

Transhumanist desire and utopian tensions in David Cronenberg's *Crash*

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Abstract

Transhumanism, predicated on the desire to make the world and the individual better through the use of already existing or soon to be developed human enhancement technologies, may be seen as an inherently utopian project. The future, as Nick Bostrom claims in his “Letter from Utopia”, is to bring as yet unknown pleasure and happiness. Transgressing the border between the human and the mechanical is the somewhat prophetic theme of David Cronenberg’s 1996 film *Crash*, based on the 1973 novel by J. G. Ballard. Employing the conventions of pornography, Cronenberg shows the fusion of the organic and non-organic and the desire which finds – or fails to find – its fulfilment in the mechanically enhanced environment. This essay analyses how *Crash* problematises the quintessentially utopian transhumanist concept of the human, focusing on the tensions between the utopian and dystopian and the potential benefits and discontents of technology.

Key words

transhumanism, pornography, technology, the Ballardian

Transhumanistyczne pragnienie i utopijne napięcia w *Crash* Davida Cronenberga

Abstrakt

Oparty o pragnienie uczynienia świata i człowieka lepszym dzięki istniejącej bądź przyszłej technologii ulepszania ludzkiego ciała, transhumanizm może być uważany za projekt fundamentalnie utopijny. Przyszłość, jak twierdzi Nick Bostrom w swoim „Liście z utopii”, przyniesie nieznane dotąd szczęście i przyjemności. Przekraczanie granic pomiędzy człowiekiem i maszyną stało się również proroczym tematem filmu Davida Cronenberga *Crash* (1996), będącego adaptacją powieści J. G. Ballarda (1973). Posługując się konwencją filmu pornograficznego, Cronenberg ukazuje fuzję organicznego z nieorganicznym i pragnienia, które znajdują – bądź nie – swoje spełnienie w mechanicznie ulepszonym środowisku. Esej analizuje, w jaki sposób *Crash* problematyzuje fundamentalnie utopijną transhumanistyczną wizję człowieka, skupiając się na napięciu pomiędzy utopią a dystopią, oraz na potencjalnych dobrodziejstwach i zagrożeniach technologii.

Słowa kluczowe

transhumanizm, pornografia, technologia, „ballardyjskość”

Directed by David Cronenberg and released in 1996, the film *Crash* is a notoriously infamous adaptation of the novel by J. G. Ballard published in 1973. The controversies surrounding its distribution, connected with the allegedly pornographic genre of the film or its potentially offensive treatment of people with disabilities, have circulated in the media of the 1990s, creating much of public sensation (cf. the opinions quoted in Brottman and Sharrett 2002: 131-132). The popular opinion of a stylised and weird porn film, however, seems not so much unjust as simply inadequate. Far from being an example of perverted hardcore pornography, *Crash* may be read instead as an abstraction and a hyperbolic representation of much

more profound anxieties connected with the enhancement and reshaping of the human body by technology or, broader still, with the way our human selves, both present and possibly future, interact with and are modified by technology. In this essay I would like to argue, first, that Cronenberg's film not only fails as a porn film but primarily does not aim to be one, and that the genre of pornography, with its extremely reductive and focused character, is used as a means rather than an aim in itself. Secondly, I will argue that this intentional reduction and stylisation allows the audience to focus on the role and importance of technology that shapes and transforms human existence. In so doing, *Crash* may be read both as a transhumanist film that shows a possible enhancement of human nature and thus its improvement and – possibly – utopian potential; and as a passionate warning against unreflective and passive acceptance of technology which transgresses the borders of the body, desire and communication of human beings.

1. A kinky movie

As Brottman and Sharrett observe, “Cronenberg's film does not fit well within the traditions of pornography” (Brottman and Sharrett 2002: 126) since, as they go on to explain, “sexual arousal in its audience is not the primary motive of the film, and, more significantly, none of the characters seem able to relate to one another in an emotional way” (Brottman and Sharrett 2002: 126). Admittedly, *Crash* does activate some of the conventions of the porn film defined as a cinematographic genre: it is based on the extreme reduction of plot, which in Cronenberg's film serves merely as a pretext for showing sexual relationships; it does reduce the construction of characters showing them solely as sex objects which represent – even physically – male and female sexual stereotypes¹; finally, like mainstream hardcore pornography, it does connect sexuality with violence. Simultaneously, however, *Crash* seems to un-

¹ For features of film pornography see Williams (2013: 150 and *passim*).

dermine and subvert its ostensibly pornographic frame by the manifested artificiality of acting and character relationships; by the over-staged, unnatural dialogues; by the slow speed of action and lack of tension between the characters and within the narrative itself, which does not seem to lead to any release or gratification of any desire; and finally by the cool colour scheme of the film (with greyish and bluish hues dominating visually) and the sombre, quasi-religious music that introduces a tone of gloom to the scenes which – at least potentially – could be interpreted as arousing. Thus, despite the employment of the structural features of the porn film: its theme, plot and character construction, the film does not succeed – or indeed does not even aim to succeed – at pornography’s main goal, that is the arousal of passion and its release.

