

**Crisis and Infantilization in the Technological Landscapes of
Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano*, J.G. Ballard's *Crash* and Dave Eggers'
*The Circle***



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Sammendrag:

I litteraturen blir ofte teknologi fortolket som en trussel som går på bekostning av grunnleggende menneskelige behov. *Player Piano* (1952) av Kurt Vonnegut, *Crash* (1973) av J.G. Ballard og *The Circle* (2013) av Dave Eggers, er tre romaner som artikulere en slik kritikk av teknologiens inngripen i individets liv. Denne masteroppgaven utforsker de teknologiske landskapene som blir skildret i de tre romanene, med det overordnede målet å formulere en forståelse av hvordan tekstene tematiserer en kritikk av teknologi. Analysen utforsker hvordan romanene beskriver den teknologiske kroppen, og de psykologiske effektene av en kroppslig tilstand i endring i møte med teknologi. Min argumentasjon er basert på en analyse av de tre tekstenes beskrivelser av teknologiske framskritt, som hele tiden sammenstilles med psykologisk stagnasjon: krise og infantilisering. En nærlesning av romanenes hovedkarakterer basert på psykoanalytisk teori viser hvordan spenningen mellom disse tekstuelle elementene fungerer som ideologikritikk, som dermed får betydning for romanenes politiske argumentasjon.

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Abbreviations:

I employ the following abbreviations in parenthetical citations:

PP Vonnegut, Kurt. *Player Piano* (1952)

C Ballard, J.G. *Crash* (1973)

TC Eggers, David. *The Circle* (2013)

TFI Freud, Sigmund. *The Future of an Illusion* (1953)

TT Freud, Sigmund. *Totem and Taboo and Other Works* (1913-1914)

(The editions of these works correspond with the works referred to in the list of works cited)

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Introduction:

Literature has a long history of articulating the dangers as well as the possibilities for human life in confrontation with technology. New technologies persistently introduce new questions regarding the human condition: ‘can electricity give life to the dead?’, ‘will the alliance between technology and politics bring about totalitarian regimes?’, ‘does virtual space obfuscate boundaries between fantasy and the real?’. These questions echo through Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, George Orwell’s *1984*, and visions of life in cyberspace as coined by the author William Gibson. Among the literatures expressing these concerns we also find *Player Piano* (1952) by Kurt Vonnegut, *Crash* (1973) by J.G. Ballard and *The Circle* (2013) by Dave Eggers, whose authors appear to have been inspired by the technological imperative of the 20th and 21st centuries: the accelerated pace of innovation and its dogmatic connection with progress. The same engagement with the porous limits between life and death, democracy and totalitarian states, fantasy and the real is conveyed in the three novels.

Technology often evokes a notion of ‘the limitless’ as this is the only persistent quality of this scientific phenomenon. What defines technology has been, and still is, difficult to discern.

Technology expands and evolves, at times seemingly out of human control, forever pushing forward boundaries with regards to the aspects of human life it affects. This forceful, limitless presence is thus frequently interpreted in literature as a fundamental threat to human existence. In *Player Piano*, *Crash* and *The Circle* the threat is posed to the psychological development of the characters: the themes crisis and infantilization are depicted in the texts as the consequence of lives lived at the hands of technology in one form or another.

Player Piano, *Crash*, and *The Circle* represent examples of how technological developments in history may have affected the literary imagination of the 20th and 21st centuries, and specifically, the notion of technology as a threat to the human body. However, the characters in the three novels are not just victims of technologies divorced from human control: the prevailing notion throughout the

three texts is that technology is a part not only of human culture, but also of human nature (Goody 1). Accordingly, the present discussion is based on the premise of technology as something inherently human, as well as ‘a generative cultural intensity that makes us just as much as we make it’ (ibid.). The technological presence in human existence is inescapable as it is constantly birthed by the rational tool-making *homo technologicus*, the primordial state of humanity. Yet, much like the overreaching Prometheus, man’s hubris creates a potential for destruction. Technology is humanity’s maker, not just the other way around, and can thus be perceived as a threat. This thesis aims at providing an understanding of the literary interpretation of the human condition in the technological landscape seen in *Player Piano*, *Crash* and *The Circle*, more specifically, how the novels imagine conjunctions of human and machine and the effect of this confrontation on the psychological development of the characters. With this objective in mind, my thesis will explore the novels’ textual juxtapositions of technological progress and psychological stagnation, a contrast that serves as a vehicle for the three novels’ ideological criticism.

