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Beating the Meat/Surviving the Text, or How to Get Out of this Century Alive

VIVIAN SOBCHACK

This demise of feeling and emotion has paved the way for all our most real and tender pleasures – in the excitements of pain and mutilation; in sex as the perfect arena . . . for all the veronicas of our own perversions; in our moral freedom to pursue our own psychopathology as a game; and in our apparently limitless powers for conceptualization – what our children have to fear is not the cars on the highways of tomorrow but our own pleasure in calculating the most elegant parameters of their deaths. (Ballard, 1985: 1)

Some time ago, in an issue of *Science-Fiction Studies*, I had occasion to rip into Jean Baudrillard's body – both his lived-body and his techno-body and the insurmountable, unthought and thoughtless gap between them (Sobchack, 1991: 327–9). The journal had published an English translation of two of the French theorist-critic's short essays on science fiction and techno-culture (Baudrillard, 1991: 309–20), one of them celebrating *Crash*, an extraordinary novel written by J.G. Ballard, first published in 1973 with an author's introduction added in 1974 (Ballard, 1985). My anger at Baudrillard arose from his willful misreading of a work whose pathological characters 'get off' on the erotic collision between the human body and technology, and celebrate sex and death in wrecked automobiles and car crashes.

A moral tale written in the guise of a 'pornographic' quasi-science fictional narrative, *Crash*'s cold and clinical prose robs the sex acts and the wounds the narrator describes of feeling and emotion and, I would assume in most cases, also of the ability to arouse the living flesh of the reader. Indeed, in his introduction, Ballard is explicit about his concerns and the novel's project. Viewing pornography as 'the most political form of fiction, dealing with how we use and exploit each other in the most urgent and ruthless way', he describes *Crash* as 'the first pornographic novel based on technology'. It is, he says, 'an extreme metaphor for an extreme situation, a kit of desperate measures only for use in an extreme crisis' (1985: 6). Excoriating the world around him in an explosive prose quite unlike that of the

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novel itself, Ballard's prescient introduction speaks of 'voyeurism, self-disgust, the infantile basis of our dreams and longings' and suggests that, in a 'communications landscape' of 'sinister technologies', 'mass merchandising', unlimited options and 'the dreams that money can buy', 'these diseases of the psyche have now culminated in the most terrifying casualty of the century: the death of affect' (1985: 1). Feeling at a moral loss in the context of what is now – but was not then – called 'postmodern' culture, Ballard is, nonetheless, moralistic. The 'ultimate role of *Crash* is cautionary', he tells us. The novel 'is a warning against the brutal, erotic and overlit realm that beckons more and more persuasively to us from the margins of the technological landscape' (1985: 6).

Baudrillard, however, refuses Ballard's warning while praising his work, and – as usual – succumbs to the brutal and erotic and techno-logical. Indeed, writing about *Crash*, the lived-body sitting at Baudrillard's desk must have forgotten itself to celebrate, instead, 'a body with neither organs nor organ pleasures, entirely dominated by gash marks, cut-outs, and technical scars – all under the sign of a sexuality that is without referentiality and without limits' (1991: 313). Forgetting itself while invisibly grounding his fantasies of 'a body commixed with technology's capacity for violation and violence', Baudrillard's lived-body is certainly disaffected, if not completely disavowed (1991: 313). This is to say that Baudrillard's body is *thought* always as an object and never *lived* as a subject. And thought rather than lived, it can bear all sorts of symbolic abuse with indiscriminate and undifferentiated pleasure. This techno-body, however, is a porno-graphic fiction, objectified and written beyond belief and beyond the real – which is to say, it is always something 'other' than the body Baudrillard lives as both 'here' and 'mine'. Alienated from his own lived-body and its existence as the material premise for very real, rather than merely literal, pain, Baudrillard gets into the transcendent sexiness of the 'brutal surgery' that technology 'continually performs in creating incisions, excisions, scar tissue, gaping body holes' (1991: 313). Rejecting Ballard's cautionary and moral gaze as outmoded and inappropriate to the contemporary moment, he luxuriates in the novel's wounds, 'artificial orifices' (1991: 316), and 'artificial invaginations' (1991: 315), in the convergence of 'chrome and mucous membranes', in 'all the symbolic and sacrificial practices that a body can open itself up to – not via nature, but via artifice, simulation, and accident' (1991: 316).

