rebels. As Detective Cope tells Tenser, "They are evolving away from the human path. It can't be allowed to continue." Meanwhile, the film begins with a shocking opening sequence in which Brecken

is ultimately murdered by his own mother, Djuna Dotrice (Lihi Kornowski), the estranged wife of Lang. When Tenser later suggests to her that he wouldn't kill his own son because he was a mutant, Djuna responds with an indication of the horror with which many in this society have responded to the rising tide of mutations, "But he wouldn't be your own son. He wouldn't even be a little kid." Asked what he *would* be, she says flatly, "A creature, a thing."

Djuna's reaction, like the work of the New Vice Unit in general, is clearly driven by a form of replacement theory, by the fear that these new humans might eventually come to replace unmutated humans. In this sense, the dystopian conditions that prevail in this society are highly reminiscent of the increasingly prominent fear among contemporary white Christian nationalist extremists that the United States (which they view as an inherently white Christian nation) is in danger of being overrun by dangerous hordes of nonwhite and non-Christian newcomers who immigrate to the United States in alarming numbers and then multiply at prodigious rates once they arrive, thus threatening to "replace" white Christians as the dominant demographic group in America.

One might here compare *Crimes of the Future* with Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* (2017), a novel that, in fact, has a great deal in common with *Crimes of the Future* in this sense, even though its satire is more specifically aimed at Christian Nationalist groups that respond to a wave of spontaneous mutations in the American population of the novel by seeking to seize control of the entire reproductive process in order to ensure that only unmutated babies, regarded as a contamination of the purity of the human race, will be delivered. Still, *Future Home* helps to illuminate *Crimes of the Future* because Erdrich makes it quite clear that the mutations occurring in her novel result from climate change and environmental degradation, something that is indicated less overtly in Cronenberg's film.

One particularly striking feature of the sudden acceleration of evolution in *Future Home of the Living God* is that it appears to function as a direct reversal of normal evolution, with humans (as well as other animal species) beginning rapidly to retrace their evolutionary paths back to primeval states. In short, Erdrich's novel directly recalls the racist notion of "degeneration," which became a huge source of popular anxiety in much of the Western world in the last years of the nineteenth century and first years of the twentieth. Fueled by widespread misunderstandings of Darwin's theory of evolution and propped up by the work of misguided thinkers such as Herbert Spencer and Max Nordau, degeneration theory was driven by fears that the white Europeans then colonizing Africa would come into contact with primitive peoples and cultures



that might somehow contaminate them and cause them (and European culture) to begin to evolve backward into a more primitive state.<sup>6</sup>

There is no indication that the mutations in *Crimes of the Future* involve backward evolution, but the history of degeneration theory indicates the way in which evolution and mutation have often been troubling to certain groups in society. Frequently, objections to the very notion of evolution have arisen for religious reasons because the well-established scientific fact of evolution clearly situates human beings in a relation of kinship with other animals rather than standing apart as a unique creation in the image of God. The opposition to accelerated evolution in *Crimes of the Future* does not seem to have anything to do with such religious beliefs, but it does have to do with the parallel belief that humans occupy a distinct position apart from the natural world, a belief that is threatened by the very notion that human beings can undergo biological evolution. The whole evolution motif in *Crimes*, then, has clear ecological implications because it disrupts the myth of human exceptionalism, a myth that has driven so much of the damage done to the natural environment by human activity.

The New Vice Unit is charged with attempting to gain control of the accelerated phenomenon by suppressing it, while the rebels attempt to gain control of the phenomenon by engineering it in a direction that is consistent with their ideology. But the ultimate weirdness of the mutations in *Crimes of the Future* suggests that they might not be so easy to control by either side. For example, the unanticipated mutations of the boy Brecken have escaped the control of both the New Vice Unit and the rebels, even if they would appear to work to the advantage of the rebels. As Detective Cope plainly states, having gained access to the body, “The kid was pretty weird inside.”