Kurt Vonnegut’s *Player Piano* may be read as a hyperbolic representation of America in the 1950s: a period when technology and the economy had been boosted by the war effort in Europe, and advertising was increasingly becoming a part of public discourse. The novel describes a period after ‘the war’, a war that had taught ‘the managers and engineers to get along without their men and women, who went to fight’ (*PP* 7). The ‘miracle that won the war’ was ‘production with almost no manpower’, and what appears to be a consumer utopia has been established (ibid.). The novel explores the shift from production by the assembly line to automation, taking humans from being vital to the functioning of the machine, to being surplus to the efficient functioning of the machine (Goody 150). Accordingly, ‘the Third Industrial Revolution’ is in its beginnings, where not only muscle work and routine mental work is devalued, but human thinking is superseded by machine activity (*Player Piano* 19). People are ostensibly liberated from work, yet are shown as mostly bored or watching television. The ghostly human presence pressing the keys of a player piano, one

of the first machines to replace a human being, epitomises the negotiation of body and technology in *Player Piano* (Marvin 36).

Player Piano was likely inspired by Vonnegut's work as a public relations man at the General Electric plant in Schenectady, New York. Working there from 1947 to 1951, while he was writing his debut novel, he was struck by the researchers' apparent lack of concern about how their discoveries would be used (Marvin 39). The development Vonnegut observed at GE was not challenged by the fact that increasing mechanisation of the economy would dislocate people from their jobs, a development that appears to be realised in the fictional Ilium New York in *Player Piano*; there is no 'work worth doing' left for the American people (*PP* 270). The frequent disregard by scientists and engineers of basic human needs – such as the integrity and dignity of doing useful physical or intellectual work – has remained a central concern in Vonnegut's writing.

In *Player Piano*, the threat technology poses to the human body is related to its capacity to exceed human capability, thus leaving people superfluous. In J.G. Ballard's *Crash*, by contrast, technology appears as a threat in its potential to deconstruct and pervert the body, which is illustrated in the novel by depictions of crashed cars and crushed bodies. However, of equal importance to the textual representation of negotiations of body and technology is how language conveys these images.

Through meticulous, technical descriptions of death and destruction an aesthetic distance arises between the narrator and the events being described, a distance that carries an importance of its own. Ballard describes how he sees 20th century society in the introduction to the 1995 edition of *Crash*: 'Thermo-nuclear weapons systems and soft-drink commercials coexist in an overlit realm ruled by advertising and pseudo-events, science and pornography' (Introduction). The juxtaposition of the horror of nuclear warfare and consumer products creates the same kind of distance to the terrors of war evoked by the language in *Crash*. In this respect, technology is a threat to the human body not only by destroying it, but also by making the act trivial and even an object of desire: destruction of the body by war technology and a fetishization of the act through media technology.

The surreal level of potential self-destruction by nuclear warfare, an actual danger in the 1970s, as

well as the masked reality of advertising, appears to affect J.G. Ballard's argument, linking technology with a quest for the real where death seems to be the only alternative left.

