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Language, Literature, and Interdisciplinary Studies

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ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE  
SUBJECTIVITY  
AESTHETICS  
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DAVID CRONENBERG  
DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS  
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POSTHUMAN CRITIQUE  
SUBVERSION  
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AFRICAN AMERICAN  
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**LANGUAGE, LITERATURE,  
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INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES**

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# Contents

- v *Editorial*  
ix *Contributors*

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## BODY, MIND, AND THE POSTHUMAN: A COROLLARY TO POSTMODERN THOUGHT

---

---

- 1 **Play As Subversion: Video Games In The Age Of Transhumanism**  
*Shalini Harilal*
- 18 **Cyborg Incorporated: Mechanics, Aesthetics, and Cyborg  
Narrativity in David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ***  
*Meike Robaard*
- 46 **Prosthetic Versus Embodied Memory in *Westworld*'s "Kiksuya"  
and Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer***  
*Colleen Johnson*

---

---

## SPECIAL SUBMISSIONS

---

---

- 62 **Love As Nepenthe: Displacing Homer With Shelley In Joyce's  
*Ulysses***  
*Dylan Emerick-Brown*
- 78 **Misrepresentation, Identity, and Authorship in Percival Everett's  
*Erasure***  
*Gergely Vörös*

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# EDITORIAL

*Deeksha Suri and Md. Faizan Moquim*

Within posthumanist thought, the knowing subject disengages itself from the dominant humanist narratives to experiment with new radical forms of subjectivity that interrogate the historical arché of evolution and critically scrutinize the possibilities of future advancement by melding biological organisms with technology. These posthuman ‘experiments’ in the domain of techno-science, creating human-machine continuum, alter ways of looking at the human subjectivity in the ongoing process of becoming, and culminate in actualizing the displacement of the knowing subject itself as the measure of all things. Such new models of bio-technological embodiment provide dynamic options for a non-unitary transformative subjectivity that is based on the relational ontology of non-human *others*. The displaced subject now attempts to reshape the existing practices of humanism by pitting them against this concept of posthumanism, i.e., its heteronomy and multi-dimensional relationality. Dynamic notion of an inclusive world with humanistic practices along with posthuman relationlity is the fresh space of possibilities that this knowing subject dares to explore.

The dispositioned subject’s attempt to examine new meanings of being human along with an evolving towards an open future marked with contingency and unpredictability involves a transcendence of unitary and autonomous human subjectivity. Challenging all humanist assumptions, this sense of transhumanism, in terms of possibilities of becoming posthuman, attaches itself to the sense of wonder and adventure in seeking acceleration of life through intelligent machines. With this symbiotic relationship between man and machine, innovative technologies are employed to increase human capacity for rising above outmoded forms of thought and existence. These extensions of possibilities within themselves admit a subject who is disengaged from the accustomed notions of living; it engages itself in a posthuman frame of reference which in turn has the potential to become the pretext for the evolution of a shared model of human life with non-human *others* and challenge the assumed superiority of liberal humanists.

This idea of a posthuman universe where technology, in a way, undermines the precedence of humans as the primary agents of action does not sediment itself easily in the common imaginary. The interrogation of the posthuman demands a forgoing of any attachment to common sense in the face of unprecedented changes brought about by

the creation of artificial and virtual life-forms. Cogent objections are raised unveiling the horrors of technology and its far reaching implications on human life; the entry of the posthumanist scope of thought into the mainstream, however, also poses counter-questions about the vulnerability of the posthuman – with its dependence upon the social, emotional, and rational capacity of its human creators. The unprecedented broadening of the frontiers of this debate thus converges at the consideration whether this technologically dependent universe is threatening or liberating.

The interdisciplinary approach to posthumanism evokes conceptual diversity in scholarship. Critical discussions in the papers received in this Issue range from posthumanist subjectivity, prosthetic technology, embodied memory, to bodies in narrativity. In the themed section of the journal, Shalini Harilal's paper relates video game avatars with the idea of *horcruxes* in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series to argue that unattainment of the transhumanist goal of overcoming death on a collective level gives rise to "psychic entropy." To deal with it, video game horcruxing emerges as a subjective coping mechanism and in doing so subverts the official transhuman narrative. Meike Robaard's paper introduces the concept of "cyborg narrativity" in the cinematic texts of David Cronenberg to study the cyborgian condition of contemporary times. Incorporating the aesthetics and mechanics of cyborg, the paper scrutinizes changing physicality through the technologization of the body. In the face of increasingly intimidating technological climate, the third paper in this section by Colleen Johnson brings out the limits of conceptualizing memory as just a disembodied information database. By analysing Uta Briesewitz's episode of *Westworld*, entitled "Kiksuya," and Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer*, the paper looks at memory as embodied lived experience, and critiques the possibility of technological intervention in the form of implanted prosthetic memory. All the three papers highlight the possibilities present in posthumanist future, but with a subversive take to critically analyse the fallouts within this prospective reality.

The first paper in the non-themed section by Dylan Emerick-Brown connects Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* and Joyce's *Ulysses* over the discussion of Nepenthe. Disengaging with the traditional association of Nepenthe with Homer, the paper opens new perspectives of love in relation to it which point towards a restorative and regenerative capacity, as developed by Shelley. The second paper by Gergely Vörös uses Foucauldian notions of subjectivity, power, and discursive formations to discuss Percival Everett's novel *Erasure* in the light of how the text challenges normative assumptions about black racial representation and attempts to deracialize the American imaginary.

The process of reading the papers and strategically working on them is always a great learning opportunity, which enriches us with intellectual vitality apparent within the current academic scenario. We publish each Issue with a hope to disseminate valuable scholarly research and, now, as we put this Issue for readers' perusal we hope to be guided by their valuable suggestions, comments, and criticism. As always, we are deeply indebted to all our editorial board members, authors, peer reviewers, and readers for their tireless contributions in helping us publish rigorous research.

*A very happy New Year 2020 to all our contributors and readers!*



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**Meike Robaard** ([meikerobaard@gmail.com](mailto:meikerobaard@gmail.com)) is a recent summa cum laude graduate in American Studies (BA) and Philosophy (Honour's BA) at the University of Groningen, Netherlands. As a young, curious, aspiring scholar and artist, she is interested, amongst other topics, in interdisciplinary questions regarding, and creative approaches to, posthumanism, the cultural significance of (fictional) monsters, and social, political, and historical representations of bodies and technologies in literature and cinema across various time periods.

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# Play As Subversion: Video Games In The Age Of Transhumanism

*Shalini Harilal*

## Abstract

This paper discusses the contemporary relevance of video games within the larger context of an increasingly technology-oriented societies. The argument proposed is that an optimistic view of the future as imagined by transhumanism could lead to an anticipation of radical goals like prolonged lifespan and immortality which, at present, remain unattainable, thereby creating a disconnect between expectations and outcomes. This paper argues that video games act as platforms for subconscious attempts at subverting this disconnect by providing players with the opportunity to create and/or inhabit game avatars. The existence of players within virtual game worlds as avatars is compared to the act of creating horcruxes in the fictional world of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series where horcrux is a contraption that helps overcome death. By comparing the notion of horcrux to the habitation of game avatars, this paper argues that a video game is a potential site for the manifestation of figurative precautionary measures against death. These measures are posited as subversive mechanisms because the rhetoric of technological advancement disregards the intensely personal nature of dying. The paper argues that figurative video game *horcruxing* is a subjective coping mechanism which is in a way subversive to the official transhuman narrative.

**Keywords:** *Death, Horcrux, Philosophy, Posthuman, Transhumanism, Video games*

Death as an experience does not easily lend itself to any definitive understanding. Despite the ubiquitous nature of death it lacks conceptual clarity even as a prime subject within different schools of philosophy. One's encounter with death is a supremely personal experience. The death of the individual/death per se has a fixed place in the human imagination. It is difficult to imagine a time when it might not have been a source of concern for humanity. The opening argument traces the timeline leading to technology-anticipating societies and the perceptions of human existence and death that have changed alongside them. It is a near impossible task to generalize with precision the

changing notions of death as conceived across history. A cursory glance however, at monotheistic religions, provides one way to put into perspective whence certain widely accepted observations on human existence and death have their origin and their evolution.

Varied observations reflect upon the vagueness attached to the concept of death even as they continue to raise many questions, one of which is, is death an avoidable event? Is ‘to die’ really the same thing as being lifeless because then why would people “fear the dead”?<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time*, points out that death happens to an individual in one’s aloneness; it is not enough that it has happened to millions of others. As Paul Gerner observes in Heidegger’s *Being and Time: An Introduction*:

Death is something which each of us must take upon ourselves. Death is the possibility of being which is most my own. In so far as death ‘is’ it is essentially in each case mine... In a sense all the possibilities of my being are mine but that possibility which is death is a distinguished (ausgezeichnet) possibility. It is that possibility which is most my own. (123)

While Heidegger dwells upon the individual and personal experience of death and dying, Camus echoes a similar thought in *The Myth of Sisyphus*:

I come at last to death and the attitude we have towards it. On this point everything has been said and it is only proper to avoid pathos. Yet one will never be sufficiently surprised that everyone lives as if no one “knew.” This is because in reality there is no experience of death... Here, it is barely possible to speak of the experience of others’ deaths. (19)

Even though Camus begins on the note that the absurdity that lies in the universe’s utter indifference to human existence should lead one to the only philosophical question of any bearing, that is, suicide, he later argues that the real mettle of the philosophical mind lies in one persisting in this absurdity. In other words, where reason fails, even

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<sup>1</sup>Pointing out to the lack of a thorough understanding of death, Freud notes that “biology has not yet been able to decide whether death is the inevitable fate of every living being or whether it is only a regular but yet perhaps avoidable event in life” (13) and that the knowledge of human mortality is never quite “grasped” by anyone. Regarding common reactions to death, Freud further observes that despite the refutations of animism as primitive, the prevailing reaction to death is one that largely complies with that of “savages” and that “the primitive fear of the dead is still so strong within us” (14).

philosophers and scientists tend to take a leap of faith into the non-rationality of religion. Death as in the final cessation of being involves little or no human agency owing to the simple fact that people die, and perhaps for this very reason, it insists upon the need for a theological and spiritual understanding of life.

Questions concerning the nature and origin of life, the existence of a creator or lack thereof could thus only be discussed from within various theological frameworks. Scholars posit the age of Enlightenment as roughly the time that brought about refreshing changes to this intellectual stagnation since it placed emphasis on the faculty of human reason and its potential to help break the world free of the irrational and the superstitious. This way of placing the human being at the centre of the world had its other consequences in framing questions regarding existence and its limitations. Where human reason is viewed as the supreme faculty, no longer could the beginning or end of existence be explained away at the hands of an external, non-rational, theological agency. Jonathan I. Israel, in *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the making of modernity 1650-1750*, places this period of intellectual reawakening from 1650 to 1750 pointing out to the largely hegemonic presence of monarchic and religious authorities in all matters concerning the populace across Europe and how there was a drastic change in this regard with the onset of the Enlightenment:

So great indeed was the cultural ascendancy of the dominant or state churches in their respective zones of hegemony that confessional theology long remained the principal and overriding criterion in assessing all intellectual debate and innovation... As the supremacy of theology waned, non-theological accounts of man, God, and the world, that is, the New Philosophy, especially Cartesianism, penetrated with such novel and unsettling consequences that rulers...found themselves compelled to intervene. (23–24)

With the cultural shift thus brought about, divine control over human life was strongly challenged. It follows that the conception of human life radically changed and any understanding of the death of the human person was consequently altered. The conception of the death of the body, within the framework of certain monotheistic religions has consistently been associated with a creator who having created all life could also destroy it at will. Even though the singularity of death as an experience was unavailable to the individual until the actual event happens, the inevitability of death was accepted and often associated with the intention and will of a divine being. Enlightenment

scholars including Jonathan Israel point out, among other things, such factors as the increasing accuracy and acceptance of scientific discoveries like the Copernican model of heliocentrism and the later support it had from Galileo to have been of pivotal significance in challenging the theological monopoly over all epistemic systems. When institutional religions narrate the origins and telos of existence, human life is clearly a consequence of supernatural forces rather than an individual being the origin of one's own meanings and purposes. It has been pointed out that this epistemological shift initiated by the Enlightenment has a natural successor in the philosophy of transhumanism (Bostrom 1–3; More 4). Where existence is no longer explained with the help of religions, contestation over the inevitability of death is rational and no longer blasphemous.

Transhumanism is a philosophy that looks at technology with much optimism. Death, among other things, is seen as a limitation to the experience of life overcoming which is therefore desirable and worth seeking. Transhumanists believe that the human person, as he/she is today, is a work in progress and there is nothing wrong in interfering with natural processes. Assuming an active role in our own evolution can be achieved by making use of advancing technologies in the fields of Genetic Engineering, Nanotechnology, Biotechnology, Artificial Intelligence, Cryonics, etc., to name a few (Transhumanist FAQ). Max More, futurist and founder of the Extropy Institute, defines transhumanism thus: “Transhumanism is a class of philosophies of life that seek the continuation and acceleration of the evolution of intelligent life beyond its currently human form and human limitations by means of science and technology, guided by life-promoting principles and values” (1).

Humanity+, the official website of Humanity+<sup>2</sup> organization, traces the history of the term “Transhuman” as it is understood today, back to the futurist FM-2030 (F.M. Esfandiary) who used the term transhuman in the sense of a “transitional human” (1972). Optimism towards future technologies is rooted in the concept of technological singularity, a concept popularized by writer Vernor Vinge. Singularity here is understood as a hypothetical point in future time which maybe brought about by supercomputers or above-human intelligence that transforms life as it is lived today (Transhumanist FAQ). What earlier belonged to the realms of fringe, pseudo-sciences in the forms of alchemy and black magic is by express invitation placed within the folds

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<sup>2</sup>Originally known as The World Transhumanist Association, Humanity+ is a non-profit organization that “...aim(s) to deeply influence a new generation of thinkers who dare to envision humanity's next steps” (Humanity+).

of the legitimate sciences in the 21st century. Assessing the position of this transitional human/transhuman vis-à-vis religion, scholars provide compelling evidence to suggest the possibility of the origin of religion itself in the evolution of human brain. Doyle, in a very relevant chapter on religion in relation to transhumanism, traces the history of scientific and psychological literature over the centuries that have succeeded in establishing links between religious experiences and the function of the human brain. He notes the presumed relation between the frontal lobe and primitive religion and the relation that ecstatic religious experiences have with TLE (Temporal Lobe Epilepsy), for “arguably, if one were to look for the seat of religion in the brain...one would begin with the frontal lobes, as the frontal lobes are among the “newest” brain structures from an evolutionary view-point” (154), and the relation that ecstatic religious experiences have with TLE. Essentially his work throws light on various attempts by researchers to link the human ability to conceive complex ideas constitutive of religions with biological processes developed through evolution (158). This link serves the purpose of subsuming under the transhumanist argument a point of view on the evolutionary development of humans that have religious instinct as a part of it. In other words, human being is indeed a ‘work in progress’ as even the capacity to conceive religions is one acquired over the course of evolution. It is necessary to understand the concept of the posthuman to fully grasp the direction of the transhumanist movement. A posthuman is the hypothetical future being who would be the evolutionary successor to humans if and when the necessary technological intervention in natural evolution is performed ethically and intelligently. The transhuman, it follows, is truly the intermediary link between humans and posthumans (Humanity+). According to transhumanists, the three possible ways to become posthuman are: Cryonic suspension: Transhumanists recommend signing up for cryonic suspension. It is a process whereby the legally-pronounced dead body is preserved at extremely low temperature under laboratory conditions. At a later point in the future, when medical technology is advanced enough, the bodies could be brought back to life (thawing). Alcor Life Extension Foundation in Arizona, USA is known for performing this procedure from as early as 1966. Ted Williams, the American baseball player is one among the cryonically preserved. (The Alcor Life Foundation website provides case reports of cryopreservation); Incremental Augmentation: By using this option, advances in medical and AI technologies are incrementally added to the human body and the posthuman, that evolves from this process, would be a consequence of cumulative additions of technology; Upload: “Uploading (sometimes called “downloading,” “mind uploading,” or “brain reconstruction”) is the process of transferring an intellect from a bio-

logical brain to a computer” and is a hypothetical option (Humanity+). Once uploaded, the upload can choose to sever connection with a biological/robotic/prosthetic physical substratum, exist as a brain in a machine and communicate with others in virtual environments. (Humanity+; More 7; Walker 37–51)

Transhuman, in the sense explained before, occupies a liminal space between life and death. “Recent studies into the biochemistry of physiological (apoptosis) and pathological (necrotic) cell death in mammalian organisms have led to new insights into the concept of death on the micro scale (at the cellular level) as well as at the macro scale, i.e., the death of the entire biological organism” (Doyle 7). There is an acknowledgement and awareness within the medical community that death is “not an event” but rather a process which therefore can be tinkered with. “Sometimes called “absolutely irreversible death” or “information-theoretic death”” is where the “...destruction of the brain has occurred to such an extreme that any information it may have ever had is irrevocably lost for all eternity. This, some people argue, is the only real (irreversible) form of death” (8). A case in point is a recent experiment, published in April 2019, by Yale researchers on slaughtered pigs in which brain activity was revived in “decapitated” pigs to a certain extent several hours after their presumed death. Nevertheless no sign of consciousness or sentience was detected (The Guardian). This research is relevant to the extent that it questions accepted notions of death as an event and opens up the possibility of encountering death as a process in stages whereby the fundamental notions of transhumanism stand validated.

In the context of the proposed argument of this paper, death is examined through the listed characteristics:

- Death is an antonym to free will which is an important aspect of the living human body (Rigor Mortis, the third stage of death, literally means ‘stiffness of death’).
- Imminence – death is characterized by unexpectedness and inevitability.
- Personal – Death takes the individual in her aloneness, it is a subjective experience that each one has to go through on her own.
- Unity – Death takes the individual in her wholeness. Brain death and such references to parts of the body becoming dysfunctional ought to be strictly understood by their medical definitions and not as emotionally and practically comparable to the death of the entire being, caus-

ing eventual decomposition and disappearance which as of now is unavoidable outside of theorizing.

The transhumanist philosophy doesn't merely remain in niche cliques; it is widely-known and on some levels anticipated. Biomedical gerontologist Aubrey de Grey points out to the medical foundation of a future where the human lifespan is fundamentally greater than it is today: "The problem of aging is unequivocally humanity's worst medical problem. Roughly 100,000 people worldwide die every day of it, and there's an awful lot of suffering that happens before you die. But I feel that the defeat of aging in the foreseeable future is a realistic proposition" (1). He also notes that gerontology as opposed to geriatrics, believes in prevention rather than cure. By tending to the damages caused by metabolism periodically, he argues, human life span can proportionally be increased. This goes against the current medical practices of treating the aged for specific ailments, and is apparently more of a solution to ageing (3).

Transhumanist philosophy both in its outlook and goals depends heavily on futuristic technology not unlike what is portrayed in technological utopian and dystopian narratives of video games and the science fiction genre of other visual and print media. One can think of films like *The Matrix series*, *Avatar trilogy*, *Interstellar*, etc., video game series like *Bioshock*, *Deus Ex*, *system shock*, etc., and TV series such as *Black Mirror* and *Altered Carbon*. Most of these narratives are set in the future, in an era of technologically advanced human societies. The fact that transhumanist philosophy works in tandem with much of the popular content in contemporary media gives legitimacy to a collective social anticipation for such ideas as prolonged life and the conclusive evasion of physical death. From a situation where such ideas as the overcoming of death were seen to be purely hypothetical and imaginary, there has been a marked shift to one where the event of its realization is soberly awaited. However, so long as the cessation of death hasn't been actualized, death would happen as before, inevitably and imminently. This onrush of the end, as we await the realization of these goals, is described thus by Damien Broderick:

And in the meantime? How tragic to stand under the shadow of the executioner's sword even as the pardon is being rushed to us! If its sharp blade falls, we are as dead and gone as any peasant or priest or king in the suffering, long history and pre-history of the world. Plainly, the only prudent move is to do everything possible to forestall accidental or infective death during the next decade or three, and to adopt as many healthy

practices as we can manage without altogether giving up on the vivid texture of life. (436)

It may be noted that there is a sense of urgency and of being positioned midway in the above quotation. The desire for the need to escape the eventuality of death is likened to awaiting a word of pardon under a rushing sword. In this mid-way position, the singularity promised by technology is visible only as a mirage. When a specific goal has been sufficiently anticipated, a non-actualization of it leads to an imbalance between the expectation and the result. This in turn could induce imbalances in the consciousness that allows itself to desire something. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi posits a condition called 'psychic entropy' to explain this chasm between what the mind expects and what it fails to receive: "Whenever information disrupts consciousness by threatening its goals we have a condition of inner disorder, or psychic entropy, a disorganization of the self that impairs its effectiveness. Prolonged experience of this kind can weaken the self to the point that it is no longer able to invest attention and pursue its goals" (37).

