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The Seduction of the Surface: From *Alice* to *Crash*

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> I have to learn alone
> to turn my body without force
> in the deep element.
> (Adrienne Rich, 1973)

When Adrienne Rich titled her 1973 poetry collection *Diving into the Wreck*, she created an image that evoked the sensation of plunging beneath the surface to explore hidden depths. Descending to the ocean floor in the collection's title poem, Rich's diver searches the remains of the wreck, a metaphor for the submerged history of patriarchal oppression and its drowned victims. The depth imagery of the poem was, however, already becoming anachronistic in a postmodern world obsessed with surfaces in which images were replacing reality and omnipresent consumerism dictated an endless cycle of rapidly changing fashions. Late 20th-century consumer society ushered in a surface aesthetic seen everywhere from television screens to billboards to glossy magazines to the hypnotic glow of the computer screen. The new depthlessness has been analyzed from many angles, and it is by now axiomatic that our postmodern era is characterized by smooth surface contours and that depth has been lost.

Fredric Jameson argues that depthlessness is culturally pervasive and encompasses far more than an aesthetic strategy; it is an aspect of contemporary human subjectivity, which is characterized by "the waning of affect", by "the liberation … from the older anomie of the centered subject [which] may also mean not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling" (1991: 15). For Jameson, Edward Munch's painting "The Scream" is the perfect expression of the modernist notion of a layered individual subject who generates an intense emotion internally and then expresses it externally. Its implied depth, Jameson argues, is obsolete in the surface ethos of postmodernism. In the postmodern world, he explains, human subjects and their cultural products are not "utterly devoid of feeling, but rather that such feelings … are now free-floating and impersonal and tend to be dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria" (1991: 16). The flattening of human emotional range joins other postmodern collapses. Jameson observes that previous depth oppositions between essence and appearance, latent and manifest, authenticity and inauthen-

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ticity, and signifier and signified have been "replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces" (1991: 16).

For theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard, the triumph of the surface over depth is liberating, releasing us from the tyranny of arbitrary constraints and fixed orders. Lyotard argues that the free play of surfaces is the most effective way to escape the confining strictures of totalizing systems. He proposes a politics of multiplicity, paradox, and surface gaming to undermine the domination of metanarratives. For Lyotard, oppression results from the belief in universal truth and can be avoided by substituting plurality and fragmentation. Depth is associated with unitary forms of domination, the surface with freedom. In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984 [1979]), Lyotard commends postmodern scientific discourses for having abandoned the misguided search for universal truth and taken up the pursuit of gamesmanship. It is a science of language games and "paralogy" (1984 [1979]: 61) that Lyotard applauds.

Lyotard's politics of multiplicity resonate with the irreverent and confrontational spirit of the 1960s, when guerrilla tactics and pranks were highly charged strategies used to attack monolithic ruling structures. Feminists were often well-served by these same tactics, frustrating patriarchal expectations with unpredictable acts and paradoxical statements. There is no doubt that surface play can be liberatory in instances when it is used as a tactic to directly challenge a specific totalizing system. But it is a dangerous fallacy to assume that the surface is inherently liberatory, for issues of hierarchy and power persist even when depth is replaced by surface. Aficionados of the surface often disregard the existence of power relations and oppression when they characterize the surface as disengaged. As Steven Connor points out, Lyotard's "book steadily detaches science from its disreputable associations with capitalism and imperialism and recreates it as a kind of art of philosophy on its own terms. In the end, as Axel Honneth and Kenneth Lea have observed, Lyotard sees the whole realm of the social under postmodernity as intrinsically aesthetic—organized in terms of narrative, linguistic and libidinal structure, rather than in terms of power" (Connor 1997 [1989]: 36). Just as depth models can produce oppressive meanings, so too can surface models, for they do not escape the production of meaning, and feminists especially should be wary of joining the chorus of surface celebration. Seen from a feminist perspective, a surface discourse is just as capable as a depth discourse of conveying patriarchal ideologies, and the distinction between surface and depth begins to look suspiciously arbitrary and meaningless.

Enthusiasm for the surface is easy to comprehend. There is much to be said for it, and one aspect of its appeal is its playfulness; the surface can be fun, and when a totalizing system is characterized by stupefying seriousness, it is a pleasure to poke fun at it with a display of surface acrobatics. It is in this spirit that Gilles Deleuze extols depthlessness in his 1969 book *The Logic of Sense*, an elaborate treatise on the philosophical and psychological dimensions of "sense" versus "nonsense". Although it is engaged in a different endeavor from Lyotard's, Deleuze's book shares with Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* a veneration of language games and illogic. Deleuze singles out for particular praise Lewis Carroll's textual play with surfaces. Deleuze celebrates *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* as grand achievements where "events … are no longer sought in the depths, but at the surface" (1990 [1969]: 9) and "with the

passion of paradox, language attains its highest power" (1990 [1969]: 79). Written by the Oxford mathematician Charles Dodgson using the pseudonym Lewis Carroll in 1865 and 1871, the two Alice texts explore a world turned into a phantasmagoria of surface phenomena. Their alternative world is defined precisely by the features that Fredric Jameson identifies as central to postmodernism: the collapse of authenticity into inauthenticity, inside into outside, essence into appearance, latent into manifest, and the signified into the signifier. Notwithstanding the fact that Alice falls down a deep hole to enter Wonderland, it becomes a depthless world. Holes and plunging movements are replaced by smooth surfaces. Deleuze points out that Wonderland's animals are eventually supplanted by two-dimensional playing card figures. He writes, "One could say that the old depth having been spread out became width" (1990 [1969]: 9). For Deleuze, *Through the Looking Glass* is a logical culmination of *Wonderland's* lateral sliding, since it sends Alice through the two-dimensional surface of a mirror onto a giant flat chessboard.

