

**Fearful Symmetry: Technophilia and the Science Fiction Cyborg in  
J. G. Ballard's and David Cronenberg's *Crash***

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*Cyborg* \n\ [cybernetic + organism] (1960): a bi-  
onic human being.

*Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 10<sup>th</sup>  
edition. New York: Random House, 1993, 287.

“Cybernetic organism,” or cyborg, is one of science fiction’s (hereafter sf) numerous oppositional terms, like “virtual reality” or “artificial intelligence.” As these phrases become less fantastic and more conversational, the tension between their oppositions frequently goes unnoticed. By contrast, the tension between sf, where the cyborg is most familiar, and reality has never been more noticeable. Sf has prophesied many technoscientific developments, including the escalator, the credit card and the video call. On the extreme end is the atomic bomb, a wild invention in H. G. Wells’s *The World Set Free* (1914)<sup>1</sup> that inspired scientific inquiry. But where does the cyborg, as trope and mega-text, iconography and perhaps social reality, fit in? The term “cyborg” was first used to describe a “hypothetical figure physically adapted for survival in space.”<sup>2</sup> Like space travel, the cyborg was once an exercise in imaginative energy, yet it would seem that it is located both conceptually and, increasingly, ontologically, somewhere in between the

escalator and the atomic bomb; between progress and annihilation, the commonplace upshot and irrevocable destruction. It either assists our bodies, or evacuates us from them.

As the cyborg occupies the shifting space between reality and sf, its presence becomes equally typified by an interrelated binary opposition that can be expanded upon using the two definitions offered above: the opposition between the physical and the cerebral. Sue Short finds the cyborg's precondition to be the technological augmentation of a human body. Though definitions have a habit of excluding more than they include, the Webster's definition is elusive. Here the cyborg is not delineated by the hypothetical, and while "bionic" places an emphasis on physicality, "human being" is as broad as one could wish, and opens up avenues for the technologising of the cerebral. Both definitions here rest upon questions about humanity and technology inclusive of a precondition: the co-presence of the organic human body and technology. Yet the Webster's definition asks a new question, the answer to which may overturn this precondition as it takes a more vital role in contemporary reality: when our cerebral interactions with technology are more sophisticated, commonplace and indicative of widespread technophilia, does the technologised body still have a role to play in our conceptions of the cyborg? Moreover, what do we make of sf texts in which the physical aspects of the cyborg trope are at their most familiar?

Delineating the cyborg into two manifestations serves to highlight the disparity between reality and sf. On the one hand is this physical precondition, the cyborg cosmetic: the co-presence of technology and the human body familiar to the cyborg icon in sf. This is set against technology that foregrounds cerebral engagement while effacing the physical link to the point where the cyborg cosmetic becomes displaced. While these two characteristics – the cosmetic and the cerebral – are often explored in tandem in sf texts, their currency in contemporary culture has seen a bifurcation of their manifestations.

This essay will examine the diminishing persuasiveness of cyborg cosmetics in sf, and the increase in the technologising of the cerebral in reality that suggests a progression towards a cyborg subjectivity that contradicts the necessity for this cosmetic. An interpretation of J. G. Ballard's 1973 cult novel, *Crash*,<sup>3</sup> and David Cronenberg's 1996 cinematic adaptation,<sup>4</sup> places the emphasis back on this increasingly overlooked cosmetic element. Combined with the misuse of the car's technology and an exploration of its impact on human organicism, *Crash* becomes a radical, though undeniably ambivalent cyborg text, alarmingly possible and an exploration of key aspects of cyborg subjectivity.

## Cyborg Cosmetics

The human body has had a long philosophical affinity with manmade objects. Ancient Greek philosophers compared the human body to a clay vessel and René Descartes likened a sick man to a poorly crafted clock.<sup>5</sup> Here the nonhuman object analogically equates unknown elements of the human body with tactile, quantifiable units of the mechanical and utilitarian. This parity continues today in a less philosophical and abstract way. Given the rapid technologising of our daily lives, at a glance it would seem that cyborg cosmetics – the cyborg’s physical and iconographic expression in sf – are moving from imagination to substantiation with alarming rapidity. However, technological aids are largely recuperations of the human subject, rather than birthing the radical third party the cyborg seems to insist on: they have a normalising function, rather than extending the body’s physical capabilities. Pacemakers, prosthetic limbs and hearing aids are routine and beneficial, but we would have a distinct anxiety were they used in tandem with a healthy, able body: such an act would attract calls of “inhuman” rather than posthuman, of spoiling or compromising organic integrity rather than improving it.<sup>6</sup>

Though it is within our capacity to improve the human body with technology, and postmodern approaches to contemporary culture frequently betray a desire to discount human organicism entirely, in practice we still cling to notions of the organic whole that contraindicate the cyborg body sf frequently shows us. The dominance of restorative technology is threatened by biomedical advances in xenotransplantation, such as the use of pig’s hearts and animal tissue in place of the compromised human. With their attention to the minutiae of human construction, these procedures are arguably more sophisticated than the technologising of the body. There is a double movement here: on the one hand our definitions of “technology” are changing, while on the other our attention is simultaneously drawn to an organic parity with the animal world, signalling a turn away from considering an invasive technological apparatus necessary to the renormalisation of the human body. As our notion of the technologised body begins to seem less fantastic, and genetic engineering seems the more likely conduit to posthumanism, the cyborg body - a fusion of flesh augmented by technology - is out of place in spite of its futurological terrain. In sf, technologised others are something of an interrogative anomaly, and often a ubiquitous feature of the future, as in the *Terminator* franchise, Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968)<sup>7</sup> and Ridley Scott’s cinematic adaptation, *Blade Runner* (1982).<sup>8</sup> While *Blade Runner* urges us to consider the replicants more human than their creators, the cyborg seems to insist

that we throw ourselves into the mix – body and all. This is demanded increasingly little by the cyborg we may be seeing in reality, the cyborg we may have already become.