The situation brought about by a collective anticipation of an evasion of the experience of death is one that is capable of inducing such psychic entropy. For as yet, death has not been evaded and, therefore, the expectations engendered by a belief in transhumanist philosophies constantly go awry. A link is posited between the psychic entropy caused by the above described situation and player engagement in video games. Psychic entropy, as defined in the above quotation, leads to a 'disorganization' of the self which no longer is able to invest 'attention.' This is another way of saying that the self is no longer able to focus on productive ends and is fragmented rather than organized in a state of unity. While the 'pardon is being rushed,' human beings are to keep the physical body safe from being destroyed. In this situation there is an evident split between the idea and the practicality of it. This imbalance is bound to cause a fragmentation of the individual self as the efficacy of the physical body and the expectations pinned around it no longer synchronize at any given point in the present. However, this gap can probably be filled at any point in future.

To analogically illustrate this point, this paper uses J. K. Rowling's concept of the *Horcrux*. In the sixth installment of the eponymous Harry Potter book series, Professor Slughorn describes horcruxes to Harry Potter thus: "Well, you split your soul, you see, and hide part of it in an object outside the body. Then even if one's body is attacked or destroyed, one cannot die, for part of the soul remains earthbound and undamaged. But, of course, existence in such a

form...” (497). As long as *horcruxes* exist, the death of the body cannot be the end. The proposed point is that the act of creating a/multiple game character(s)/avatar(s) and engaging in video game play may be equated to the process of creating *horcruxes*. The fictional utility of *horcruxing* is not exactly an absolute evasion of death. Rather, the more the number of *horcruxes*, the more one evades the imminence of the event of disappearance. It is essentially the splitting of the soul into several pieces so that the single whole self does not vanish in the event of death.<sup>3</sup>

It is common knowledge that the effective distribution of the time available to an individual can result in accomplishing a number of tasks simultaneously, thus, producing the illusion of more time than actually available. In a similar manner attention/focus can be split in a way that enables selective memory possible, which ultimately helps in keeping the memory of daily drudgery at bay. However, a life lived in the virtual dimension allows for this attitude to manifest more efficiently as compared to other platforms. In *Life on the Screen: Identity in the age of the Internet*, Sherry Turkle points out the ability of real-time virtual worlds to make the individual rethink oneself in terms of one’s mind, body, and identity. Virtual worlds make possible parallel existence and in this sense they represent the postmodern life situation (47).

On a conscious level, a human who has active avatars in a multiple number of video games is efficiently splitting one’s time and attention into a different dimension and therefore to some extent escaping the routine reality. On a much less conscious level, the same process signifies an intuitive measure against death, rooted in the notion of the latter taking away the individual, in her aloneness. As previously noted, death confronts the individual in her individuality and takes from her this unity of the individual as a whole. It is precisely this principle which is used in this subconscious attempt to sabotage the death of the body. This process, which has been equated with the concept of *horcruxing* here, is meant to undermine death by splitting or creating more parts of the self than can be taken away at once. It is

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<sup>3</sup>It is fitting to remember Freud’s argument for “doubling as a preservation against extinction” in the context of his discussion of Otto Rank’s concept of the Double/doppelganger as “an insurance against destruction to the ego” and as a “denial of the power of death.” He also talks about how this instinct of self-preservation is reflected in the language of dreams. The fear of castration is not represented directly; instead, other symbols stand in to represent the object (9). Clearly, such an “insurance against the destruction to the ego” occurs in a scenario where a person has multiple existences across game worlds.

important to note that none of this produces any corporeal results as the process is figurative. The act of engaging in multiple game worlds simultaneously through game-specific avatars helps challenge the non-availability of certain promises made by transhumanist philosophies. The player engages in ‘*horcruxing*’/doubling in her engagement with video games to gain a certain control, which is predominantly figurative, over her mental activities. Death is a personal experience and therefore any philosophy or ideological premise that assures a collective redemption from it can only be viewed with suspicion. The psychic entropy created by an inability of the mind to conflate the promise of overcoming death with the near impracticality of it in the present finds a subversive expression in video game play where the player potentially engages in creating and stashing away *horcruxes* (pieces) of themselves. To be more specific, inhabiting game worlds as characters is subversive precisely because the undercurrents of existence within game worlds in multiple forms point to a way of protecting the unity of the individual subject as it is no longer susceptible to death and disappearance when it is existing ‘as many’ as opposed to ‘as one.’

In *Stories, Meaning, and Experience: Narrative and Enaction*, Popova observes that causality is a part of direct human perception. She understands human cognition of complex narratives with the help of Merlin Donald’s concept of ‘slow process’ (qtd. in Popova 35–6), “...which runs at the background of human cognitive life, while the faster-moving sensorimotor one, responsible for the short-duration processes...runs in the foreground” (Popova 35). The ‘slow process’ mentioned before, may here be understood as the cognitive process in action, that unifies the player’s multiple presences as game characters across platforms in a holistic narrative. Video games are essentially narratives of varying complexity which may be played and ‘understood’ in terms of the same concept of causality inherent in human cognition. The ‘psychic entropy’ resulting from the discord between expectations and reality is resolved at a figurative and mental level.

In “The Transhuman Inclination of Video Games,” Robert. M. Geraci points out that all video games are essentially transhuman in nature because the game world is able to defy physical laws. This paper stresses the fact that the transhuman goal of defying death is perpetually set in the future and, therefore, figurative video game *horcruxing* is a subjective coping mechanism which is in a way subversive to the official transhuman narrative. Death might be overcome in the future, but, until then, it is rushing towards the present and it has to be dealt with alone. Transhumanism looks forward to a future where the society would collectively evade death. But, the subjectivity inher-

ent in the experience of death opposes the collective/communal nature of transhumanist optimism for the future.

Engaging in the figurative process of *horcruxing* in the virtual dimension amounts to corporeal results to the extent that, the promise of overcoming death is a discourse regarding what is to come in the future and not the present. If the idea of the future is itself a way of perceiving time in the present, the corporeality of etching *horcruxes* in the virtual dimension in the now already exists simultaneously with the future of fast-approaching death. It is a question of recognizing the unprecedented intermediary nature of existence today and its ways of expressing itself. As death takes over the individual in the solitariness of one's self, it also results in the will of the body being handed over to death. Rigor mortis (stiffness of death), described as the third stage of death (Jalan), describes this condition. The very act of play as opposed to the stiffness of death on the virtual dimension signifies an intuitive reaction against this absolute giving up of the free will of the body.

As a case in point, *Simcity: Buildit* is a simulation game published by Electronic Arts that serves as example for an immersive game experience accessible to larger audience by virtue of being available on the smartphone platform. Unlike the original Sim series which let players create their own avatars and life situations, this variant is one that has an implicit avatar, not an explicit or 'present' character/avatar. *Simcity: Buildit* players are mayors of cities that they get to build from the scratch. 'Other' people/characters (AI) inhabit the houses and buildings you fashion in your city. The player agency in this game is therefore an implicit rather than explicit presence, despite which an immersive and constant engagement within the game world is a requirement. Any neglect by the player's 'mayor' character by being inactive in the game world for extended periods of time takes a toll on the city, from the sewer systems, transport, and electricity to law and order; everything suffers and the city falls into utter chaos and what more, the Sim inhabitants start to vacate your city; the product of your time, hard work, and sometimes real money. The necessity of consistent and constant presence of the player that this game demands for any substantial progress to be made cannot be overstressed. Being an online game which does not really have an end goal as such, the intrusion potential of this game in daily life is high because it can replace life itself; a quality many video games share.

Another example is *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, the third installment in the Witcher game series. It is an open-world game that gives players access to literally every part of its geography, neatly laid out in a map.

In contrast to the *Simcity: Buildit* game discussed above, *Witcher 3* is not an online game, neither is it a mobile platform game. The player takes on the character of a trained fighter but the aspect of the game relevant to this paper is its open-world character. Although there is an overarching theme and goal that drives the main narrative of the game, none of its primary or secondary goals are either time-bound or sequence-specific. The game lets the player roam around the geography of the game world without necessarily being involved in a quest; that is to say, one can exist within the game riding horses, swimming across lakes, picking medicinal flowers and making potions and the like. A player can choose to simply exist within the game space as an extension of it without exhausting the possibility of existence by “finishing” quests and getting to the end of the story. This example is relevant because gameplay in *Witcher 3* allows for existence in a virtual game world as a character susceptible to an exemplary level of customization, without exhausting the possibility of being. In both *Witcher 3* and *Simcity: Buildit*, the act of ‘horcruxing’ is particularly ‘safe’ owing to the ongoing nature of these games, a characteristic they share with many online games as well. At this juncture it is also important to mention that the option to re-spawn or to regain lives in video games is a general characteristic that makes them a site of coping mechanism as they are figurative measures against the onrush of death. The two games mentioned above are peculiar to the extent that their narratives are ongoing and therefore the death of the character is quite impossible in the same way as in certain other games that explicitly offer the player a number of chances of life to get a quest right.

The question arises as to why videogaming is a better way to *horcrux* against death than any other life activity. The duality between mind and body, and the potential of the mind to outlive the limitations of the body have always been speculated by philosophers. This process of letting the mind drift is a characteristic of reading, viewing, and browsing the cyberspace in general. Qualitatively, in video games, the mind/body divide is actualized to its maximum potential. It is important to make this distinction between traditional art forms and video games with regard to the flexibility these media allow in exercising this disconnect. In reading and viewing, the identification with a character and adventures in the *textworld* are accomplished as someone else. In games, the virtual mind and the body that engage in play belong to the player, regardless of what character one plays. The attachment to the *game world* is through the avatar in the game, but the avatar is ontologically dependent on the player unlike in other scenarios. It is the avatar that makes *horcruxing* in the game world possible.

The significance of engaging in the process of *horcruxing* within games is that there is a disconnect between mind and body, and to even have a perceived dissociation with the body, which is the reference point for defining death, is to also temporarily distance oneself from the approach of death, metaphorically. This experience of disconnect is important because death is conceived within the framework of the body; if and when body processes stall, including the functions of the brain, death is certified. In non-virtual/real-life *horcruxing*, body, the point of reference for understanding mortality, accompanies the mind everywhere.<sup>4</sup> The transhumanist assumption, described by Robert Freitas, is that the human body is designed to destroy itself:

Red cells carry oxygen to our tissues and remove carbon dioxide. Respirocytes [respirocyte is an artificial mechanical red blood cell just 1 micron in diameter having 1/100th volume of a natural red cell.] do too, but would be made of much stronger diamond-like materials, not floppy lipids and proteins as we find in living cells. (70)

The human body is made up of “floppy” material, intended for destruction with the passage of time. The transhumanist vision is to replace the floppy body material with “diamond-like” structures, and other substrates more durable and strong. The non-durability of human body is its inherent character as it is not built for endurance but to naturally become decrepit and eventually disappear. For this reason the death of the individual is fundamentally understood as the death of the body. As a game avatar is ontologically dependent on the player, it is not just the mind of the player that doubles itself in a virtual world but also the body.

While Geraci argues that video games in general have a ‘transhumanist inclination’ because they defy the limitations of the real world, others like William Sims Bainbridge draw this connection by appealing to a similar point that game avatars provide us the experience of becoming more than what we are:

Avatars point out to us that enhancement is not merely a matter of increasing the effectiveness of a person in taking action, but also can mean an altered form of consciousness that expands opportunities for experience, and escape from the conventional

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<sup>4</sup>Multitasking is a way of effectively utilizing time and in real-life one does spread oneself thin by donning several roles, being part of several fan clubs, organizations, etc. In such *horcruxing* activities, body accompanies mind regardless to say.

system of moral restraints. Especially noteworthy is the fact that one individual may have many different avatars, thereby becoming a *multiplex* or *protean personality*. (91)

It would not be out of place to point out that this characteristic of video games and virtual worlds in general should be seen as corollary to the technological revolution that qualifies contemporary times. Video games is one of the most representative art forms of this century precisely because it captures the plurality, the changing quality of life today. Human beings today are more ‘protean’ and less constrained by cultural, political, and biological limitations than ever before in history. The point is that the power of the game world to mediate virtual transcendence of human limitations should be seen in tandem with its rise as an art form to match the times that produced it which is essentially a product of globalization.<sup>5</sup>

Video games like all art are ultimately a cultural product and therefore, are in a reciprocal relationship with the social and political order. In their definition of the transhuman, the Transhumanist FAQ 3.0 of Humanity+ website notes:

One might ask, given that our current use of e.g. medicine and information technology enable us to routinely do many things that would have astonished humans living in ancient times, whether we are not already transhuman? The question is a provocative one, but ultimately not very meaningful; the concept of the transhuman is too vague for there to be a definite answer. (Transhumanist FAQ)

There is a necessity to draw a qualitative distinction between what constitutes the transhuman and what does not. One of the more obvious links that connects video games to transhumanism is avatars and their metaphorical relevance to the field of neural-computer interface,<sup>6</sup> a field that is expected to make most transhumanist goals come true. But then it is sensible to remember that while technological changes affect the society holistically, the average human of today,

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<sup>5</sup>Human beings are no longer bound by the restrictions of time and space to physical locations, and interactions happen over virtual spaces, therefore, video games is an art form reflective of this age because narratives also play out on the virtual world where people collectively engage with stories in spite of time-space constraints in real-time (MMORPGs).

<sup>6</sup>As previously mentioned, among the three options transhumanists put forward to become posthuman, “upload” is the option that discusses the possibility of a neural-computer interface where the personality/avatar of an individual is transferred onto a computer system as a “brain in a machine.”

according to this logic, would be transhuman regardless of his/her allegiance to this point of view. While it is important to acknowledge the existing literature establishing a link between video games and transhumanism, it is important to not confuse life with art. Human beings today are qualitatively far more transhuman than earlier; in video games it is more a case of art catching up with time by reflecting the qualitatively more transhuman.<sup>7</sup>

The human body as it is today is a limitation and it is hoped that a point in the future would take care of this issue once and for all. While in broad agreement with the basic tenets of transhumanism the paper bases itself on a cultural shift brought about by the transhumanist understanding of death. The point that the transhumanist goal of overcoming death is always set in the future cannot be stressed enough. This paper seeks to understand the affective consequences in the present of this goal set perpetually in future time. Figurative *horcruxing* does not intend to overcome death; it merely is a hologram of the desire for the “rushing pardon,” projected from deep within the mind.

In conclusion, given the contemporary relevance of video games within the larger context of increasingly technology-anticipating societies, the paper argues that an optimism for the future imagined by advancing technologies leads to anticipation of radical goals like prolonged lifespan and immortality which, at present, remain unattainable, thereby, creating a disconnect between expectations and outcomes. The possibility of a future evasion of death when internalized, leads to a conflict between the expectations of the mind and the ability of the body to fulfill them. This results in subconscious attempts by the mind to reinstate the lost balance. Video game play attempts to subvert this disconnect by letting players create and inhabit characters in virtual worlds where the disparity between a promise for collective evasion of death and the personal nature of death as an actual experience is challenged and subverted.



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<sup>7</sup>Medical advancements have already significantly improved the quality and span of life; the use of prosthetic limbs, pacemakers, etc., make humans of today transhuman in the sense that these are incremental augmentations.

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# Cyborg Incorporated: Mechanics, Aesthetics, and Cyborg Narrativity in David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ*

Meike Robaard

## Abstract

Reflecting on the ubiquity of screens in contemporary life, this paper seeks to suggest that we inhabit a “cyborgian condition” in which (human) bodies (and self-understanding) are composed with technology. Upon analyzing David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983) and *eXistenZ* (1999), and in engaging with existent theoretical discourse, this paper studies the movement and appearance of arguably posthuman performing bodies on the screen, and the ways in which they can be accounted for as special narrative vehicles. Drawing upon Donna Haraway's primarily text-based exploration of the cyborg's radical potentiality, and Daniel Punday's literary analysis of corporeal narratology, this paper introduces the concept of “cyborg narrativity” by emphasizing the unique “aesthetic” and “mechanical” properties of cinematic (that is, visual) storytelling. In examining cyborg typologies and presenting “cyborg narrativity” as a way of approaching the “new” body image(s) that technological changes propel, this paper incorporates Cronenberg as a co-theorist, making visible new ways of understanding “being(s) in technology.”

**Keywords:** *Cyborg, body-horror, posthumanism, Cronenberg, cinematography, corporeality, narrative, aesthetics, technology*

Surrounded by (technological) screens, varying from computers to mirrors, we find ourselves existing in what protagonist Nicki Brand in David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983) refers to as “overstimulated times” in which we “crave stimulation” (00:10:34). Always in one way or another engaging with technical tools, the subject finds herself increasingly fusing with the devices she uses to enhance her abilities, which operate as an “...expressive medium for [her] being-in-the-world” (Trigg 75). Whilst technology is arguably as old as humanity itself, it is the role that it plays today in not merely simulating or elevating but rather creating reality that leads post-phenomenologist Don Ihde to conclude that, moving away from the basic notion that “we are our bodies” (both socio-culturally and biologically), we have now become “bodies in technologies” (138). We see these “bodies in

technologies” brought to the screen and turned on their heads through the works of Canadian horror-filmmaker David Cronenberg, who argues that technology has not so much taken over our body-environment but rather what occurs is “...the absorption of technology into the body and the extension of the body through technology” (“commentary” 00:47:48). More than just existing in technology, then, as Cronenberg illustrates in *eXistenZ* (1999), in which a seemingly organic video-game universe starts to display a “very weird reality-bleed-through effect” (01:19:22), we have additionally become bodies through and bodies as technologies. Given such an updated state of both being(s) and world(s) in, as, and through technology, it might be useful, as Udo Krauwurst writes, to understand and diagnose such existential circumstances as the symptoms of a “cyborgian condition” (145), an ontological status resulting from this continuous merging of extensive technological tools and extending, transforming selves. This notion of the cyborgian as a characterization of life in what Marshall McLuhan refers to as the “electric age,” where “we see ourselves being translated more and more into the form of information” (64) can be a useful interpretation of increasingly technically mediated environments, or “medial ecologies” (Hayles 5), that we occupy and construct ourselves in. Cyber-spatial territories, henceforth, Michael Heim argues, serve perfectly as “...a metaphysical laboratory, a tool for examining our very sense of reality” (31) in which the artist, as “a mad scientist [whose] life is their lab” (Cronenberg & Rodley 7), can by means of creative investigation provide us with “(cognitive) maps” (Jameson 89) that help guide us meaningfully through such updates of being and challenging representations thereof. The condensation of “technical images” (Flusser 10) and material reality of the cyborg, as a celluloid figuration that has now entered the popular imagination, then “becomes synonymous,” as Christine Cornea notes, “with an understanding of contemporary life” (4) in which we see the same occur. An important, yet often overlooked artist and producer of such “images of thought” (Deleuze and Guattari 16) undertaking precisely this critical, cartographic endeavor, is David Cronenberg, a former biology-student turned director who “...look[s] at each [of his] films as a sort of lab experiment” (qtd. in Hickenlooper 4). Cronenberg, this paper asserts, comes to perfectly embody the performative scientist examining our cultural condition which finds expression in his films through the merging of visual play and philosophical experimentation.

Cronenberg’s cinematic corpus, particularly *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ*, revolve around body as the center of both creation and destruction and figure into a dynamic of renewed interest in the body across art and theory. As Dylan Trigg writes in *The Thing: A Phenom-*

*enology of Horror*, Cronenberg's filmography is a "...testament to the primacy of the body in the structure of the subject" (85); extremely "body-conscious" ("fear" 00:10:49), perhaps even body-obsessive, Cronenberg treats the material body as the phenomenological basis for our being, even as "the primary fact of human existence" (qtd. in Dee). Such a renewed focus on the body reflects a "corporeal turn" (Sheets-Johnstone 3) in cultural studies and critical analysis, in which the body is foregrounded as the situated center of identity, informing contextualized knowledge(s) and ontologies consequently. In his book, *Narrative Bodies: Towards Corporeal Narratology* (2003), David Punday introduces the notion of "corporeal narratology" (vii) to address this previous lack of focus on or even denial of embodiment, resulting in a kind of disembodiment in narrative. According to Punday, this is "the result of a [textual] tradition that has worked to shape the body's relevance to narrative in very peculiar and sometimes contradictory ways" (viii). The non-primacy of the body in literary analysis is not so much caused by an actual invisibility or non-existence but is rather the consequence of a post-enlightenment discourse concerned with bodily transcendence and writing the body, as subordinate matter opposed to ratio and ideas, out of narrative. In seeking to move away from such body-phobia, bodies in cinematic narrative, which opposed to textual bodies, quite literally carry the narrative through movement, character development, and dialogue therefore require distinct analysis. Although Punday makes a point in arguing that "[w]hat makes the body so important to narrative and to our ways of thinking about reading is how it seems to resist powerfully textual representation" (viii), this paper suggests that Cronenberg's work, as a cinematic rather than a textual corpus, does precisely this; it foregrounds the body through reflection to such an extreme that his films become corporeal and produce almost somatic effects of fear. Given that Punday's analysis remains textual and does not take into consideration the cinematic, there is an important novelty to the corporeal narrativity that Cronenberg's corpus displays given his visualized focus not just on the human body but also on its relationship with the technological domain. This paper's contribution, in bringing together Donna Haraway's arguably revolutionary writings on the (subversive) cyborg and Daniel Punday's exploration of the role of bodies in narrative, thus becomes two-fold: cyborg narrativity, itself a cyborgian synthesis, complicates the technology-affected body whilst pointing at its narrative agency. If technology, as Cronenberg seeks to exemplify in his films, is "first of all an extension of the human body" (00:47:48), then the notion of "corporeal narratology" defined by Punday might require an update, both in terms of moving from text to film, as well as from "purely biological/organic" to "cyborgian" bodies. It is this update of "cyborg

narrativity,” as a “critical invention” (“commentary” 00:06:22) positioning not just the body but more accurately the synthesized/synthesizing cyborg body as a narrative “map(ping out)” (McCracken 288), that this paper seeks to introduce, both through its content and its *incorporative*, patch-work like writing style, weaving together former theories and the analysis of the author.