Where, in all this erotic technophilia, I asked at the time, was Baudrillard's body? Both the one at the desk, the physical and intentional lived-body of the man and the repressed or disavowed lived-body of the postmodernism for which he and his disciples stand. At once decentered and completely extroverted, alienated in a phenomenological structure of *sensual thought* and merely *psychic experience*, it was *re-signed* to being a *no-body*. The man's lived-body (and, not coincidentally,

the body of a man) – its material facticity, its situatedness, finitude and limitations – had been transubstantiated through textualization into the infinite possibility and irresponsibility and receptivity and legibility of the ‘pure’ sign. Telling the ‘story’ of this kind of critical collapse of the materially real into ‘readable text’, Fredric Jameson points to how ‘finally the body itself proves to be a palimpsest whose stabs of pain and symptoms, along with its deeper impulses and its sensory apparatus, can be *read* fully as much as any other text’ (1991: 186). The sense of the body that Baudrillard privileges, then, is sense as it is amputated from its origins in material existence. Baudrillard’s body finds its erotic pleasures located only in the *jouissance* of semiotic play, its pain only in writer’s block. And so – given that I first read Baudrillard on *Crash* while I was recuperating from major cancer surgery on my left distal thigh and knew all about gash marks, cut-outs, technical scars and artificial orifices and invaginations – I wished the man a car crash or two, and a little pain to bring him (back) to his senses.

Indeed, there is nothing like a little pain to bring us back to our senses, nothing like a real (not imagined) mark or wound to counter the romanticism and fantasies of techno-sexual transcendence that characterize so much of the current discourse on the techno-body that is thought to occupy the cyberspaces of postmodernity. As Jameson reminds us: ‘History is what hurts. It is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis’ (1981: 102). Thus, while it is true that, between operations, I could joke that my doctor ‘had gone where no man had gone before’, sitting there reading Baudrillard as I was living my artificial orifice and technical scars, I could attest to the *scandal* of metaphor and the *bad faith* informing the ‘political economy of the sign’. The ‘semiurgy of contusions, scars, mutilations, and wounds’ on *my* thigh were nothing like ‘new sexual organs opened in *the* body’ (Baudrillard, 1991: 314; emphasis mine). Even at its most objectified and technologically caressed, I lived this thigh – not abstractly on ‘the’ body, but concretely as ‘my’ body. Thus, sharp pain, dull aches and numbness (which, after all, is not not-feeling, but the feeling of not-feeling), the cold touch of technology on my flesh, were distractions from my erotic possibilities, and not, as Baudrillard would have it, erotically distracting.

This critique, however, was leveled at Baudrillard some time ago – before I actually *became* a techno-body and experienced prosthetic pleasure. Fairly recently, my left leg was amputated above the knee and now I have a prosthetic replacement. Quickly done with pain (even the phantom sensations disappeared after five months), I went out and bought a whole new wardrobe of fancy underwear to don for my visits to the prosthetist – who is quite nice-looking, very absorbed in me, and generally positioned around crotch-level as he tinkers with my titanium knee. I love my prosthesis with its sculpted foam cosmetic cover –

particularly the thigh which has no cellulite and is thinner than the thigh on my so-called 'good' leg. With much effort, I have learned to walk again, the stump first thrust into the socket of a leg held on by a suspension belt and now into what is called a 'suction' socket of a leg that – when it or I am working right – almost feels like 'me'. This new socket has also allowed me a kind of experience with 'artificial orifices' that has none of the pain of surgery and all of the erotic play of technology. Every time I put the leg on, I literally 'screw' a valve into a hole in my new thigh, depressing it to let the air out so that the prosthetic sucks my stump into the very depths of its fiberglass embrace.

I have also become a 'lean, mean machine'. After the amputation, I lost an extraordinary amount of weight – not from dieting in the mode of the self-loathing females of our culture, but from the intensive exercise of, first, merely getting from here to there on crutches and, now, from 'pumping iron' to keep the rest of my body (the 'meat' or 'wetware' as we techno-bodies or cyborgs call it) up to the durability and strength of my prosthetic leg. Indeed – and here I admit to a certain confessional stance I don't usually condone in others – I gave up dieting years ago in anger at its built-in self-criticism and, hardly a glutton, worked on accepting myself 'as I was'. Now, however, all the clothes I never gave away fit me again. Quite frankly, I admit to feeling more positive about my loss of weight than negative about the loss of my leg. (This constitutes, I suppose, a 'fair' – if hardly equitable – trade-off.) The truth of the matter is that I feel more, not less, attractive than I used to. Hard body (however partial) that I am, I feel more erotically distracting and distracted than I have in years – although it is hard to find the time to do anything about it given all the hours I spend in physical therapy and at the gym. Indeed, over the year and a half since my amputation, I have come to learn that it's ridiculous (if not positively retrograde) to accept myself 'as I am'. I have found I can 'make myself over', reinvent myself as a 'harder' and, perhaps, even 'younger' body. In fact, right now I am contemplating plastic surgery: getting my eyelids done, perhaps removing the crease that runs downward from the side of my mouth and makes me look less happy than I really am. This then, is the power available to the 'polymorphously perverse' cyborg woman – though hardly what Donna Haraway had in mind when she wrote her ironic manifesto (1985).