Depthlessness also finds expression in the Alice books' unpredictable transmutations. There are no fixed and authentic essences governing the books' surface play. Everything is always changing, from Alice's height, to the meaning of words, to the appearance of objects. By the time a baby boy grows a snout and becomes a pig in Alice's arms, she has already become accustomed to the impermanence of her surroundings and expresses little surprise. It is this aspect of Alice's experiences that intrigues feminist theorist Luce Irigaray when she uses Alice as the central figure in the first chapter of her book *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Writing about Alice's subjectivity by concentrating on her eyes, Irigaray writes "Eyes always expecting appearances to alter, expecting that one will turn into the other, is already the other" (1985 [1977]: 10). As if in anticipation of postmodern hybridity, boundaries in the Alice books dissolve between species, and profound emotions are everywhere replaced by "free-floating, impersonal intensities dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria".

The *Alice* texts represent for Deleuze freedom from static, rule-bound conventions that words and phrases have accrued over time. In *Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, language is free to make new associations, paradoxical ones, that bask in semiotic spontaneity. Alice is continually disoriented, unable to cling to a conventional understanding of temporal and spatial relations or logic. When the Mad Hatter runs verbal circles around Alice, Carroll writes, "Alice felt dreadfully puzzled. The Hatter's remark seemed to her to have no sort of meaning in it, and yet it was certainly English" (1990 [1865]: 85). Alice cannot make sense of the Hatter's use of language, in which words have become detached from their meanings. It can thus be argued that the Alice texts are prophetic, foreshadowing the features of postmodernism that would become commonplace during the latter half of the next century. Alice is bombarded by rapid-fire constantly changing language that escapes meaning, the same sort of language that now dominates the discourses of advertising in our consumer society. She also experiences the confusion now frequently inspired by circuitous and labyrinthine postmodern architecture and by the MTV-style fast-paced manipulation of space, time, and logic.[1]

Lewis Carroll's surface play extended beyond his written texts, for he was also an avid photographer at a time when the medium was still new. Photography has always been a uniquely surface medium, providing tantalizing images of the

external appearances of objects and figures. Frozen at a particular moment, figures in photographs are wrenched from the contexts of time and their own subjectivity. They become flattened, two-dimensional, and read on the basis of the way they look. According to Helmut Gernsheim, Carroll took up photography in part because he was fascinated by its magical surface properties, by "the gradual development of the latent image" (1949: 35). Carroll was aware of the power of photographic illusion for he encouraged the children who posed for him to wear dramatic costumes. More than just a technician, Carroll was also an art director who carefully composed each photograph's *mise-en-scène*. His manipulation of surfaces for photographic effects prefigures the postmodern obsession with glossy images. We are now caught up in a frenzy of instant images in an age of digital simulations, while Carroll took photographs using the painstaking and methodical methods of the age of mechanical reproduction.

Despite, or because of, its involvement in consumer society's hyperreal, photography is singled out by Linda Hutcheon as a primary medium for postmodern innovation. She selects photographers who use the medium for "parodic postmodern play with the history of photography" and the "parodic appropriation of mass-media images" (1989: 100). Contrary to Fredric Jameson, who views pastiche without parody's ironic bite and sense of humor as the dominant postmodern mode, Hutcheon sees ironic and critical parody as postmodernism's defining strategy. For Hutcheon, postmodern parody uses "the conventions of realism against themselves in order to foreground the complexity of representation and its implied politics" (1989: 99). Significantly, Hutcheon uses surface imagery to describe postmodern photography's project. She writes,

> Postmodern photographic theorists and practitioners are fond of using the image of "fringe interference" to describe their work. By this, they mean to signal what happens when the aesthetic equivalent of different waves forms encounter each other: two stones thrown into a pond make ripples which meet and, at the point of meeting, something new happens—something that is based on the individual forms that preceded it, but is nevertheless different. Today, photographic artists like Victor Burgin, Barbara Kruger, Martha Rosler, and Hans Haacke are all working across various "wave" forms: high art, advertising, documentary, theory. The ripples emanate from each, intersect, and changes occur that can be called postmodern. (1989: 118)

Hutcheon's choice of ripples on a pond as a metaphor for postmodern photography's parodic intertextuality aligns her with the surface aesthetic of Lyotard and Deleuze, but Hutcheon differs by taking up a feminist agenda. She asserts that "postmodern parodic strategies are often used by feminist artists to point to the history and historical power of those cultural representations, while ironically contextualizing both in such a way as to deconstruct them" (1989: 102). But Hutcheon sees a crucial difference between the enterprises of postmodernism and feminism; while postmodernists avoid taking a position from which to launch their critique, for such a position would constitute a totalizing system, feminists take a stance that condemns patriarchal oppression. Hutcheon quotes Barbara Creed on this difference:

> Whereas feminism would attempt to explain that crisis [of legitimation that Lyotard has described] in terms of the workings of patriarchal ideology and the oppression of women and other minority groups, postmodernism looks to other

> possible causes—particularly the West's reliance on ideologies which posit universal truths—Humanism, History, Religion, Progress, etc. While feminism would argue that the common ideological position of all these "truths" is that they are patriarchal, postmodern theory […] would be reluctant to isolate a single major determining factor. (Creed 1987: 52, quoted in Hutcheon 1989: 153)

Because of its reluctance to stand for a specific position, postmodernism in Hutcheon's view is surrounded by political confusion and compromised by its complicity with master narratives (1989: 119). Feminist tactics escape postmodernist political confusion, according to Hutcheon: "While feminisms may use postmodern parodic strategies of deconstruction, they never suffer from this confusion of political agenda, partly because they have a position and a 'truth' that offer ways of understanding aesthetic and social practices in the light of the production of—and challenge to—gender relations" (1989: 154). Hutcheon's point recalls Craig Owens' observation that "the affinities between poststructuralist theories and postmodernist practice can blind a critic to the fact that, when women are concerned, similar techniques have very different meanings" (1983: 73).