Looking at Cronenberg’s films through the lens of visual writing and “body”-language, instead of solely belonging to the body-horror genre, it further adds to the ongoing dialogue(s) about the role of the body in narrative, the body and technology, and cinematic versus textual representation. By incorporating aesthetics and mechanics of both corporeality and technology as agents of (self)production together into a “cyborg subject,” who not only has its own peculiar style of appearance but also embodies as well as operates according to an arguably palpable philosophy, Cronenberg, as a “metaphysical poet” (qtd. in Rodley 131), enables his characters and stories together to operate through what this paper shall term “cyborg narrativity.” What lies at the heart of this paper, therefore, is not just a critical intervention into the role of the (cyborg) body in narrative, but also the cinematic fleshing out of such criticism through illustrated embodiment of these concepts in Cronenberg’s two selected works. On one level, Cronenberg, as the “God, artist, mechanic” (*eXistenZ* 00:22:10) of heterotopic worlds, experiments with the sometimes-experienced-as-intrusive infiltration of technological devices. An example thereof is *Videodrome*’s “Civic TV, the one you take to bed with you” (00:01:00) technology in Cronenberg’s films is always-already present, not just as McLuhanian extensions but as (new) body parts or organs of perception which, as further exemplified in *eXistenZ*, enable access to new (game) worlds in which systems “port into you” and where, instead of using batteries, “you’re the power source” (00:38:06). Cronenberg critically examines and oftentimes rethinks our relationships to technology by means of “diffraction as a mapping of interference” (Haraway 300), sometimes in culturally unsettling and uncanny ways. In doing so, through his moving visualizations, Cronenberg forces us to look into a cinematic mirror that is seemingly haunted. It is not just the mirror-image, then, but on a more fundamental level the cyborgian self-image that Cronenberg enables us to see and engage with. Both *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ*, in their focus on technology, mediation, and identification thus come to display what Fredric Jameson refers to as “[a] shift in the dynamics of cultural pathology [that] can be characterized as one in which the alienation of the subject is displaced by the fragmentation of the subject” (63), a condition of which we can recognize the symptoms especially through

cultural texts. Yet, such a fragmentation of the subject made literal in Cronenberg's films does not result in the post-modernist "death of the subject," but rather signifies the "birth" of "new flesh" (V 01:13:15) as inherently embodied, technological, and thus material.

Building on Espen J. Aarseth's idea that "the text [is] a kind of machine, a symbiosis of sign, operator and medium" (55), Cronenberg's films, in themselves already cyborgian constructions composed on "writing machines" (qtd. in Rodley 169), operate by producing certain "special effects." Moving from text to cinema, amongst other things, we see a shift from emphasis on linguistic characters, that is letters, to physical characters or bodies. Both Cronenberg's films foreground the technology-infused body as the central force, if not source, of narrative construction, by focusing, as Daniel Punday puts it, on "how the body contributes to our ways of speaking about and analyzing narrative" (IX) as well as by visually updating Donna Haraway's manifested understanding of the "cyborg" as "...a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as fiction" (149). He introduces us to a more "New Materialist" (Dolphijn & Van der Tuin 2012) visual writing of film thus allowing the cyborg more aptly to be both "theorized and fabricated" (Haraway 150). An understanding of this visual writing of film in Cronenberg's works is rather crucial here, as it not only synthesizes textual theories and material manifestations, but also seeks to underline the multiple ways in which "bodies," particularly in the selected two films, not only act out a language-based script but actually write and establish narrative gestures physically.

Originally coined by Australian neurologist Manfred Clynes in 1960, the term "cyborg" is a neologism made up out of the words "cybernetic" and "organism," introduced to "...describe the new symbiotic entity that results from the alliance between humans and technology in a closed, artificial environment" (qtd. in Aarseth 51). The figure of the cyborg, with all its ambiguity and embodied paradoxicality, has a complex history which mimics the inherent multiplicity and entanglement of the cyborg itself. The cyborg, as Donna Haraway puts it, is something we all are; she writes, "by...our time, we are all chimeras...hybrids of machine and organism... the cyborg is our ontology... a condensed image of both imagination and material reality" (15). This definition, from *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991), that Haraway provides us with helps us see that despite the sometimes trivial mode through which the cyborg is represented (such as in the *Terminator* (1984–2019) and *RoboCop* (1987–2014) franchises), "the cyborg," as she states, "...is from the start a polluted

category” (qtd. in Olson 4) and what Sue Short calls an “indeterminate creature” (3). The cyborg’s growing appeal as a kind of cultural phenomenon or icon, can in part be understood as the consequence of a fascination with such technological complexity and historical ambiguity. In popular fictional portrayals of the cyborg, for example, the non-neutrality that comes with this indefiniteness is illustrated by the clear-cut “goodness” or “evil” of the cyborg concerned.

In both of Cronenberg’s films, the viewers find themselves much closer to an undramatized image of reality-as-we-know-it, in which people live their lives together with technology in increasingly intensifying ways; cyborg is not the obvious villain or hero but becomes accessible to the viewer through their own mirror-image. Cronenberg’s assembly of the cyborg-trope in stories and people’s day-to-day intimacy with technological devices, then, seems to echo precisely what Haraway means when she writes that “[t]he cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience,” and that “the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion” (149). The paradoxical, simultaneous deconstruction and reconstruction (a film is a kind of illusion, after all) of this optical illusion thus arguably becomes one of the main driving forces in Cronenberg’s visual writing. As such, things in *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* are not as they initially seem: by foregrounding the body in both films Cronenberg toys not just with alternative, sci-fi representations of cyborg bodies as cultural-technological embodiments of the now and new, but even more so plays with the idea of socially-real reflection, not necessarily presenting novelty but rather mirroring what already is and perhaps always was. *Videodrome* tells the story of Civic TV CEO, Max Renn, who, in his search for new sensationalist television shows to broadcast, stumbles upon the seemingly illegal Malaysian program “Videodrome,” a show displaying sexualized “[t]orture, murder [and] mutilation” (00:12:19) and finds himself being affected in different ways by viewing it, leading to the distortion not just of his reality but also of his physicality. *eXistenZ* shifts the focus from the dangers of passively consumed television towards the active participation in videogames. The viewers follow female protagonist, Allegra Geller, game-designer at Antenna Research and inventor of the new “metaflesh” game system (00:05:32) which, through “game pods” attached by “UmbyCords” to “bioports” (00:05:55), “a sort of hole in your spine” (00:20:43), enables the physical “walking through” (00:16:03) and interaction between a virtual game world and the human nerve structure, echoing Cronenberg’s conviction that technology “...is first and foremost an extension of the neurological system” (qtd. in Natashi). Whilst “downloading *eXistenZ* by Antenna Research” into her audience (00:07:32),

however, Allegra is attacked by a fanatic member in the audience, who has been able to pass the security because of his “flesh and bone” weapon (00:14:47), and calls for “[d]eath to [Allegra] the demoness” (00:09:21). Allegra finds herself on the run with her body-guard Ted Pikul for not merely threatening the safety, but rather risking the stability of reality by mixing and messing with existence through her games, leaving her many anti-eXistenZialist enemies. Max is similarly accused of contributing to “a social climate of violence and sexual malaise” (00:10:09), thus threatening the safety of the real in *Videodrome*.

The two films lend themselves particularly well to both analysis and embodiment of cyborg narrativity. Not only are there numerous thematic overlaps between them which in different ways display how cyborg narrativity functions, the relationship between the films can also be characterized as one of conjoined twins, partially separate entities that exist as parts of the same “body,” in conjunction with Chris Rodley’s suggestion for perceiving the films as “inverse twins” (8). Both films, based on original scripts written by Cronenberg, concern themselves with notions of reality, biology, and technology, all brought, almost literally, in touch with one-another, played out in and on the arena (V 00:20:29) that is the conjoined (non-essentialized) body itself. Especially in mediating understanding between technology and human identity, these narratives operate as “...running on the complex infrastructures of social and psychic systems” (Clarke 13), given that they concurrently build on and go against popular culture and its beliefs. As Lia M. Hotchkiss notes, “[b]oth *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* metacinematically toy with the truth value of the cinematic signifier” (18); *Videodrome* disorients us seemingly without end, thus making it impossible to distinguish between what is real and what is not, whereas *eXistenZ* starts off with definitively hallucinatory circumstances of entering the game and, with it, marking its descent into the (seemingly) “unreal.” It is only towards the end of *eXistenZ* that it becomes clear to the viewer that what initially seemed to be a linear narrative of deterioration and dissociation that maintains a clear division between fantasy (game) and reality, is actually the glitch of one kind of hallucination into the other, thus, making it impossible for the viewer, even as the film comes to an end, to determine what was actually “real” or whether everything depicted was actually part of one big game. Whilst *Videodrome* gradually dissolves the separation between real and hallucinatory—a journey embodied by the protagonist Max, these distinctions do not make sense to begin with in *eXistenZ*. Not merely attached by thematic overlap, then, the films also finish and complement each other’s narrative in a true twin-like fashion, virtually

leading *eXistenZ* to pick up where *Videodrome* left off. Inasmuch as *Videodrome* introduces the idea of the organic taking over mechanical functions, it is in *eXistenZ* (where the merging of representation and reality, set in motion in *Videodrome*, has become established as indistinguishable) that Cronenberg fully fleshes out his Canguilhemian philosophy that “all is body” (Natasi). Hence, the organical has not merely *become* (as in *Videodrome*), but moreover always-already *is* the mechanical. The films, as twins, conjoined or inversed, thus continue to speak to each other in numerous ways. The dialogue on the technologization of the body and biologization of technology therefore endures, leaving not just Cronenberg but also, though differently, the audience, in Hotchkiss’s words, “still in the game” (16).

Situating Cronenberg as a weaver of fictional creation (techno-fantasies and scenarios in sci-fi) and reality-observation (cultural anxieties over the use of technological devices), building on Haraway’s claim that the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an “optical illusion” (149), this paper argues that it is precisely such an optical illusion that Cronenberg makes visible to the viewers, by “show[ing] the unshowable [and] speak[ing] the unspeakable” (Cronenberg qtd. in Rodley 131). This element of making-visual is crucial to Cronenberg, for as he claims, “I have to show things because I’m showing things that people could not imagine... if I had done them off-screen, they would not exist,” henceforth attempting to make it “common currency of the imagination” (qtd. in Rodley 41–43). Cronenberg’s films thus allow the viewers to see a specific, post-Harawayian, updated vision and its “effective/affective” (Hurley 203) bodies. Writing as an act of mere textuality in an age of “the image, the imagined, the imaginary” (Appadurai 31) proves insufficient on its own in reflecting upon such circumstances. Embracing cinematography as a type of “light-writing” (Williams 16) and as “technolog[y] of inscription” (Hayles 117), instead, allows us to revise a literature-based understanding of writing and thus move towards the idea of writing through the body as image construction. This move from traditional writing, that is textual inscription in narrative, towards cinematic writing based on movement, gesture, and image is important to consider in the context of visual narratives, and particularly so with regards to Cronenberg’s films. To indeed “speak the unspeakable,” Cronenberg invents an explicit bodily language that narrates, not merely through words but rather through visual materiality and corporeal expression, an aesthetic that surpasses the somewhat simplistic categorization as “body horror.” As bodies move and act out in front of Cronenberg’s camera, they establish narratives not predominantly by means of textual scripts, but rather through bodily/technological

wounds, growths, and viruses translated into “readable” imagery.

In *Videodrome*, the image is a central feature: it is the televised image that compels, even brainwashes Max initially, for as Professor O’Blivion predicted “[t]he television screen has become the retina of the mind’s eye” (00:11:24), and that same image transforms, inscribes, and reshapes him in his image as a cyborg tape-recorder (01:03:06); thus, the image has become embodied, the flesh has become image. The making of television shows, of which the Civic TV station as well as the Rena King Show (00:09:38) are examples, then is another theme in the film (itself an image construction). *eXistenZ* pushes forth this centrality, focusing on virtual-image-construction, that is the job of a video-game designer crafting worlds of images for entertainment-purposes. Unlike *Videodrome*, in the game “eXistenZ,” which later turns out to actually be part of the metagame “tranCendenZ” pioneered by PilgrImage (01:29:53), all is simultaneously flesh (given the organic-looking game-devices used), but is also (technological) image given its video-game nature. Such a paradox then seems to give birth to the new flesh that *Videodrome* prophetically closes with. Image and flesh become one, embodied by the cinematic Cronenbergian cyborg who writes narratives on and through its own body, translated and projected onto the screen.

As we move from text-based writing to visual, cinematic writing, in which medium and (film)maker become, in somewhat cyborgian ways, intertwined mechanically as well as aesthetically through their collaboration, the focus on film becomes highly relevant given its reliance on cinematographic technology. As Jacques Derrida notes, there seems to be an inherent assemblage-ness to cinema (qtd. in Landow 9), which this paper argues already makes cinematic production, especially given its use of montage, “cuts, pans, and zooms” (Brophy 9), cyborgian per definition, for it connotes the mixing and consequential blurring of organic and mechanical elements into what Gordon Coonfield calls “machinic assemblage... not [as] a thing, but as a process, and ongoing organizing of multiplicities” (qtd. in Spicer 83). Such an understanding of cinema as both a cyborgian medium and product that is constantly in-the-making, then, has profound effect on narrative and especially narrative cinema, for as Bruce Clarke notes, “a narrative text is a story that is ‘told’ in a medium” which is then shaped by such a medium consequently (22). In Cronenberg it is the captured-on-film body itself, as “...both the marker of boundaries and the expressive medium for our being-in-the-world” (Trigg 75) that is transformed into such a mediator or story. *Videodrome*, in particular, contains a number of scenes in which physical changes on the body-

surface give indications of the narrative's prospective trajectory: what Max first thinks is a "rash" (00:33:32) actually turns out to be the beginning of the transformation that ends with his body turning into a video-war-machine. *eXistenZ*, which ironically barely makes use of CGI (Computer Generated Imagery), shows less grotesque physical changes but nevertheless uses the body-game-simulator as its storyboard. The appearance of the bio-port plug-ins located on Pikul and Allegra's backs change each time we move onto a different story-layer. The assemblage or coming-into-being of the cyborg as cyborg, then, is a constant process in *Videodrome* as well as *eXistenZ*: distinctive parts lose their status as solo units and become mixed together, to such an extent that neither beginning nor end, but only blend can be recognized. As such, the aesthetics of *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ*, that is, the philosophy of how things look in the film, is a "cyborg aesthetic" that presents itself through acts of hybridity and synthesis. This blending, as Haraway writes, is purposeful for "there is a pleasure in the confusion of boundaries" (qtd. in Fleckenstein 42), which finds expression through the inversion of numerous binarisms in Cronenberg and might in part explain why Cronenberg's cyborgs are sometimes hard to recognize as cyborgian.

Messing not just with our idea/image of the cyborg but also blurring the lines between concepts informing particular understandings of the relationship between body and mind, we cannot easily fit these fleshy cyborgs into an already-existing, fixed category, which of course is precisely the point. The binarism that first, and according to Steven Shaviro most importantly, collapses in Cronenberg's works is that of Cartesian dualism between mind (thought) and body (matter) because his films demonstrate how "...neither can [any longer] be said to be the cause or ground for the other" (130). *Videodrome* demonstrates this parallelism through Max's confusing hallucination for materiality, constantly touching his body (V 00:51:51) to find signs of reality but whilst doing so never being sure of what is mind and what is body. Similarly, in *eXistenZ*, the game itself is no longer just a product of mind, as one would traditionally expect with an "idea-turned-game," but rather results from "[y]our body, your nervous system, your metabolism, your energy" (e 00:38:14): there is neither beginning nor end in sight. The ambiguous, transgressive blurring of numerous borders, especially between the organic and the machinic, occur and become anatomized in *eXistenZ* and *Videodrome*. Such syntheses allow Cronenberg's creatures to be cyborgian as opposed to simply monstrous or robotic, for they are neither just mimetic, artificial, metal constructions nor simply slimy and gross. Cronenberg's cyborgs are inherently embodied, symbiotic, and move far beyond being simply

organism or mechanism. However, this does not make these cyborgs any less organic or “natural.” Rather, what is organic versus what is mechanic is reconfigured through the rejection of an inherent human nature or essence, increasingly blurring the lines between human and machine through the image of the cyborg. As both films progress, it becomes clear that, through the incorporation of all kinds of devices into the body, we are all made up out of different parts. Whether it is watching television, playing video-games, or simply wearing glasses and riding a bike, we are constantly using tools, mechanizing and enhancing ourselves, and in this manner consequently changing ourselves physically.

The non-essentiality of the cyborg, defying both the organic and the mechanic backbone, allows for it to function as an important “demonstrating” monster. As Vicki Kirby notes in *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal*, “[t]he image of the cyborg has inspired critical discourse because [of] its volatile instability, its contours...the identity of the cyborg is regarded as monstrous because there is nothing about a cyborg that [can] be regarded as essential” (146). This lack of essence is exemplified not merely by the fact that in both *eXistenZ* and *Videodrome* bodies lose their status as undoubtful markers of reality, but is also brought forward by the numerous human-machine comparisons which radically de-center any kind of human essence as of central importance in informing a stable identity. In *Videodrome*, for example, electronic pirate Harlan shouts at Max that he is “...not a mechanism you can switch on and off” (V 00:57:47), because Max treats his subordinate as if he were just a machine, urging Harlan, as if he were a human tape-recorder, to document all *Videodrome* broadcasts. Cronenberg ironically pushes this literalization further as it is precisely such a human tape-recorder, complete with suggestive stomach-slit, that Max himself turns into as the narrative progresses. His identity and that of the machine have become physically intertwined, the human essence not so much lost but never present in the first place and constantly reprogrammed. It is this open-endedness, then, operating according to a kind of illogical logic that cannot be reduced to X or Y, that allows Cronenberg’s beings, such as the cyborgian Max-as-recorder, to be both “hideous and beautiful at the same time” (Barker qtd. in Jones 175). As monstrous as Cronenberg’s cinematic bodies often are or become, then, it is precisely this element of developing techno-monstrosity that is of fundamental importance: as Haraway remarks, “...monsters have the same root as to demonstrate; monsters signify” (Haraway 333n16) and “...have always defined the limits of community in Western imaginations” (180). Thus, positing Cronenberg’s cyborgian monsters as creatures born out of, existing on,

as well as frequently crossing over, boundaries such as “the border of organic and inorganic things” (Castanyer 4), these limits are constantly uprooted.

This understanding of the nature of technology, as expressed by both Allegra and Max, echoes Cronenberg’s own artistic view that “technology is not this very inhuman thing that imposes on us... but [that] it in fact comes from us, it’s part of us, it’s an expression of us” (“Cronenberg on Cronenberg” 00:20:05). Cronenberg’s philosophy, thus, is not merely a repetition of McLuhan’s argument that “[a]ny extension... affects the whole psychic and social complex” (19) and that “technology is an extension of man” (23) but rather emphasizes, as Canguilhem argued, that “machines can be considered as organs of the human species” and that “[a] tool or a machine is an organ, and organs are tools or machines” (55). While in *Videodrome*, we see the protagonist undergo a kind of word-becoming-flesh of Canguilhem’s argument as the film progresses, thus laying bare a process of “cyborgification” explicit for the viewer to see, *eXistenZ* further builds on this transformation in demystifying the body as a stable referent or “ontological access” (Hansen 5) to the real by now fully accepting the technological status of organic matter and vice versa. No longer bearing certainty, for it is the “real” itself that has, alongside the bodies themselves, been transformed in the process, Cronenberg’s fleshy cyborg bodies are a testament to a novel kind of mechanical organization that moves beyond where it has gone before.