Dave Eggers' novel *The Circle* (2013) was published after the information revolution, and in the midst of a digital age struggling with growing pains and a crisis of ethics regarding the impact of surveillance on the privacy of the individual. In a parallel to *Player Piano*: *The Circle* is a vision of a future America, profoundly changed by technological advancements, yet highly recognizable in its current form. The novel shows technology as omniscient and omnipresent in a manner that is familiar to an increasing number of people in Western societies in the 21st century, as the novel describes technology that collects information about all forms of human behaviour. Everything from people's health data, shopping preferences and social activity (online and offline), is gathered in a project owned by the world's biggest internet company – carrying the same name as the novel. Masked by an apparent subtlety the Circle invades all aspects of private life in a tyranny of surveillance and information. Technology becomes a threatening presence hovering over the characters, correcting their behaviour in favour of the company's ideology. The effect is a moralising form of surveillance, reminiscent of religious doctrine.

In *The Circle*, technology appears to absorb the human body through various devices that promote the gathering of information. Pills inside the stomach and wristbands registering bodily functions, endless layers of screens reporting events and demanding reporting to, small cameras placed around the neck and chips inserted into the bones of children. Human values and needs appear secured, as truth, justice and security for all human beings are the goals of the company. However, the novel also points to the implications of this increasingly all-encompassing company: '[i]nfocommunication [...] paired with ruthless capitalist ambition' (TC 484). Furthermore, the novel effectively conveys how social media and surveillance technology stimulate a fundamental human need: 'We all know we die [...]. So all we have is the hope of being seen, or heard, even for a moment.' (TC 485) However, being watched and controlled is fatally mistaken for being seen.

In his book *Kurt Vonnegut's Crusade* (2006), Todd F. Davis points to *Player Piano*'s distinctly postmodern style: 'the nature of Vonnegut's postmodernism exhibits the most basic tenet of Lyotard's celebrated definition of postmodernity: an incredulity towards grand narratives' (41). Jean-François Lyotard's book *The Post-Modern Condition* (1979), was published close to three decades after *Player Piano*, yet it is interesting to see the novel as an early example of postmodern literature in its attack on an American master narrative: 'a myth common to America and often reified in the genre of utopian Science Fiction: Mechanical progress means a better future for all' (Davis 42). A critique of this master narrative and its increasing influence on society is also a part of the political argument in *Crash* and *The Circle*. Despite the temporal distance between the publication of the three texts, this form of ideological criticism transcends their historical context: the novels share a critique of the uncritical belief in technology as a saviour of humanity, providing existential truth, security and material wealth. The three novels thus evoke an affinity with the postmodern in their abandonment of a coherent historical narrative, national or individual, that serves to guide the trajectory of the characters' development.

Across the 20th century several critical theorists have articulated criticism of an ideology that may be described as a technological master narrative. In his book *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), Herbert Marcuse describes the machine as a vehicle of oppressive power:

The brute fact that the machine's physical (only physical?) power surpasses that of the individual, and of any particular group of individuals, makes the machine the most effective political instrument in any society whose basic organization is that of the machine process.

(6)

In Marcuse's argument the machine process is profoundly at odds with human freedom, and functions as a repressive tool against human needs. A recent book may serve to illustrate an American historical perspective on mechanical progress. David E. Nye's *America as Second Creation: Technology and Narratives of New Beginnings* (2003) describes the technological

foundation stories that are part of the American literary tradition. Nye refers, amongst others, to the statesman Daniel Webster and newspaper editor Horace Greeley – both men writing in early 19th century America – who ‘articulated the master narrative of technological amelioration, in which the second creation emerges seamlessly out of the first’ (18). The myth of a technological second creation of the land, argues Nye, has remained in the American imaginary as a master narrative that occludes reference to America’s native peoples who were displaced in the process of technological advancements on the continent.

Whereas *Player Piano* and *The Circle* can be explored in the context of American politics, history and mythology, *Crash* negotiates the technological master narrative through a different literary technique. The characters in the novel are depicted in obsessive states where technology, sexuality and the aesthetics of commercialism consume their entire existence. The textual representation of these elements is epitomised in the car as a metaphor for life in the technological landscape. The trauma of a car crash arguably establishes technology as a version of a master narrative in the minds of the characters. More specifically, the recreations of crashes and incessant driving on the roads encircling London provide the characters with a sense of purpose and existential truth. However, the depictions of bodily destruction and subsequent fetishization of death and wounds defamiliarize the notion of technology as a vehicle of progress.