### Thinking Machines

While the medical technologies congruous with sf cyborg cosmetics are often hidden within the human body, or designed with discretion in mind (like the flesh-tones of synthetic prostheses), in a mechanical sense they are undeniably clunky. Some are embedded within the body, implanted with maintenance in mind, inscribing the body with scars and bruises; others have visible points of articulation or cannot be concealed without compromising their functionality. Increasingly, the most widespread of cyborgising technologies are comparatively elusive due to their unprecedented consonance with human consciousness. The ambient technology of mobile phones, computers and the internet are embodiments of the technosublime: we are now overawed by technology rather than by nature. This technology foregrounds cerebral engagement and hides its mechanics. Whilst their technology is viscous and activated by organicism – light touches or strokes and voice activation – it is invisible, like wireless connection via satellites and radiowaves. This disparity between the observable cosmetic and the discreet cerebral serves to delimit the sf imaginative from the earthly.

Our forays into cyborg cosmetics remain largely medical and recuperative rather than transcending human corporeality. The contemporary cyborgs that we may be encountering in reality, and often suspect ourselves to be, are cerebral rather than physical. As we become increasingly sophisticated in the way we interface with technology, in the disembodied online world, the computer, or rather its ambient technology, becomes a totalising “metaphor of the self,” our way of being in the world, and we experience ourselves as disembodied consciousness.<sup>9</sup> Here reality intersects with cyborg theory, which negotiates the consonance technology has with our mental activities, trending towards “the final blurring of distinctions between reality and virtuality.”<sup>10</sup> The concept of the posthuman, in which cyborg subjectivity is often located, privileges “information and consciousness over physicality.”<sup>11</sup> Here there are intersections of sf and reality, exemplified by the virtual beings and landscapes in William Gibson’s cyberpunk. Aspects of *Neuromancer* (1984)<sup>12</sup> are in concert with internet communications, as characters bypass the tacky human body to explore elegant unions of mind and machine. Much of the narrative tension stems from the thematic discord between technologised consciousness and human or-

ganicism. In an increasingly digital world, the body's comparative lack of consonance with technology brings both the organic and the cerebral into uncomfortable relief: the virtual realm that accommodates human consciousness "restricts identity to a 'on' or 'off' position where the only choices are to switch 'on' the virtual self of information technology or switch 'off' the actual self, thus eliminating the body's identity."<sup>13</sup> When Gibson's characters are punished by confinement in their bodies we can compare this with the sensation of being severed from the internet. Both are situations of cultural isolation – of the mind being trapped within the comparative limits of the organic body.

An examination of a contemporary technological device highlights the disjuncture between cyborg cosmetics and cerebral manifestations. We interface with the iPod with effortless liquidity: it is far too responsive to be a traditional prosthesis and its ability to tune into our emotions makes it a cerebral rather than physical extension of ourselves; but it is not made to be opened. Exposing its mechanical interiors – whirring hard drive, lithium battery and wiring - immediately voids its warranty. Our ability to customise and personalise it makes its technology viscous, but one of its pre-programmed responses is the failure of its technology (figure 1). This pathetic mimesis of human expression as interpreted by technology inspires rage more potent than the joy at hearing a favourite song. Our relationship to the iPod becomes suddenly physical. But the sensation of the cyborg – the after-image of its cerebral unity – is displaced as it lingers in this static image, and our frustration at being severed from it highlights the organic body's confrontation with stubborn mechanics. Sally Pryor's remark brings this confrontation into a relationship both real and metaphorical: "What does it mean to think of oneself as a computer? To me the conception reflects the Cartesian mind/body dualism: the mind is equated with software and the body is equated with hardware."<sup>14</sup> Set against the failure of cerebral unity with technology (software), the physicality of the cosmetic relationship (hardware) is brought to light, and the sensations are undesirable: "[o]ur machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert."<sup>15</sup>

### Revising the Cyborg

Considering the disparity between sf's cyborg cosmetic and the increasing pervasiveness of concealed, ambient technologies that alter the human psyche, we may pose the question: does this make us cyborgs? If so we are a transient sort, readily threatened by the uncomfortable return of the organic. Similarly, much sf iconography would have to disagree. The fic-

tional ontology of the cyborg often intersects with reality, but is more frequently lapsing behind it. Moreover, sf's insistence on the cosmetic component of cyborgisation and our bypassing it in favour of commonplace technologised cerebral subjectivity asks that we question the relevance of sf's socio-critical role as a voice for the conscience of technoscientific progress and as an imaginative site to test these ideas before their fruition. There is a gulf between cyborg cosmetics and theoretical discourses, such as Donna Haraway's, that have championed its subjectivity.<sup>16</sup> If posthumanism is indeed a necessary evolutionary step,<sup>17</sup> it will largely be a cerebral, rather than a bodily one. "[P]ostmodernists [often] seem anxious to rid themselves of the human altogether,"<sup>18</sup> and emphasise the cerebral rather than the organic, yet the fusion of flesh and machine is the sf cyborg's traditional precondition. For an undeniably self-conscious genre, should sf be uncomfortable with the cyborg's narrative and iconographic impotency, or content that its authors and directors saw it coming one way or another?<sup>19</sup>

In truth, cyborg subjectivity is constantly being improvised, and is thus an ongoing epistemological negotiation of fiction and reality. For sf, attempts to locate a time and space for the cyborg has caused the genre anxiety, necessitating revisions. The turn of the millennium passed without incident: there were no Y2K machine revolts and no Skynet Terminators. Thus Judgement Day 1999 was not only temporarily postponed over the course of the *Terminator* franchise, but later considered inevitable.<sup>20</sup> This allowed the production of *The Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* (2008-2009)<sup>21</sup> which, when contrasted with the franchise's prior assertions, insists that cyborg cosmetics are a crucial element, rather than an afterthought. Arnold Schwarzenegger has been replaced by the Summer Glau/Terminator gynoid, and the clunky Cylons of the original *Battlestar Galactica* (1978-1979) series are now played by supermodels in the reboot (2004-2009).<sup>22</sup> It is starting to seem naïvely optimistic to expect the replicants of *Blade Runner* by 2019, and because androids didn't show in 1992, we have delayed their arrival till 2021 in subsequent reprintings of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Suspended between fiction and reality, we are left wondering where future editions will take us.