Cronenberg’s films as cyborganic narrative texts and performative cyborg embodiments are situated and flow over into the outside-of-the-text, thus subverting the grammatical rules separating inside from outside and word from flesh, that structure them. As Michael Grant argues, such subversion is the result of Cronenberg’s systematic violation of matters of our experience resulting in the violation of “the grammar of inner and outer” (6) as well as in a transgression of the “grammar of our concepts” (Wittgenstein qtd. in Grant 3). This violation in *eXistenZ* and *Videodrome* sometimes comes with literal violence: pushing the flesh to its extremes, the viewer’s inner world is touched by the exterior image in truly unnerving ways (Shaviro 137). The genre of body horror features perfectly into this disordering of the inner and the outer, for in spilling its guts horror par excellence makes insides visible, “pushing the spectacle of interiority” (Grant 1). Cronenberg’s visual, almost biblical treatment of the “(video)word made flesh” (V 01:12:46) also performs such an internal/external collapse or implosion because, as Karen Barad notes, it “...challenges the presentationalist belief in the power of words to represent pre-existing

things” and opposed to “...turn[ing] everything (including material bodies) into words,” as written fiction arguably does, instead “...is a contestation of the excessive power granted to language to determine what is real” (802). In this sense, neither word, nor body any longer serve as proofs or representations of truth: rather, word and body, now “uncontrollable” (V 00:36:43) are merely testament to narratives embodied by the medium that tells it. Reality and fiction, originally constructed as each other’s opposites, become (con)fused: it is no longer clear where “reality,” as we know it, ends, and where the hallucination begins. Depending on the protagonist’s perception, we are handed down to Allegra and Max’s account of their experience as well as their bodies “backing” this up, experiences they often do not understand themselves. It is important to note here that this is not a classical example of unreliable narration, a literary invention which foregrounds the role of consciousness, that is mind, in constructing reality: rather, what we see here is an example of what Katherine N. Hayles refers to as “the remediated narrator...foregrounding a proliferation of inscription technologies that evacuate consciousness as the source of production and recover in its place a mediated subjectivity” (117). Remediated, literally, by technology, the protagonists find themselves “interpellated... into technoscience” (Haraway 49), which is a main characteristic of cyborg narrativity. There is a systematic “dislocation of narrative discontinuity” (Grant 15) leaving the unsettling question of what is actually going on perpetually in the air throughout the films. As Michael Grant notes, this sense of looming existential danger that the films generate in the viewer also represents their ambiguous narrative drives given that “the film[s] seem to go forward only hesitantly, feeling [their] way” (14 emphasis added). For the technophobe as well as the technophilic, the form of cyborg narrativity that exists throughout Cronenberg’s works is threatening for both mechanical and essentialist worldviews. This is not only because of its unstable narration, the display of graphic scenery, or the arguable twistedness that informs the ideas worked out throughout his films, but more fundamentally because they challenge the often taken-for-granted notion that, phenomenologically speaking, our bodies are the “touchstones” (Cronenberg qtd. in Rodley 145) of our reality, and as such generate uncanny feelings of anxiety or indeed, existential horror.

In both *eXistenZ* and *Videodrome* “realness” versus “fictionality” as definitive categories of meaning no longer matter, that is, they no longer signify. The initial association between quality and felt “realness,” both expressed by the multiple pro-realism collectives in *eXistenZ* as well as summed up in *Videodrome* by Max when he states that “[y]ou can’t take your eyes off it... it’s so realistic” (V

00:12:41) because more clearly fictionalized programs are “too sweet” (V 00:19:45), is not only questioned by Cronenberg but also denounced in *eXistenZ* where there seems to exist a longing for the unreal to take over the real. Allegra finds herself on the run, when an almost Rushdian “fatwa” (v 00:35:35) is issued against her for designing a game that, according to the anti-eXistenZialists, is “too realistic” and threatens reality. She comes to function as an embodied “demoness” (00:09:21) and identified enemy of the natural and the real, arguably because in her creation of eXistenZ as an “instant-on world” (00:27:45), she is in fact “playing God.” This binary opposition of fantasy versus reality, in addition to that of body and mind, the mechanical and the organic, and inner and outer, consequently, is completely rejected, if not entirely “deconstructed” by Allegra. The game-pods designed by her not only show no sign of digitality and are indeed products of “mutated animal organs” (e 00:55:12), she also perceives bodies in games and bodies in “reality” to be identical. Such a doubling is illustrated by the fact that in-and-outside the game there are no differences in the appearance of the bodies of the characters, that is, no electronic or virtual alteration is evident that would make it possible to distinguish between the two worlds, except change in hairstyle and outfit (e 00:40:02). It is in this sense that, despite the different (cyborg) body-types that the two films depict, there are only bodies of uncertain evidence that take us by the hand and carry us through transformation and destabilization. Whereas in *Videodrome* it is (video) technology that destroys any traditional form of physical presence through the incarnation of the “new flesh,” *eXistenZ* seems to already exist in this reconfigured fleshy “ecosphere” (“commentary” 00:01:49) and makes everything, from “pink-fone[s]” (e 00:11:58) to playing videogames a matter of flesh. The endings of both the films leave the viewers with the sense that, as Steven Shaviro notes, “the distinction between fantasy and reality, or between inner bodily excitation and outer objective representation, has entirely collapsed” given that these texts of cyborg narrativity set into motion a state in which “...technology becomes ubiquitous, and is totally melded with and objectified in the human body” (141).

This cyborg aesthetic, with its implosion of numerous binaries as important symptoms of cyborg narrativity, becomes visible throughout *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* and gives birth to a new meta-physical variety of cyborg body-types, both “embedded and embodied” (Braidotti 28), that are constantly in the making. Cronenberg presents such complex, alternative, non-traditional cyborg-body-productions, through the visualization of subversive and inversive body-images. As Denis Mellier and Charles La Via note, Cronenberg’s

cyborgs are “intimate becomings,” materialized through a process of decomposition/recomposition which has been rendered visible” (106). In both films, everything that matters, is physical, despite the optical illusion of simulation, mimicking virtuality: the constant presence of organic elements, either as bleeding tv-screens (V 01:12:15) or as nipple-reminiscent game consoles (e 00:20:00) remind us that it is the body itself, albeit changing, that we always return to. In this sense, this overarching understanding of corporeality is essential to making bodies meaningful, and “...defines a general body through which all of the textual objects touch” (Punday 82–83). The cyborgian body-imagery reflected when positioning Cronenberg’s protagonists in front of the mirror thus “...is designed to call attention to the ways in which science, technology and medicine routinely contribute to the fashioning of selves” (Kull 52). It is these “special effects” of body-imagery which Cronenberg’s films generate that lead this paper to posit that when performing a reading of his works, it is insufficient to understand the “body horror” that appears in his films as merely a matter of style. Rather, in focusing on the function of horror present in Cronenberg, it soon becomes evident that exploding heads (e 01:07:08), ripped-open bodies (V 01:20:5), and growths of new, oftentimes disgusting-looking limbs (V 01:12:06) are not part or even driving forces of the films for their shock-value or blood thirst. Instead, the horror in Cronenberg, particularly when combined with the cyborg narrativity that his films exemplify, serves as the actual phenomenological, philosophical skeleton, structuring the viewers’ experience and consequential self-(as-body)-perception in a way that effects both the personal, private as well as public, social body.

As a “literalist of the body” (Shaviro 129), Cronenberg’s cinematic corpora are, like Russian dolls, full of bodies-within-bodies, henceforth generating a wide range of body-types, which conceal and reveal themselves as “sites of intimate knowledge” (Lacan qtd. in Trigg 38). Given that, as Alan Hyde remarks, “there is no knowledge of the body apart from our discursive constructions of it” (6), these body-types prove especially informing. In the first place, the two films are, as previously stated, due to their nature of construction, cyborg bodies in and of themselves. Beyond bodies of work, we also see the turning-cyborg bodies of the protagonists and their reflection thereupon. Literally positing the protagonists as “armed” with weaponry (V 01:05:45), guns play an interesting role here: the films themselves being full of numerous weapon-references, that is, describing a camera-part known as “flashgun” (V 00:54:10) and “shooting” images/“shooting questions” (e 01:32:12), the corporeal extends itself and comes to “incorporate” all, including ammunition. In *eXistenZ* similar-

ly, whilst McLuhan justifiably argues that games "...incorporate both the action and reaction of the whole population into a single dynamic image" (208), what the viewers see is not just structural inclusion but actual, physical as well as complete incorporation of the "imaged" in which "you do not so much play, as the game plays you" (Castanyer 8), which is interestingly coupled back to film by Cronenberg as a form of "interactive cinema" ("Cronenberg on Cronenberg" 00:21:42).

The less visible bodies within bodies in Cronenberg's films are corporations, such as *Videodrome's* Spectacular Optical and *eXistenZ's* Antenna Research, PilgrImage and Cortical Systematics, collectives that can alternatively be called "sociotechnical assemblages" (Ihde 92). The anti-corporatism present in Cronenberg's works, expressed through the numerous espionage plots and corrupting corporate interests in both films is quite remarkable, because as the etymology of the word "corporation" suggests, it is the human body writ large. As Cronenberg states in an interview, "[a]n institution is really like an organism, a multi-celled animal in which the people are the cells... the very word 'corporation' means body... an incorporation of people into one body" (qtd. in Rodley 29). A worker, then, is simply a body within a larger body, similar to *eXistenZ* gamers playing on, as well as within, their own bodies. Cronenberg's body-literalism thus comes to fruition in different ways, all of which make use of a "corporeal schema" that generally envisions "the world as flesh" (Hansen 82), and understands everything as and through (the) corporeal. Cronenberg's enduring interest in the physical, henceforth is at bottom, as Jonathan Dee notes, "a metaphysical one" and deserves new critical reading.

Bearing across "material" (Hayles 48), even "talking metaphor[s]" (Jones 175), Cronenberg's cyborg is a paradigmatic figuration that exists in a constant state of flux and transformation in such a fleshy world. It is in the search for alternative, quite literally constructive formulations of both the cyborg body and narrativity, then, that Cronenberg performs the task of the creative scientist, enabling us to move away from traditional literary theory concepts concerning narrative, replacing them with "ones of multilinearity, nodes, links, and networks" (Landow 2), by focusing instead on but also narrating through the a-typical, seemingly organic cyborg body of the "new flesh" (01:24:40). This observation of difference echoes David Hakken's argument that, given the "...newer forms of cyborgification [that] are so different from their predecessors... we are justified in developing a [new] typology of cyborgs" (72). With a new typology also comes a new topology, for as Haraway writes, "bodies are maps of

power and identity” (180), which requires critical reading. Narratives of cyborg fiction play an important role in such a cartographic endeavor, performing a socio-cultural function in providing the viewer with transformative, transporative metaphors and “body maps” (Schiphorst qtd. in Hansen 64–65) that help the viewer mediate cultural conflicts and social reality. Narrating through the body as such becomes the cyborg’s weapon that arms the viewer with new “...constitutions [of] narratives of the Other” (Appadurai 36) and allows the viewer to witness the “...collapse of metaphor and materiality as not a question of ideology but of modes of practice” (qtd. in Cornea 11) through the Jamesonian “aesthetics of cognitive mapping” (89). Such newly practiced forms are paradigmatic because they require the viewer to redefine the human in the face of a new mutually determined human-machine hybrid reality or cyborg world or as arguably posthuman “liminal entities” (Halberstam & Livingston 203). Cronenberg enables his audience to see two, inversed twin-like versions of how such entities might look.

The cyborgian aesthetic of binary-inversion and transgression gives birth to numerous mutations of the new flesh, figuring into different body-images and a new cyborg-typology, which operate according to a particular physical, narrative mechanics of mixing and moving. Fully embracing Marshall McLuhan’s predicament that “the medium is the message” (54), then, finally this paper argues, that, recalling Edward Said’s judgement of author Salman Rushdie, Cronenberg’s work is not just “about the mixture” of body and technology; “it is that mixture itself” (qtd. in Hotchkiss 28). This mixture itself that is Cronenberg’s monstrous corpus of films allows us, through the cinematic visualization of narrative bodies, to update Haraway’s understanding of the cyborg as existing in written form through literary (science) fiction and leads us to Cronenberg’s exploration of these cyborg bodies literalized and brought to filmic “life.” As Schneider notes, the “making literal” that Cronenberg often comes back to does not divorce performative bodies in film from “discursive systems of representation” but rather “...draws attention to the reality effects of the symbolic” (qtd. in Cornea 11). It is this kind of mechanism that provides Cronenberg’s cyborgs with fuel to move (mechanics) and show (aesthetics).

The mechanics fueling *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* come not only with their own techno-corporeal mode of narration that is intensely physical, but more subtly, especially due to its genre as (body)-horror, moves and activates the bodies of the viewers through the establishment of intersubjective, physical special effects. Cronenberg narrates

through the increasingly mechanized flesh a vivid materiality which is not merely quoted but rather “...incorporated into [the films’] very substance” (Jameson 55). In the films, changing bodies become signs of change within the films more generally and serve as clues that help us move through the narrative meaningfully. Making use of the body itself as a primary site of operation for story-telling, Cronenberg enables bodies to visually “tell” the story by means of demonstration. This is exemplified by the growth of Max Renn’s hand into a fleshy gun (01:03:53), the growth of a brain tumor caused by visions (00:36:11), the emerging slit on Renn’s stomach suggestively shaped like a videotape recorder (01:02:33), and bleeding television-as-stomach (01:12:15) in *Videodrome* and through the presence of “game-pods” and “UmbyCords” (00:19:00), the “fitting” of the bio-port (00:18:29), organic gristle guns (00:14:08), numerous instances of infected bio-ports (01:20:21), and use of virtual-reality inspired gaming gear (01:27:43) in *eXistenZ*. Each of these physical altercations that progresses throughout both the films serve as part of what McLuhan refers to as a larger “...collective surgery carried out on the social body.” Such a surgery, given the absence of “immunity” (70) allows the medial, technological virus to spread and become part of the biology, as new organs of perception, of Cronenberg’s subjects that appear to us on the screen. The moving and “sca(r)ring” of bodies within and beyond the screen in part depends on Cronenberg’s play on pre-established narratives of technophobia, to be found in the real-life context of the films’ creation. Given its portrayal of the uncanny, consuming horror-cinema is a physical experience, causing heart throbs, gut-wrenches, and shock. Furthermore, there is also a distortion of the characters themselves that takes place throughout both films, thus resulting in what Fleischman and Strauss refer to as the “...turning [of] the theory on its head that man is losing his body to technology” (qtd. in Hansen 3) that causes a kind of anxiety in the viewer, who in watching a film essentially already loses his body to the screen because virtual 2D experience temporarily replaces 3D/4D experience of the off-screen body. Such phobia, as illustrated by Pikul who initially defends his not-having of a bio-port as being due to “a phobia about having [his] body penetrated” (00:17:43), builds on the understanding of the “organic” body as hermetically sealed: any kind of intrusion then becomes an external danger threatening such a coherence. These narratives, then, are literalized and pushed to their extremes. Not only are there actual depictions of the perceived-as-intrusive entering of the mechanical into the organic realm (V 01:05:31 and e 00:24:27), but there is also the sense that such a perception of technological penetration might in itself be illusory, given Cronenberg’s underlying philosophy that there is actually no such thing as exterior technology that is

not also already an internal matter. Almost all technological devices in both *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ*, after all, come from within quite literally (e 00:10:01 and e 00:08:10). Cronenberg materializes Vicki Kirby's idea that regardless of the structural frame "...through which man's body is ciphered and located as being in the world, one can only presume that this information also informs the very matter of his body's material constitution" (3), resulting into the cinematic performance of all kinds of anatomical dissections of the video-drome and video-game bodies in the films. The narrative bodies Cronenberg produces through such mechanics are "transgressive bodies" (Richardson 3) because they push narrative subjectivity to its extreme, displaying an affective "ecstasy and terror of abjection" (Shaviro 156). Terror, because the viewer, in a sense, sees his fears of physical effects of technology come true in the cinematic world through characters and scenarios that Cronenberg depicts. Yet, by making everything body and through numerous sexual references, Cronenberg also displays a kind of "jouissance in abjection" where pleasure meets pain (Beard 127). Such mechanics, which Cronenberg makes use of, appeal, through story and characters, to the other side of the audience who instead of fearing technology rather technophilically obsess over it and its promise of bodily transcendence and salvation. Cronenberg, similar to the technophobic, dramatizes such *philia* or techno-fantasy to an almost comical degree and criticizes it consequently through clever use of narrative structure. Reflecting upon such dreams of self-enhancement and technological possibility serves as a recurring theme in Cronenberg's work, thus, in turn mirroring the real-life response that the increasing importance of technology generates: that of intense phobia, or *philia*. Such a mirroring presented through cinematic performance then facilitates the move, as Karen Barad notes, from "...questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality...to matters of practices/doings/actions" (802).

Cronenberg does not merely echo such narratives of fantasy or horror, but rather goes against what Kathleen Woodward describes as "a disavowal of the limits of the body" (qtd. in Bender 59) as one of the ideologies of technology, by reasserting and transgressing, not transcending, such limits. Protagonist Allegra Geller, game designer or "game-pod goddess" (00:05:55) in *eXistenZ*, perfectly illustrates the ideological idolization of technology as a means to "overcome our finitude" (Ihde xiii) by seeking to transcend her physical existence in reality by moving into the realm of the virtually real. Even after digging a tooth-turned-bullet (00:14:08) out of her shoulder and in the rear of another assassination-attempt at the gas station, Allegra remains convinced that her game-invention will, in the words of her su-

per-fan Gas, allow for the "...breaking out of the cage of your own making" (00:26:14), that is, the physical body that puts limitations on human ability. Both Allegra and her fan, it thus seems, experience their bodies as a burden on the mind, rather than a point of entry into world: as a cage capturing the soul, transcending the body through technology thus becomes a motive of liberation, albeit, as Cronenberg comes to show, a misleading one. The viewers witness Cronenberg's rejection of certain ideological fantasies of technology when this transcendental search eventually leads to Allegra's loss of reference point to the real (similar to Max's experience), given that her physical body no longer provides her with solid evidence of actual existence in "reality." It becomes questionable, henceforth, if *eXistenZ* is really "just a game" (00:47:11) that you can "...pop right out [of]...if there's a problem" (00:50:23) by pushing pause: the distinction between the "game" and life slowly disintegrates for both viewer and player alike. Allegra seems somewhat aware of this collapse, or rather, implosion, when she states that *eXistenZ* is "a game everybody's already playing" (01:13:17) in reply to Pikul's sense of disorientation, that is, as existence or life. Through narrative strategies of self-referentiality (names, TV shows, and themes), glitches (moving from one (game) world to the next, game personality vs. real-life personality), repetition (repeating of lines within the game), and a looping (particularly *eXistenZ* ends where it began, though differently), almost hallucinatory narrative structure, Cronenberg thus misleads the technophobe and lets him run in circles. Such a (non)structure in both films, whilst initially suggesting a mere existence of different "levels of reality" (Gas 00:21:45) towards the end of the films demonstrates not so much how reality is layered but rather how it is always blended, leaving the viewer wondering whether with either technophobia or technophilia, he got the wrong end. This sense of confusion is something both *eXistenZ*, when the narrative turns out to be a narrative within a game with a narrative outside of it, and *Videodrome*, when Max kills himself, hallucinated or real, to become the new flesh, leave us with. As narratives within narratives, through a cyborg aesthetics, Cronenberg thus makes use of mechanics of multiplicity, multilinearity, and (con)fusion which characterize cyborg narrativity.

In conclusion, upon analyzing both Cronenberg's use of mechanics and aesthetics, it becomes evident that the narrative embodiment Cronenberg experiments with relies, in its performance of cyborg narrativity, on a merging of these mechanics (of story-telling, that is, narrativity) and aesthetics (of visualization and personification, that is, subjectivity). Understanding the (cyborg) body as a narrative vehicle with its own mechanics and aesthetics exemplified by Cronenberg's

works, then, allows us to more aptly comprehend how “...bodies as objects of knowledge are material-semiotic nodes” (Haraway 292), hence, generating meaningful polysemic posthuman signs and Harawayian figurations. Aesthetics and mechanics, as well as subjectivity (appearance) and narrativity (technique), become intertwined in *eXistenZ* and *Videodrome* and perfectly illustrate/perform, the cyborg narrativity, itself a combination of the aesthetic subject and the mechanism of story-telling, as an “enacted destabilization of the real” (Hotchkiss 16) and a consequential demonstration of the “fragility of reality” (Cronenberg qtd. in Rodley 144). Given their shivered non-traditional coherence, the narrative structure in the films appear to mimic (though arguably also vice versa, for as William Mitchell notes, “[w]e make our tools and our tools make us” (qtd. in Allen 33)) the ways in which Cronenberg represents the humanist subject phenomenologically in his work, reiterating Paul Ricoeur’s understanding of the subject as “...a fragmented multiplicity, a subjectivity without a centre” (qtd. in Langsdorf 47). We see this cyborg narration, the implosion of subjectivity versus narrativity and aesthetics versus mechanics, come to its full fruition not just at the end but all throughout *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* especially through the motif of the screen, which is always-already present given their cinematic nature and keeps returning. There is a stark contrast between the films in this sense: whereas *Videodrome* is full of screens that talk (V 00:01:10) and often mediates its characters through them (Nicki 00:09:19, Brian O’Blivion 00:11:43, Max 01:13:48, Barry Convex 00:46:58, and Mascha 00:54:28), in *eXistenZ*, where we would expect screens given its focus on (computer) gaming, it actually makes no use of screens and virtually performs the final step “to the technologically ‘wired’ body cages...” given that “the video game, even with a very large screen, remains framed by the screen” (Ihde 10). Brian O’Blivion, who “...refuse[s] to appear on television, except on television” with his “television name...designed to cause the cathode-ray tube to resonate” (00:11:34) is enigmatic here: precisely through disembodiment given that, as we later find out, O’Blivion is already dead and only remains existent through seemingly organic, breathing videotapes and hallucinations, he comes to embody the new flesh. The screen has become not just a body-mediator but a body in itself, generating not just new cyborg-body images but also mirroring a new sense of self existing in a cyborgian era.