After Brecken is killed, Dotrice recruits Tenser and Caprice to perform a public autopsy of Brecken so that the boy’s marvelous mutations can be revealed to the world. Unfortunately, Caprice finds that the dead boy’s insides seem shockingly ugly and grotesquely contaminated, his organs heavily and bizarrely tattooed. By now an experienced performer, she then quickly improvises, continuing her narration, ending with an apparent Conradian literary allusion and attributing the weirdness of the boy’s insides to the fact that “the crudeness and the desperation and the ugliness of the world has seeped

---

<sup>6</sup> For an excellent survey of the degeneration scare of this period, see Kershner (1986).

inside even our youngest and most beautiful. And we see that the world is killing our children from the inside out. [...] Let us create a map that will guide us into the heart of darkness.” It turns out, however, that the strange condition of Brecken’s body as discovered in the autopsy has been caused by the fact that Timlin has replaced all of the boy’s original organs with the grotesque ones that Caprice finds in the autopsy, thus undermining the rebel project to present the boy as the harbinger of a new kind of humanity.

### **The Imagination of Deterioration: Structures of Feeling in *Crimes of the Future***

The mysterious mutations that are taking place in the world of *Crimes of the Future* contribute to a general sense of anxiety, a general sense that humans are no longer in control of their fates or of the natural world. These mutations, in general, are small ones, causing only minor changes in human biology. Still, the fact that even human biology has become unstable certainly suggests a state of crisis, possibly announcing the beginning of a slow decline in humanity’s status as the dominant species on the planet. Human dominance, in this film, is not approaching a sudden, cataclysmic end; it is beginning a gradual, extended decline. We are approaching, not a bang, but a whimper.

This kind of slow decline is, in fact, embodied in virtually every aspect of the film. For example, any number of visuals in the film directly suggest a state of material decay. Beginning with an opening shot that contains a rusting capsized ship, we see one image after another of wreckage and dysfunction. Meanwhile, every interior space we see in the film seems depressingly dark and grimy, badly in need of cleaning and painting, as if no one even bothers to make the effort to do such things any longer. All in all, then, the atmosphere that informs this “future” would seem to be a sort of allegorized version of the present time in which the film was released, a time in which a global pandemic that had just killed millions was still far from over, while a gnawing awareness (despite mass attempts at denial) of the increasing danger posed by climate change was creeping up even on those who preferred not to think about it.

The overall anxious atmosphere of decline in the film can perhaps best be understood by an appeal to the notion of “structures of feeling,” first put forth by Raymond Williams back in the 1970s. Noting how social and political analyses are often applied in past tense to phenomena that are now complete and can be studied and understood in terms of fully-formed concepts such as “ideology,” Williams argues that, in order to study the present, we need less

formal concepts, such as structures of feeling, which describe an overall sense of the world that is still evolving. For Williams, these structures of feeling “can be defined as social experiences in solution, as distinct from other social semantic formations which have been *precipitated* and are more evidently and more immediately available” (Williams 1977, 133–34).

Williams also suggests that structures of feeling, because they are vaguely defined and still evolving, are often first clearly stated in certain prophetic works of art. One thinks here, for example, of Susan Sontag’s (1966) well-known notion of the “imagination of disaster” to describe a general sense of impending sudden doom that resulted from the tensions of the Cold War, tensions that were widely reflected in the panoply of alien invasion and postapocalyptic narratives that dominated the science fiction films of the 1950s. In contrast, one might describe the structure of feeling of our own time as more of a vague uneasiness, as a sort of “imagination of deterioration,” informed principally by the slow violence<sup>7</sup> of climate change, but recently boosted by the COVID-19 pandemic as well<sup>8</sup>. We are also surrounded by crumbling infrastructure and a widespread sense that crime and the economy are bad and getting worse. Meanwhile, in the U.S., we live in a time of political crisis and charlatanism, with fascism lurking in the shadows, barely even bothering to disguise itself. *Crimes of the Future* addresses this structure of feeling in its general depiction of a deteriorating future world.