What Hutcheon's analysis indicates is that the surfaces of feminist postmodern photographs convey meaning; they "point to the history and historical power of […] cultural representations, while ironically contextualizing both in such a way as to deconstruct them". In these photos surfaces can be fragmented and paradoxical, but they are not meaningless; they encourage us to look anew at the familiar products of consumer culture and recognize their alignment with oppressive patriarchal traditions. The recycling of cultural products in these photos does not reject meaning, but constructs new meanings. Given that surfaces can be used by feminist postmodern photographers for political purposes, it is apparent that an avoidance of meaning is an ideological choice, not the result of an aesthetic strategy. Surfaces can be used to construct meaning or they can be used to dodge meaning; or they can, as they often do, transcend the artist's intention and convey unintended meanings.

For artists, the decision to create meaning or avoid it is informed by context. Clearly Lewis Carroll was the product of a significantly different historical context from our own, and his choices were based on his relationship to his period's particular expectations and demands. Although his interests foreshadowed postmodern phenomena, Lewis Carroll was far from being a proto-postmodernist. Instead, his personality was entirely forged by the Victorian era's depth and repression. His biographers agree, in fact, that he was an exemplary Victorian man. Morton N. Cohen writes, "Reticent Victorian, inbred Oxonian, upright cleric, rational mathematician—conservative, formal, controlled—Charles Dodgson presents a formidable figure, a prototype of his time and class, a sharp portrait of an age graven into a single human being" (Cohen 1995: 197). Carroll's diaries reveal a man fixated on self-discipline and self-recrimination, obsessed with resisting the temptations of sin (Cohen 1995: 200). He was such a prude that even his fellow Victorians ridiculed him and described him as looking like a man with a poker up his behind. His textual surface play, then, hid what Morton Cohen calls "the fire within" this deeply repressed man (1995: 197). Now, desire flows more freely and commodified surfaces facilitate its endless circulation through the media, entertainment, and advertising industries.

Lewis Carroll's relevance to our postmodern age inspired the 1996 novel *Automated Alice*, by Jeff Noon. The novel reveals the contemporary pertinence of Carroll's interest in the mutability of reality, but also illustrates how 20th-century technological innovations have created a different context for understanding such mutability. In the novel, Alice climbs into a grandfather clock in pursuit of a parrot in 1860 and emerges in 1998 in the strange world of postmodernism reimagined through a Victorian sensibility. Instead of computers, this world has termite mounds that operate according to the "beanery system" based on the binary premise that "a bean is either here, or it's not here" (Noon 1996: 21). As a computermite explains to Alice, "[…] we termites are even better than beans at being here or not being here because we've got legs, and therefore we can move much faster than beans" (Noon 1996: 22). A randomologist, whose motto is "knowledge through nonsense" and whose dazzling wordplay rivals the Mad Hatter's, tells Alice about his world's pursuit of artificial intelligence: "they say that if you could get enough computermites into a big enough mound … you could have a termite brain equal in imagination to the human mind" (Noon 1996: 31). Although it has not accomplished this feat, the novel's world of 1998 has successfully created artificial doubles. Lost in a maze, Alice discovers a remarkably life-like statue of herself named Celia. "'I'm your twin twister,' explains Celia, '[…] your anagrammed sister"' (Noon 1996: 50). Celia comes to life and joins Alice in her adventures. After Alice returns to her own Victorian age, she lives a long life, but she is never entirely certain that it was she who returned and not Celia. "'Perhaps, in the turmoil of those last moments in the future,' Alice would sometimes whisper to herself, 'I was confused with Celia? Perhaps it was the Automated Alice that really came back to the past?' And until the very end of her God-given days, my dear, sweet Alice was unable to decide for certain if she was really real, or else really imaginary" (Noon 1996: 222–3).

Alice's confusion about her identity is a fitting allegory for the postmodern precession of simulacra and rejection of fixity. According to Jean Baudrillard, "abstraction today is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or the concept […] It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (1983: 2). Celia begins as a duplicate of Alice, but when later in life Alice cannot distinguish herself from Celia, it seems that "signs of the real" have been substituted "for the real itself" (1983: 4). Baudrillard has decried what he calls "the cool universe of digitality", but he is also mesmerized by its shimmering surfaces (1983: 152). In his 1979 book *Seduction*, he celebrates what he calls "the sacred horizon of appearances" (1990 [1979]: 53). To oppose psychoanalytic depth models that engage in interpretation and the search for meaning, Baudrillard offers seduction, which he defines as "the manifest discourse—discourse at its most superficial—that turns back on the deeper order … in order to invalidate it, substituting the charm and illusion of appearances" (1990 [1979]: 53). In the spirit of Lewis Carroll, Baudrillard admires the playful realm of games where "all appearances conspire to combat and root out meaning" (1990 [1979]: 54). For Baudrillard, the surface inevitably seduces us because "only signs without referents, empty, senseless, absurd and elliptical signs, absorb us" (1990 [1979]: 74).