Reiterating Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s observation that “humans are the fabric into which all objects are woven” (qtd. in Allen 31), given that all technology in the films is simultaneously organic, Cronenberg’s metaphysical cinema, “as a form of world-production”

(Ivakhiv 192), shows us how one can visualize such cyborgization to proceed through cyborg narrativities. Reading, or better put, experiencing such visual texts of cyborg narrativity can help us, then, in developing "...a kind of cultural literacy of technology and science" (Olson 2). In this sense, the cyborg narrativity that Cronenberg's films require us to read and feel through not only result in a better understanding of these works, but also help us better see how we, as actors outside of the film, might fit into such fictional schemes that blend into reality. It is for this reason that cyborg narrativity in *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ*, as this paper sought to make explicit, using the cinematic texts to illustrate the theory rather than the other way around, not just contributes to act of reading but also updates ways of seeing and, consequently, leads us to a different self-image of the cyborg, as Haraway states, as a "...disassembled and reassembled postmodern collective and personal self" (qtd. in Seidman 102). If, as Alain Millon argues, "it is across the virtual body that our culture constructs its own body image" (14), then David Cronenberg places us right in front of a mirror, however scary and confrontational that might be. Looking ourselves into the eye, with *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* in mind, we realize that what the viewers see is not just a cyborgian material-semiotic construction, wearing glasses, driving vehicles, operating all kinds of devices and thus always-already, in one way or another, cyborg, but what the viewers see in addition, as puzzling as it may sound given Cronenberg's horror-components, is a story, an image of hope and creative ability to change through tools of our own making.



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# Prosthetic Versus Embodied Memory in *Westworld*'s "Kiksuya" and Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer*

Colleen Johnson

## Abstract

The creation of human-passing Artificial Intelligence (AI) in both science fiction and the real world must interrogate the importance of materiality and embodiment in the development of personal identity and consciousness. While it may seem that both Uta Briesewitz's episode of *Westworld*, entitled "Kiksuya," and Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer* [Emotion Picture] work on a theory of memory as disembodied digitizable information, the films actually put forth a more nuanced theory of memory and identity that aligns with recent work in neurobiology which—as described by José van Dijck—claims that memory is constituted by sensory feeling and emotion rather than being just a function of data processing. This theory of memory is portrayed in both works by the traces of deleted memory still accessible to the lead characters and their ability to distinguish between embodied memories of lived experience and implanted prosthetic memories.

**Keywords:** *Artificial Intelligence, posthumanism, memory, identity, embodiment, materiality, cinema studies.*

Science and science fiction interested in creating and imagining human-passing Artificial Intelligence (AI) must often interrogate questions about what it is to be human, have consciousness, and personal identity. One avenue that may be explored to explain personal identity formation is the impact of nature versus nurture, or how one's lived experiences or the memory information one retains about those experiences, form one's sense of self. If one considers that a person's identity is based on all their past experiences, one might then put forth the theory that an AI meant to pass as human consciousness could form a human like personal identity through the uploading of a set of memories that would give the AI artificial lived experiences. It then develops its sense of self and behavior patterns. Similarly, one might theorize that if a real human's memories could be uploaded to a computer as a full set of memory data, their consciousness could be replicated in the digital format allowing that consciousness to live on forever. In both Uta Briesewitz's episode of the television show *Westworld*, entitled "Kiksuya," and Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer* [Emotion Picture] which was based on her music album of the same name, the role of

memory in (non)human consciousness, identity, and behavior is interrogated in order to question the theory of memory as a purely informational system that could be digitized without meaningful loss. Both films ultimately argue that memory is grounded in materiality and embodiment rather than constituted of data/disembodied information that can be uploaded, stored, or transferred digitally. Memory is therefore crucial for the construction of personal identity and, subsequently, behavior.

Both “Kiksuya” and *Dirty Computer* grapple with the questions of memory and consciousness in the digital age and what it means to be human and maintain personal identity. In both works, the institutions in power assume that memory informs identity and therefore determines future behavior. However, they fail to anticipate the role of embodiment in the relationships between a (non)human’s memories, identity, and behavior. In both cases, prosthetic memories are implanted in the characters while previously embodied memories are erased in order to implant a new identity into the objectified (non)human so that their behavior can be modified. However, in both works, traces of the “true” or “original” identity remain due to the embodied nature of lived memories and experiences. The failure to convince these (non)humans of the validity of their new identities and their failure to maintain the desired new behavioral patterns enforces a theory of memory as embodied and material. This theory establishes a connection between memory’s role in forming identity and its embodied nature. It is then significant that the lead characters in both films are characters of color, as their position as racialized subjects prevents them from escaping the impact of their embodied experience even after their memories are erased and/or replaced. In *Dirty Computer*, the racialized body is already in conflict with social norms and hegemonic value systems of the world of the film, and is therefore marked as deviant for merely existing, even if it is performing good behavior. Similarly, the type of behavior that appears in Akecheta’s programming in “Kiksuya” is written as specific racial stereotypes and informs the kinds of embodied experiences he can and will have. The embodied experiences and struggles of Akecheta and Kohana in “Kiksuya” and of Jane and Zen in *Dirty Computer* leave traces of memory in such a manner that embodied interactions with others’ material bodies disrupt their prosthetic memories and identities as traces of their embodied memories resurface. It, therefore, highlights the limits of the authorities’ assumption that memory is only information that is upload-able, delete-able, and replaceable.

In the television show *Westworld*, artificial humanoid robots called hosts are created out of flesh-like materials with a computer based Artificial Intelligence program that is modified to individualize each host based on a set of inputs which include a backstory of artificial memories and varying scales of personality traits. These hosts live within a theme park called Westworld which allows human visitors to go on adventures in the Wild West and have encounters with extremely realistic human replicas that they could never have with real human beings. The moral questions at the heart of the show are: When does it become unethical to treat a non-human being that has consciousness like an object? Does it count as rape if a human man forces himself upon a female host? Does it really hurt her if her memory is erased and reset periodically such that she cannot remember being violated? Is it really murder if a human shoots or stabs a host if that host is not human and can be repaired, have its memory erased and reset, and re-enter the park with no knowledge or recollection of the pain of the injury? While these questions recurrent in the entire series, the episode “Kiksuya,” which is the eighth episode of the second season, instead argues that lived experiences never actually disappear, even if the specific information of the memory disappears from one’s consciousness. Rather, the physical experiences of the body remain evident within the body as feeling, emotion, affect, or even sensory instinct. In “Kiksuya,” a host from Westworld’s Ghost Nation (which was created to resemble the indigenous American Lakota Indians), named Akecheta, narrates the story of his many remembered lives to Maeve’s (one of the series regulars) daughter. His goal in reciting his memories to the young girl is to show her who he is and help her recognize his identity as a friend with whom she is safe, rather than a threat. He recounts how his first life, which he shared with his lover, Kohana, was taken from him when he was taken out of his village and reprogrammed. He explains that he believes the world they are in is wrong and that there is another world outside of it somewhere. Through Akecheta’s narrative, we find that he lost his memories of Kohana, but that upon meeting her again, the memories resurfaced. Similarly, through her new interactions with Akecheta, Kohana also regains her memories of their previous life together. The episode implies that Akecheta is taken to be reprogrammed for two reasons: 1) he has discovered the maze symbol and begins to investigate its meaning which leads him to find the “door” and he comes to believe that there is another world outside of the one he knows and 2) the characters and storylines of the theme park as a whole are being overhauled in preparation for its grand opening after a successful beta testing phase, and Ford, the creator, wants to change Akecheta’s story and identity for the new intended audience (i.e. the human park tourists). Akecheta’s pre-

vious identity as a peaceful villager and his knowledge of the “door” that could lead to escape attempts are deemed unacceptable for the grand opening of the park. Consequently, his memories are erased and he is given a new backstory and new personality traits which include increased aggression, so that he behaves in a stereotypically “savage” way to fulfill the expectations of the wealthy park attendees who wish to fight Indians.

Janelle Monáe’s emotion picture, *Dirty Computer*, approaches memory’s role in identity formation and behavior from the opposite perspective in that the objectified beings whose memories are erased and modified are actually humans, as their minds can be interfaced with, as though they are computers using futuristic technologies. The authorities refer to humans as “computers,” and the computers that are classified as “dirty” are captured and taken to the cleaning facility (*Dirty Computer* 00:00:00–00:00:25). The lead character, Jane, is arrested for what is deemed deviant behavior, and is subjected to a memory wipe or “cleaning” in which all of her memories are viewed like files on a computer and deleted before she is given a new name and identity, MaryApple54. The goal of the cleaning is to force those existing outside the society’s norms to assimilate and become part of the authoritarian system. Thus, the introductory voice-over states, “You were dirty if you looked different. You were dirty if you refused to live the way they dictated. You were dirty if you showed any form of opposition at all” (*Dirty Computer* 00:00:11–00:00:23). The first “crime” listed being “look[ing] different” already implicates the authorities as a white supremacist institution which uses technology to enforce racialized persecution. Like Akecheta in the *Westworld* episode, Jane and her lover, Zen—who now believes herself to be the torch MaryApple53—can feel the falseness or hollowness of the implanted memories while recognizing the truth or reality of the embodied memories they regain access to. The experiences and resistance of both characters, Akecheta and Jane, challenge their respective authorities’ assumptions about how memory works as data and information and how prosthetic memories can alter a being’s identity and behavior.

In her article “Prosthetic Memory: Total Recall and Blade Runner,” Alison Landsberg defines “prosthetic memories” as “...memories which do not come from a person’s lived experiences in any strict sense” (175). Landsberg explains, “these are implanted memories, and the unsettled boundaries between real and simulated ones are frequently accompanied by another disruption: of the human body, its flesh, its subjective autonomy, its difference from both the animal and the technology” (175). In the case of *Westworld*, this paper

argues that the hosts' bodies, made from flesh-like material and able to feel the same levels and types of pain and pleasure that humans can, function to disrupt the hosts' relationships with their prosthetic memories because they possess the level of embodiment necessary to disrupt the simulation. The problem that embodiment poses to a project of altering identity and behavior, by erasing or implanting prosthetic memories, is that once the relationship between body and memory is taken into account, it is much more difficult to locate where memory is "stored" and therefore difficult to devise a way to remove it. In both *Dirty Computer* and *Westworld* the authorities approach the project of controlling bodies through memory with only a basic understanding of memory and look only toward the "mind" in order to alter it. Akecheta's memories are thought to be stored only in his programming which the theme park's scientists and technicians can access through their computers and tablets, and can therefore change and reprogram as they see fit. The "science" behind the modification and erasure of memories in *Dirty Computer* is more complex since the objects being modified are humans. However, the facility's understanding of memory, human mind, and consciousness reduces them to a matrix of data and information stored in the brain, which can be accessed through electric probes and displayed on a computer screen as though the information is but digital files. Once converted to the screen, Cleaners can select memories that are "saved" with a time stamp and file name, just as a digital file is saved, and play the memory like a video or delete it. This theory of memory completely ignores traces of lived experience left elsewhere within the body or the ways in which memory consists of more than just upload-able information, being reliant on embodied experiences.

In her article "Memory Matters in the Digital Age," José van Dijck brings together multiple theories of memory from neurobiology, cognitive philosophy, and cultural theory, in order to interrogate how memory is embodied and "what 'substance' memories are made of" (350). Van Dijck claims that "memory is obviously embodied" and looks to determine how that embodiment functions and interacts with the materiality of what he calls "memory objects" (350). She states, "on the one hand, personal memory is situated inside the brain...[but] on the other hand, personal memories seem to be located in many (mediated) objects that...serve as reminders of lived experiences: photos, diaries and so forth" (350). It is, therefore, the body's relationship with these objects and the potential for other bodies to function as

memory objects that must be examined in order to understand memory and embodiment.<sup>1</sup>

Van Dijck traces the evolution of memory theory's understanding of memory as embodied and introduces the "connectionist concepts" of memory that first recognizes the possible role of the body (351). The assumed "one-to-one correspondence between physical stimulus and mental image" was refuted in 1896 by Henri Bergson who instead viewed memory as "...not exclusively a cognitive process, but also an action-oriented response of living subject to stimuli in his or her external environment" and therefore disavowed the "idea of 'pure memory'" that is only mental image without materiality (352). According to Van Dijck, current research in memory recognizes that "...cognitive tasks such as factual recall, or affective tasks such as emotions or feelings" are carried out by the entire "bodily apparatus" that consists of "genes, neurons, and living cells" and that "memory involves both (the perception of) a certain body state and a certain mind state" (353). Van Dijck's preferred metaphor to describe memory is thus not that of information storage, whether digital files or analogue archives, but rather that of a "symphony orchestra" which is made up of multiple instrumental sections in order to "perform" a memory (354). This metaphor is preferred as it recognizes that the recollection or "performance" of a memory will change over time and be interpreted differently each time it is recalled. Van Dijck also argues for the role of emotion in the embodiment of memory, using the example of Joel in the film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* to show that "...memories consist partly of information that can be erased, yet their emotional core persists" (Van Dijck 355). Van Dijck claims, "the contents of memory are configurations of body states represented in somatosensory maps" (357). Therefore, memories are felt throughout the entire body, and memory objects might evoke those feelings within the body even if the specific information regarding the circumstances that originated those feelings are no longer present. In other words, when the informational details of the memory can no longer be accessed, the feeling is all that is left of the embodied memory, but that trace of sen-

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<sup>1</sup>For the purposes of this paper, the term "memory object" refers to an object or body that has interacted with the subject, and therefore left traces upon the subject's body through which embodied memory is stored. The term "embodied memory" then refers to the memory itself that belongs to the subject and was gained through the subject's physical and embodied interactions with its surroundings. Therefore, the subject might re-access forgotten embodied memories if it once again interacts with the memory object, since the impression of that object is what created the embodied memory in the first place. Similarly, memory objects might also be external recordings or performances of the embodied memory that, while interacting with the subject in a new instance, trigger affective recall of a previously embodied memory.

sory experience is enough to inform identity and behavior and can still be consciously accessed through interaction with a memory object.

However, a disembodied view of memory has been used throughout much of history with metaphors for the mind being “the library” or “the archive” that retains information in “...an enclosed space from which it can be retrieved on command” (van Dijck 351). Posthumanist theorists have also theorized memory and the mind as a disembodied matrix of data and information. In the introduction to her book *The Neuro-Image: A Deleuzian Film-Philosophy of Digital Screen Culture*, Patricia Pisters discusses how the abundance of screens, whether phone screens, computer screens, digital billboards on screens, etc., impacts our understanding of information, our interactions with other people and information, and memory. Pisters claims that contemporary culture operates on what Lev Manovich calls “database logic” in which “the world appears to us as an endless and unstructured collection of images, texts, and other data records” (Manovich quoted in Pisters 10). The view of the world as merely information able to be organized through databases in digital form and viewed on a screen, according to Pisters, has caused “...the traditional (and scholarly) notion of media objects as ‘texts’” to be replaced by “the notion of media operating as ‘dynamic software performances’”. As a result, “memory and history are...seen as dynamic, as well and are continually transforming in an open archive” (Pisters 11). While van Dijck may agree that memory does change and evolve each time it is performed, this paper argues that this is not the same kind of dynamic change that Pisters discusses. For Pisters, memory is not, as Van Dijck argues, reperformed by the individual to contextualize their present experience through their past experiences. Rather, memory—understood through database logic—is seen as a set of data that once changed and reprogrammed in the digital form, does not retain its previous form and is interacted with in the same way as any other digital file. Pisters herself does not believe that memory is never embodied, but she claims the abundance of digital information which is displayed and accessed through screens makes people interact with memory as disembodied digitizable information. This is perhaps why the authorities in both *Westworld* and *Dirty Computer* are able to adopt such a theory of memory and believe they can succeed in altering and erasing it. They have thoroughly objectified their prisoners and view them only through screens. In *Westworld*, while there are scientists who work to repair the flesh of the hosts, the technicians and writers in charge of programming the hosts and providing their memories only interact with each host’s digital file. The files give them information on the host’s vitals and physical status as well as information on every

thought, action, or speech they have performed. Technicians then might assume they have a full view and understanding of the host since they have access to all the possible data and information that exists about the particular host. However, they lack bodily interaction with the materiality of the host. Similarly, the Cleaners in *Dirty Computer* sit in a room adjacent to their patient where they can theoretically view her through a glass window, however they are seated behind a set of screens which display all her vitals, digital images of brain activity, and her memories displayed in an organized database like form mimicking digital files. They seem not to actually see the material object of the patient's body through the window even as she is displayed in front of them because they believe all they need to know is displayed on the screen. Van Dijck explains this phenomenon, claiming that as digitization has allowed "activities of the living brain" to be "increasingly visualized" through "digitized imaging technologies" (365), human interaction with these digital images of the brain has created an illusion that the brain is a "disembodied informational entity" (367). It is this illusion that "memory could be severed from the body" (van Dijck 367), that the authorities running the dirty computer cleaning facility and the technicians and authorities running the Westworld theme park have based their actions and policies around.

However, the protagonists in both *Dirty Computer* and *Westworld* challenge their respective institutions' assumptions about a disembodied mind by accessing their embodied memories. For both Zen in *Dirty Computer* and Akecheta and Kohana in *Westworld*, the "memory objects" that ultimately cause erased memories to be recalled are objects they had embodied, had material interactions with, and objects that provided strong emotional, affective, and sensory experiences that were felt not only in their conscious mind, but throughout their entire bodies. In both films, these memory objects are not mere objects, but the beings and bodies that the protagonists had loved. In *Dirty Computer*, Zen finally rediscovers her identity through interaction with Jane and the embodied impact Jane has on her as a memory object tied to a deeply emotional experience. In the timeline of the film, Zen appears after Jane's first cleaning treatment. She wakes Jane and introduces herself as the torch MaryApple53 who is there to help Jane through her cleaning process. Since Jane resists the process and all her memories have not been deleted in the first round of the "Nevermind," she recognizes MaryApple53 as her lover, Zen, and tries to explain that they know each other. But Zen has been successfully cleaned and only knows herself to be MaryApple53, a torch who is only aware of her life and her job within the facility checking vitals and guiding dirty computers through the process of assimilation. Later,

however, after Jane has endured multiple rounds of cleaning, MaryApple53 notices the tattoo on Jane's wrist. The tattoo is shown multiple times throughout the film leading up to this scene, so the viewer recognizes it as an important symbol and object. MaryApple53 is perplexed by the tattoo and examines it. Mid-examination, she seems to be disturbed and experiences an affective response to her interaction with the tattoo. She sits down next to Jane, but rather than voicing her own feelings, she expresses perhaps a newly found affection for Jane and attempts to comfort her. However, her memory is not yet fully returned even if the emotions have been evoked. She parrots to Jane the mantra that seems to have been drilled into all the workers at the facility, stating "people used to work so hard to be free. But we're lucky here. All we have to do is forget" (*Dirty Computer* 00:33:39–00:33:49). This line suggests that true freedom comes from assimilation and that erasure of memory can erase identity to the extent needed to fully assimilate into hegemonic culture and, therefore, live a life free from oppression.

Much in the way that American society promises to reward racial and cultural assimilation with success and social mobility, the fictional society of *Dirty Computer* rewards MaryApple53's assimilation into the authoritarian system. While she cannot literally become white, MaryApple53 performs an appropriate level of whiteness by submissively accepting the system, giving up every aspect of her individuality (including her own name), dressing in the institutionally mandated garb, and continuing the cycle of oppression by participating in the cleaning of more so-called dirty computers. Jane, however, values her life, her experience, and her identity too much, and recognizes that she would rather continue fighting the system and challenging social hegemony than lose her lived experiences. She responds, "but I don't want to forget you" (*Dirty Computer* 00:33:50–00:33:55). The scene culminates with a palpable emotionality as the two women stare at each other and MaryApple53 clearly fights her instincts and emotions that are evoked by her interactions with Jane's material body. She is shaken by Jane's claims of their past relationship, and feels enough truth in them that she later asks her supervisor, Mother Victoria, about the possibility that it all might be true. Thus, MaryApple53 can feel the presence of the embodied memory even if she cannot yet access its informational details.

The significance of Jane's tattoo to Zen's embodied relationship with Jane is further explained when one of Jane's memories is played out to the song "Don't Judge Me" (*Dirty Computer* 00:39:10–00:40:25). Throughout the timeline of her memories, Jane had been

romancing two people, Zen and Ché, and the three end up in a polyamorous relationship. In this final memory, the three lovers are spending a relaxing evening on the beach. The toned-down color pallet of the scene emphasizes the emotion by drawing the focus of the viewer to the characters in each shot, rather than allowing the viewer to be distracted by busy surroundings. Close ups on each character's face, on physical touch between characters, and on the symbol that becomes Jane's tattoo also emphasize the emotionality of the scene. Zen is shown to draw the design of the tattoo on paper, show it to Jane, and then draw and embed it on Jane's skin. So, not only is the tattoo an embodied part of Jane's identity, it is also a link between Jane and Zen's lived experience. The process of creating the tattoo is an embodied memory for Zen such that even when she can no longer remember the memory of the tattoo's creation, or even remember her name being Zen, she still has an emotional and bodily response to her interaction with the tattoo and Jane's skin as material objects. The tattoo, as a memory object, stores a performance of the memory while also evoking the embodied memory that remains within Zen's entire somatosensory system, not just her conscious mind. When viewing the memory, Cleaner 2 remarks that he thought they had already deleted the "beach stuff," (*Dirty Computer* 00:40:27–00:40:29) but it seems the deep embodiment of that memory for Jane as well causes it to resurface continually. When Zen finally regains the informational details of her memories, she is again studying the tattoo, and stroking it with her fingers as Jane sleeps. Once Jane regains consciousness, the two exchange an emotionally loaded look and Jane knows through Zen's reaction that she finally remembers. This also suggests that the newly attempted deletion of the beach memory has failed, as Jane is still aware of Zen's true identity and her feelings towards her.