In addition to a negotiation of the technological master narrative, the three novels offer textual representations of the technological body. In her book *Technology, Literature and Culture* (2011), Alex Goody describes how ‘engaging with the implications of the technological body and the ways that literature explores these implications leads to a fuller understanding of the substantial connections of our existence as beings in the world’ (136-137). It is no simple task discerning the historical, physical and philosophical silhouette of the technological body. However, an early image in 20th century critical thought, envisioning a conjunction of body and technology, is Sigmund Freud’s idea of man as ‘a god with artificial limbs’ (*Civilization and its Discontents*, 1930, 36). Whereas man once attributed desires that seemed beyond his reach to the gods, he is now ‘quite

impressive when he dons all his auxiliary organs, but they have not become part of him and still give him a good deal of trouble on occasion' (36). Freud describes a dichotomy between the body and technology – an extension as well as a restriction. In the latter part of the 20th century this early 'fantasy of extension' has been replaced in critical discourse by a debate concerning the usefulness, or rather fruitfulness, of the idea of the human as a separate organic entity, or, as Alex Goody puts it, to 'reconfigure rather than negate the nature of the human and human autonomy in our theorizations of technology' (Goody 47). The key figure in this debate is the cyborg, as described by Donna Haraway in her 'Cyborg Manifesto' (1985). The cyborg introduces the notion of hybridity, accepting the porous limits between body and technology, while arguing for a potential for emancipation of oppressed groups in society by a reimagining of humanity through this figure (Haraway 150). In the realm of literature, Cyberpunk fiction embraces the infinite possibilities for consciousness in cyberspace. Within this imaginary the 'god with artificial limbs' is rendered somewhat amputated as technology is naturalized into something inextricable from the human form, not an auxiliary to be put on. I return to the idea of the technological body as 'a god with artificial limbs' and the hybrid qualities of the cyborg in the conclusion to this thesis.

A contrast may be identified in theorizations of the technological body, between technology offering bodily transcendence and an amelioration of human capabilities, and technology as a defamiliarizing element making the body an object amongst other objects. The latter serves as a contrast to Haraway's idea of the cyborg, and resonates with how *Player Piano*, *Crash* and *The Circle* imagine the technological body: mechanical and automated, an Other or a virtual spectacle in conflict with the self. I pursue my inquiry of the objectified body through media theory concerned with the body as spectacle: Guy Debord's book *The Society of The Spectacle* (1967) and Jean Baudrillard's essay "The Ecstasy of Communication" (1987). The main body of this thesis, however, is based on a reading of the novels' characters' through psychoanalytic theory.

In J.G. Ballard's 1962 manifesto 'Which way to inner space?' the writer proclaims his ambition to explore precisely this 'inner space': 'The biggest developments of the immediate future will take

place not on the Moon or Mars, but on Earth, and it is *inner* space, not outer, that needs to be explored' (*A User's Guide to the Millennium*, Ballard, 197). The writer's own definition of this 'inner space' changed throughout his literary career, yet the connotations of a 'psychological space' remain central to this Ballardian trope (Francis 65). In the context of 'inner space' Ballard's writing can be described as science fiction serving as a vehicle to illustrate the psychology of the terrestrial contemporary, such as the mass iconography of the 20th century and the trauma of war (ibid). As a literary style (Francis 12), Ballard's 'inner space' is associated with the dreamlike images of Surrealist painting, a style quite remote from Kurt Vonnegut's determinism or Dave Eggers' articulations of postmodernity. However, the three novels *Player Piano*, *Crash* and *The Circle* share an engagement with the 'inner space', or 'psychological space' of the characters, characters that inhabit science fictional societies. Neither of the texts at hand includes space travel, as Ballard advises against in his manifesto, yet the technological developments being described are as pivotal as would be a human colony on Mars, in their psychological impact: a profound sense of estrangement and subsequent psychological crisis. In other words, the three novels *Player Piano*, *Crash* and *The Circle* construct settings of advanced technological landscapes, in the not-so-distant future, yet turn the attention inwards, towards 'inner space', the 'psychological space'.