But can the cyborg as "a paradoxical and polysemic metaphor ever provide the basis for coherent understanding, let alone potentially cohesive action"?<sup>23</sup> Searching for a palatable and concrete manifestation of the cyborg is precarious, and it is likely that the cyborg's fluctuating history reveals its imaginative persuasiveness rather than its existence. In this sense the cyborg is an increasingly uncomfortable harbinger of posthumanism and of postmodern subjectivity. In cyborg films, there is anxiety about differentiating the technological copy from the organic original, making it a key

feature of postmodern culture, if not a metaphor for postmodernity itself. But in its iconographic state, as in *RoboCop* (Paul Verhoeven, 1987),<sup>24</sup> the cyborg is embarrassingly hard to champion as the paragon of technophilia: unlike the functioning iPod, its cosmetics are at the apogee of technological aesthetics.

Does the presence of the technological and the artificial, the organic and the natural, intimately bring the two projects together while retaining their respective autonomy, making the cyborg a nominal construction only; or, is the cyborg a third party, created from this union? Asking what it means to be a cyborg quietly infers that we have answered the question of what it means to be human, and whether the cyborg will require further revision of human essentialism. As artificial intelligence progresses, it may become altogether supercilious to ask what it means to be a machine. While there is always the question of improbability or a healthy cynicism with which we treat most sf, it is less frequent that we meet the genre with consternation. Sf, a field including critical theory and fiction, has become a 'mode of awareness', characterised by reflections about plausibility and ethical and social interpretations.<sup>25</sup> The cyborg may see human subjectivity displaced, compromised and perhaps superseded; but unlike with stem cell research we are yet to reach the same cultural and ethical impasse. The cyborg often makes us feel inadequate physically and mentally, but its representation is technologically deficient. As in sf, cyborg subjectivity gains currency when it is a product of human will, rather than an invasive "other" from outer space. The cyborg cosmetic seems antiquated in even the most futurological sf, largely superfluous in an increasingly technologised contemporary culture. In light of this it may seem appropriate that the cyborg is most potent when codified as a metaphor, a myth in search of a narrative, be it political, sexual or ethical and, lacking functionality, in search of contemporary reality.

### ***Crash* as Cyborg Text**

However, an interpretation of J. G. Ballard's 1973 cult novel, *Crash*, and David Cronenberg's 1996 cinematic adaptation offers a frighteningly accessible cyborg subjectivity that shifts the focus back onto the cosmetic component, highlighting key discourses attached to cyborg subjectivity. Placing Ballard's and Cronenberg's *Crash* within the context of the sf cyborg and its status in reality serves as a retroactive historiography, allowing us both to broaden and re-evaluate the cyborg episteme – the collection of texts that inform our understanding of cyborg narratives and iconographic expressions as they interact with reality. However, before this claim can be made,

it must be noted that neither Ballard's novel nor Cronenberg's film are obvious cyborg texts. Despite their emphasis on the link between human organicism and technology, both lack the immediacy and familiarity of cyborg iconicity, and evade an obvious and unproblematic appeal to cyborg cosmetics. As stated, this cosmetic link is the traditional precondition for the cyborg, which when manifest as an icon seems exaggerated and unwieldy compared to contemporary cerebral cyborgisations. However, interpreting *Crash* as a cyborg text allows us to reconceptualise the trope in both its textual and cultural states. Christine Cornea's analysis of Cronenberg's adaptation focuses primarily on performance-as-cyborgisation, but she notes that "the representation of the cyborgisation process in *Crash*, as compared to films like *The Terminator*, *Robocop*, *Universal Soldier*, the literal melding of the human with the machine in *Crash*, is far 'messier' than the relatively 'clean' images presented."<sup>26</sup> By the same token, Ballard's novel is decidedly fleshy and visceral in its descriptions of sexual encounters between wounded bodies that occur in relation to technology. Thus considering *Crash* a cyborg text serves to reconfigure our conceptions of the cyborg: focussing on the cosmetic and interrelated subjectivity, *Crash* problematises other manifestations in sf, which are comparatively "clean." This is in keeping with contemporary trends: in attempting to keep up with reality, sf cyborgs, such as those found in the reboot of *Battlestar Galactica* and *Sarah Connor Chronicles*, have gradually mimicked the aseptic and less visceral manifestations of contemporary claims to cyborgisation. Though working from the other end of history, bringing *Crash* into relation with these texts serves once again to remind us of the historical vulnerability of the trope and shifting cultural perceptions: cyborg cosmetics are either becoming unnecessary or aesthetically unacceptable, and are thus abandoned or revised.

Importantly, this highlights our cultural ambivalence towards physical manifestations of cyborgisation, and this ambivalence is reflected in *Crash*. Estranged from the immediacy of cyborg iconography, the quotidian technology of the car is a far cry from the futurological or extrapolated technology presented in cyborg texts. By the same token, it is far more prevalent than the medical technologies outlined above. Here cyborg cosmetics and subjectivity are interconnected, working from a technology shared by sf and reality. As such, *Crash* offers an alarming point of difference in that it presents a cyborg cosmetic and subjectivity that is as clumsy as it is achievable, since it uses commonplace and accessible technology. Thus an interpretation of *Crash* as a cyborg text emphatically grounded in a cosmetic inclusive of technology and the human body offers an unfamiliar reification<sup>27</sup> of the concept of the cyborg in the text, concretising it via the fusion of flesh

and machine, and suggesting the cyborg's potentiality in contemporary culture.