If you've believed all of this, you probably think me less polymorphously perverse than extraordinarily self-deluded, bitter, or in some strange state of denial. Which, in fact, I'm not. Although a great deal of what I've revealed here is true, what is *not* true is that I've resigned myself to being a cyborg, a techno-body. My prosthesis has not incorporated me. Rather, the whole aim of my physical existence over the last year and a half has been to incorporate it. Thus, my stance toward – and on – my prosthetic leg is quite a bit different from the one I've entertained here as a

playful, yet ironic, response to the delights of the techno-body celebrated by Baudrillard and his followers. What many surgeries and my prosthetic experience have really taught me is that, if we are to survive into the next century, we must counter the millennial discourses that would decontextualize our flesh into insensate sign or digitize it into cyberspace where, as one devotee put it, 'it's like having had your everything amputated' (Barlow, 1990: 42). In the (inter)face of the new technological revolution and its transformation of every aspect of our culture (including our bodies), we have to recognize and make explicit the deep and dangerous ambivalence that informs the reversible relations we, as lived-bodies, have with our tools and their function of allowing us to transcend the limitations of our bodies.

Writing a number of years after her optimistic, if ironic, manifesto for cyborgs, Donna Haraway recognized the self-exterminating impulses of the discourses of disembodiment suggested by Baudrillard's porno-graphy of the body on the one hand and the *Mondo 2000/Wired* – let's download into the datascape and beat the meat – subculture on the other. In an interview (Penley and Ross, 1991) she warns against the very 'liberatory' cyborgism she once celebrated (however ironically) insofar as it jacks into (and off on) the 'God trick', and denies mortality. Our reversible relations with our technology, our confusion of consciousness with computation, of subjectively lived flesh with objective metal and hard-wiring, is – as Haraway points out – a 'transcendentalist' move: 'it produces death through the fear of it', disavowing as it does the fact that

we really do die, that we really do wound each other, that the earth really is finite, that there aren't any other planets out there that we know of that we can live on, that escape-velocity is a deadly fantasy. (Penley and Ross, 1991: 20)

In *Technology and the Lifeworld*, philosopher Don Ihde discusses the ambivalent, or 'doubled' desire that exists in our relations with any technology that extends our bodily sensorium and, thereby, our perceptions – be they eyeglasses or prosthetic legs, the motion picture camera or the computer. He tells us:

On the one side is a wish for total transparency, total embodiment, for the technology to truly 'become me'. Were this possible it would be equivalent to there being no technology, for total transparency would *be* my body and senses. . . . The other side is the desire to have the power, the *transformation* that the technology makes available. Only by using the technology is my bodily power enhanced and magnified by speed, through distance, or by any of the other ways in which technologies change my capacities. These capacities are always *different* from my naked capacities. The desire is, at best, contradictory. I want the transformation that the technology allows, but I want it in such a way that I am basically unaware of its presence. I want it in such a way that it becomes me. Such a desire both secretly *rejects* what technologies are and overlooks the transformational effects which are necessarily tied to human-technology relations. This illusory desire belongs equally to the pro- and anti-technology interpretations of technology. (Ihde, 1990: 65)