For Baudrillard, J. G. Ballard's novel *Crash* (1994 [1973]) is the ultimate expression of the hyperreal's seductive surface. Written in 1973, *Crash* uses car

wrecks as an allegory for human fusion with technology in the late 20th century, signaling the way toward a posthuman future in which human subjectivity has been replaced by cold technological functionality. Its protagonists become obsessed with car crashes and can only become sexually aroused by gruesome injuries and twisted metal. Their unemotional couplings are as mechanical as the car wrecks they seek out. Baudrillard writes that "the technology of *Crash* is glistening and seductive, or unpolished and innocent. Seductive because it has been stripped of meaning, a simple mirror of torn bodies". Not only stripped of meaning, but stripped of everything, according to Baudrillard: "there is no affectivity behind all this: no psychology, no ambivalence or desire, no libido or death-drive". In Baudrillard's reading, there is also no "good or bad". He exults in being released from the responsibility of making moral judgments, insisting that the novel resists any attempts to impose morality. Instead, he writes, there are only "bodies and technology fused, seduced, inextricable one from the other" (1991: 315, 314, 319, 315). *Crash* is thus for Baudrillard the text that best exemplifies the seductive power of the surface, which he argues abolishes everything but its own gleaming appearance.

With its cybernetic fusions, Ballard's novel fits within the definition of posthuman narratives provided by Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingstone: "posthuman narratives … have all but replaced previous metanarratives about humanity, its bodies, its subjects, its pains, and its pleasures. These narratives show how the body and its effects have been thoroughly re-imagined through an infra-disciplinary interrogation of human identity and its attendant ideologies" (1995: 4). The posthuman bodies described by Halberstam and Livingstone are those, like the ones in Lewis Carroll's Wonderland, that have abandoned fixed categories in order to embrace hybridity and constant flux. Unhindered mutability is the posthuman ethos. With its emphasis on the avoidance of fixity, posthumanism can be viewed as the corporeal equivalent to postmodernism, and it presents some of the same thorny issues for feminists.

For some feminist theorists, posthuman changeability is an effective paradigm for feminists who wish to avoid the trap of being labeled. Historian of science Donna Haraway's influential essay, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist -Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" (1991: 149–81), takes this position by using the figure of the cyborg, a half-human and half-machine entity. Haraway argues that although the concept of the cyborg has military origins, it can be appropriated as a strategic model for rejecting militaristic control. What the cyborg metaphor provides for Haraway is a way for feminists to escape the rigid classifications that facilitate regulation from a centralized authority. Slippery identities can forge tactical alliances and resist external control. Recalling the language of postmodern theorists, Haraway writes that "the cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity" (1991: 151) and asks, "what kind of politics could embrace partial, contradictory, permanently unclosed constructions of personal and collective selves and still be faithful, effective—and, ironically, socialist feminist?" (1991: 157). What she rejects is an apolitical stance that revels in pure gamesmanship, writing, "we risk lapsing into boundless difference and giving up on the confusing task of making partial, real connection" (1991: 161). At the same time she also rejects a return to universals: "We do not need a totality in order to work well. The feminist dream of a common language, like all dreams for a perfectly true language, of perfectly

faithful naming of experience, is a totalizing and imperialist one" (1991: 173). Haraway advocates instead feminist abandonment of traditional Western dualisms that separate concepts and entities from one another—"self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, reality/appearance, whole/part, agent/resource, maker/made, active/passive, right/wrong, truth/illusion, total/partial, God/man" (1991: 177)—in favor of strategic connections—symbolized by the cyborg, which eliminates gender, and other, difference—designed to further the goal of ending oppressive power relations. Her position is not unlike the feminist postmodern photographers analyzed by Hutcheon, who employ the tactic of deconstruction through parody, but not as an end in itself, only as a means to the feminist end of rejecting continued patriarchal oppression.

Not all feminists align themselves with Haraway's utopian posthuman project. Judith Squires, for one, acknowledges the desirability of Haraway's goal but cautions that in practice there are important political factors to consider. She writes that "while cyberfeminism might offer a vision of fabulous, flexible, feminist futures, it has as yet largely failed to do so. Instead cyberfeminism has become the distorted fantasy of those so cynical of traditional political strategies, so bemused by the complexity of social materiality, and so bound up in the rhetoric of the space-flows of information technology, that they have forgotten both the exploitative and alienating potential of technology and retreated into the celebration of essential, though disembodied, woman" (2000: 369). Squires finds value in postmodernist rhetorical tactics, but only if they are accompanied by actual political interventions:

> One needs to find the metaphors that allow one to imagine a liberatory knowledge, to colonize discourses which operate to exclude and undermine. It takes a certain form of political irony to grapple with this ambivalence: using mimicry, mockery, pastiche and parody as ways of appropriating dominant images for one's own ends. Thus the appropriation of the cyborg for the mapping of possible feminist futures has the potential to be a subversive act. But let us not imagine that persuasive rhetoric alone is sufficient to shift the distribution of power. (2000: 370)

Squires provides as a corrective to "technophoric cyberdrool" (2000: 360) a position that accepts certain aspects of Enlightenment metaphysics, the ones that maintain that political change is possible in response to organized political action. She writes:

> [A]lthough the appeal of the cyborg may reside in the challenge it poses to Enlightenment metaphysics, we need not accept the Enlightenment's myth about its own nature as a coherent, unitary project, which can only be accepted or rejected wholesale. Thus, we can jettison the rationalist and individualistic assumptions of Enlightenment thinking while reclaiming its pluralistic and democratic political project. In short, we may want to use the cyborg as a positive icon in our political imagination, but we cannot also allow ourselves to take an apolitical stance with regard to the form and operation of developing technologies. (2000: 360–1)

The commitment to political change in Squires' essay is not far from Haraway's own agenda, but Squires provides a much-needed critique of some cyberfeminists whose appropriation of Haraway is confined to hip techno-stylishness.