In *Westworld*, Akecheta similarly realizes he is living a different and wrong life when he finally sees his lover Kohana again and recognizes her eyes. He *feels* as though he knows her even though memories of her do not exist in his conscious mind. This occurs because his memories with Kohana were not only a part of his prosthetic backstory that the *Westworld* writers fed into his artificial mind. Rather, once he and Kohana were released into the park as hosts, he had formed new embodied memories through his material interactions with Kohana. Somatic traces were left behind each time his flesh interacted with its environment, such that his body remembers the feelings Kohana's eyes evoked in him even if his "mind" does not remember who she is. This embodied recognition causes him to feel as though he "had lived another life before this one" and that "the past was calling [him]" ("*Kiksuya*" 00:19:40–00:19:51). In order to restore Kohana's

memory of him, Akecheta attempts to evoke her embodied memories by making her imitate their farewell ritual from their previous lives. He places her hand on his chest and recites the words as they used to before their identities were changed, saying, “Take my heart when you go” (“Kiksuya” 00:25:30–00:25:45). His plan works as she responds with the other half of the ritual, saying “Take mine in its place” (“Kiksuya” 00:25:50–00:26:00). Even though her previous performance of this ritual with Akecheta was presumably deleted out of her programming and she no longer recognizes him or remembers knowing him, her body knows how to respond. Her “mind” does not have the informational part of the words, but her embodied senses of hearing and vision recognize the familiarity of seeing Akecheta speak those words in connection to her affective loving relationship with him. In the past, she had felt the words in her body in addition to processing them in her mind and, as Van Dijck suggests, the somatosensory engagement with the experience left its traces such that the bodily response to the memory could be reperformed even without the presence of the informational details of the memory. The body’s remembrance then triggers the rest of the memories to return, and she is able to remember his name and recognize him as her lover once more. Kohana states, “I feel I’ve loved you for so many lifetimes. I remember that” (“Kiksuya” 00:27:45–00:28:05), demonstrating that her memory and ability to remember is directly tied to feelings and emotions as an embodied part of her sensory experience.

In a scene that parallels the emotionally climactic scene in *Dirty Computer* then, Akecheta Kohana sits close to a camp fire as they further discuss their situation and future plans. Similar to the scene in *Dirty Computer*, the emotional intimacy of this scene is emphasized through the use of close-up shots of their face, while the scene is filmed in a low light with a dull sandy background such that the viewer’s attention is drawn fully to the characters in the scene rather than to their surroundings. The use of close-ups also plays off the assumption that the face is the instrument that expresses most of the emotion as it appeals to the viewers as they associate face with a character’s personhood and emotional investment.

In addition to arguing for memory’s embodiment, Van Dijck also connects memory to identity formation. She argues for the ways in which loss of memory objects is “...often equated to the loss of identity, of personal history” (358) and notes that the materiality of the memory object is also important to its role in a person’s identity. The physical impressions left on the memory object due to its interactions with its environment (including those with the subject to whom it is

significant) are, in fact, what make it a memory object for that subject. Therefore, when a sentimental object is lost, a new copy cannot replace it, even if it is an exact replica. According to Van Dijck, this is because the “physical appearance—including smell, look, taste, and feel—renders mediated memory objects somehow precious” (358). Those physical qualities are unique to the object due to its specific lifetime and interactions with its environment just as a person’s embodied state is specific to their interactions with their environment such that the physical state and quality of their body are always reliant on their lived experience (358). Thus, even at the level of the body, a person’s identity relies on embodied memories.

In her article “Identity, memory and cosmopolitanism: The otherness of the past and a right to memory?” Anna Reading broadens the link between memory and identity to the scale of cultural memory and claims that memory not only has implications on personal identity, but also on “culture, citizenship and justice” (381). Reading notes that “studies of personal and individual memory stress the ways in which remembering the past over time are crucial to identity” (383) and references Martha Nussbaum’s suggestion that “the negation of memory results in a loss of self” (383). *Dirty Computer* and “Kiksuya” both demonstrate the ways in which individual memory is tied to cultural memory, in turn, showcasing Akecheta’s and Jane’s lived experiences as reliant on their cultural identities, and their ability to remember those lived experiences profoundly impacting their sense of self and identity. Akecheta feels a connection to his original cultural identity within the pastoral village, as his first lived experiences occurred in the same context. Therefore, when his entire culture is reprogrammed as seemingly savage warriors in the park’s upgrade, he retains his embodied cultural memory of the material interactions he had in his previous life and feels that his new culture is wrong. Jane’s extreme resistance to the Nevermind is similarly tied to her embodied cultural memory. Her experiences as a black queer woman, in a society that already marks her as deviant due to her cultural and racial ties, fuel her identity as a rebel and her drive to stand up against assimilation. Because she has cultural memory and knowledge, her personal identity is strengthened, and she is able to fight to maintain it. We also see that Zen must lose access to her cultural identity as a queer woman of color in order to assimilate into the passive torch that she becomes.

The connection between memory and identity is also supported by Landsberg’s claim that, “we rely on our memories to validate our experiences” (176). However, Landsberg states this in an argument for prosthetic memory’s ability to alter identity, further stating that “the

experience of memory actually becomes the index of experience: if we have the memory, we must have had the experience it represents” (176). She claims, “memory is constitutive of identity” and provides the example of the beggar character in the 1908 film *The Thieving Hand*, who shifts his identity from that of a beggar to that of a thief after inheriting prosthetic memories of thieving from a prosthetic hand that previously belonged to a thief. Landsberg argues that with prosthetic memory, we might “...[have] the memory without having lived the experience” (176) and claims that this “...problematizes any concept of memory that posits it as essential, stable or organically grounded” and “...makes impossible the wish that a person owns his/her memories” (176). This notion, however, is challenged by Van Dijck, and the two works this paper analyzes show that prosthetic memory is recognized as inauthentic by the protagonists once they become aware of their “true” embodied memories. Even after Akecheta’s “aggression” is increased to not only change his identity through erased memory but also through programmed personality traits, it is recognized as prosthetic, and he is able to return to his true identity once he regains his true memories that were based in the lived experience of his time in the pastoral village. Similarly, Zen in *Dirty Computer* returns to her identity as a rebellious queer woman of color as soon as she regains her original embodied memories. She is able to recognize her prosthetic identity—the passive torch MaryApple53 who had been assimilated into the facility/governmental system of cleaning dirty computers—as fake and divest herself of it.

This question of the role of memory and identity brings us back to the key question in AI studies of what makes an AI successful. According to Katherine Hayles in *How We Became Posthuman*, the definition of AI “...privileges consciousness as the essence of human being” (235) and the goal of AI is then to show “intelligence comparable to that of a human,” but not necessarily develop further, such that the “machine intelligence ...cannot be distinguished from a human intelligence” (238–239). The *Westworld* hosts are therefore designed to function as closely to humans as possible, so it follows such theories of memory and identity formation that would determine how they are programmed. It also cause their experiences with embodied and prosthetic memory to mirror the humans in *Dirty Computer* even if their developers did not anticipate it. Hayles performs an analysis similar to Van Dijck regarding the importance of embodiment and the ways in which the theories of AI have ignored it.

One of the initial field defining studies in Artificial Intelligence was that of Alan Turing, who—in his famous 1950 article “Computing Machinery and Intelligence”—posed the question, “can machines think?” In this work, Turing defined what he called “The Imitation Game,” which has since become known as the “Turing Test.” This game consists of an interrogator, a human, and a machine attempting to imitate human intelligence. The level of “thought” that the machine can attain is therefore judged by whether or not the interrogator is able to distinguish (without seeing either of the other participants) the machine from the human based on their participation in a written conversation or interview. According to Hayles, the job of the interrogator in the Turing Test is to “...pose questions that can distinguish verbal performance from embodied reality” (xi), however, by continually emphasizing the goal of the thinking machine, “...researchers performed again and again the erasure of the embodiment at the heart of the Turing Test” (xi). It is this tendency toward the erasure of embodiment that *Westworld* and *Dirty Computer* seek to critique. Hayles provides Hans Moravec’s proposal that “human identity is essentially an informational pattern rather than an embodied enaction” (xii) as an example of such an erasure of embodiment. She elaborates that “the Moravec test was designed to show that machines can become the repository of human consciousness—that machines can, for all practical purposes, become human beings” if given the right pattern of information (xii).

The two works this paper has analyzed combine the theory of identity as based on memory information with the interpretation of memory as an embodied construct. It leads to a new theory of identity as the formation of self that is shown to be based upon one’s embodied memories and lived experiences. This theory of memory and identity as embodied is demonstrated by the traces of the deleted memory still accessible to the characters, Akecheta, Kohana, and Zen. It is also evident in the way characters can distinguish between embodied memories of lived experience and implanted prosthetic memories throughout both works and the ways in which they define their identities through their embodied memories. Therefore, while it might seem that *Dirty Computer* and *Westworld* put forth an older theory of memory in which memory is “a kind of information-retrieval system” (Van Dijck 355), the works actually put forth a more nuanced theory of memory and identity that aligns with recent work in neurobiology which—as described by Van Dijck—claims that memory is constituted by sensory “feeling” and emotion rather than “data processing” (355).

Taking this theory of embodied memory into consideration, it may be concluded that, while it is tempting to use nonhuman simulations in order to enact violent fantasies or assimilate deviant elements, the justification that the erasure of memory data prevents violence from being “real” or impactful is ultimately erroneous. A justification of violence towards conscious machines or humans treated as machines based on a theory of disembodied memory and identity also—as seen in *Westworld* and *Dirty Computer*, respectively—might lead to a slippage between how we view and define humanity versus technology, allowing for humans to become dehumanized, as our own consciousness becomes more and more associated with machine-like functionality.



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# Love As Nepenthe: Displacing Homer With Shelley In Joyce's *Ulysses*

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## Abstract

One of the least explored muses for James Joyce's *Ulysses* was Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* which left its mark on Joyce's protagonists, Leopold and Molly Bloom. Joyce quoted Aristotle in his notes in the spring of 1903, "It is harder to endure pain than to abstain from pleasure" and it is this exact sentiment that brings together the similarities between Shelley and Joyce, highlighting the Blooms' yearning to banish grief from their minds regarding their deceased son, Rudy, and avoid the pain of loss, plaguing their marriage. One subtle Homeric seed from *Prometheus Unbound*—the word "nepenthe"—can be traced through Joyce's early readings of Shelley's play by his personal annotation in Shelley's works within his *Ulysses* notebooks and the published novel. This word is the balm for a character and author who suffered through the death of a child—one alive for 11 days and the other never born. Joyce metaphorically uses nepenthe to represent chloroform, the substance Queen Victoria used to dull the pain of childbirth for her son of the same name as Bloom, Leopold. However, unlike Homer's original use of nepenthe to simply banish grief from the mind, Joyce employs the version of nepenthe used by Shelley in which the drug is symbolic of love. This subtle contextual shift alters the theme of overcoming grief as not something to simply be eliminated, but rather something to be replaced by love. Understanding this can change the way in which readers approach the protagonist of *Ulysses*, the development of his struggle throughout the novel, and its ultimate conclusion.

**Keywords:** James Joyce, nepenthe, *Ulysses*, Queen Victoria, *Prometheus Unbound*, Percy Bysshe Shelley, love

James Joyce's novel, *Ulysses*, first conceptualized around 1906, published serially from 1918–1920, was famously written with Homer's *Odyssey* as a scaffold. Not only did Joyce find inspiration in

Homer's epic poem, but also from various other literary figures he had read up to that point. One of these readings was Percy Bysshe Shelley's closet drama, *Prometheus Unbound*. The thematic similarities between Shelley and Joyce highlight the Blooms' yearning to banish grief from their minds regarding their deceased son, Rudy, and avoid the pain of loss plaguing their marriage. Understanding that the contextual use of Shelley, as opposed to Homer, changes the meaning of the Blooms' relationship and whether or not their marriage can survive the turbulence set up in the novel. Tracing the textual genetics of this context from the published *Ulysses* through Joyce's notes to his original annotation in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, one can understand how this subtle contextual shift alters the theme of overcoming grief as not something to be simply eliminated, but rather something to be replaced by love.

With the exception of Michael Schandorf, little research is available to relate Shelley's impact on Joyce. He writes that Shelley "...was a more subtle, but arguably more lasting Romantic influence on the stylistic and aesthetic development of both Stephen Dedalus and Joyce himself. Nevertheless, most critics seem to have generally ignored or brushed off Shelley's influence in *Ulysses*..." (416). However, even Schandorf ignores Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* and the potential connection of the play to the Blooms of Joyce's *Ulysses*.

Joyce's brother, Stanislaus, recalled the youthful writer's many inspirations in his biography of James, *My Brother's Keeper*. Stanislaus wrote of Joyce, "Among the older poets he had progressed from his boyish hero-worship of Byron through Shelley to Blake, where my prejudice in favour of sanity prevented me from following him" (99). Similarly, as part of his matriculation course at university, James Joyce wrote a paper entitled "Subjugation by Force" on September 27, 1898, which specified:

Again in works of fancy, a too prolific imagination literally flies [*sic*] away with the author, and lands him in regions of loveliness unutterable, which his faculties scarcely grasp, which dazzles his senses, and defies speech, and thus his compositions are beautiful indeed, but beautiful with the cloudiness and dream-beauty of a visionary. Such a thing as this often affects poets of high, fanciful temper, as Shelley, rendering their poetry vague and misty. (7-8)

As early as 1898 Joyce was not only reading Shelley's works, but also thinking on and critiquing them, considering his impact on the literary landscape he would later mold as well.

Between 1903–1905, Joyce again used inspiration from Shelley in his posthumously published *Stephen Hero*, a draft of sorts for *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* featuring Stephen Daedalus. Joyce had Stephen address his above concern with Shelley's works dazzling the senses with a "vague and misty" prose style. He wrote, referring to a line from Act II, Scene 1 of *Prometheus Unbound*, "...sometimes Shelley does not address the eye. He says 'many a lake-surrounded flute.' Does that strike your eye or your sense of color?" (*Selected Poetry* 129). Stephen also quoted Shelley from Act I, Scene 1: "'I [He] will watch from dawn to gloom / The lake-reflected sun illumine / The yellow bees in the ivy[-]bloom'" (*Selected Poetry* 129). Joyce's thoughts on Shelley's closet drama were certainly utilized in relation to a character – Stephen Daedalus – who would become one of the protagonists in *Ulysses*. However, neither of these excerpts from *Stephen Hero* made it to the final draft version as *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Interestingly, one quote from *Prometheus Unbound*, did make it into the final draft of Joyce's. As Sebastian Knowles reveals in *The Dublin Helix*, "After Bloom's appearance in 'Scylla and Charybdis,' Mulligan quotes Percy Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*: 'Life of life, thy lips enkindle'...He is referring to Bloom's encounter with the statues; the lines can also be taken to refer to Bloom's encounter with Molly on the Hill of Howth..." (109). Between the two quotes in his unpublished *Stephen Hero* and single line tucked in *Ulysses*, one could be forgiven for being unaware of the influence Shelley's closet drama had on Joyce's writing career.

According to Giorgio Melchiori in *The Genesis of Ulysses*, on July 31, 1906, Joyce wrote to his brother from Rome: "Hesitate to give my impression of Rome lest my interview with the bank-manager might change it. Terrorised by the bank, while looking for it I found this on a wall 'In this house Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote *The Cenci* and *Prometheus Unbound*'...(L, II. 144)" (51). While working on *Ulysses*, Joyce took note of his current career status in relation to that of Percy Bysshe Shelley – albeit 90 years earlier – at the same location. In the same building Joyce, highly disgruntled, was to begin working a menial job in a bank to support his family while writing, where Shelley had penned two of his classics. Whether this left a sub-

conscious imprint on Joyce's psyche or not, we will never know for certain. However, the year Joyce spent in Rome was none other than the year he shaped *Ulysses* from a short story into a novel.

In "The Shade of Shelley: From Prometheus to Ulysses" Carla de Petris notes Joyce's affinity for Shelley: "And the year before his stay in Rome James had written to Stanislaus who was still in Dublin: I am writing (imagine!) a summary of English literature for a Berlitz book for the Japanese: five or six pages [...]. In my history of literature I have given the highest palms to Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Shelley" (286). Carla de Petris, citing C. Curran's *James Joyce Remembered*, also writes about "the assistant librarian in the National Library of Ireland, J.J. O'Neill, who remembers 'listening to Joyce and Gogarty discussing Shelley'" (291). While Joyce's views of Shelley certainly evolved over the years, one cannot escape the fact that during a critical period of his literary career pre-*Ulysses*, Joyce greatly admired the Romantics. And so, from the timeline presented, we know that Stanislaus had noted Joyce's admiration of Shelley in his youth and that as early as 1898 Joyce was writing about him at university. Between 1903–1905, Joyce was including quotes from *Prometheus Unbound* in his own writing and admiring the house in which the play was written when he moved his family to Rome in 1906. While this was eight years before devoting his full attention to *Ulysses*, Joyce had already written to Stanislaus that he was working on a story for *Dubliners* entitled "Ulysses" and over the next few years more of his famed novel would slowly take form. When Frank Budgen was discussing with Joyce the admiration he felt for the lyrical dramas of Shelley, Joyce replied, "No doubt there is much beauty in Prometheus Unbound and Héllas, but I feel that it's all on the wrong track" (182). Despite his criticisms of the Romantics, Joyce admired the skill of Shelley and his use of Aeschylus's works as an inspirational base for the two works mentioned to Budgen. However, he felt the lack of realism and attention to human detail in Shelley's writing that he would later utilize in *Ulysses*. In similar fashion to Shelley, Joyce scaffolded *Ulysses* onto the mythological story of Homer's *Odyssey*. According to Richard Ellmann in the James Joyce Online Notes, Joyce's library contained in his Trieste personal library as of 1920 a copy of Shelley's *The Complete Poetical Works* from 1912 and *The Poetical Works* by Shelley, both of which contained *Prometheus Unbound*. With this contextual set up, one can start to delve into the texts of these two writers to study the intersection of Shelley's vision and Joyce's imagination.

The audience's role in Shelley's play resembles that of a novel's reader. When reading a closet drama, there is no shared experience in a theatre, but rather an imagining of the words coming to life in one's mind. Episode 15 – the “Circe” episode – of *Ulysses* is even written in the format of a closet drama as it is in a script format with no intention of being, or with proper ability to be, performed on stage. In this way, *Prometheus Unbound*, owing to its form, is near to the experience of reading a novel than a typical drama. Contextually, Shelley wrote *Prometheus Unbound* with a message, following massive political turmoil. Victoria Lynn Scrimmer wrote that Shelley's closet drama was “in part, a response to the bloody aftermath of the French revolution which weighed heavily on Shelley's mind (as it did for many of the Romantic poets)” (31). Similarly, Joyce was writing *Ulysses* in the shadow of World War I. In *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom reflected, “I resent violence and intolerance in any shape or form. It never reaches anything or stops anything. A revolution must come on the due instalments plan” (525). Likewise, Bloom's wife, Molly, thought to herself in her stream-of-consciousness episode, “...I dont care what anybody says itd be much better for the world to be governed by the women in it you wouldnt see women going and killing one another and slaughtering...” (640). Joyce, himself, had a similar attitude, confiding in Frank Budgen on many occasions, “You know, Budgen, I am not a bloodyminded man” (256). Joyce, Bloom, and Molly all make note of rejecting violence. Thematically, following the French Revolution for Shelley and World War I for Joyce, there is a similarity between Shelley's use of Prometheus to show his readers that love triumphs over violence and the peaceful proclivities of Joyce's protagonists. Just as through brute masculine force Jupiter cannot forever dominate Prometheus, the usurpers cannot take Ithaca and Penelope from Odysseus, Hugh “Blazes” Boylan cannot steal Molly from Bloom, and love cannot be overcome by the violence of war.

In *Ulysses*, when Leopold Bloom was writing intimate letters to his pen pal, Martha Clifford, under the pseudonym Henry Flower, and discretely masturbating to a flirtatious Gerty MacDowell on a Dublin beach, his wife, Molly, was having an affair with Hugh “Blazes” Boylan at their home. In *Prometheus Unbound*, the titan Prometheus had been chained to the icy sharp rocks on the side of a mountain, plagued by a multitude of tortures, as punishment for his defiance in giving mankind the gift of fire – often symbolic of wisdom or illumination. Unlike Aeschylus's version in *Prometheus Bound*, in this

version Prometheus was freed and the tyrant, Jupiter, fell from power. In *Ulysses*, despite Bloom's sexual distance from his wife and their simultaneous infidelities, Molly chooses her husband in the end, much like *Prometheus Unbound*, where despite the tragedy and trials which occurred earlier, the end represented hope for the future.