Obviously, transparency is what I wish – and strive – for in my relation to my prosthetic leg. I want to subjectively embody it. I do not want to regard it as an object or to think *about* it as I use it to walk. Indeed, in learning to use the prosthesis, I found that *looking objectively* at my leg in a mirror as an exteriorized thing to be thought about and manipulated did not help me improve my balance and gait so much as did *subjectively feeling* through all of my body the weight and rhythm of the leg in a *gestalt* of motor activity. Insofar as the leg remains an object external to me, a hermeneutic problem to be solved, a piece of technology to use, I cannot live it and be enabled by it to accomplish intentional projects that involve it but don't concern it. So, of course, I want it to become totally transparent. The desired transparency here, however, involves *my* incorporation of the prosthetic – and not the prosthetic's incorporation of me (although, seen by others to whom a prosthetic is strange, I may well seem its extension rather than the other way around). This is to say that although my new and enabling leg is made of titanium and fiberglass, I do not perceive myself as a hard body – even after a good workout at the gym, when my union with the weight machines (not the leg) momentarily reifies that metaphor. Nor do I think that because my leg may very well outlast me into the next millennium, it confers upon me invincibility or immortality. Prosthetically enabled, I am, nonetheless, not a cyborg. Unlike Baudrillard, I have not forgotten the limitations and finitude and naked capacities of my flesh – nor, more importantly, do I desire to escape them. They are, after all, what ground the concrete gravity and value of my life, and the very possibility of my partial transcendence of them through various perceptual technologies – be they my bifocals, my leg or my computer. That is, my lived-body – not my prosthetic leg which stands inert in a corner by the bed before I put it on in the morning – provides me the *material premises* and, therefore, the *logical grounds* for the intelligibility of those moral categories that emerge from a bodily sense of gravity and finitude.

I have been using the phenomenological term 'lived-body' throughout to a purpose. Seeming redundant, it serves as a corrective to those prevalent objectifications that complacently regard the body, even one's own, as merely a conceptual or objective thing. One of the consequences of our high-tech millenarianism is that the moral material and significance of the lived-body is elided or disavowed, not only by the delusional liberatory rhetoric of technophiles who long to become either 'pure' electronic information or self-repairing cyborgs like Schwarzenegger's Terminator, but also through the dangerous liberatory poetry of cultural formalists like Baudrillard who long to escape the lived-body and its limitations and write it off (quite literally) as just another sign of its times. This is to say, Baudrillard is of a piece with all those in our culture who revile the lived-body for its weaknesses and who wish to objectify its terrible mortality away – those, for example, who are

obsessed with physical fitness (and through various and often perverse or pathological means attempt to transform themselves into hard bodies and lean machines), those who are turned on by images of the body being ‘blown away’ and ‘riddled’ by bullet holes (how clearly the vernacular speaks the substance of desire), those like Hans Moravec who want to ‘download’ into the datascape (1988), those who refer to their bodies contemptuously as ‘meat’ and ‘wetware’, and even those who, less overtly than Baudrillard, theorize and intellectually commodify ‘the body’ as an *objective thing* that one can hold – dare I pun? – at arm’s length, available to disinterested scrutiny. This alienated and highly fetishized fascination with the body-object (the body that we *have*) and the devaluation of the lived-body (the body that we *are*) is a consequence of a dangerous confusion between the agency that is our bodies/our selves and the power of our incredible new technologies of perception and expression.

In a recent article critiquing ‘technocriticism’ and its underlying ‘rhetoric about age’, Kathleen Woodward reads technological development in western culture as a ‘story about the human body’:

Over hundreds of thousands of years the body, with the aid of various tools and technologies, has multiplied its strength and increased its capacities to extend itself in space and over time. According to this logic, the process culminates in the very immateriality of the body itself. In this view technology serves fundamentally as a prosthesis of the human body, one that ultimately displaces the material body, transmitting instead its image around the globe and preserving that image over time. (1994: 50)

As we increasingly objectify our thoughts and desires through modern technologies of perception and communication, our subjective awareness of our own bodies diminishes. As Woodward suggests, ‘there is a beguiling, almost mesmerizing relationship between the progressive vanishing of the body, as it were, and the hypervisuality of both the postmodern society of the spectacle . . . and the psychic world of cyberspace’ (1994: 50). This disappearance (or increased ‘transparency’) of the material, lived-body, its apparent displacement by technological prostheses that can enable and extend our perceptual and expressive powers, provokes in some the ‘heady’ sensation of having ‘beat the meat’. That is, the increasing transparency of one’s lived-flesh enabled by new technologies as well as the ubiquitous visibility of new technologies leads to euphoria and a sense of the limitless extension of being beyond its materiality and mortality. This, however, is ‘false’ consciousness – for it has ‘lost touch’ with the very material and mortal body that grounds its imagination and imagery of transcendence. As Woodward emphasizes, ‘the possibility of an invulnerable and thus immortal body is our greatest technological illusion – that is to say, *delusion*’ (1994: 51).