In light of the novels' focus on 'the psychological space', I employ several of Sigmund Freud's theories on the psychodynamics of the mind to further an understanding of how the characters' psychological crises reflect technology's influence on the body. Freud consistently understands society as projections of the mental functioning of the individual, which is the main reason for why I have found his theories applicable to further an understanding of technology as inextricably linked with human nature. In my exploration of the three novels I have found it useful to consider technology as a scientific phenomenon that has implications for the subconscious workings of human psychology: a Freudian logic may serve an understanding of the characters' self-destruction and loyalty to technologies that preclude free will.

In different ways, the three novels depict protagonists that are subject to a lack of agency. Paul Proteus, the protagonist in *Player Piano*, suffers from ‘periods of depression’, the trajectory of his life decided by an inescapable determinism (*PP* 12). James Ballard, the narrator in *Crash*, is traumatised by a car crash and subsequently relives the experience in a manner that consumes his entire existence: forever circling the ‘constant and unchanging traffic patterns’ preparing for his suicide (*C* 50). Mae Holland, the protagonist in *The Circle*, is happy to be working for the most powerful internet company in the world. However, the narrative depicts how she is increasingly trapped inside the Circle; the circular eye-like shape of a technological “god” is always on her, while a pain is ‘spreading its black wings inside her’ (*TC* 410). In this context, a notion of *the circular*, a return to the point of origin, as opposed to linear progress and development echoes through the three texts: the determinism in *Player Piano*, the forever circling traffic patterns in *Crash* and ‘Completion’ of the Circle in *The Circle* (*TC* 323). The notion of the circular can be further explored through the themes crisis and infantilization. Part I of this thesis will focus primarily on the theme crisis in the technological landscape, in other words, stagnation as opposed to progress. Part II will approach the notion of the circular through the theme infantilization in the technological landscape where the argument is based on a reading of the psychological conditions of the characters as these appear to have returned to the original state of any individual – childhood.

Part I ‘Crisis in the Technological Landscape’

Part I of this thesis aims to explicate how *Player Piano*, *Crash* and *The Circle* juxtapose technological progress with an array of crises. Further, it will show how this narrative contrast serves as a vehicle for the texts’ ideological criticism. Throughout the three texts the notion of crisis informs several aspects of the narration. In each text conjunctions of body and machine are consistently associated with a crisis of human nature: in *Player Piano* technology is shown to exclude the human body, in *Crash* technology perverts and deconstructs the human body, and in *The Circle* technology appears to absorb the human body. The novels’ aesthetic qualities are a reflection of how they imagine such conjunctions of human and machine. The metaphors employed to depict society, as well as aspects of the characterisation, suggest three aesthetic styles that I refer to with the following terms: nostalgia, defamiliarization and transparency. The notion of crisis is not limited to the use of metaphor and characterisation. As the following three chapters will argue; imagery, myth and narrative technique together evoke the theme of crisis in the technological landscape.

Chapter 1, *Player Piano*: ‘Aesthetic of Nostalgia’

‘[...] Paul wondered at what thorough believers in mechanization most Americans were, even when their lives had been badly damaged by mechanization’ (*Player Piano* 229).

