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Letter to the Editor

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## Explaining Agonist Treatment Through Movie Language: The Interesting Allegory of 'Videodrome'

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TO THE EDITOR: A number of movies have dealt with the issue of drug abuse. Although several film authors have brilliantly portrayed drug-related phenomena, few have provided any insights into the dynamics of addiction. Sometimes, films 'about addiction' are not reality-movies, and deal metaphorically with the broader issue of addictive behaviour, without focusing directly on one substance or even on chemical addiction. Exceptionally, one movie directed by David Cronenberg, *Videodrome*, succeeds in providing with an explanation of the metabolic nature of addiction and its treatment [1-3]. The story is about a TV manager who discovers an illegal TV channel showing shocking images of sex and violence, transmitting on a 'hidden' wave frequency, which is always changing and is awkward to decode. The manager gradually becomes more and more eager to expose himself to 'videodrome', and as long as he reinforces the habit, something continues to change inside him biologically. Even in the absence of any outer stimulation, his brain produces hallucinations of violent scenes; this scares him, and leads him to search for help. Independently of the videodrome shows, another clandestine transmission is on air on the same frequencies. In it, a man, called Professor O'Blivion, is speaking about the risks of videodrome exposure, and warning the audience that they may mutate physically, without being able to get rid of the videodrome's parasitic influence, as if it were some sort of new organ sucking energy out of the soul. Video-addicted people, in fact, become completely dedicated



Figure 1. The videodrome-addict inserting his head into the image: when desire becomes craving, it can no longer reach out reward. In addiction, the overdrive produced by the deviated function of the reward system creates a 'black hole' into the capability to grant oneself pleasure. The chronic state of discomfort and suffering of addicts is a product of addictive ties to a fading anticipation of pleasure.

to videodrome, and are enslaved to its pushers, who belong to an organization that aims to control people's behaviours for their own purposes (Figure 1).

At a certain point, two videodrome staff people grotesquely appear during one of his speeches and strangle him to death. In the hope of finding a solution to his own disease, the protagonist reaches a therapeutic centre which was founded by O'Blivion where he was trying to cure videodrome-affected individuals and bring them back into social life. The place is called

the “Cathode Ray Mission”: a population of homeless people is hosted in small cells, each containing a small TV, so that they will be saturated by a normal TV signal, with controlled doses of sex and violence. O’Blivion’s theory is that, by the daily and continuous maintenance of a controlled intensive stimulation of brain circuits by visual cues, people may stop craving for over-stimulation by videodrome and escape from enslavement to it. Inspired by this solution, the protagonist eventually rejects his latest videodrome dose, and tries to destroy the organization along the slogan “Death to videodrome; long live the new flesh!”.

This formal representation of addiction offers a much more precise description of addictive dynamics than some textbooks. In fact, the name ‘videodrome’ recalls the idea of an acceleration within a circuit, a rush after something, an excess of attraction towards an object with an overactive appetitive behaviour. Other movies do no more than suggest that addiction originates from some emotional ‘hole’, a handicap, some kind of deficiency to which craving acts in a compensatory way. The video-signal acts by a kindling mechanism, so that the brain ends up by itself producing the spark that lights the craving for more stimulation. The desire

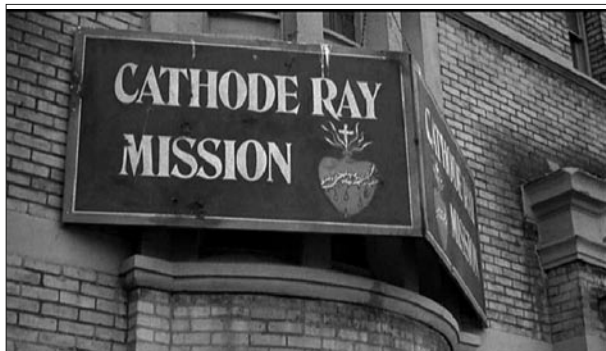


Figure 2. The “Cathode Ray Mission” Headquarter appealing to videodrome street junkies. Cathode rays are the channel by which the disease develops and can also be means of healing, all depending on the modulation of stimuli. A metabolic disease caused by a phasic “cathode ray” cured by the exposure to a “tonic (methadone-like) cathode ray”.

for some videostimulation becomes the prominent idea invading the mind’s room, to the point of overlapping with reality (the metaphor of having hallucinations). The only chance to escape from the video-arena (where you endlessly pursue your craving) is to lose the acquired memory (O’Blivion). This Vincent Dole-type character is a professor who developed an anticraving programme



Figure 3. The inside of the Cathode Ray Mission. Each addict sits in a cardboard-wall cell, in front of a TV screen, to be exposed to controlled doses of stimulating images. Daily attendance of the Mission prevents junkies from dedicating their efforts to ‘videodrome’ doses, allowing them to rehabilitate.

using the same kind of stimulation (visual), i.e. an agonist-based method, to detach people from a toxic stimulus (Figure 2, Figure 3). Acquiring an awareness of losing control is not enough to allow an ill person to escape from their addiction, as symbolized by the video-killers strangling the emerging disease awareness embodied by Professor O’Blivion. The first enemy of treatment is the disease itself, beyond any patient’s motivation. The work we do as addiction physicians is, indeed, similar to that done in his Cathode Ray Mission: a homeopathic struggle against an overactive behaviour which is causing impairment, and is deeply rooted into the brain, as if it were a microscopic parasite made of neuronal flesh. Our treatment programmes aim to make the parasite starve, while feeding the brain’s metabolic gap with an antidote. Eventually, we will be able to see our patients’ new lives blossoming from the ‘new flesh’ we have grown.

### Conflict of Interest

The author has no relevant conflict of interest to report.

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