Thus, I have no desire, like Baudrillard or Moravec in their respective

disembodying fantasies, to 'beat the meat'. Indeed, in light of Ihde's description of the doubled and contradictory structure of our relations with technology, this phrase resonates with contradictions that are tied to, but implicate more than, 'sexual difference'. Certainly, in American vernacular, it speaks of male masturbation. However, in today's world, it also speaks of a desire to get rid of bodily desire – perhaps once through orgasm, but now through technology. Simultaneously, then, the phrase expresses the contradictory wish, on the one hand, to get rid of the body and to overcome its material limitations and demands and, on the other, 'to escape the newly extended body of technological engagement' (Ihde, 1990: 75–6) and *to reclaim experience through the flesh*. Hence *Crash*, its narrator (an 'other' Ballard) telling us: 'The crash was the only real experience I had been through for years. For the first time I was in physical confrontation with my own body, an inexhaustible encyclopedia of pains and discharges' (Ballard, 1985: 39). Hence, the novel's conflation of wounds and orgasms and automobiles, its confusions of flesh and metal, its characters' imagination of 'a sexual expertise that would be an exact analogue of the other skills created by the multiplying technologies of the twentieth century' (Ballard, 1985: 100). Hence, the dream 'of other accidents that might enlarge [the] repertory of orifices, relating them to more elements of the automobile's engineering, to the ever-more complex technologies of the future'. Hence Ballard's narrator asks, 'What wounds would create the sexual possibilities of the invisible technologies of thermonuclear reaction chambers, white-tiled control rooms, the mysterious scenarios of computer circuitry?' and hence he visualizes: 'the extraordinary sexual acts celebrating the possibilities of unimagined technologies' (1985: 179). Throughout the discourses of cyborgism, there is extraordinary emphasis on the erotics of technology as flesh-based, on a transcribed and transubstantiated sexuality that is fatally confused as to the site of its experience.

Baudrillard, Moravec, the *Mondo 2000* and *Wired* folks, all want, as Ihde puts it, 'what the technology gives but do not want the limits, the transformations that a technologically-extended body implies' (1990: 76). Thus, the disavowal inherent in Baudrillard's celebratory description of the techno-body as 'under the gleaming sign of a sexuality that is without referentiality and without limits'. Wanting what 'technology gives', but disavowing what it 'limits', those who find the techno-body 'sexy' forget that screwing the valve into place on my prosthetic thigh brings me no shudder of physical pleasure. This is a thigh that cannot make sense of the lacy lingerie that touches it, cannot feel the silk stockings that caress its artificial skin. In sum, my prosthetic leg has its limits and whatever it does to extend my being-in-the-world, whatever way it enhances and amplifies my perceptions and the significance of my existence, however much it seems to bring me in closer

material contact with the technological world, I still had to give up my fleshy leg in trade, to lose something in the bargain. What is particularly dangerous about Baudrillard's erotics of technology – and utterly different from Ballard's pornography of technology in *Crash* – is that, despite its seeming heightened consciousness, it finally disavows the *technological status of technology*. Thus, unlike Ballard, Baudrillard's dizzying pro-technological rhetoric hides anti-technology desire and its self-deception promotes deadly, terminal confusions between meat and hardware.

At this millennial moment when high technology has given so many cultural critics and academics a technological 'high', there might be some cachet in claiming for myself the 'sexiness' of cyborg identity. Rather than – along with the century – being on my 'last leg', I could describe myself as being on the 'first leg' of some devoutly wished for transformation of my human frailty and mortality. This, however, is not the case. Living – rather than writing or thinking – my 'newly extended body of technological engagement', I find the fragility of my flesh significantly precious. While I am deeply grateful for the motility my prosthetic affords me (however much in a transformation that is perceptually reduced as well as amplified), the new leg is dependent finally upon my last leg. Without my lived-body to live it, the prosthetic exists as part of a body without organs – a techno-body that has no sympathy for human suffering, cannot understand human pleasure and, since it has no conception of death, cannot possibly value life.

And so, here as in *Science-Fiction Studies*, I wish Baudrillard a little pain – maybe a lot – to bring him to his senses. Pain would remind him that he doesn't just *have* a body, but that he *is* his body, and that it is in this material fact that 'affect' and anything we might call a 'moral stance' is grounded. Both significant affection and a moral stance (whether on prosthetic legs or not) are based on the lived sense and feeling of the human body not merely as a material object one possesses and analyzes among others, but as a material subject that experiences its own objectivity, that has the capacity to bleed and suffer and hurt for others because it can sense its own possibilities for suffering and pain. If we don't keep this subjective kind of bodily sense in mind as we negotiate our techno-culture, we may very well objectify ourselves to death. It is only by embracing life in all its vulnerability and imperfection, by valuing the limitations as well as possibilities of our flesh, and by accepting mortality, that we will get out of this – or any – century alive.

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