Notions of the idea of the circular – of stagnation as opposed to progress – are evoked in *Player Piano* through a pattern of determinism, more specifically, as a textual representation of a distinctly American *technological* determinism. Technological inventions were decisive to the genesis of the country and its people, a part of history that has its remnants in the mentality, described in *Player Piano* as ‘being peculiarly American since the nation had been born – the restless, erratic insight and imagination of a gadgeteer’ (*PP* 10). In *Player Piano* the American mentality, an instinct for technology, precludes free will for the individual and historical progress for society. In this context, the protagonist Paul Proteus and the fictional society of Ilium New York are depicted in a state of

crisis. The novel does not evoke nostalgia for another time in history: the narrative appears to carry a sardonic acceptance of history as an endless repetition of ‘one set of values being replaced by force by another set of values’ (PP 261). However, through the use of imagery and echoes of American mythology, the novel evokes nostalgia for a human condition that has been lost on the road towards a complete mechanisation of society.

Technological Determinism: Crisis of Progress

The first chapter of *Player Piano* foreshadows a coming crisis; ‘a unit’s complete breakdown’ (PP 22). Antisabotage laws are rigidly enforced in Ilium New York and the protagonist Paul Proteus, the manager of the Ilium Works, ‘suffers from periods of depression’ (PP 16, 12). ‘[A] false tranquility’ appears to be forced not just on Proteus, but on the workings of society (PP 170). The novel traces the development of a protagonist and a society in crisis: the negotiation and final resolution of these crises suggest a pattern of technological determinism.

Paul Proteus voices a central concern in the novel when he wonders at the American belief in mechanisation (PP 229). The narrative is set ten years after ‘the war’ during which ‘the managers and engineers learned to get along without their men and women, who went to fight’ (PP 7). Consequently, the economy of the society depicted has since the war been based on ‘production with almost no manpower’ (ibid). Engineers have invented ‘machines [that] are doing America’s work far better than Americans ever have’ (PP 51). As voiced through the protagonist, this process has badly damaged the lives of Americans, who are left redundant to the system: ‘Those who couldn’t compete economically with machines had their choice, if they had no source of income, of the Army or the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps’ (PP 28). There are no more wars, hence the life of a soldier is no more than an aesthetic experience: ‘hollowness hidden beneath twinkling buttons and buckles, crisp serge, glossy leather’ (ibid.). The Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps typically perform work such as forty men repairing a small hole in the road (PP 27-28). However, ‘the lament of so many, wasn’t that it was unjust to take jobs from men and give them to machines,

but that the machines didn't do nearly as many human things as good designers could have made them do' (*PP* 229). For instance, a displaced train conductor complains that his mechanical and automatic replacement will 'never help an old lady down the steps' or 'watch out for a little girl three years old all the way from St. Louis to Poughkeepsie' (*PP* 228). The conductor appears to have surrendered to the idea of the machine taking his job, yet complains it is not doing it well enough.

There are several examples in the novel of people surrendering their position to machines: 'As an old joke had it, the machines had all the cards' (*PP* 72). The joke is a reference to the system of classification of every educated citizen. Machines credit graduates – using 'mysterious, unnamed units of measure' – with a high, medium or low personality that is translated into perforations on a personnel card (*ibid.*). The card is irrevocable and determines the trajectory of an individual's life. Bud Calhoun, one of the protagonist's colleagues at the Ilium Works, comes to Paul Proteus asking for a job because he has invented a gadget doing his work 'a whole lot better than [he] did it', and subsequently the 'job classification has been eliminated' for himself and his co-workers (*PP* 70). Paul Proteus cannot offer him a job, as machines perform work classification and assignment according to a person's Achievement and Aptitude Profile – the personnel card (*PP* 72). And even though Bud Calhoun does design "'[...] with a damn sight more imagination than the prima donnas in the Lab.", his card does not qualify him for anything but the Petroleum Industries assignment he recently invented himself out of (*PP* 71). Bud Calhoun has no job because of his imaginative technological design, but cannot work in design because the machines have decided he is unqualified for working in design. Bud Calhoun has 'the restless, erratic insight and imagination of a gadgeteer', a 'peculiarly American' mentality that has made him superfluous (*PP* 10).