Yet *Crash* is at its most ambivalent when we consider the functioning of its cyborgising technology. It was suggested earlier that contemporary technologies congruous with the human body have a normalising effect. In both Ballard's novel and Cronenberg's film, access to heightened forms of sexual experience are twinned with a self-destructive psychopathology, as characters move from fascinations with car crash re-enactments and crash test dummies, to inflicting injuries on themselves and each other. Rather than any totalising effect of normalisation, these two impulses find *Crash* suspended between two poles that find no normative balance. Yet the cyborgisation on offer is undeniably productive in its reification of the cyborg concept. Michael Hardin notes that

Mapping technology onto the body does nothing but affirm the body's centrality, its subjectness. Mapping the body onto technology is what creates "immortality," the simulacra, because it screens the human onto the technological [...] transforming the human into object.<sup>28</sup>

The emphasis on the cosmetic, where both body and technology find symmetry and activate one another, exposes a cyborg subjectivity that is discursive, rather than the closed system Hardin gestures to, in which technological object and human subject are held at arm's length. Rather, by collapsing the physical, and thus cosmetic, barrier between object and subject, *Crash* makes for a reification of the cyborg-as-third-party, thus transforming the debate at the level of the episteme and at a broader contemporary cultural level.

The tension between the imaginary and reality has been outlined above as an anxiety for both the sf cyborg and the culture that constantly negotiates its significance, and this is most keenly felt at the disjuncture of the cerebral and the cosmetic. Jean Baudrillard suggests that when "[r]eality was able to surpass fiction, [it was] the surest sign that the imaginary has possibly been outpaced."<sup>29</sup> If imagining a futurological cyborg cosmetic has been surpassed by an arguably more fantastic cerebral manifestation, looking backward and beginning from a shared technology is unlikely to invalidate contemporary trends. However, it raises serious questions about reification, questions which have been elusive given the extrapolative nature of sf, in which (usually technoscientific) elements of our empirical environment are elaborated on, heretofore revised for posterity's sake (as gestured to above with *Do Androids* and the *Terminator* franchise), or dismissed as nonessential or aesthetically grotesque.

With this ambivalence in mind, Ballard's novel and Cronenberg's film can be used to question the boundaries of sf's cultural value and explore the human body's interfaces with technology to create a new discourse. Cronenberg's film was received by many critics as a tour de force of perverse fetishes, suggesting it says much about the way we police the boundaries of technological representations of sex and sexuality - a concern shared by cyborg discourse.

The subjectivity presented here is particularly poignant, given the cyborg's theoretical harmony with postmodernity and its uncomfortable discursivity. Ballard, who in many ways anticipated the dissemination of postmodernism's ethos and aesthetic, enters the present from an oblique and abstracted near future, not so much the "what if?" of traditional sf, but the "what is" of speculative fiction. Though written thirty years before their incursion, Ballard's novel palpitates with the alienation often identified as the paradigmatic experience of postmodernity. Occupying terrain akin to the Ballardian near future, Cronenberg's film works from a different angle: rather than exploring the highly conceptual space of the anticipation, the film is a violent elegy for a neurasthenic postmodernity that hadn't delivered the vertiginous euphoria of dislocation. Rather, characters with evacuated identities live out a "[p]ost-surveillance anti-drama" of pre-millennium apathy<sup>30</sup> which simultaneously reasserts Ballard's anticipatory "death of affect."<sup>31</sup>

In both versions of *Crash* the car exerts a technologising influence on the human body and is a catalyst for a cyborg subjectivity that emphasises its cosmetic value. The eagerness with which flesh turns itself inside out and embraces the reconfiguration of its organic parameters is both a becoming of the near future, and a protest against its conditions. Amidst the overt technology and social entropy that surrounds the characters, the possibilities of the cyborg identity seem the most exciting; not to redeem the human subject, but to enter a new discourse made possible by the technology of the car. Vaughan<sup>32</sup> is always exploring the continuity of the organic with the technological, massaging his genitals against the vinyl of the car interior before having sex (141), or mimicking the car's engraving of itself onto the human body by chalking outlines of his disfigured penis onto the ruined instrument panels. In Cronenberg's film, Elias Koteas's "ragged and dirty" tattoo of a steering wheel on his chest takes the form of a "global prophecy," indicating the parity of the car's technology and the human body.

However, this analysis raises several problems. The car seems a clumsy, or at least an innocuous component in a cyborg project: its technological pathways of blacktop and bitumen are obvious and cumbersome.

The technological landscape we now inhabit does not prize such evident machinery, and the car is no longer a symbol of futurist philosophy or the propellant of modernisation. As a facilitator of cyborgisation, the car seems profoundly antithetical with modern technology and Donna Haraway's emphasis on bio/microtechnologies.<sup>33</sup> Thus the car's status as technology seems questionable: its moving parts are obvious, it is loud, it leaks fluids and is, no matter how sleek the design, undeniably industrial. These are signs of what can be considered the technological grotesque. The flesh/car interface, instigated by a crash, is inelegant, if not clumsy, compared with ambient technologies. Nevertheless, as is clear from the controversy surrounding Cronenberg's adaptation, the nerve Ballard touched has not been anaesthetised.<sup>34</sup>

It is precisely this tension between the car's transformative potential and our indifference to its technological ubiquity that makes *Crash* a radical cyborg text. The moral authority with which the car crash speaks frequently seems at the apogee of its true place in society. The car's pervasive invisibility is indicated in both the novel and the film, as characters occupy hospital beds reserved for air crash victims, a space for spectacular, yet infrequent destruction rather than commonplace trauma. After his first car crash, James visualises his deformed car "mounted as some kind of cautionary exhibit outside [...] operating theatres" (36), but this is obviously a delusion. Similarly, moments of heightened concern about road safety never seem to resonate for lengthy periods of time in our daily lives. This is exemplified by Princess Diana's car-crash death, which briefly had a moralising, cautionary effect, as though the car acquired a new, sententious and perverse quality in its power to kill indiscriminately.<sup>35</sup> Thus *Crash*'s potency lies in its play with our ambivalence, the car's ubiquity and the ease and tenacity with which Ballard and Cronenberg pursue its transformation, and the way we are transformed by it.

