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## The Shrouds

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## The Shrouds

### Abstract

This is a film review of *The Shrouds* (2024), directed by David Cronenberg.

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### Author Notes

Elijah Siegler is Professor of Religious Studies at the College of Charleston. He is the co-author of *Dream Trippers: Global Daoism and the Predicament of Modern Culture* (2017) and the editor of *Coen: Framing Religion in Amoral Order* (2016). He is currently working on a monograph about spirituality in Asheville.

*Note: I have known David Cronenberg since I was a child (see Siegler 2012 for more detail). This review incorporates a conversation I had with Cronenberg on December 17, 2024, at a coffee shop near his home in Toronto.*

This is the story of a filmmaker from Toronto, who is well off but not extravagantly wealthy. He drives a Tesla and lives in a comfortable but austere home. He is trim and aging well, with a shock of white hair and a dry sense of humor. He is an outspoken atheist whose loving stable relationship to his Jewish wife is upended when she gets sick with cancer. Their lives become regulated by medical forces beyond their control. His wife dies and he buries her. He feels like climbing in the grave with her, but he settles for buying a plot next to hers. Eventually, he starts dating again. Out of his intense grief and bereavement come a new masterful creative project.

This above paragraph is a summary of the backstory of *The Shrouds* in which a man named Karsh Relikh, played by Vincent Cassel, creates GraveTech, a burial shroud equipped with cameras which allows someone to see their loved one decompose. It also describes David Cronenberg, whose creative project is his new movie *The Shrouds*, which he wrote and directed. This is Cronenberg's twenty-third feature film and his most autobiographical since 1979's *The Brood*. Both films are a response to the dissolution of Cronenberg's marriages: the earlier film dramatizing a contentious divorce and custody battle with his first wife, and the new film about the aftermath of the illness and death of his second wife, to whom he had been married for thirty-seven years.

Whereas *The Brood* is a classic of body horror (a genre of which Cronenberg has been rightfully credited as the founder), *The Shrouds*, if all you knew about it was that it is a noted horror auteur's deeply personal film about illness, loss, and the death of a loved one, you might think it would be a ghost story, or a tale of the undead. (Ghosts, hauntings, zombies, and vampires

have, of course, been used since the birth of cinema, and for thousands of years prior, to work out our feelings about death, illness, and loss.) But you would be wrong. Cronenberg, the staunch atheist, has, in his fifty-plus year career, never made a film with a supernatural element. And he is not about to start now. (Not that he hasn't been asked: see Siegler 2012, 1101-1102). If one must pin down the genre, one might call *The Shrouds* "an international technothriller art film." (For other examples, see Olivier Assayas' *Demonlover* (2002) and *Boarding Gate* (2007)).

We learn the backstory in the first sequence of the movie—an awkward blind date. The plot kicks into gear when the GraveTech technology reveals to Karsh that his wife Becca's corpse is growing metallic protuberances and when Karsh's hi-tech graveyard is vandalized. Who is responsible for these violations? Icelandic eco-terrorists who use Runic symbols? A nefarious data-stealing Chinese textile corporation called Shining Cloth (fast fashion meets ByteDance meets the Shining Path)? Citadel Technologies, a Hungarian-Canadian conglomerate, fronted by a seductive French-Korean woman?

We are in familiar Cronenbergian territory. As I wrote in 2012, "secretive, isolated communities with authoritative, charismatic leaders and dangerous ideologies are constant features in most of his original scripts [...] the plots advance because of warring "cults" (Siegler 2012, 1108).

In *The Shrouds*, these groups, who may be either competing or collaborating, seem to be part of a shadowy multinational conspiracy. These global concerns are the clearest expression of Cronenberg's cosmopolitanism (even more than his 2012 film, titled *Cosmopolis*) but, unlike say, *Videodrome*'s Spectacular Optical or *The Brood*'s Somafree Institute, they are spoken of but rarely seen. Clearly, Cronenberg, in his late career phase, feels comfortable with a sketched-in plot.<sup>1</sup> In one of the film's several subtle touches of black humor, the real villain is (probably) revealed to

be Becca's oncologist, the mostly offscreen Dr. Jerry Eckler, who teaches classes on "the psychology of healing."