The concept/tradition of using some sort of natural drug to banish grief or anger is an old one. Nepenthe is a drug from Homer's *Odyssey* which banishes grief from the mind. From ancient times as well as in mythology, nepenthe was a highly sought-after remedy for real human problems. In Act III, Scene 4 of *Prometheus Unbound*, the Spirit of the Hour narrated the changes to the world following the liberation of Prometheus after Jupiter's defeat: "nor pride, / Nor jealousy, nor envy, nor ill shame, / The bitterest of those drops of treasured gall, / Spoilt the sweet taste of nepenthe, love" (365). This also wove its way into Joyce's *Ulysses*, albeit used metaphorically.

Grief was most definitely felt by the two protagonists in *Ulysses* and the concept of banishing it with an Homeric drug would certainly have been appealing to Joyce for usage with his characters. As seen in the novel, Bloom and Molly longingly read a letter written by their teenage daughter far away in Mullingar, working in a photo shop. Their other child, Rudy, died eleven years prior to when the novel took place. Rudy was born in December of 1893, but passed away just eleven days later. Bloom felt guilty for his death as he recited the adage, "If it's healthy it's from the mother. If not the man" (79). Bloom and Molly have not had sex since Rudy's death ten years ago, creating the erotic tensions presented throughout the June 16<sup>th</sup> day of the novel.

Given that Bloom was able to masturbate on the beach to Gerty MacDowell and Molly was having an affair with Boylan, the cause of Bloom's and Molly's sexual separation was ostensibly not physical, but rather the result of an emotional disconnect following the death of their son. But, Katherine Singer's observation on Shelley's use of nepenthe, unintentionally, sounds Joycean in its application to Molly and her reconciliation with herself. "The drug-induced mechanism for revolution that Asia has imbibed is now disseminated to the rest of the world, particularly women, in a refined form of the drug...In the last half of the poem, nepenthe raises women's awareness of their own false obeisance to tyranny and then proceeds to medicate grief and pain by erasing traces of the war and conflict of the recent past. This

drug,” Singer noted, “both stimulates great acts of ‘truth-loosening’ and mutes the pain and humiliation from years of gender inequality and colonization, a forgetting perhaps necessary for acts of forgiveness” (698). This description is decisively Joycean in how Molly, who is given the last word in the novel, is aware of her own obeisance to men throughout her life and this allows her to open up in the stream-of-conscious “Penelope” episode, therapeutically sorting out her complex emotions brought on by her affair and Bloom’s noticeably late return to home. This led to a one-sided reconciliation of sorts for Molly, ending in her affirmative “Yes” (644).

Homer originally used the drug to simply wash away the pain of the past, Shelley’s focus is more on the future with a redemptive and restorative quality. Homer wrote that nepenthe was “A drug infused, antidote to the pains / Of grief and anger, a most potent charm / For ills of ev’ry name” (50). But it isn’t just the matter of banishing grief from the mind that connects Shelley’s nepenthe to Joyce’s. Joyce’s nepenthe, which reflects Shelley’s as opposed to Homer’s, does not merely exile the pain. Shelley meant to mend society whereas Joyce wanted Bloom’s mind to heal. While Molly revealed in her stream-of-conscious soliloquy that she had emotionally recovered from her loss, she noted how her husband has not. “...the first cry was enough for me...hed go into mourning for the cat...” (637). Bloom, meanwhile, was haunted by his son’s absence as it was felt throughout the novel and most notably at the very end of the closet-drama-styled “Circe” episode in which he saw the specter of his son and called out his name to no reply. It is thus apparent how the drug, nepenthe, banishing grief from the mind, would play into the relationship of Bloom and Molly, particularly the former. It was the nepenthe of love referenced in Shelley’s play that Joyce used to anesthetize Bloom’s grief which was a prerequisite for healing his marriage.

The sense of loss the Blooms felt for Rudy was personal for Joyce. He and the love of his life, Nora Barnacle, both had a son, Giorgio, and daughter, Lucia, as of 1908. However, Nora had a miscarriage when she was around three months pregnant. This, apparently, affected Joyce more than it did Nora, with Joyce even examining the fetus before its burial. According to Richard Ellmann, Joyce wrote to his brother, Stanislaus, about the fetus “whose truncated existence” he was “probably the only one to regret” (269). It can be no coincidence that Molly was able to recover from the death of Rudy and Nora was

not so much affected by her miscarriage whereas the fathers – Bloom and Joyce – were both haunted by the loss. This brings the allure of nepenthe into clearer focus for Bloom and his creator, Joyce.

From a thematic perspective, Shelley's use of "nepenthe, love" (365) in *Prometheus Unbound*, for banishing grief from the mind would have been of particular interest to Joyce in regard to the character development of his protagonist in *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom. Joyce had even reportedly told Frank Budgen, during the writing of *Ulysses*, that he thought *Prometheus Unbound* was the "Schwärmerei of a young Jew" (13). Schwärmerei is German for "enthusiasm" and so it is interesting that Joyce would suggest that Shelley's closet drama would be the enthusiasm of a young Jew when he was writing about Leopold Bloom who was of Jewish heritage. Bloom was familiar with German as he thought about what it could have been like if Rudy hadn't passed away so young. "I could have helped him on in life," Bloom pondered. "Learn German too" (74). It was only those brief moments of what-could-have-been – those minor and loving intimacies a father would have shared with his son – that temporarily removed Bloom from the grief of Rudy's death.

Most importantly to this thesis, Joyce had in his personal library in Trieste, during the time he was writing *Ulysses*, two collections of Shelley's works, both containing *Prometheus Unbound*. With the invaluable help of Richard Watson of the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, where Joyce's Trieste library is housed, it was revealed that between his two copies of *Prometheus Unbound* – both catalogued by Richard Ellmann – in *Shelley's Poetical Works*, the word nepenthe had been underlined (214). It's exciting to consider that this subtle underlining was the marked genesis of Joyce's interest in the Bloomian concepts of love, forgetfulness, and grief all wrapped in a single word and concept. Through this, it can be estimated that Joyce not only read *Prometheus Unbound*, but had specifically singled out the drug, nepenthe, during the time period he was working on *Ulysses*. And no annotations were made to the reference of nepenthe in Joyce's copy of *The Odyssey* as well.

There has been some debate over the authenticity of the books in the Joyce collection at the Harry Ransom Center given that the books were transferred from James to Stanislaus when he left Trieste. Annotations cannot typically be verified as having been made by

James Joyce himself even when the publication dates of some of the books in the collection have also been scrutinized in the timeline of Joyce's residence in Trieste. However, the publisher's London address on the title page dates this edition of *Shelley's Poetical Works* as 1877 which allows for ownership of the book while Joyce was in Trieste from 1904–1920. Given that this particular book had only one owner between James Joyce and the Harry Ransom Center, Stanislaus, it is highly unlikely that the annotation was made by anyone other than James Joyce. Stanislaus wrote of Joyce that while his youthful brother was an admirer of Shelley's, he could not be persuaded to read the Romantic poet himself. Stanislaus's aesthetic prejudice against Shelley makes it highly improbable that he would have read his brother's copy of Shelley's works, let alone annotated it. Lastly, as revealed by the Harry Ransom Center through photographic evidence, this edition of the book bears James Joyce's "J.J." book stamp on the flyleaf which is a significant clue that this was James Joyce's book and the annotations within it are his.

To take this underlining instance one step further in the linguistic genetics, a study was done on Joyce's Notebook VIII.A.5 by Phillip Herring at the University at Buffalo's James Joyce Collection. Herring referenced a note by Joyce written around 1918: "L (nepenthe – anesthetic [Queen Vict.])" (1969, 295). It is important to understand that this is the only known mention of nepenthe in any of Joyce's surviving notes for *Ulysses*. Herring clarified that, "PARENTHESSES, preceded by COLOR INDICATORS (B = blue, R = red, L = lavender) show the portion of a phrase marked through in color pencil, and, generally what Joyce found most interesting" (295). The indication of lavender is another point that will be delved into later.

In the "Lestrygonians" episode of *Ulysses*, for which these notes were used, Bloom considered Mina Purefoy's lengthy three-day labor in the hospital as, "Life with hard labour. Twilight sleep idea: queen Victoria was given that. Nine she had. A good layer. Old woman that lived in a shoe she had so many children" (132). The phrase "twilight sleep" was a term coined for the use of an anesthetic to numb pain without loss of consciousness, typically for childbirth. Appropriately, Joyce used this term in the "Oxen of the Sun" episode while Mina Purefoy was giving birth when he wrote, "the benefits of anesthesia or twilight sleep" (335). The earlier quote was a reference to Queen Victoria's use of chloroform as an anesthetic during the labor of her

eighth child in 1853. As Robert Liston wrote, “Many people still distrusted surgeons, and many religious fundamentalists resisted the idea of easing pain in other situations, such as childbirth” (155). However, after the popular monarch’s use of the drug, “it became wholly respectable” (155).

The eighth child referred here was the queen’s youngest son, Leopold, named after the uncle of Victoria and Albert, Leopold I of Belgium. The quote from *Ulysses* was the product of Joyce’s note regarding nepenthe: “nepenthe – anesthetic [Queen Vict.]” (Herring 295). In none of Joyce’s other literary works is nepenthe referenced. Like Bloom of *Ulysses*, both are named Leopold and the prince was alleged of being a freemason, something Joyce’s character was known to be as well. There are numerous references to Bloom’s membership in the freemasons throughout *Ulysses*. Likewise, there was also a parent-child connection to nepenthe being used metaphorically for chloroform: Bloom’s father, Rudolph Bloom, committed suicide using an overdose of “2 parts of aconite liniment to 1 of chloroform liniment” (560) and Queen Victoria used chloroform in the labor of her son, Leopold.

Furthermore, there is additional connection between Victoria, Bloom, and Shelley’s Prometheus. In the “Hades” episode, as Bloom thinks about life and death, he ruminates on loss and grief. He also reflects on his sense of guilt over Rudy’s death. That is why, when Rudy died, his relationship with Molly changed. In a thematic inverse, when Queen Victoria’s husband passed away, her relationship with her son was equally altered. As S.L. Goldberg wrote, “upon the widowed Queen Victoria at last abandoning grief for her Consort: ‘her son was the substance. Something new to hope for not like the past she wanted, waiting. It never comes. One must go first: alone under the ground: and lie no more in her warm bed.’” (134). It shows that Joyce was not relying on the literal Homeric, but rather the metaphorical Shelleyan nepenthe because it isn’t simply a drug banishing grief from the mind, it is love fighting against the pain of the past. Prometheus’s love banishes the grief of Jupiter’s tyranny; Victoria’s love of Leopold banishes the grief of Albert’s death; and there is Bloom’s love of Molly that holds their marriage together by a thread to banish the grief of Rudy’s death. For Bloom, because of Rudy’s death merely eleven days after birth, there forms an association between birth and death, which allows for Joyce’s use of chloroform to act as the metaphorical nepenthe -

“twilight sleep idea” (132) – during Victoria’s childbirth of Leopold – the Duke of Albany, not Leopold Bloom.

The color indication in Joyce’s notebook of lavender also has a poetic connection to *Ulysses* in the “Ithaca” episode when Bloom’s first unlocked drawer contained “...a 1d. adhesive stamp, lavender, of the reign of Queen Victoria...” (593). This certainly fits in with what Molly Bloom, in the “Penelope” episode, referred to as “the language of stamps” (625). It is also intriguing to get to see the line in *Ulysses* from the reference written in Joyce’s notebook, traced back to its initial inspiration from the underlined nepenthe in his copy of Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*.

The latter half of Queen Victoria quote regarding the Mother Goose nursery rhyme of the old woman who lived in a shoe was a pun on the number of children the British monarch had and was even referenced in a note Joyce penned between 1903-1920 under the header “Lestrygonians”: “...old woman who lived in a shoe (Vic)...” (II.i.2. Notebook). Joyce was thinking of Queen Victoria when drafting “Lestrygonians” as she was given an entire line in his notes out of only a dozen for that entire episode. Merely two lines below in Joyce’s same notebook, he wrote, “...left Lombard street because Rudy +...” (II.i.2. Notebook). The cross is symbolic of a gravestone, referring to his death. The mention of Rudy and Lombard Street relates to the excerpt from *Ulysses* five pages later from the Queen Victoria reference when Joyce wrote, “When we left Lombard street west something changed. Could never like it again after Rudy” (137). Joyce wrote twelve lines of notes on the “Lestrygonians” episode in this notebook; there are 1,225 lines in the “Lestrygonians” episode of *Ulysses*. It could be argued that if Joyce mentioned an idea in his notes, it was very important to his draft of the novel. In one-sixth of these lines from his notebook, Joyce wrote about Queen Victoria’s children and Rudy’s death as the cause of the Blooms’ move from Lombard Street and as mentioned immediately after in *Ulysses*, the cause of Leopold Bloom’s lack of interest in sex with Molly. As Queen Victoria was not a character in the novel, her presence should be viewed with more symbolic signification, such as her clear connection to nepenthe and the banishing of grief from the mind. As it was Prometheus who introduced the nepenthe of love back into the world, allowing for the re-birth of society in Shelley’s play, it was Queen Victoria who popularized the use of chloroform as an anesthetic, allowing for the banish-

ment of pain during childbirth. These usages of nepenthe are bridged by Bloom's grief over his son who passed away so close to birth.

A final explanation for Queen Victoria's presence also lies within the pages of Joyce's notesheets in the British Museum, as transcribed by Phillip Herring. For the "Ithaca" episode, Joyce had written, "Victoria = Penelope" (449). Like Molly, Victoria is, at least in a particular aspect, an avatar for Penelope in Homer's *Odyssey*. Both were monarchs of their respective kingdoms and both had to reign without their husbands for a time. However, it is also interesting to consider that Joyce linked both Molly and Queen Victoria together given his interest in their maternal similarities. Victoria's presence in *Ulysses* was intentional in a deeper literary sense than the simple historical and contextual levels most people associate her with in the novel.

Lastly, Joyce even mentioned "Prometheus" in his Linati Schema, written around 1920 for his friend, Carlo Linati, to help with the reading of *Ulysses*. It is worth mentioning that while other characters from Homer's *Odyssey* are understandably included in the "Persons" category such as Telemachus, Antinous, Menelaus, and Helen, Prometheus is not an Homeric character, having no mention at all in *The Odyssey*, making his appearance all the more fascinating. While Prometheus's reference in this schema for the "Cyclops" episode is ambiguous, it is interesting that its significance is listed as "The Egocidal Terror" and its Science and Art association is listed as "Surgery". Egocide is defined as a symbolic suicide "aiding individuals in the rebirth process" (Rosen 209). This bridges the two texts by Shelley and Joyce. This egocidal suicide can indicate Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* in the violent suicide of the French Revolution and the healing rebirth of a nation in its ashes, reflected in the closet drama; it can also connect to Joyce's Leopold Bloom, whose father committed suicide and whose thoughts throughout the day in *Ulysses* reflected a strong yearning to reconcile with the death of his son – named after the suicidal Rudolph – and its impact on his marriage. Another identifiable bridge here is that, in the "Cyclops" episode for which Prometheus is associated in Joyce's schema, Bloom expounded upon his theory on life in which, "love, says Bloom. I mean the opposite of hatred" (273). Bloom here was speaking like Shelley when the 19<sup>th</sup> century writer penned, "nor pride, Nor jealousy, nor envy, nor ill-shame, The bitterest of those drops of treasured gall, Spoilt the sweet taste of nepenthe, love" (365). In both texts there is the belief that life's only redeemer is

love. One can get a sense of Bloom's promethean ideals in the "Cyclops" episode, as the Linati schema suggests, where love is the very bond keeping Molly and Bloom together despite the widening distance between them acting as the catalyst of the novel's drama. Also, Prometheus's Science and Art association being called "Surgery" is certainly applicable to Queen Victoria's use of chloroform in the birth of her son, Leopold. The label given by Joyce for the "Lestrygonians" episode in the Linati Schema is "Dejection". It is in this episode that Queen Victoria's twilight sleep idea is mentioned, defining the thesis of this paper with Bloom's yearning to abandon the grief of his son's death. It is difficult to imagine a more apt word to sum up the source of Bloom's marital troubles with Molly than the very symptom *nepenthe* is designed to remedy: dejection.

In 1820, Percy Bysshe Shelley published *Prometheus Unbound*. As early as 1898 Joyce had been mentioning Shelley's works in his writings for his matriculation course at university and between 1903-1905, Joyce included excerpts of *Prometheus Unbound* in his posthumously published *Stephen Hero*, which never appeared in its published literary cousin, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Between 1903-1920, Joyce wrote a comment in his *Ulysses* notebook on Queen Victoria having many children and the Blooms leaving their home on Lombard Street because their son, Rudy, died, which was also the catalyst of Bloom's celibacy with Molly. Joyce annotated, underlining *nepenthe*, in his copy of *Prometheus Unbound* sometime between 1904-1920. Around 1918, Joyce also made a note of connecting *nepenthe* with Queen Victoria as an anesthetic. And around 1920 Joyce wrote his Linati Schema which included Prometheus related to surgery and egocidal terror, uniting Joyce's novel with Shelley's closet drama on a thematic level. When considering similarities between Shelley's and Joyce's use of *nepenthe* along with the timeline of Joyce's writings pertaining to these connections, we can see the genetics of this inspiration as a key aspect of *Ulysses*.

Understanding that the contextual use of "nepenthe" stems from Shelley and not Homer is the significant aspect of this paper. The Homeric *nepenthe* would suggest a mere numbing of sorrow whereas the Shelleyan *nepenthe* reveals that the very anesthetic to grief is love, opening door to future redemption and growth. Shelley, like Joyce in the end of *Ulysses*, was suggesting that the true drug which banishes grief and sorrow is love. This Shelleyan ideal of collective love conquering tyranny and war, espoused in *Prometheus Unbound* in the

shade of the French Revolution, was unavoidably felt and used in *Ulysses* by Joyce in the shadow of World War I. 1922 was the year Joyce published *Ulysses* and it was the centennial of Shelley's death. In the aftermath of World War I and in commemoration of Shelley, Gertrude Slaughter wrote of *Prometheus Unbound*, "Perhaps it is because we are in such need of a spiritual vision that shall recall the disillusioned mind to a sense of the majesty of life, that Shelley's belief in a world redeemed by perfect love and universal sympathy is acquiring a new value" (69). Bloom sought an anesthetic for his painful loss of Rudy which had created the association of sex and death for him; Molly sought the opposite of an anesthetic – a stimulant, so to speak – to resurrect her love life and make her feel desired. And it was Victoria's use of nepenthe or chloroform, the same anesthetic Bloom's father used in his suicide, to numb the sensation of childbirth for her Leopold, that bridged birth and death, love withered and love renewed. Love, as Shelley so beautifully stressed, was the only redeemer for mankind. Love was the very bond Bloom and Molly felt that, despite their emotional or physical infidelities, their insecurities and fears, kept them together in the same bed in the end, awaiting the dawn of a new day.



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## Misrepresentation, Identity, and Authorship in Percival Everett's *Erasure*

Gergely Vörös

### Abstract

The microcosm of Percival Everett's *Erasure*—just as our own world—is interwoven with a set of normative expectations that not only circumscribe the self-identity of its main character, Thelonious Monk Ellison, but have a determining effect on him as an author as well. This paper explores a delicate link connecting racial misrepresentations, cultural industries, and power inequalities. It argues that the novel seeks to undermine the historically dominant assumptions of racial authenticity as well as locate to true racial authenticity in the plurality of African American experience. In doing so, it utilises Foucauldian notions of subjectivity, power, and discursive formations. Such concepts allow for the understanding of human subjectivity as the effect of larger semiotic systems. In this context, race is understood as a prescriptive rather than descriptive concept—a category that figures as a tool of social control. Consequently, Percival Everett's *Erasure* enters into a dialogue with the dominant racial representations of the contemporary United States in the hope of deracialising the American imaginary.

**Keywords:** *Percival Everett, Erasure, race, power, ideology, subjectivity, double consciousness*

Misrepresentations of blackness can be traced back to colonial times. Even though the cultural forms of racial stereotyping have undergone major permutations since then, they share a common imperial heritage—the desire to sustain the socio-political, economic, and moral superiority of whiteness. In this regard, the practice of minstrelsy, *coon* comedies or, more recently, ghetto novels are contingent on a discursive economy which seeks to sustain societies along racialised lines. Popular cultural imagery has its roots in the everyday assumptions of ordinary people. Since everyday experience is never devoid of hegemonic assumptions, culture becomes the sphere of stereotyping where dominant discourses take control over narrative representations of minorities (Hall 473). Consequently, only those representations which conform to the hegemonic criteria of authenticity are considered worthwhile by the majority (475). Since a large proportion of the community has a vested interest in sustaining asymmetric power rela-

tions among different races, popular portrayals usually seek to naturalise unequal distribution of power. In this regard, the criteria of black authenticity lie in the eyes of the beholder (Lubiano 189). Considering that racial authenticity has generally been constructed from a majority perspective in the United States, African Americans have usually defined themselves “through the eyes of others” (W. E. B. Du Bois xiii). Percival Everett’s 2001 novel, *Erasure* expresses a powerful critique of racial stereotyping and commodification of racial misrepresentations. This article seeks to explore how, within the microcosm of the novel, racial misrepresentations perpetuate a hegemonic discourse, which, by the act of racialisation, constructs and controls African American subjectivities.