Through its uncompromising repetition of violence and perverse sexuality, both made possible by the technology of the car, Ballard's novel seemed neither to advocate nor condemn Vaughan's enthusiastic psychopathology – "a new sexuality born from a perverse technology" (13) – while classification boards and road safety groups feared Cronenberg's film would incite copy-cat mayhem on the highways, or possibly arouse filmgoers.<sup>36</sup> Could *Crash* cause such anxiety if its technologically sanctioned hypersexuality and amoral psychopathology were not so uncomfortably close to our own? Vivian Sobchack's emphatic response to Baudrillard's reading of *Crash* as a totalising simulacrum brings the reality of human organicism back into focus, and possibly suggests that Ballard's novel has an inalienable moral value.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, William Beard notes: "The body is denied by

the technoculture around us [...]; we cannot truly become machines ourselves. The gulf introduced between the world of technology and the world of [the] organic appetite and mortality is so great [...] It will be an ever-present [...] human wish to heal the schism.”<sup>38</sup> If the interface between the car and the human body is to be understood as fertile ground for cyborgisation, we may best regard this as a process of retrofitting. Though a common trope and aesthetic in many sf texts, this is unfamiliar territory for the cyborg. The metamorphic plasticity of the cyborg identity is one of its most attractive features: its subjectivity not only accommodates technological change, but traditionally welcomes it enthusiastically as its first principle. Yet as a figure of progressive technology the cyborg’s affinity with the past usually serves only to truncate its efficacy and persuasiveness. However, rewriting the cyborg, or in this case, reconceptualising it, once again re-maps its potential across fiction and reality.

What is radical about interpreting *Crash* as a cyborg text is not only the way it uses technology, but the way that it misuses it to its own end. To explain we can briefly return to the iPod: its technophilic lure lies in its silky urbanity, not its wires and internal components soldered and screwed into place - these are not for public consumption. Once the iPod’s seal is broken and obligations to repair it are voided, we make this technology do something it was not intended to do. Much like Heidegger’s broken tool, in its dismantled state it “announces itself.”<sup>39</sup> Similarly, the car becomes a newly discursive object once smashed: it is a violation of itself, its technology made to perform and appear as other than itself, even as it exposes its interiors. The deformed car becomes a deviant symbol in its mass-produced landscape.

Here the equivalencies between the technology of the car and the organic human present themselves in *Crash*. These equivalencies in Ballard’s novel mesh with Cronenberg’s cinema. *Crash* is Cronenberg’s most extreme articulation of his “new flesh” project, first clearly voiced in *Videodrome* (1983)<sup>40</sup>: to reconfigure the integrity of the organic human subject and recapitulate the plasticity that accommodates the mechanomorphic. In *Crash*, equivalencies of the mass produced car and the mass produced body indicate the generic tedium of both: James observes that the precise make and model of his crash car could be easily extrapolated from the instrument panels engraved in his chest (28). However, through the event of the car crash, their ability to accommodate one another indicates the plasticity of their deviant forms – the crashed car and the wounded body – and the potential for a new cyborg subjectivity. In the miasma of monotonous sexual ritual, the commingling of flesh and technology is an “unrehearsed theatre.” (22.) Like the deformed car, James’s wounded

body reveals its discursive potential in its departure from mass production. The wound becomes a dramatic token of difference in its “deviant deformity.” (29.) This is paralleled in the film, as James Spader’s ragged, jaundiced and purpling scars signal a violent departure from the chrome palette and clean, post-industrial curvatures of the interiors. His deviant body now has the ability to arouse Deborah Kara Unger’s interest and her “wound envy”<sup>41</sup> is a displacement of her desire for a “second life” (78) of physicality in concert with the technological landscape of freeways and airports. The technology of the car does not exert a normalising function on the injured body: its misapplication renders both technology and body transgressive. This reminds us of our adverse reaction to restorative technology used on a healthy body, and brings many negative reactions to *Crash* into the same dialectic.

Baudrillard considered Ballard’s novel to represent a totalising simulacrum – “there is neither fiction nor reality – a kind of hyper-reality has abolished both.”<sup>42</sup> However, the car crash has the capacity to disrupt the simulacrum by both rising to its over-rehearsed hyperreality and transgressing it with the organic “real.” Characters are relieved to fulfil the prophecy of road safety commercials, but delight in being, for the first time, “in physical confrontation with [their] own bod[ies].” (39.) Identity does not so much become recuperable by the interpretive event of the ruined object; rather this new object becomes the radical third party that the cosmetics of cyborgisation insist upon – not wholly human, not wholly technology, but a new subjectivity.

### **Cyborg Sexuality in *Crash***

This new subjectivity finds its most obvious expression in the realm of sex and sexuality. The fleshly preoccupations of Cronenberg’s cinema and Ballard’s own ambition to make “the first pornographic book novel based on technology”<sup>43</sup> demonstrate the implications that this reconceptualisation of cyborg cosmetics has for human sexuality, and their often uneasy translation into a new cyborg subjectivity that demands attention to the increasingly overlooked cosmetic.