For Sontag, the science fiction films of the 1950s ultimately tended to allay our fears and thus to operate “in complicity with the abhorrent,” rather than to serve as a cry of protest against the insanity of the Cold War arms race (1966, 225). The open-ended *Crimes of the Future*, on the other hand, provides very little solace or reassurance. After all, the imagination of deterioration is thoroughly informed by a sense that things are not only bad but are getting worse and will continue to do so, leaving little room to imagine improvement. Moreover, while nuclear holocaust is easy to identify as the source of Sontag’s imagination of disaster, the imagination of deterioration results more from a gloominess the vagueness of which can be attributed to the simple fact that climate change is, in reality, an extremely large and complex phenomenon, along

---

<sup>7</sup> This widely cited term was coined by Rob Nixon (2011) to describe the slow pace (relative to things like nuclear holocaust) at which climate change is causing violent destruction around the world.

<sup>8</sup> There is no mention in the film of COVID or any other infectious disease—which makes sense, given that humans in this world are now generally impervious to infection. Yet the fact that Tenser generally wears a face mask when he goes out in public serves as a clear visual cue that COVID forms part of the mood of this film.

the lines of the “hyperobjects” discussed by Timothy Morton as being so vast that we simply can’t get our heads around them, thus evading comprehensive mapping and logical analysis much in the way such analysis is evaded by the weird and the Gothic (Morton 2013).

It is useful here to recall Fredric Jameson’s widely cited comments in relation to the popularity of postapocalyptic narratives due to what he sees as the failure of utopian imagination in the postmodern era. Writing in the early 1990s, Jameson refers specifically to the apocalyptic effects of climate change when he notes that “it seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism” (Jameson 1994, xii). Roughly a decade later, Jameson elaborates his point about postapocalyptic narratives by noting that, amid a general postmodern loss of the ability to think historically, contemporary culture has largely lost the ability to envision the end of capitalism and the rise of something better via any sort of normal historical process. As a result, our culture has become fascinated by visions of the destruction of civilization itself as the only way to end capitalism. As Jameson puts it (in a widely quoted, but somewhat enigmatic, declaration), “Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world” (Jameson 2003, 76).

I would argue that the imagination of deterioration is the next stage in the decline of the historical imagination described by Jameson. In particular, *Crimes of the Future* suggests that we have now reached the stage when we can no longer even imagine the end of the world and can instead imagine only a slow, inevitable decline that continues forever, with no conclusion in sight. There is no indication that the decaying world of *Crimes of the Future* is the result of some cataclysmic event so much as the slow and steady decline of the natural environment, accompanied by a concomitant decline in public social and political structures and rise in personal pessimism. Thus, the imagination of deterioration is far more pessimistic than the imagination of disaster: the latter of these visions posits an apocalypse that might lead to rebirth and renewal; the former posits nothing but more of the same ongoing deterioration.

One of the key signs of deterioration in the world of *Crimes of the Future* is the strange state of that world’s technologies. Technology, after all, has been one of the key drivers of modernity from the Industrial Revolution onward, both in terms of dramatic improvements in quality of life and in terms of the environmental effects that drive climate change and threaten to make the earth uninhabitable. Though the title suggests that the film takes place in the future,

the world of the film certainly doesn't seem futuristic, because it lacks the gleaming future technologies that we associate with science fiction, substituting instead grotesque Cronenbergian technologies that seem to belong in a horror film. When we do see more conventional technological devices in the film, they do not seem futuristic at all, including a couple of shots of antique-looking CRT television sets. These sets serve not as a sign that the action might actually be set in our past, so much as a reminder that the future we are looking at is not the gleaming, utopian one of classic Gernsbackian science fiction. It is a future in which conditions, technological and otherwise, have severely declined, a dystopian future that recalls the retro technology of something like Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985)<sup>9</sup>, though with the added Cronenbergian touch that much of the technology looks so biological. The message seems to be clear: we cannot count on technology alone to save us. Technology, in fact, might be a big part of the problem.