In light of the above strategies of subversion, it seems debatable, however, if *Crash*, despite its porn film stylisation, has ever aspired to the status of a kinky movie. Instead, I would suggest that the extreme reduction of the porn movie as a genre, with its distilled and condensed character, serve as a convenient vehicle to introduce an altogether different theme, of which sex is but one – though probably the most spectacular and thus selected one – manifestation. It is worth noticing that virtually all the sexual scenes shown in the film (starting with the opening shot introducing the main female character in an airplane hangar, long before the eponymous crash, which is traditionally interpreted as the traumatic moment triggering the connection between sex and cars – see Sage 2008: 46) involve some kind of technology or technological intervention in the body. This connection, in turn, draws attention not so much to the ‘kinky’ or technologically perverted nature of the sexuality of the characters shown in the film, as to the technology itself and the human interaction with it, of which sexuality is but one, conveniently glaring and shocking, and hence instructive example.

In his Gothic re-reading of both Ballard’s and Cronenberg’s *Crash*, Victor Sage claims that in the film, “the premise of sex-

ual initiation is consistently reversed and the pornographic story told the wrong way round” (Sage 2008: 46) by employing extreme stylization, skeletally linear narrative frame, statuesque pacing, whispered dialogue, derelict musical cadences and the alienated way of the camera movements (Sage 2008: 47). All this leads, in Sage’s opinion, to a Ballardian ‘abstraction’, i.e. to “the process of conversion of objects and bodies into conceptual analogy” (Sage 2008: 47). It seems that the abstraction arrived at in the film, via its extreme reduction of the plot to the body and its basic interactions, is that of the interaction with technology – not so much of the future but the one present already and often absorbed unreflectively. By abstracting from – or subtracting – all superfluous details, Cronenberg arrives at the ‘bare life’ – at the essence of human involvement with technology, back in the 1970s and 1990s aptly symbolised by the car, nowadays probably equally well including the Internet and social media.

2. Technological paradise

The technologies shown in Cronenberg’s film probably do not strike the viewer as particularly futuristic: they include mostly the car, apart from video players and cameras, recorders, telephones, petrol stations, car washes and road infrastructure. Thus, as Brottman and Sharrett convincingly argue, *Crash* is not a particularly futuristic or sci-fi movie; instead, as they observe, “it deals with the technology of the present rather than that of the future, and, in fact, is interested in the future only as a perspective from which to understand the current moment” (Brottman and Sharrett 2002: 126). This observation is additionally strengthened by the passage of time: watched well into the 21st century, Cronenberg’s *Crash* could hardly impress contemporary audiences with technological futuristic imagination as all the gadgets it shows have become by now either entirely domesticated or already outdated. Paradoxically, however, this out-datedness does not alter or diminish the

technological focus of the film, indirectly confirming its abstract and ideological rather than purely representational character. The technology employed is shown as an example of a larger phenomenon and, just as sex, allows the audience to focus its attention on the more abstract problem.

The intersection of technology and human existence in the film comprises two aspects: firstly, the interventions performed on the human body itself, and secondly, the modifications of human behaviour introduced by the presence of technology. *Crash* shows human bodies both mutilated and enhanced by technology: on the one hand, the bodies harmed and crippled by cars, disabled and reduced in their functions (e.g. the character of Gabrielle, who can barely walk) and yet paradoxically enhanced, as the various surgical and orthopaedic interventions, scars and wounds become unexpected, and so far unimagined, areas of exploration and adaptation, and of unknown – at least sexual – pleasures. Thus, the technological transformation of the body is shown as both a disabling and yet – possibly – empowering intervention, pointing to its latent beneficial potential. Likewise, the interaction with technology and the behavioural changes triggered by the latter's presence are claimed to be at least ambiguous, if not beneficial. In keeping with the adopted convention, they affect and are shown in the sphere of sexuality and sexual relationships, which function in the film as laboratory cases of more general processes. The impact of the car crash, the potential development and enhancing of sexual experience offered and made possible by the car, metonymically represent larger – and potentially expanding – possibilities of modifications of human experience due to technology. In the key moment of the film, Vaughan, the chief advocate and practitioner of technologically driven and modified sexuality, declares:

It's the future, Ballard, and you're already a part of it. You're beginning to see that there's a benevolent psychopathology that beckons towards us. For example the car crash is a fertilizing rather than destructive event. A liberation of sexual energy mediat-

ing the sexuality of those who died with an intensity that's impossible in any other form. To experience that, to live that – that's my project. (Cronenberg 1996)

In essence, this is a creed, a declaration of faith in the potentially beneficial intersection of human behaviour and technology, of a paradoxical release of imagination and energy by even such a normally destructive event as the car crash. The example chosen and illustrated by the film is obviously far-fetched and exaggerated: neither the type of sexuality portrayed, nor car crashes themselves, seem to be – and usually are not in actual experience – particularly fertilizing or inspiring events. Yet, consistently with the film's abstract rather than representational character, they imply a possibility of transformation of human behaviour in an unprecedented and unimagined direction.

3. Transhumanist desire

The belief that the interaction with technology and the technological enhancement of human body may improve human existence and raise it to unprecedented levels lies at the core of transhumanism. In one of the manifestoes of this trend, significantly entitled "Letter from Utopia", Nick Bostrom addresses his imaginary readers with pity and encouragement, pointing to the possibility of such transformation of human body and human life so as to make it a single, long-lasting moment of bliss (Bostrom 2008: 1). Eliminating illnesses, upgrading cognition and elevating well-being are possible due to the advancement and use of technology and are to improve human existence to the degree unimaginable yet to present human beings. Bostrom tries to convey this future bliss referring to the imperfect human imagination:

I am summoning the memory of your best experience [...] in the hope of kindling in you a desire to share my happiness. And yet, what you had in your best moment is not close to what I have now

– a beckoning scintilla at most. If the distance between base and apex for you is eight kilometres, then to reach my dwelling requires a million light-year ascent. The altitude is outside moon and planets and all the stars your eyes can see. Beyond dreams. Beyond imagination. (Bostrom 2008: 3)

The existence of the future transhumanist being that Bostrom describes is to be a single uninterrupted pleasure, unspoiled by illnesses or death, unbridled by a limited mind or plagued by sadness or pain. It is a vision of existence where human beings make use of their full potential, both physical and mental, and are not inhibited by accidental disruptions. Bostrom himself calls this state a utopia and indeed, the vision he projects is clearly utopian for at least two reasons: first, as it is predicated on a desire and belief in the possibility of improvement of human condition, and secondly, as the life he portrays seems convincingly utopian in its harmony, peace and happiness.

Bostrom's letter may strike one as naïve and simple; a dream rather than a realistic analysis of the possible impact of technology on human body and existence. Yet, in its simplicity, it succinctly encapsulates the hope invested in transhumanism and the transgression of human limitations by the use of various technologies. This hope lies at the foundations of all kinds of transhumanist reflection, which, as Michael Hauskeller observes, has strong utopian tendencies (Hauskeller 2014: 2) and "whose proponents and allies frequently and quite openly declare themselves to be motivated by a desire to create a better world or make this world a better place" (Hauskeller 2014: 2). Transhumanism, then, seems to be a quintessentially utopian project and its representation in Bostrom's letter, as simple and naïve as it may seem, is only an imaginative and playful exaggeration of the hopes connected with it.

This utopian desire, central to transhumanist thought, is believed to be realisable in the future due to the development of science, which is perceived as crucial in the process of

transgressing the borders of human body and its condition. As Hauskeller writes,

Transhumanists believe that the best chance we have to make this world a better place is through the use of already existing or soon to be developed human enhancement technologies. By gradually improving human capability we will eventually change into beings far superior to any human that has ever lived and hence can be seen, in this respect, as 'posthuman'. (Hauskeller 2014: 2)

Technology, then, is believed to set human beings free from the confines and limitations of the human condition and to allow them to explore and develop their potential so far only latent and dormant, waiting to be discovered and released. Interestingly, transhumanist theoreticians and advocates seem little worried about the potential dangers, problems or yet unpredictable side-effects triggered by the intervention of technology. As Hauskeller concludes, they "are optimists regarding the future of humanity. They look forward to what lies ahead of us, and embrace without much hesitation the technologies that are supposed to lead us there" (Hauskeller 2014: 4).