An important feature of the cyborg cosmetic is that it is a mode of body-experiment. Throughout human history sexual reproduction has been the most potent of such experiments, allowing us to play with the intimacies of our DNA. For Haraway, the cyborg does not organically reproduce, but is a mapping of a social reality located in a technological network onto the organic. In this sense, it becomes a resolution of the cultural conflict between the organic and technosocial.<sup>44</sup> In sf, the destabilisation of gender binaries

and their implications for human sexuality is often played out on an organic level – the feminist sf of Ursula Le Guin, Joanna Russ’s *The Female Man* (1975)<sup>45</sup> or Slava Tsukerman’s *Liquid Sky* (1983)<sup>46</sup> for example. By contrast, in Ballard’s novel the human body is functionless and overplayed without the intervention of technology. The unrehearsed body and the otherness of its veiled organicism attracts: vomitus is far more compelling than genitals, and septic leg wounds fascinate (16). Minor deviations from the body’s organic whole present themselves as excesses of the organic. Physical deformity, instigated by technology, “reveal[s] the secret formulas” (17) to negotiate a new subjectivity.

*Crash* finds itself located on the cusp of pre-cyborg society, which heralds the coming of a “post-gender world.”<sup>47</sup> Yet one of the most alienating features of *Crash* is its inhabitation of a world that appears totally post-sexual. Partners function as “masturbatory receptacle[s]”<sup>48</sup> with rehearsed apertures and programmatic genitals. There is a distinct loss of any sense of arcane novelty: unspontaneous sexual encounters are hollow and ritualistic, lethargically repeated and restaged. Both Ballard and Cronenberg take this lack of the arcane as the first principle of the near future, and then extrapolate beyond it. In Ballard’s novel there is the regimented, public performance of gender, such as Catherine’s “demonstration model” (112) performance of femininity, and the unnervingly sterile performances in Cronenberg’s film betray a neurasthenic human collective that begins to lose interest in gender. Cronenberg’s “organic” sex scenes – those that take place outside of cars – seem to beg the intervention of the car’s re-sexualisation. Bored characters look more like the technological “motion sculpture” (48) landscape Ballard describes. Cronenberg accentuates the futility of sex in the technological landscape that alienates the body by ensuring his sex scenes have no cathartic or orgasmic potential or resolution. He abruptly cuts away to an equally repetitious and anti-climactic sexual encounter.

In *Crash*, the organic body is a known quantity. Genitals have an overly familiar ontology and a lethargic terminus. The orgasm is alienated from organicism and sexuality, as when James’s “sluggish semen [is] urged into [Catherine’s] vagina by [his] bored pelvis” (41). The “climax as anti-climax”<sup>49</sup> becomes an existential anxiety as it is displaced into the realm of the repetitious mechanical. As the human body and psyche are in harmony with their technological and industrially oppressive environment, the ruination of the car and the body creates a new discursivity. People are alienated from their own bodies and each other, but the car crash marks a transition into the perversely sensual by way of the intervention of technological scarification. James is no Six Million Dollar Man and Spader is neither fem-

inised nor macho-ised by the cyborg process. The wounded body is shown to be vulnerable, betraying its cyborg cosmetic co-dependence on the technology of the car for mobility and its presence for sexual arousal.<sup>50</sup>

A key feature of this reconceptualisation of the car is the use of its deviant form to facilitate cyborg copulation. The technology of the car is rendered hermaphroditic in its dislocation from the traditional phallic analogue – an analogue that would have been persuasive in the 1970s when Ballard was writing.<sup>51</sup> Its deviant state can be seen as a systematic dismantling of this trope. In psychoanalytic theory human excretions are commonly aligned with the viscosity of the female body,<sup>52</sup> but the car's engine coolant is compatible with all bodily fluids. It scars, kills, maims and facilitates sex indifferently. Crash victims are penetrated indiscriminately and sex partners are enveloped in a genderless and gender-indifferent machine. As characters pursue the destruction of the cars they drive, their bodies undergo a metamorphosis: the hermaphrodisation of the car's technology becomes inscribed on the human organic whole, rendering the body deviant. For example, the photographs of Gabrielle's recuperation depict her gradual transformation by the car from "conventional" to a "creature of free and perverse sexuality" (99). Vaughan's disquieting obsession with genital disfigurement, and the constant exposure of his own car-crash-deformed penis, become confirmations of their empty, overplayed potential. The wound fashioned by technological scarification threatens to usurp human sexual practices and indicate a new cyborg practice. Genitals are a discrete cluster of sex and sexuality, often defining gender and sexual practices. By comparison, the wound is a new aperture with a discursive potential that displaces the specificity and integrity of the gendered organicism. The presence of the wound is evidence of the fruitful interface that produces the cyborg cosmetic, and the sex act that takes place in the car is a recapitulation of the presence of the organic within the mechanical.

Liberated from gender and codependent on technology, *Crash* offers a reification of cyborg sexuality that interrogates our ambivalence. On the one hand it runs contrary to our preconceptions: "[the] cyborg is generally imagined as sterilised or unacceptably aberrant because of its mechanical components."<sup>53</sup> On the other, Sue Short notes that "cinematic cyborgs are specifically gendered," despite being icons that have "the capacity (in theory at least) to do away with such concepts."<sup>54</sup> While the *Terminator* franchise has seen a transition from the hypermasculine to the hyperfeminine across film and television, *Crash* offers a point of difference. Here, the cyborg "new flesh" does not take gendered sexual attraction as its precondition. James is attracted to the deviancy of Vaughan's scarred body, rather than to a homosexual partner, and the absence of both eroticism and ho-

mosexual attraction facilitates their sexual union (102). Like James's relationship with Helen, Vaughan holds no sexual interest out of the car. The cyborg does not bother itself with sexual reproduction and its only condition is the comingling of the organic with the technological. Thus the wounded body and the crashed car are made equivalent in their discursive deviancy, "reveal[ing] the possibilities of an entirely new sexuality." (102) These new possibilities have the unique power to dismantle cultural notions of "bio-power" – the social practice by which we ascribe aesthetic value to discrete parts of the human body ("good" or "public" regions include hair, faces, lips and eyes; "bad" or "private" regions are genitals, anuses, underarms and nostrils)<sup>55</sup> (this is not to be confused with Michel Foucault's notion of bio-power). Spader's penetration of Rosanna Arquette's leg (a region likely caught between the two "bad" regions of the vagina and the foot) wound is a confronting scene (it is frotteurism at the very least), but it concretises the new discursivity of cyborg copulation: new technologically founded apertures become "contact points for all the sexual possibilities of their futures." (156.)