Films, of course, have been warning us of the dangers of encroaching technology for a long time. One thinks, for example, of Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) and its iconic image of the poor Tramp being fed through the gears of a factory machine like film through a projector. Indeed, it is significant that one of the key devices that warn of the dehumanizing potential of technology in *Modern Times* is the "Billows Feeding Machine," a device that is designed automatically to feed workers while they stay at work on the line, thus eliminating the need for lunch breaks. This machine thus represents the ultimate in the use of technology to exploit workers. Predictably, it goes berserk, pummeling the Tramp and leaving him covered with food. The automatic feeding chairs in *Crimes of the Future* don't work much better, adding an additional note of horror through their skeleton-like appearance and through their even more invasive activity, which includes manipulating the entire body during the feeding process, supposedly to optimize digestion, given that digestion is another of the natural things that doesn't seem to be functioning well in this decaying world.

These chairs remind us that most of the technological devices that we see in *Crimes of the Future* look back to Cronenberg's earliest body horror films, though their strange hybrid appearance, seemingly combining technology and biology, is perhaps most directly reminiscent of the devices in *eXistenZ* (1999), which strongly infuses its body horror with science fiction. In *Crimes of the Future*, though, this combination, more than in Cronenberg's earliest films, points to

---

<sup>9</sup> And, of course, the retro technologies of *Brazil* clearly riff on the generally depressed conditions that prevail in Oceania in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949).

the way technology has corrupted nature, which is one of the film's clearest signs that we are looking at a film in which human technological development has invaded and infected the natural world so thoroughly that they can no longer be separated. Meanwhile, this process comes at a cost to humans, who have also been infected by technology, even if they can no longer be infected by microbes. The message is clear: we cannot change the natural world with technology without also suffering repercussions that change humans because humans cannot be separated from nature.

The imagination of deterioration in *Crimes of the Future* reflects the fact that climate change is impacting human psychology, as well as biology. One of the key consequences of late capitalist society that Jameson sees reflected in postmodern art is what he calls the "waning of affect," a general decline in the ability to experience genuinely deep emotional connections that, for Jameson is related to the psychic fragmentation of postmodern subjects, leaving them too unstable to be able to feel and experience things as deeply as people once did. In *Crimes of the Future*, the most obvious allegorical indicator of this sort of waning of affect—which makes the Imagination of Deterioration more a structure of *unfeeling* than a structure of feeling—is the general loss of the ability to experience pain, which stands in as a sort of physical objective correlative for the inability to experience deep emotion. Individuals in the society are literally numb. But the imagination of deterioration that pervades this film also involves a deterioration of feeling in an emotional and psychological sense. One of the major consequences of the imagination of deterioration is the grim acceptance that conditions are getting worse and worse and that nothing much can be done about it. Meanwhile, much of the film involves attempts by individuals to somehow feel *something*, somewhat in the mode of the characters in Cronenberg's *Crash* (1996), who inflict horrendous injuries on themselves in automobile accidents as a way to try to connect with genuine feeling. In both *Crimes of the Future* and *Crash*, meanwhile, the quest to overcome numbness carries a powerful erotic energy, though eroticism in *Crimes* has also deteriorated, to the point that no one in the film ever actually has sex, despite the fact that so many things are sexually charged. Indeed, there are suggestions in the film that the conventionally erotic, along with so many other emotionally charged categories, has now deteriorated into obsolescence.

After Caprice finishes a show in which she makes a spectacle of Tenser's inner organs, the audience gathers for a reception with the artists. Timlin, who seems painfully shy, possibly autistic, approaches the recovering Tenser and says, in the weird robotic whisper-speak that Stewart employs throughout the film, "Surgery is sex, isn't it? You know it is. Surgery is the new sex." She is

clearly aroused, in her own affect-less way. She tells Tenser, in fact, that, when she was watching Caprice cutting into him, she wanted him to be cutting into her. “Art triumphs once again,” Tenser tells Caprice after Timlin leaves, suggesting the way in which representations that *suggest* sex have now replaced sex itself.