As an antidote to empty rhetoric, Squires reminds us that there are actual stakes for actual people in the relationship between technology and humans.

This is precisely the same admonition provided by Vivian Sobchack to Jean Baudrillard in her response to his reading of *Crash* when she challenges his single-minded veneration of surfaces to the exclusion of all other concerns, even ones he should recognize from his own lived experience. She takes him to task for his "postmodern romanticism" and his dangerous refusal to recognize the material reality of bodies that suffer and feel actual pain. Sobchack warns her readers that "if we don't keep this subjective kind of bodily sense in mind as we negotiate our technoculture, then we, like Vaughan, like Baudrillard, will objectify ourselves to death" (1991: 328, 329). Squires and Sobchack are not advocating a naive return to the real. Squires makes this clear when she praises the power of language to envision alternatives and grapple with contradictions. But she and Sobchack both persuasively warn against the dangers of residing permanently in the realm of decontextualized rhetoric. For feminists who recognize that there are stakes for winning or losing ground in the struggle against patriarchy, it is important, to quote Donna Haraway again, to avoid "lapsing into boundless difference".

A lapse into boundless difference is what feminist theorist Elspeth Probyn finds problematic in the work of Lacan, Derrida, Deleuze, and their feminist champions who define the feminine as an abstract quality that expresses itself in certain modes of writing, speaking, and thinking. Probyn challenges this free-floating notion of the feminine by arguing that "gender must be represented as processes that proceed through experience" (1993: 3). Like Squires, Probyn recognizes the complexity of the issues for feminists, but argues for the necessity of contextualization in material experience:

> An insistence on the facticity of women's experience is not unproblematic; however, a critical use of experience must confront the central questions that the feminine elides. Not to do this, to be content with the easy pleasures of the feminine, is to lose a fundamental opportunity: an opportunity to precisely use our material experiences to map out the changing relationships between identity, ideology and gender, within the historical moment in which we live. (1993: 57)

Probyn, Squires, and Sobchack are each in their way advocating feminist strategies that partake of surface paradox but do not abandon meaning. Although Probyn explicitly adopts a surface model in her more recent book, she nonetheless asks the reader to look for meaningful connections: "If I propose the surface as a more adequate chronotope than models of depth and interiority, it is because I search not for causality but for transversal connections … If the surface is but another optic, another way of viewing the social, it is only of use if it stretches our analytic reach, if it allows for other ways of seeing and connecting the various examples of our varied lives" (1996: 35). Probyn uses a surface model not to flee from meaning into gleeful antics, but to encourage in readers a particular analytical mode that makes new and insightful connections between disparate elements.

The analytical mode of making connections proposed by Probyn is in fact a useful strategy for reading the novel *Crash*. It is the strategy implicitly suggested by Ballard himself in his 1974 introduction to the French edition of *Crash*.

Ballard's introduction illuminates *Crash*'s meanings by brilliantly connecting disparate cultural phenomena that informed his thinking while he wrote the novel, and by characterizing these phenomena as aspects of the late 20th century's aggressively technological paradigm. In its often-quoted conclusion, Ballard writes that "needless to say, the ultimate role of *Crash* is cautionary, a warning against that brutal, erotic and overlit realm that beckons more and more persuasively to us from the margins of the technological landscape" (1985 [1973]: 6). Baudrillard chooses to dismiss Ballard's interpretation of *Crash*, indicating that the novel has simply gone beyond its own author (1991: 319). But a close reading of *Crash* reveals that despite its avoidance of a moralistic stance, it is preoccupied with the opposition between surface and depth. From the beginning, the novel revolves around a tension between the two phenomena, alternating between smooth surfaces and plunging depths. On the very first page, references to surfaces—crushed bodies splayed across vinyl seats, walls covered with photographs—alternate with depth imagery—a car jumping the rails of an airport flyover and plunging through the roof of a bus, bridges arched over motorways, and the roof of a multi-story parking garage. The alternating lateral and plunging movements continue throughout the novel: the surface of Elizabeth Taylor's thighs, a copying machine, shattered windshields, deformed metal and plastic automobile surfaces, and faces lit by "broken rainbows" give way to bodies "pierced", "punctured", and "impaled" by door handles and steering-columns "as if in some calibrated act of machine fellatio" (Ballard 1994 [1973]: 12). When Ballard describes the prostitutes photographed by Vaughan as resembling "startled survivors of a submarine disaster", the analogy reinforces an already established diving metaphor (1994 [1973]: 10).