Karsh refers to the question of who violated his wife's body as a "classic detection puzzle" but the audience probably doesn't care as much about the detective story as it does about the resonant images and deep emotions, which I felt most clearly in scenes with Diane Kruger as Becca appearing nude and evermore disfigured in Karsh's dreams. (She is emphatically not a ghost.) Becca's absence/presence is also felt in scenes with Kruger as Becca's twin Terry, and as the voice of the untrustworthy AI animated avatar, Hunny. Cronenberg, of course, is interested in the physical effect of emotions as exemplified in the opening line of movie, spoken by Karsh's dentist: "Grief is rotting your teeth." Relatedly, one source of the powerful emotion coursing through *The Shrouds* comes from Cronenberg's self-recognition of his own mortality (a "relikh?!"). (As other film critics have pointed out, several other films made in 2024 share this theme.<sup>2</sup>)

The plot, the imagery, and the emotional themes of this film center on graves and bodies being desecrated—and "desecration" is a word that is notably used in this movie. "To desecrate" means to violate something sacred, and knowing this fact, along with the film's autobiographical nature, it should come as no surprise that *The Shrouds* stands as Cronenberg's most Jewish film. True, Cronenberg does not deign to make his stand-in, Karsh, come from a secular Jewish background, as Cronenberg himself does. Instead, Karsh tells his blind date, he is "some Belarusian Eastern Orthodox thing." But elsewhere, Jewishness abounds—in the allusions to Jewish food (a way many secular Jews relate to their tradition), including Guy Pearce as tech nerd Maury chowing down on Matzoh ball soup and pastrami, and references to United Dairy and Fat Pasha, two actual Jewish-identified restaurants in Toronto. (Many of Cronenberg's films are explicitly set in Toronto, but *The Shrouds* is the first to be set in *Jewish* Toronto.) As well, Karsh

deflects Terry's conspiracy theorizing by referencing Stalin's paranoid antisemitic dictum, "(Jewish) doctors plot." And most resonantly, we see Jewishness in the Hebrew letters carved on Becca's gravestone.

But this is not a case of an aging artist "finding God" or "returning to his roots." If *The Shrouds* is Cronenberg's most Jewish film it is also his most atheist. Cronenberg, in his public statements, has always been among the most avowedly atheist filmmakers, but his characters were not. Until now. In the first sequence of the movie, Karsh refers to himself a "non-observant atheist" and calls the shroud of Turin a fake. Later, speculating his private graveyard might have been vandalized by religious extremists, he notes that "we've been called techno-atheist infidels."

In some ways, *The Shrouds* embodies a very old debate between tradition and modernity or religion and atheism, enacted at multiple levels, not least in a seemingly throwaway bit of dialogue about the "burial versus cremation" debate: burial being necessary in the Jewish tradition, while cremation being seen as more ecological and modern. Cronenberg, wisely, does not presume to settle this debate, but simply records how it plays out on an emotional level—through a powerful depiction of grief, yes, but also of confusion and anger (at a medical establishment that robs us of our power, among other indignities). And finally, as shown in the last scene of Karsh flying across the ocean towards an uncertain future, there is a glimmer of hopefulness towards whatever comes next.

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<sup>1</sup> Or Dangling subplots and antagonists referred to but never seen, which point to the fact that *The Shrouds* was written to be the pilot for a Netflix series. (The series itself would have shown more of these groups, and, Cronenberg told me, more about death rituals of various religions.)

<sup>2</sup> I owe this insight to John Semley writing in *The Baffler*. Similarly, Marya Gates on the Filmspotting Podcast thoughtfully places *The Shrouds* with two other 2024 films about losing a longtime spouse, made by aging directors who were also in the process of losing spouses: *Oh Canada* from Paul Schrader and *Megalopolis* from Francis Ford Coppola.

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