### Concluding Remarks

As it stands, we seem unsure of what to do with the cyborg: we grow into its dated identity and this largely keeps us living in the present, which is the sf cyborg's past. Does *Crash's* reclaiming of the cyborg cosmetic invalidate the contemporary technophilic allure of the cerebral? Unlikely: put simply, the text's ambivalence resists an interpretation totally in its favour, however convincing its reification of a cyborg subjectivity that is codependent on the cosmetic fusion of flesh and machine. By the same token, abandoning the cyborg cosmetic seems likely, but our willingness to revise it may suggest an unending fascination. Though these revisions have heretofore seen the cosmetic projected further into the future, *Crash* suggests that we are already well equipped with sufficient technology; yet the rapid technologising of our daily lives may very well mean that there will be no great cyborg epiphany. Cyborg subjectivity is often evoked as a persuasive and exciting module for feminist and gender politics, yet the gap between cyborg cosmetics and its contemporary cerebral manifestation suggests these arguments remain largely speculative. By contrast, *Crash's* reemphasis on cyborg cosmetics is overwhelmingly visceral and uncompromising, a cosmetic frighteningly able to be realised. The quotidian technology of the car, as a component in a process of cyborgisation, intervenes in contemporary comprehensions of the cyborg, both in everyday practices and in sf. Carl Tighe observes that Ballard treats the car as an "overwhelming natural dis-

aster and explores its effect on human sexuality,<sup>56</sup> and his words are well timed: the car, like the medical procedures examined earlier, is making a slow transition into green technology. If anything, this draws it closer to our own physiology rather than estranging us from its technology, suggesting either an easy cosmetic transition or a gradual negation of the stringent technological element of the cosmetic.

While *Crash's* claim to a reified postgender cyborg subjectivity is conceptually rewarding, this is unlikely to legitimise it in practice. Ballard's characters are not resolving a crisis, but unnervingly equipping themselves for the future: "[through] the new parameters of Gabrielle's body, [we were] developing a sexual expertise that would be an exact analogue of the other skills created by the multiplying technologies of the twentieth century." (100) Similarly, Cronenberg leaves us suspended in a whirlwind of perverse romance and entropy. If anything, he projects Ballard's anxieties into the twenty-first century. Haraway sees only promise in cyborg subjectivity, but *Crash's* "marriage of sex and technology" (142), while visceral, is profoundly indecisive. Ballard's 1995 preface is decidedly cautionary – "a warning against that brutal, erotic and overlit realm that beckons more and more persuasively to us from the margins of the technological landscape" (6) - but unconvincing. The novel's ambiguity, inflected with the surrealist project only to show without moralising,<sup>57</sup> is a discernible presence in Cronenberg's adaptation. Ballard's later-proclaimed indecisiveness is perhaps most persuasive in its dualism, and likely reflects our own attitudes to cyborgisation: while cautioning people to mind the bend in the road ahead, he simultaneously finds irresistible the urge to tell them to speed up.<sup>58</sup>



Figure 1

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## NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> H. G. Wells, *The World Set Free* (1914; rpr., BiblioBazaar, 2008).
- <sup>2</sup> Sue Short, *Cyborg Cinema and Contemporary Subjectivity* (New York: Pelgrave and Macmillan, 2005), 4.
- <sup>3</sup> All quotes taken from J. G. Ballard, *Crash* (1973; rpr., Scoresby: Vintage, 1995).
- <sup>4</sup> *Crash*, DVD, directed by David Cronenberg (New Line Cinema, 1996).
- <sup>5</sup> Sally Pryor, "Thinking of Oneself as a Computer," *Leonardo* 24:5 (1991): 585.
- <sup>6</sup> Charles R. Garoian and Yvonne M. Gaudelius, "Cyborg Pedagogy: Performing Resistance in the Digital Age," *Studies in Art Education* 42:4 (2001): 335-336.
- <sup>7</sup> Philip K Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968; repr., London: Millennium, 1999).
- <sup>8</sup> *Blade Runner*, DVD, directed by Ridley Scott (Warner Brothers, 1982).
- <sup>9</sup> Sally Pryor, "Thinking of Oneself as a Computer," *Leonardo* 24:5 (1991): 585-586.
- <sup>10</sup> Adam Bostic, "Seeing Cyborg through the Eyes of Popular Culture, Computer-Generated Imagery, and Contemporary Theory," *Leonardo* 31:5 (1998): 358.
- <sup>11</sup> Short, *Cyborg Cinema*, 169.
- <sup>12</sup> William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (1984; rpr., Hammersmith: HarperCollins, 1995).
- <sup>13</sup> Garoian and Gaudelius, "Cyborg Pedagogy," 339.
- <sup>14</sup> Pryor, "Thinking of Oneself as a Computer," 586.
- <sup>15</sup> Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto" in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1991); *The Cultural Studies Reader* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition), ed. Simon During (London: Routledge, 2003), 17.
- <sup>16</sup> Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 314-334.
- <sup>17</sup> Short, *Cyborg Cinema*, 165.
- <sup>18</sup> Short, *Cyborg Cinema*, 168.
- <sup>19</sup> Such a pre-eminence is the subject of Scott Bukatman's *Terminal Identity: The*

- Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* (Duke University Press, 1993).
- <sup>20</sup> Judgment Day 1999 was thought to have been thwarted in *The Terminator* (James Cameron: Orion Pictures, 1984) and then again in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (James Cameron: TriStar Pictures, 1991). In *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (Jonathan Mostow: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2003) it was revealed that Judgment Day was inevitable.
- <sup>21</sup> *Terminator: The Sahara Connor Chronicles*, TV series, created by Josh Friedman (Warner Bros, C2 Pictures, 2008-2009).
- <sup>22</sup> *Battlestar Galactica*, TV series, created by Glen A. Larson (ABC, 1978-1979) and *Battlestar Galactica*, TV series, created by Glen A. Larson and Ronald D. Moore (Universal, 2004-2009).
- <sup>23</sup> Short, *Cyborg Cinema*, 161.
- <sup>24</sup> *RoboCop*, DVD, directed by Paul Verhoeven (Orion Pictures, 1987).
- <sup>25</sup> Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., "The SF of Theory: Baudrillard and Haraway" *Science Fiction Studies* 18:3 (1991): 387.
- <sup>26</sup> Christine Cornea, "David Cronenberg's *Crash* and Performing Cyborgs" *The Velvet Light Trap* 52 (2003): 11.
- <sup>27</sup> By reification I mean, in the traditional sense of the word, to materialise or to make concrete an idea, with no allusion to the Marxian notion of reification intended.
- <sup>28</sup> Michael Hardin, "Postmodernism's Desire for Simulated Death: Andy Warhol's Car Crashes, J. G. Ballard's *Crash*, and Don DeLillo's *White Noise*," *Literature Interpretation Theory* 13: 1 (2002): 36.
- <sup>29</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "Ballard's 'Crash,'" *Science Fiction Studies* 18:3 (1991): 310.
- <sup>30</sup> Ian Sinclair, *Crash* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 57.
- <sup>31</sup> David Pringle, *Earth is the Alien Planet: J. G. Ballard's Four-Dimensional Nightmare* (California: The Borgo Press, 1979), 27.
- <sup>32</sup> To avoid confusion Cronenberg's characters will be identified by the actors portraying them: James Ballard – James Spader; Helen Remington – Holly Hunter; Vaughan – Elias Koteas; Catherine – Ballard; Deborah – Kara Unger; Gabrielle – Rosanna Arquette.
- <sup>33</sup> Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 315.
- <sup>34</sup> "JG Ballard: South Bank Interview (Part Two)" YouTube video, from The Southbank Show televised September 12, 2007, posted by "sambar0986," October 26, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MNNuaquuoYM&feature=related>.
- <sup>35</sup> Bradley Butterfield, "Ethical Value and Negative Aesthetics: Reconsidering the Baudrillard-Ballard Connection," *PMLA* 14:1 (1999): 64.
- <sup>36</sup> Roger Luckhurst, "J. G. Ballard: *Crash*" in *A Companion to Science Fiction*. Ed. David Seed (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 512-521.

- <sup>37</sup> Vivian Sobchack, "Baudriillard's Obscenity" *Science Fiction Studies* 18:3 (1991): 327-329.
- <sup>38</sup> William Beard, *The Artist as Monster: The Cinema of David Cronenberg* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 38.
- <sup>39</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*. trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1962), 105.
- <sup>40</sup> *Videodrome*, DVD, directed by David Cronenberg (Universal, 1983).
- <sup>41</sup> Marq Smith, "Wound envy: touching Cronenberg's *Crash*" *Screen* 2:40 (1999): 193.
- <sup>42</sup> Baudrillard, "Crash", 319.
- <sup>43</sup> J. G. Ballard, "Introduction" in *Crash* (1973; rpr., Scoresby: Vintage, 1995), 6.
- <sup>44</sup> Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 316.
- <sup>45</sup> Joanna Russ, *The Female Man* (New York: Bantam Books, 1975).
- <sup>46</sup> *Liquid Sky*, DVD, directed by Slava Tsukerman (Cinevista Media Home Entertainment, 1983).
- <sup>47</sup> Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 316.
- <sup>48</sup> Mark Browning, *David Cronenberg: Author or Film-maker?* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2007), 150.
- <sup>49</sup> John Costello, *The Pocket Essential David Cronenberg* (Vermont: Trafalgar Square Publishing, 2000), 81.
- <sup>50</sup> Cornea, "David Cronenberg," 11.
- <sup>51</sup> My thanks to Andrew Milner for this observation.
- <sup>52</sup> Karen Beckman, "Film Falls Apart: 'Crash,' Semen, and Pop," *Grey Room* 12, (2003): 97.
- <sup>53</sup> James L. Cherney, "Sexy Cyborgs: Disability and Erotic Politics in Cronenberg's *Crash*" in *Screening Disability: Essays on Cinema and Disability*, ed. Christopher R. Smit and Anthony Enns (Maryland: University Press of America, 2001), 171.
- <sup>54</sup> Short, *Cyborg Cinema*, 7.
- <sup>55</sup> Cherney, "Sexy Cyborgs," 170.
- <sup>56</sup> Carl Tighe, *Writing and Responsibility* (Oxon: Routledge, 2005), 80.
- <sup>57</sup> Barbara Creed, "The Untamed Eye and the Dark Side of Surrealism: Hitchcock, Lynch and Cronenberg" in *The Unsilvered Screen: Surrealism on Film*, ed. Graema Harper and Rob Stone (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), 120.
- <sup>58</sup> J. G. Ballard: "South Bank Interview (Part Two)."