The novel's unresolved tension between surface and depth is symptomatic of a culture transfixed by shimmering appearances but still subject to the gravitational spirals of depth. Ballard maintains a detached, scientific tone throughout the novel, reproducing the sterility of the omnipresent technology responsible for redefining the human psyche. Although the novel avoids making explicit judgments, it nevertheless demonstrates that the posthuman logic of techno-embodiment leads inevitably to death. Vaughan, the charismatic character said to be leading us into a new age of techno-fetishism, obsessively rehearses his own death, and the novel actually is told in flashback after he kills himself in a dramatic, flaming car wreck. As N. Katherine Hayles points out, the novel revolves around the pursuit of transcendence through death (1991: 323). With all of the action occurring near an airport, and with metaphors of flight throughout, there is an inescapable trajectory leading from technological dehumanization to death. If Vaughan and his faithful circle of techno-obsessed converts are interpreted as harbingers of the posthuman future, then the novel indicates that human beings are hurtling at top speed toward complete annihilation.[2]

Crash and the *Alice* books share more than their canonization as exemplary surface texts; they are also both concerned with loss of identity in new, inhospitable environments. *Crash*'s literal death-drive is more apocalyptic, but Alice, too, is continually threatened and suffers explicitly from textual erasure of her identity. In both *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice disappears amid a flurry of surface transformations and puns. Disoriented and confused, her identity slips away from her grasp, so that when the Caterpillar in

Wonderland asks her, "Who are *you*?" she is unable to answer. In *Through the Looking Glass*, she loses her identity again when she enters the wood where things have no name, and she finds herself incapable of providing names for any of the objects she sees or even for herself. While Alice's loss of self can be given a postmodernist reading as releasing her from the humanist myth of a unified, immutable subjectivity and allowing posthuman hybridity, it is instructive to remember the specific context of the book's production. When considered in its historical context, *Alice in Wonderland* is not simply a playful romp, and its meanings become problematic for a feminist reader.

Alice Liddell, the girl who inspired Lewis Carroll's stories and who was the prepubescent object of his desire, was the young daughter of Henry Liddell, Dean of Christ Church College, Oxford, where Carroll was a mathematics tutor. Only three years old when she moved with her family to Oxford, Alice quickly become the object of Carroll's attentions. That Carroll was a pedophile is no longer a matter of dispute. He lavished himself on Alice, and there is persuasive evidence that when he was 31 and she was 11, he spoke to her parents about his desire to marry her after discreetly waiting a few more years. Biographers have speculated that it is this event that prompted Alice's mother's sudden decision to banish Carroll. Given that it wasn't unusual for young adolescent girls to marry older men at the time, it was probably his lower class status rather than his age that her mother rejected. Carroll spent the rest of his life fostering relationships with other little girls. According to one biographer, he "sought them out singly and in groups, while walking in parks and along the beach, on railway journeys, in homes, in theatre dressing rooms, in classrooms. He discovered them by word of mouth, by letter, by begging introductions. Where friendships succeeded, he clung to them tenaciously, doing all he could to foster them" (Cohen 1995: 174). Carroll had a "passion for kissing little girls" (Colin Gordon 1982: 87) and photographing them, preferably in the nude (Cohen 1995: 166–7).

Alice, the most intense object of his desire, lived a long life, dying at the age of 82 in 1934 after having married and had three sons, two of whom were killed as soldiers during the First World War. During most of her adult life, she was known only as Mrs. Hargreaves; people did not connect her to the fictional Alice in the enormously popular children's books. But late in her life she was "discovered" and honored extravagantly. In 1932, at the age of 80, she traveled to New York to receive a Doctorate of Letters at Columbia University on the occasion of the centenary of Lewis Carroll's birth. The media aggressively covered her visit to the States, referring to "Alice in a New Wonderland" (Gordon 1982: 238). But her reemergence as little Alice was not entirely pleasing to her, and it initiated a slippage between fact and fiction that left her bewildered. Alice wrote to her son shortly after the celebration in New York, complaining that "probably most people have forgotten all about me, as an individual" and, continuing, "But, oh, my dear, I am tired of being Alice in Wonderland. Does it sound ungrateful? It *is*—only I do get tired" (Gordon 1982: 244).

Alice's frustration might well speak for any number of women thrust into the role of muse who have seen their public images transformed beyond their control by male artists. The Alice books simply heighten the typical erasure of female subjectivity by making Alice's loss of identity explicit. Although the Alice

books are usually read as charming children's stories, it is possible to interpret them as exercises in terror for their young protagonist/victim. This is the interpretation provided by a film titled *Dreamchild* (1985), a fictional account of the elderly Alice's visit to New York. Despite a disappointing recuperative ending, the film brings Alice's subjectivity to the foreground. In the film, 80-year-old Alice is haunted by memories of Lewis Carroll. Amid the disorientation provoked by New York and fast-talking journalists, Alice suddenly and unexpectedly encounters the Wonderland creatures in her hotel room. The creatures are cruel and terrifying, taunting Alice mercilessly. They transform popular Victorian games involving questions and answers into vicious verbal attacks. Their aggression is an effective metaphor for the Alice books' misogynistic tendencies, perhaps a result of Lewis Carroll's repressed desire for Alice having been transformed textually into frustrated hostility.[3]

A feminist reading of the Alice books in their historical context thus reveals the danger of generalizing about the liberatory powers of the surface. The books may release discourse from some tyrannical fixed orders, but they are also capable of reestablishing others, in particular the order of misogyny. Luce Irigaray recognizes this in her appropriation of Alice in *This Sex Which Is Not One* when she refers to Alice's loss of identity and her "violated" eyes:

> No doubt this is the moment Alice ought to seize. Now is the time for her to come on stage herself. With her violet, violated eyes. Blue and red. Eyes that recognize the right side, the wrong side, and the other side: the blur of deformation; the black or white of a loss of identity. Eyes always expecting appearances to alter, expecting that one will turn into the other, is already the other. But Alice is at school. She'll come back for tea, which she always takes by herself. At least that's what her mother claims. And she's the only one who seems to know who Alice is. (Irigaray 1985 [1977]: 10)

Irigaray suggests that the unreliability of appearances has not liberated Alice, and instead has contributed to an instability that has robbed her of a sense of self. Irigaray's ambivalent use of Alice is suggestive of the dilemma facing other feminists who enjoy the Alice books' language games and playful irreverence but are nonetheless uncomfortable with their implicit contempt for Alice.