In a key later scene, the obviously starstruck Timlin corners Tenser in her office and explains that her work with the registry exposes her to a great deal of spectacle: “It’s, in our line of work, very easy to be dazzled by the glamour of the performance world, the charismatic people we meet, like you.” She tells him that he is the center of the world of the registry, that what he creates lights up her world. She describes Wippet and herself as “drab little bureaucratic insects,” who pale in comparison with a star like himself. The seeming reference to Kafka here is surely intentional on the part of Cronenberg, if not of Timlin, and much of this film has a Kafkaesque feel, even if it blows past Kafka in its vision of a world regimented to the point of absurdity. Then, in the film’s most straightforward attempt at a conventional sex scene, Timlin launches an awkward attempt at all-out seduction, beginning with a weird version of talking dirty, noting that Tenser’s “powerful gravitational field” is causing her to imagine “hurtling towards you, plunging into your black hole that pulls all light into it.” She keeps moving toward him as they continue to talk, while he keeps backing away, trying to change the subject. She’d love, she says, to have him inside her—or at least she says she’d love to be in that surgical module with him operating on her. Then she launches herself at him physically, inserting her fingers somewhat clumsily into his mouth as if searching for something. What she is searching for, apparently, is some kind of human connection. She withdraws her finger from his mouth and puts it in her own mouth; then, she even tries a conventional kiss, but he immediately backs off and starts loudly attempting to clear his throat, which has been trying to close up throughout the film. “I’m sorry,” he tells her. “I’m not very good at the old sex.”

And, lest we think that his lack of interest in a sexual connection with Timlin arises out of loyalty to Caprice, it should be noted that he and Caprice never have the “old sex,” either, but confine themselves to the machine-mediated new sex of surgery. In one scene, Tenser even uses their equipment to perform some minor “practice” surgery on a gloriously nude Caprice, to which she responds as if to sex. Tenser suggests that she might be in the next show, but she says, “Maybe this is just for us.” Tenser then removes his own clothing and joins her in the device, setting the control on automatic and lying with her as the machine cuts into both of them simultaneously. This is about as

close as they can come to any sort of genuine emotional connection, though there is another even more sexually explicit scene that occurs a few minutes later, after Tenser pays a call on another surgeon, Dr. Nasatir (Yorgos Pirpassopoulos). Recruiting Tenser to appear in an “Inner Beauty Pageant,” that will bring surgery to a new level of spectacle, Nasatir has installed a sort of abdominal zipper that will make it easier to access Tenser’s inner organs so that he can more easily compete in the pageant. Caprice is a bit nervous that Tenser might be moving away from her with this new installation, but he reassures her by suggesting that this zipper could never replace the sexual aspect of their interpersonal surgery. “Zippers have their own sex appeal,” she says suggestively (in a moment that takes the analogy between sex and surgery to a hilarious new level). She drops to her knees, unzips his surgical zipper, and starts to perform oral sex on the thusly opened wound. “Careful,” he says, “don’t spill.” In this moment, Tenser and Caprice do seem to establish an odd sexual connection, though its poignancy is undermined to some extent by the outrageous riff on oral sex. In any case, the moment also shows the extremes to which people in this world have to go to achieve any sort of connection, to feel anything at all.

There are, in short, few moments in *Crimes of the Future* that seem to provide respite from the imagination of deterioration. There is, however, a faint glimmer of hope in the film’s open-ended conclusion. The film ends on a note of uncertainty as Tenser decides to try eating one of the plastic/petroleum bars that the rebels have developed as a new food to nourish their modified bodies, a food that is deadly to unmodified humans. At first, Tenser reacts as if he might be dying as well. However, as the camera moves in to an extreme closeup of Tenser’s face, he opens his eyes and a hint of a smile flickers across his lips, suggesting the possibility that he himself might have somehow now evolved to be able to digest plastics. It is not clear whether this would be a good thing or a bad thing, but the imagination of deterioration is so grim that even uncertainty is an improvement.

## Conclusion

While *Crimes of the Future* is, in many ways, a return to the body horror of director David Cronenberg’s early films, it updates those films through its emphasis on issues of global concern in the early twenty-first century. For example, climate change seems to be the central driving force behind the weird mutations that drive the film’s body horror, making the film a work of eco-



horror, as well. Meanwhile, the horror of this film extends beyond the body. The film constructs a grim future world in which virtually everything seems to be in a state of decay, leading to a “structure of feeling” that clearly comments on our own present moment at the beginning of the 2020s. Analogous to the “imagination of disaster” that Susan Sontag identified in relation to Cold War narratives of the 1950s, this even more pessimistic structure of feeling can be described as the “imagination of deterioration.” It is marked by a general sense that most of our social and political systems are in a state of slow, inevitable decline, though it is perhaps most centrally driven by an awareness of climate change, which thus wreaks havoc on the people of this future world both physically and emotionally. Still, while *Crimes of the Future* contains little in the way of utopian energy, it ends on a note of uncertainty that offers a slim wedge of hope.