Read in this context, David Cronenberg's *Crash* seems to both project and simultaneously question the transhumanist dream of technologically enhanced human experience. On the one hand, just as transhumanists, it shows the importance and impact of technology, not to be ignored due to its omnipresence, and the enhancing potential it may bring. Choosing eroticism as its illustrative example, the film dramatises the potential of already available technologies for the transformation of human body and human sexuality, and suggests the unexplored areas of desire and satisfaction that the intersection of technology and human body might bring. Interestingly – as the hostile reviews of the film have suggested – the new perspectives opened by the fusion of the organic and the mechanical may seem perverted and unnatural to the still unchanged public. This rejection, however, paradoxically may be interpreted as emphasising a truly visionary and revelatory charac-

ter of the thus achieved experience which is shown as so entirely new as to be misinterpreted as sick and unpleasant.

Yet, the film itself does probably block such a simplistic interpretation. Far from being a transhumanist apology of technology, *Crash* both installs the utopian transhumanist reflection and undermines it at several levels.

4. Utopian tensions

Despite its focus on technology and the attention drawn to the transformative potential of cars and speed, David Cronenberg's film seems far from their enthusiastic glorification and takes a problematising rather than apologetic stance towards their utopian results. For one thing, the immediate object of quasi-transhumanist transformations – sexual life and satisfaction – seems hardly improved in the film. Despite many ingenious attempts dramatised in the plot, sexual life of the protagonists of the film seems hardly satisfactory or fulfilling; their openness to experimentation and technology mostly brings frustration, pain and mutilation rather than any kind of utopian bliss. If, then, sex in the film functions as a convenient example of more general phenomena, what it illustrates seems to be a failure of the transhumanist experiment with technology enhancing the spectrum of experience rather than its triumph. The last scene of the film emphatically points to the disappointment and frustration of the characters that invested their hopes in technologically enhanced sexual experiments, whose only conclusion is the resolution that perhaps they will work "next time" (Cronenberg 1996).

Secondly, the technologically developed and mediated life of the characters of *Crash* seems far removed from any visions projected in Bostrom's letter. The frames of the film showing motorways and fly-overs, parking lots, airports and roads, all de-personalised, empty, concrete-grey and dirty, hardly testify to any utopian paradise. More accurately, they provide a post-industrial setting for a story of restlessness, failed dreams and

frustrated desires rather than any harmonious and peaceful bliss. Using the typical 'Ballardian' setting, Cronenberg's film shows the anxieties of the present rather than a utopian future or utopian projection. Additionally, the cinematographic shape of *Crash* – the employed colour scheme, the musical score and the chosen shots – with their claustrophobia, hostile spaces and cold surfaces, all construct an overwhelming and depressing image of the represented world of the film. The cinematographic aesthetics selected for the story hardly matches that traditionally associated with utopias and instead, activates the connotations of dystopia.

Most importantly, however, the film does not seem to show the creation of any lasting community created around the technological enhancement. At first, the audience may have the impression that a small group of characters gathered around Vaughan – all car-accident victims and survivors – may serve as such a quasi-utopian community that develops an alternative life-style and whose members support each other, despite their unconventional pursuits. Yet, quite soon it turns out that this group is actually an accidental assembly of individuals driven by their egoistical aims and pleasures and hardly interested in any more communal or altruistic subjects. Their paths diverge and, after Vaughan's death, the group disintegrates, as never united by anything more than the ambitions and pursuits of its charismatic leader. Thus, the characters themselves never seem to be interested in creating anything like a utopian community and are focused on their individual desires and their gratification rather than on any larger-scale projects. Their utopian dreams – if the concept of utopia is applicable in this case at all – are of an individualist and hedonistic rather than communal and social character. Their failure once again points to the problematic aspects and anxieties surrounding the transhumanist desire to bring utopia via the means of technological enhancement of the human body and mind.

On closer inspection, then, David Cronenberg's *Crash* may be read not so much as a porn film and not quite as a film eulogising the possibilities of human interaction with technology. Though instrumentally using the former and clearly preoccupied with the latter, the film ultimately shows technology as a problematic potential rather than a simplistic and optimistic solution, and seems to draw attention not only to the enhancement it may bring, but also to its alienating effects and possible failures. *Crash*, then, oscillates between a transhumanist desire for a technologically mediated utopia and a post-industrial pessimism of the culture of inflation and excess, amused to death and yet constantly dissatisfied. Far from privileging any of these two options, it registers and expresses the tensions and anxieties connected with the development of technology and the human interaction with it, and does so with no delusions or easy optimism.

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