The novel *Crash*, with its clinical tone and relentless dehumanization of all of its characters, manages to avoid misogyny. However, the 1996 film adaptation directed by David Cronenberg does fall prey to misogyny in a misguided effort to transfer the novel's surface aesthetic to the screen. Cronenberg's slick film, also titled *Crash*, relies on standard cinematic conventions that already have made eroticized surfaces entirely conventional. The film *Crash* consequently does not introduce a radically altered form of sexuality. Instead, it perpetuates the continual filmic recycling of familiar misogynistic imagery.

While the novel pulls the reader in two directions, laterally across surfaces and vertically into depths, the film emphasizes the surface almost exclusively. There are gleaming reflections in windows and on the chrome of cars and airplanes, glistening shattered windshields, smoothly functional modernist furniture, tattoos of car insignias, and photographs of accident scenes and injuries. Depth imagery is primarily confined to deep focus shots of a row of identical beds in a hospital ward, hospital hallways, sidewalks beneath underpasses, and the ceiling patterns in parking garages. In nearly each case, depth is illusory

because the surface image is merely repeated successively, as in a trick mirror shot. Depth is just a receding multiplicity of surfaces. The characters are equally flat, moving through the film in zombie-like trances. When the former race car driver Colin Seagrave suffers a concussion while recreating James Dean's fatal car wreck, his stupor is virtually indistinguishable from the other characters' lethargy. Cronenberg may have intended his flat characters to illustrate the postmodern death of affect. As Fred Botting and Scott Wilson write in their analysis of the film, "Cars replace human subjects, equivalent units of mechanical and automatic motion" (1998: 189). But when the film's human automatons are viewed in the context of its use of other cinematic conventions, their effectiveness as emblems of postmodern two-dimensionality is greatly diminished.

Most importantly, the film evokes the conventions of softcore pornography. The book's interest in tracing the features of a new posthuman sexuality is translated by the film into the familiar conventions of the softcore porn genre. The book revolves around the fetishization of scars and wounds to explore its new sexuality, but its tone is entirely cold and clinical. As the book's narrator tells us at one point, "the erotic dimension was absent" (Ballard 1994 [1973]: 102). Indeed, throughout the book, sex acts are devoid of heat and intensity. The film, however, is steeped in the erotic dimension. Scars, bruises, and wounds are signified with Fredericks-of-Hollywood-style lingerie. Gabrielle (Rosanna Arquette), the most disfigured character, wears a tight black lace bodysuit, leather straps, and metal prosthetic contraptions that imply softcore bondage. Its cool, elegant lighting also heightens the film's stylish allure.

The film's softcore erotic dimension intersects with horror film conventions in its narration. Unlike the book's first-person narrator, the film gives us an omniscient narration represented by a moving camera that consistently tracks toward events from a distance. Its slow, deliberate movements evoke conventional horror film cinematography that lurks on the periphery of events and pursues characters in long, suspenseful track-ins. Although the book's narrator, named "Ballard", is also the main character in the film (played by James Spader), his point of view does not control the camera's stealthy gaze. He and the camera are, however, both intimately involved with the same character: his wife Catherine (Deborah Unger). She is the film's erotic centerpiece, and she is presented in an entirely conventional way. She is a mannequin: a smooth, shining female object of desire with a hard lacquered surface and a stunned, vacant demeanor. She drifts through the film in a pouty daze, and the camera's obsessive stare heightens her association with a high-fashion model posing for photographs.

As if Catherine's subjectivity weren't already sufficiently absent, the film undertakes the job of eliminating its last remnants. An analysis of the film's opening and closing sequences reveals an attempt to destroy her control over her own sexuality. In the opening sequence, the camera tracks through an airplane hangar to find her caressing a plane's smooth surface with her breast and then encouraging her flight instructor's sexual advances. She is the one in control of the encounter, choreographing a dance of desire involving herself, a man, and a machine. In contrast, the film's final sequence shows her husband, Ballard, pursuing her small sports car in the big phallic 1963 Lincoln that Vaughan drove to his death. On a rain-slicked highway, Ballard forces Catherine

to go over an embankment and crash. Ballard climbs down the embankment to her wrecked car and finds her injured body sprawled on the ground. When she says she thinks she's all right, he whispers, "maybe the next one, darling", evoking his earlier use of these words when she told him that she hadn't come during her interlude with the flight instructor in the hangar. Then Ballard has sex with Catherine as she lies bruised and broken on the ground, and the film ends.

Ballard and Catherine are attempting to kill themselves in this crash, to reach an unprecedented orgasmic intensity through death, and by "maybe next one", he means that they might succeed in their next attempt. What we see, however, is a woman who has lost the more active role she originally had in a sexual encounter with a human being and a machine. In the context of the film's use of horror conventions, she is its victim, a standard horror film formula that falls far short of introducing the new posthuman forms of sexuality proposed by the book. As Barbara Creed argues, "the potentially radical nature of Cronenberg's representation of desire is undercut by an unadventurous approach to questions of sexual difference and sexual choice" (1998: 176). It is the film's phallocentric sexual politics that prevent it from successfully considering "the nature of desire in the postindustrial, postmodern age" (Creed 1998: 175). Iain Sinclair reaches a similar conclusion when he writes about the film that "it exists only on its surface […] [Cronenberg] depoliticises Ballard's frenzied satire. He makes the pornography safe and elegant" (1999: 122).