---

**M. Keith Booker** is Professor of English at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville. He has written or edited more than 60 books on literature, film, and popular culture, with a special interest in horror and science fiction, as well as modern and contemporary literary fiction.

## References

- Bacigalupi, Paulo. 2015 (2009). *The Windup Girl*. San Francisco: Night Shade Books.
- Booker, M. Keith. 2023a. “A Horror Film for Our Times: *Annihilation* as Weird Folk Eco-Horror.” In *Future Folk Horror: Contemporary Anxieties and Possible Futures*, edited by Simon Bacon, 275-90. Lanham, MD: Lexington.
- . 2023b. “A New Expansion: Climate Change, Posthumanism, and the Utopian Dimension in Paulo Bacigalupi’s *The Windup Girl*.” *Utopian Studies*, forthcoming.
- Canavan, Gerry, and Andrew Hageman, editors. 2016. “Global Weirding.” Special issue of *Paradoxa: Studies in World Literary Genres* 28.
- Debord, Guy. 2014. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Translated by Ken Knabb, Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets.

- Edwards, Justin D., Rune Graulund, and Johan Höglund, editors. 2022. *Dark Scenes from Damaged Earth: The Gothic Anthropocene*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Erdrich, Louis. 2017. *Future Home of the Living God*. New York: Harper.
- Friedman, Thomas L. 2010. "Global Weirding Is Here." *New York Times* (17 February).  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/17/opinion/17friedman.html>.
- Graulund, Rune. 2022. "Lovecraft vs. VanderMeer: Posthuman Horror (and Hope?) in the Zone of Exception." In *Dark Scenes from Damaged Earth: The Gothic Anthropocene*, edited by Justin D. Edwards, Rune Graulund, and Johan Höglund, 45-63. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Haraway, Donna. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Holzhaeuser, Wilson. 2017. "What is Weird? The Films of Lanthimos and Tsangari." *MovieJawn*. (25 May).  
<https://www.moviejawn.com/home/2017/5/24/considerthe-lobster>.
- Jameson, Fredric. 2003. "Future City." *New Left Review* 21, (May-June): 65-79.
- Jameson, Fredric. 1991. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Jameson, Fredric. 1994. *The Seeds of Time*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kershner, R. B., Jr. 1986. "Degeneration: The Explanatory Nightmare." *Georgia Review* 40, no. 2 (Summer): 416-44.
- Luckhurst, Roger. 2017. "The Weird: A Dis/orientation." *Textual Practice* 31, no. 6: 1041–1061.
- . (forthcoming) "The Greek Weird Wave." *The Weird: A Companion*, edited by Carl Sederholm and Kristopher Woofter. Oxford: Peter Lang.
- Morton, Timothy. 2013. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Nixon, Rob. 2011. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Smith, Andrew, and William Hughes, editors. 2013. *Ecogothic*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.
- Sontag, Susan. 1966. "The Imagination of Disaster." In *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, 209-25. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- VanderMeer, Jeff. 2008. "The New Weird: 'It's Alive?'" In *The New Weird*, edited by Ann VanderMeer and Jeff VanderMeer, ix-xviii. San Francisco: Tachyon Publications.
- Weinstock, Jeffrey Andrew. 2022. "The Anthropocene." In *Dark Scenes from Damaged Earth: The Gothic Anthropocene*, edited by Justin D. Edwards, Rune Graulund, and Johan Höglund, 7-25. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Williams, Raymond. 1977. *Marxism and Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press.

---

- 2023 -

MONSTRUM is Published in Montréal, Québec by the Montréal Monstrum Society.  
Copyright and intellectual property rights are held by the individual author(s).



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License  
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).