In the microcosm of *Erasure*, race plays a prominent role. As Thelonious “Monk” Ellison, the narrator of the novel puts it, he “hardly ever think[s] about race,” yet some people will try to ruin him “because they do believe in race [...]” (Everett 4). This is so because race is not merely a neutral category of identification. Instead, membership to a certain race assigns its members a certain social status. Ellison’s dark skin not only implies that “some of [his] ancestors were slaves” but also provides justification for white policemen to detain him without any apparent reason, and thus to remind him of the subject position prescribed for *blackness* (3). In this respect, race figures as a prominent tool of social control. That is, as an integral part of the hegemonic narrative, the epistemology of racial categories lends the appearance of legitimacy to the hegemonic social order. Consequently, Percival Everett insinuates that even at the brink of the 21<sup>st</sup> century *blackness* is linked to an inferior position in the social hierarchy.

Thelonious Monk Ellison, the protagonist of Percival Everett’s *Erasure*, struggles to fit into the racialised microcosm the novel presents to its readers. Ellison, who does not “believe in race” (4), refuses to conform to the hegemonic racial assumptions of society. For even though he is of a muscular build, he is bad at basketball, instead of rap, he listens to *white* music, reads continental philosophy, speaks in a middle-class accent, and generally does *white* things (Everett 3). Consequently, as he says: “[s]ome people in the society in which I live, described as being black, tell me I am not *black* enough. Some people whom the society calls white tell me the same thing” (4). Whilst Ellison consciously resists the expectations held towards him, his struggle is at the heart of his isolated and alienated existence that determines his being at a fundamental level. In other words, the racialising pressure mounted on Ellison from without, by forcing him into subordination, circumscribes Ellison’s self-identity (Butler 3). Although, by

refusing to occupy the subject position reserved for *blackness*, Ellison slips out of the grips of power, he is denied entry into the very structure of society and is doomed to a liminal existence.

The vivid imagery of woodworking that dominates the initial part of the book functions as a metaphor highlighting the nature of social existence within the novel.

Saws cut wood. They either rip with the grain or cut across it. A rip saw will slice smoothly along the grain, but chew up the wood if it goes against the grain. It is all in the geometry of the teeth, the shape, size and set of them, how they lean away from the blade. Crosscut teeth are typically smaller than rip teeth. The large teeth of rip saws shave material away quickly and there are deep gaps between them which allow shavings to fall away, keeping the saw from binding. Crosscut teeth make a wider path, are raked back and beveled to points. The points allow the crosscut saw to score and cleave the grain cleanly. (Everett 4–5)

In the quoted passage, the typology of different saws seems to stand for the formative effect of racial stereotypes, representations, and expectations. For, just like saws, they serve, as it were, to cut and carve out one's subjectivity. The geometry, "shape, size and the set of" the saw teeth determine the character of the marks left on our beings (5). Yet, as Percival Everett suggests, there is no escape: the saw teeth will carve deeply into our flesh—for this is what they are designed to do. It may come as no surprise then that whilst Ellison is making the final touches on a wooden table, he recalls Foucault's "discussion of discursive formations" (152). According to Foucault, "discursive formations" are systems of meaning that circumscribe the horizons of what can be thought and said (*The Archaeology of Knowledge* 116). These formations not only make the world knowable for us, but they also impose their order on it—they establish "[t]he rules of formation" that constitute human "conditions of existence" (38). Hence, such semiotic systems, by demarcating the subject positions in the world, construct and regulate the self. Consequently, discursive formations figure as the "[...] modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects" (Foucault "The Subject and Power" 777). It is the deeply racialised culture of the United States that forces Ellison to fit into a subject position that is completely alien to him. Hence, by invoking Foucault's idea of discursive formations and their power over self-identities, Percival Everett weaves into the fabric of *Erasure* a concep-

tual thread which illuminates the link between racialisation and subject formation.

Racial expectations, however, are even more crippling to Ellison's literary career. Rejections, negative reviews, and criticisms of his novels are usually supported with the line that his prose too is "not black enough" (Everett 49). Ellison refuses to feed the public demand for "the true, gritty real stories of black life" (4), which would reinforce the stereotypical image of African American experience associated with criminality, pathology, and irrationality. As a result, his prose is considered inauthentic as it fails to approximate the racial assumptions of the American public. According to Michel Foucault, a literary work accommodates a variety of signs alluding to the persona of the author ("What is an Author?" 228). Whilst Foucault originally talks about textual clues pointing in the direction of the author, the paper views, paratextual hints to be just as much important. For it is due to the photo on the back cover of his first novel that the public is very well aware of the fact that Ellison is black. In this way, his authorial identity gets entrapped within the racial rubric of literary discourse, his fiction is perceived as "a certain mode of being of discourse," as an utterance that must be approached with certain assumptions and assigned a certain status (228). As a result, his literary works are interpreted with reference to his ethnic origin and are expected to conform to the prevailing racial expectations. Yet, the characters inhabiting Ellison's fiction are not "called niggers," do not "comb their afros," do not speak the vernacular of Harlem and do not dwell in ghettos (Everett 49). Hence, when Ellison looks up his novels in a bookstore, he finds his novels in the African American studies section, where those interested in his fiction would not even consider looking for it (34). Thus, as Ellison fails to approximate the prevailing racial expectations, the publishing industry and the market do not recognise him as a fiction writer of African American descent.

Although Ellison's novels are unpopular due to their perceived inauthenticity, *We's Lives In Da Ghetto* by Juanita Mae Jenkins is considered "a masterpiece of African American literature" (46). The novel, telling the story of Sharonda F'rinda Johnson, is acclaimed for providing a credible insight into "the typical Black life in an unnamed ghetto in America" (46). At fifteen she is shown to be already pregnant with her third child (from her mother's third husband), lives with her junkie mother and her mentally challenged basketball-playing brother

(46). The novel provides readers with a panoply of assumed racial characteristics. As a fictional reviewer writes, “[o]ne can actually hear the voices of [Jenkin’s] people as they make their way through the experience which is and can only be Black America” (46). There are only certain forms of authentic *Black America* for the American public and the experience of those who do not conform to these criteria is simply ignored. Margaret Russet notes that African American novelists are held to an overly reductive “standard of empirical-reference,” as based on their skin colour; the works of African American writers are primarily read against the prevailing racial expectations (360). Though Russet is right in pointing that racial markings are physical signifiers, it is believed that they serve to link the empirical with the imaginary, and thereby, the referent to which black authors are held is of an ideological nature. For Jenkin’s characters, the voice through which she speaks, and the microcosm she portrays do not have any actual correspondence in empirical reality. Instead, her fiction is applauded for its authenticity as it confirms the ideological assumptions generally held by the American public. It constructs blackness in opposition to the socially dominant rationality and succeeds in portraying racialised groups as the enemies of reason, order, and morality.

A change in Ellison’s circumstances, however, nudges him to reconsider his principles. Upon the tragic death of his sister, he moves back to the parental home to take care of his ageing mother. Living on his minimal royalties without a job in New York, Ellison is faced with a financial situation that proves stifling for him. Seeing no better way out, he puts a page in his father’s manual typewriter and begins to write a novel on which he knows he can “never put [his] name” (Everett 70). *My Pafology*, written in a strong dialect, tells the story of the ghetto-dwelling Van Go Jenkins and recounts his path towards criminal life. Van Go, who fathered four children from four different women, moves between odd jobs, commits minor offences, and has no interest in becoming a good citizen. With the help of his mother, Van Go gets employment with a rich black family. Although he tries not to blow his chance initially, he ends up raping the heavily drunk daughter of his employer one night. That is, Van Go loses control over his baser urges and goes against the dictum of reason. Completely in line with the dominant racial assumptions, *My Pafology* demarcates black subjectivity in opposition to reason—in opposition to *white* rationality. Drawing on Falguni Sheth, Ellison associates African Americans with

a perceived “unruliness” that provides both the basis and the justification of their racialisation in *My Pafology* (26).

Historically, circulating tropes of black authenticity have engaged in the discursive construction and maintenance of racial divisions. The representations of blackness disseminated through literature, music or films have not only provided a basis for racial self-definition, but they have also framed the expected behaviour and habitus of “an ideal Black man or [a] woman” (Nguyen and Anthony 772). Racial misrepresentations, being integral part of discursive formations, engage in the construction of collective identities and their ascription on racialised subjects. Hence, they “provide what we might call scripts: narratives that people can use in shaping their life plans and in telling their life stories” (Appiah 97). In this sense, racial misrepresentations lend the sense of “narrative unity” to African American lives, and thus profoundly shape African American experience (97).

Having said that, *My Pafology* makes a subtle, self-conscious allusion to the link between commercial value and racial stereotypes. Following Van Go’s sexual attack on his employer’s daughter, he is invited to Snookie Cane’s talk show, where, to his astonishment, instead of applause he is faced with a series of questions about neglecting his children and not paying any child support. Nevertheless, at the peak of the show, as two policemen come for Van Go, Snookie Cane explains that Van go might have raped a woman (Everett 137). In this sense, Van Go’s appearance on the show is the confirmation of the assumed racial characteristics through which Van Go becomes “a proper TV nigger” (130). Van Go, however, manages to run away from the studio. As a fugitive, he commits a double homicide, killing a shop owner and a man who claims to be his father. Following a hostage situation, the police manages to catch him by sabotaging his getaway car. He is pulled out of the car by his hair and is forced to the ground, while the cameras point at him (149). Yet, he is not bothered anymore. As he says: “I be on the TV. The Cameras be full of me. I on TV [sic]” (150). With his arrest, Van Go Jenkins reinforces the ideological image of the African-American. Percival Everett implies that the overexposure of such stereotypical representations in media is premised on the fact that they conform to the hegemonic criteria of African American authenticity.

By publishing *My Pafology*, Ellison relinquishes his identity and succumbs to the power of the racial stereotyping imposed upon him. As Darryl Dickinson-Carr points out with regards to *Erasure*, the American public expects no ingenuity from black authors, only grittiness and “pathology” and this is exactly what Ellison gives them (46). Right at the beginning of writing the novel, Ellison starts to feel pain in his feet coursing up to his spine right into his brain. Passages from *Native Son*, *The Color Purple*, and *Amos and Andy* occur to him, and he starts “screaming inside,” protesting that he does not “sound like that,” that his parents or his family do not “sound like that” (Everett 70). Following the success of the book, Ellison starts to feel as “a sell-out” (182). Although he publishes the book under the pseudonym of Stagg R. Leigh, as *My Pafology* gains currency, a complex authorial identity develops out of the name and the blurry photograph on the back cover of the book which reinforces the racial assumption of the market. His work kills off Ellison by negating him as an author only to bring into life the authorial persona of Stagg R. Leigh. As the persona constructed by the public overwrites Ellison’s identity, Everett employs Barthes’ famous thesis that “the death of the Author” is redeemed by “the birth of the reader” to make sense of the realities of African American experience (383). Accordingly, Everett suggests that, by producing works that conform to stereotypes, writers of African American origin renounce agency over their work and become puppets to hegemonic racial expectations.

Although *Native Son* and *The Color Purple* are explicitly alluded to, they are not the only canonical works of African American literature with which *Erasure* enters into a dialogue. Whilst Everett appears to suggest that these texts are an integral part of the discursive economy which legitimates the inferior status of African Americans, the character of Thelonious Ellison, who is considered inauthentic both as a person and an author, seems to point back to Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. The “invisibility” of Ralph Ellison’s narrator is not the result of “a biochemical accident to [his] epidermis” but “a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom [he] come[s] in contact” (3). That is to say, his invisibility has more to do with the way society and, mainly, the white majority perceives him. As Scott Thomas Gibson points out, it is an issue of perception on the part of those whose ideological assumptions prevent them from beholding the African American subject in its totality (362). Thelonious Ellison in *Erasure* too suffers from a kind of invisibility. Provided that his literary works

are perceived as “not black enough” for the public, as an author he is destined to obscurity (Everett 49). Whilst Ellison’s invisibility appears as the direct consequence of his assumed inauthenticity, the cultural fabrication and consumption of authentic *blackness* get to be seen as the contemporary means of policing and segregating racial boundaries (Gibson 261). Therefore, the claim that *My Pafology* represents “the true story of what it is like to be black in America” reinforces the assumption that it is in one way or another inferior to the experience of *whiteness* (Everett 262–263).

It must be noted, however, that Ellison initially actively engages in the construction of Stagg R. Leigh but as he contemplates his own role in Stagg R. Leigh’s birth, he can see the irony startlingly well. He is “a victim of racism by virtue of [his] failing to acknowledge racial difference and by failing to have [his] art be defined as an exercise in racial self-expression.” He decides “to wear the mask of the person” he is “expected to be” to unshackle himself from being economically oppressed (238). As Ellison is asserting Stagg Leigh’s individuality and “annihilating [his] own presence,” he can see that the public loves Stagg R. Leigh (276). Even after owning up to be the author of the novel, Ellison goes further to prove that he is “the real thing” (244–245). He goes as far as to suggest that Stagg R. Leigh might have “killed a man with the leather awl of a Swiss army knife” (245). Upon this utterance, Cynthia, the naïve companion of the well-known producer, Willy Morgenstein, eyed “Stagg quite differently.” It is now undeniable to her that Stagg is “the real thing” (245). Her gaze here seems to figure as a metaphor for the publishing industry that creates and superimposes Stagg R. Leigh’s persona on Ellison’s self and body. As a result, the market takes Ellison, “. . .reconfigure[s]” him “[t]hen disintegrate[s]” him, “leaving two bodies of work, two bodies, no boundaries yet walls everywhere” (285). Ellison, who gains financial profit from selling the persona of Stagg R. Leigh, eventually, has “to pay the price” by “losing” himself locked up in a body with Stagg R. Leigh (286).

The duality of Thelonious Ellison and Stagg R. Leigh points back to W. E. B. Du Bois’ idea of “double-consciousness.” For Du Bois, this is “a peculiar sensation,” a “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (xiii). Ellison can indeed feel his “two-ness” (Appiah 97). He is a middle-class American

and a black; two selves, two apparently contradictory identities locked into a racially marked body. Stagg R. Leigh and Ellison inhabit the same body, and they make the trip to Stagg R. Leigh's first public appearance on the *Kenya Dunston Show* "...together, on the same flight and, sadly, in the same seat" (Everett 265). Stagg R. Leigh does not merely remain an alter-ego but becomes the pure embodiment of the racial expectations imposed on him. At the end of the novel, when Stagg is awarded one of the most prestigious literary awards in the country, Thelonious Ellison experiences a moment of epiphany. In a vision, his childhood self holds up a mirror in which he can see the reflection of Stagg R. Leigh (293). This moment clears away his illusions, and Ellison comes to understand that he has allowed himself to grow identical with the image society has sought to construct of him.

In addition to the main body of the novel and Stagg R. Leigh's book, the readers find fictional dialogues between historical characters, sketches, story fragments, and a complete conference paper in the novel. These fragments are an organic part of *Erasure* and by providing an insight into the workings of several discursive formations, serve to illuminate the interconnectedness of race, identity, and authenticity. As Françoise Sammarcelli points out, the "journal format" employed in *Erasure* provides various different outlooks on the narrative as well as facilitates the illustration of the story with seemingly far-fetched associations (2). Everett seems particularly fond of allusions to the Nazi approach to art, and from these references, the fictional dialogue between Hitler and Eckhart, one of his early friends and political allies, is most relevant for this discussion. Although Everett adds an additional *h* to Eckart's name, either intentionally or by a mistake, misspelling it as "Eckhart," it is obvious that Hitler talks to Dietrich Eckart in these conversations. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Eckart became immensely popular with his adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, which he tailored to suit his political interests. As Ralph M. Engelman highlights, by his adaptation of *Peer Gynt*, Eckart sought to fabricate a "racial allegory" in which Great Boyg and the trolls stood for "the Jewish spirit"—the force seeking to subjugate the German nation (120). In the dialogue written by Everett, it endlessly irritates Eckart that his whole recognition rests on his well-known adaptation. As he explains that he has come to hate *Peer Gynt*, Hitler, oblivious to Eckart's meaning, explains that as Eckart "unveiled the Jews for what they are," *Peer Gynt* now "speaks to the German soul." In response to Hitler's readiness to fight the trolls with him, Eckart can only concede

and utter that “[t]hey will destroy German culture if we let them” (Everett 45). The irony of this dialogue is that, similar to Thelonious Ellison, Eckart has only limited control over the reception of his work. If he is to preserve his authorial status, he must go along with the social expectations. Hence, he can either be recognised as an artist for the adaptation that resonates with the dominant tropes of Teutonic mythology or be completely ignored.

In a similar way, an imagined dialogue between two painters, de Kooning and Rauschenberg, highlights the leitmotif of the novel. Having asked de Kooning for a painting, Rauschenberg erases the work and presents it as his own.

de Kooning: You put your name on it.

Rauschenberg: Why not? It’s my work.

de Kooning: Your work? Look at what you’ve done to my picture.

Rauschenberg: Nice job, eh? It was a lot of work erasing it. My wrist is still sore. I call it “Erased Drawing.”

de Kooning: That’s very clever.

Rauschenberg: I’ve already sold it for ten grand.

de Kooning: You sold my picture?

Rauschenberg: No, I erased your picture. I sold my erasing.  
(254)

Everett insinuates that both *My Pafology* and *Erasure* are akin to Rauschenberg’s erasing. Ellison constructs the African American subject in terms of the dominant racial expectations and sells this ‘erasure’ to the American public through *My Pafology*. Highlighting the constructedness of the dominant racial representations, Percival Everett’s *Erasure* seeks to obliterate their legitimacy as authentic portrayals of the African American experience.

*My Pafology* is not merely a novel within the novel but becomes the negative reflection of *Erasure*. Thus, the two plotlines show interesting analogies. Both Ellison and Van Go Jenkins struggle under the burden of racialised stereotypes and struggle to fit into the subject

position that society demarcates for them based on their ethnic origin. Yet, their financial circumstances force them to act according to the dictum of the dominant social expectations. Van Go Jenkins fully fits into his expected role by becoming a living example of assumed black pathology, Thelonious Ellison does just the same by becoming Stagg R. Leigh. That is, through conforming to the dominant racial assumptions both of them turn into a simulacrum without a referent in reality, which ironically gets to be regarded as *the real thing*. Thus, as Françoise Sammarcelli argues, *Erasure* converts Ralph Ellison's "motif of invisibility" into a motif "of media overexposure," which is underlined by the fact that both "*My Pafology* and *Erasure* end with their protagonist facing the camera" (2). Consequently, Ellison, who so far has been invisible to the racialised vision of the public, is transformed into the very stereotype of the African American author. In this sense, his final reaction to the public at the award ceremony, where he stares into the camera and utters, "'Egads, I'm on Television'" invokes Van Go Jenkins' reaction to the media coverage of his arrest (Everett 294). Hence, their final moments seem to indicate their entrapment in the imaginary realm. Thus, as both Ellison and Van Go Jenkins merge together with the dominant racial stereotypes, "the signs of the real" become substituted "for the real" itself (Baudrillard 2). Consequently, they turn out to be empty racial signifiers with no referent in actual reality.

To sum up, Percival Everett's *Erasure* illuminates a delicate link connecting racial misrepresentations, cultural industries, and power inequalities. Everett not only seeks to erase the previously dominant representations of blackness but suggests that authenticity is to be found in the plurality of black perspective instead of exclusionary stereotypes. Through *Erasure*, the struggle of Thelonious Ellison for recognition and his subsequent failure become the tragedy of African Americans who, like him, do not conform to the dominant stereotype of authentic blackness.

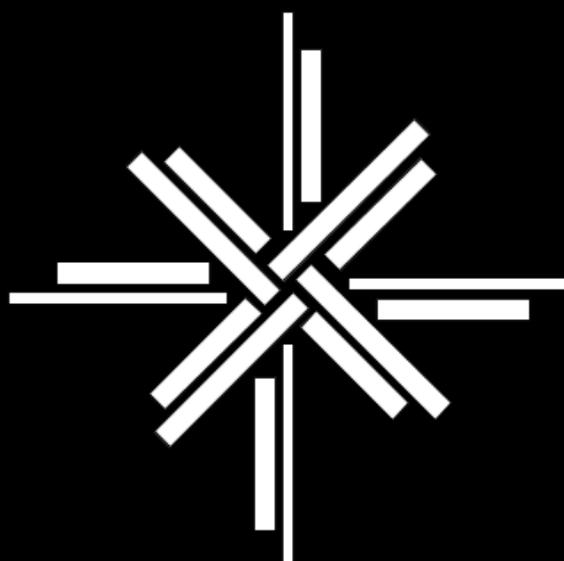


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