Interestingly, J. G. Ballard strongly defends the film, denying that its representation of sex is conventional. In an interview with Ballard, cultural critic Mark Dery observes that "Cronenberg reads *Crash* as softcore porn in the Helmut Newton mode" (1997: 51). Ballard responds that for him, "book and film are far too cool and self-aware to be erotic" (quoted in Dery 1997: 51). He also defends his friend Helmut Newton, saying, "I don't see Helmut Newton as a purveyor of softcore porn but as the creator of a unique imaginative world not too far from *Crash*—he loved Cronenberg's film, and I told him in London recently that if he ever made a film it might be like Cronenberg's *Crash*; he didn't disagree" (quoted in Dery 1997: 51). One man's softcore porn is another man's "unique imaginative world" when it comes to interpreting images. Even though we live in a postmodern surface world rather than in Lewis Carroll's primly repressed Victorian era, surface imagery still inescapably signifies meanings. In Carroll's time, misogyny rose from the depths to the surface; now, it resides permanently on the surface, where it shimmers seductively yet ominously.

Ironically, Cronenberg's film was overshadowed in 1997 by an actual event that dramatized Ballard's novel much more effectively. The death of Diana, Princess of Wales, in a car crash vividly and hideously illustrated the novel's themes. In both the novel and the death of Diana, the cults of technology, celebrity, and sex intersect and lead inexorably to death. As Salman Rushdie writes in an essay making the analogy between *Crash* and Diana's death, "In Diana's fatal crash, the Camera (as both Reporter and Lover) is joined to the Automobile and the Star, and the cocktail of death and desire becomes even more powerful than the one in Ballard's book" (1997: 68). Rushdie interprets Diana's death as a warning about our culture's obsessive pursuit of photographic images. He writes, "The battle is for control; for a form of power. She did not wish to give the photographers power over her—to be merely their (our)

Object. In escaping from the pursuing lenses, she was asserting her determination, perhaps her right, to be something altogether more dignified: that is, to be a Subject. Fleeing from Object to Subject, from commodity toward humanity, she met her death" (1997: 68). Rushdie's analysis reveals how misogyny can reside even on the surface and is not dependent on totalizing depth models. By fleeing from photographers only to have them push their phallic lenses into her face while she lay dying, Diana experienced the relentless assault on female subjectivity that Cronenberg's film glamorizes.

Surfaces can be seductive, but they can also be dangerous. From the playful word games of the Alice books to the glossy stylishness of the film *Crash*, surfaces are just as capable as depths of expressing ideologies of domination. Thus it is ill-advised to generalize about the liberating powers of the surface or any other aesthetic strategy. No aesthetic approach is inherently emancipatory. Every text is unique, and even the most depthless texts are not exempt from expressing oppressive power relations. Now that the surface is the aesthetic norm rather than a radically subversive strategy, it is especially important to be wary of its seductions. In postmodern times, existing power relations are maintained without recourse to totalizing forms of domination. Power hierarchies are no longer dependent on depth models that reproduce their vertical structure. Now they rely on facets that stretch horizontally. Contrary to Baudrillard's assertion that "all appearances conspire to combat and root out meaning", surfaces can be complicit with oppression. We should pause before joining Baudrillard in his zeal for "the sacred horizon of appearances". Depths can be deadly, it's true; in the poem "Diving into the Wreck", Rich writes of descending into the sea and "blacking out", but she continues despite the risks and writes that "my mask is powerful/it pumps my blood with power" (1973: 23). Submersion is sometimes risky, but remaining on the surface is not the solution. In this 21st century Wonderland, where official political and corporate discourses have already replaced sense with nonsense, there are many reasons to resist the alluring but deceptive seduction of the surface.[4]

Notes

1. A close reading of the Alice texts reveals even more prophetic coincidences. For example, there is speculation that Lewis Carroll based the Mad Hatter on another eccentric mathematician of the time, Charles Babbage, who attempted to build a mechanical calculating machine: The Difference Engine. Without the H, the Mad Hatter can be understood to be a Mad Adder. Babbage's Difference Engine is now thought of as an early, crude prototype for the computer. Additionally, the chess game that structures *Through the Looking Glass* became the standard for artificial intelligence researchers trying to measure a computer's degree of human equivalence. And near the end of *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice makes the point that it is impossible to "talk with a person if they *always* say the same thing". Martin Gardner points out that Alice's point is fundamental in information theory, in which there "is no one-value logic—no way to record or transmit information without at least a binary distinction between yes and no, true or false. In computers, the distinction is handled by the on–off switches of their circuitry" (Gardner 1990: 319).
2. There are scientists, among them Hans Moravec, Kevin Warwick, and Ray Kurzweil, who advocate the creation of super-intelligent robots capable of superseding humans, eventually making human beings obsolete.

3. More recent adaptations of Carroll's Alice books have also emphasized their sinister aspects. A computer game published in 2000 features a knife-wielding Alice who must fight her way through a dangerous Wonderland inhabited by murderous monsters. (The game is titled *American McGee's Alice*; it was developed by Rogue Entertainment and published for PC's by Electronic Arts.)
4. An earlier version of this article was presented at the *TechnoLust: Desire and Technology* conference in Antwerp, Belgium, 21–23 November 1997.

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