There is a story about a barber embedded in the narrative that further exemplifies the American instinct for technological invention, moreover, how this instinct precludes progress and free will for the individual.

[...] in his next nightmare, he'd dream of a machine that did one of the jobs, like combing, and he'd see how it worked clear as a bell. And it was just a vicious circle. He'd dream. Then he'd tell himself something the machine couldn't do. Then he'd dream of a machine, and he'd see just how a machine *could* do what he'd said it couldn't do. And on and on, until he'd dreamed up a whole machine that cut hair like nobody's business (*PP* 189).

The gadgeteering instinct comes to the American mind in dreams. In the case of the barber, his concern that he would be put out of business by a machine gave him nightmares that led him in the direction of a self-fulfilling prophesy. Although the dream of invention is a 'nightmare', and it is prescient of the end of the barber's profession, the 'vicious circle' of technological determinism cannot be escaped (*ibid*).

The protagonist's relationship with his father, Doctor George Proteus, further illustrates the notion of a predetermined fate. The position of Proteus' father was 'in importance approached only by the presidency of the United States', and his son has been trained to rise 'almost as high in the organization' (*PP* 7). Thus, Paul Proteus is among the few people to still have a function in the economy. Proteus' father is dead, yet the heritage proves a challenge to circumvent. The protagonist suffers from 'periods of depression', struggling to see how the work of managers and engineers like himself has 'brought on a golden age' (*PP* 7, 12). Yet, 'for want of a blow severe enough to knock him off the course dictated by the circumstances of his birth and training', he remains in his position as manager of the Ilium Works (*PP* 170). In his doctoral thesis *The World According to Kurt Vonnegut* (1994) Bo Pettersson writes extensively on the presence of determinism in Vonnegut's work. Pettersson points out how the initials of the protagonist parallel those of the title, and much like a player piano he can only play the tunes, or act, in the way he has been programmed to (Pettersson 82).

The heritage of a pioneer of the complete mechanisation of society is a persistent conflict in the characterisation of the protagonist. 'Of late, [Proteus'] job, the system and organizational politics

had made him variously annoyed, bored or queasy' (*PP* 12). However, throughout the narrative Proteus remains a "player piano": a mechanical puppet with automated and pre-programmed responses to people and events around him.

Paul Proteus' wife Anita has 'the mechanics of marriage down pat [...] her approach was disturbingly rational, systematic' (*PP* 21). Moreover, Proteus' response to her is consistently 'automatic' (*PP* 35). In her presence he is no longer in charge of his body and its reactions as their relationship is guided by repeated, mechanical patterns. Although Paul often sees Anita as 'no more than a mirror image of his own importance', he morphs into a mechanical puppet in the presence of her 'beautiful assurance': 'Only things that might please or interest her came to mind – all else submerged. It wasn't a conscious act of his mind, but a reflex, a natural response to her presence' (*PP* 35).

Proteus assuages his dissatisfaction with occasional trips across the bridge to a bar in an area locally known as Homestead, where the majority of the population in Ilium New York live. Homestead is the location of a 'spiritual disaster', a population robbed of purpose, and a rebellion on the rise (*PP* 120). His conversations with the people in Homestead gives him new perspectives on the hierarchy 'that was a nightmare to most' (*PP* 120). He nevertheless returns to the company of the other managers and engineers; asking for 'refutation' of the facts while under the 'spell' of projections of his late father (*ibid.*). The indecisive nature of the character's convictions remains stable throughout the narrative. Due to the symbolic force of his position in the hierarchy, he is drugged and kidnapped by rebels, the Ghost Shirt Society (*PP* 258). Proteus feels liberated from the responsibility of making decisions when given the 'black and white' options of either joining the rebels or being killed; now '[h]e couldn't make his own decisions for reasons anybody could understand' (*PP* 267). As an engineer and manager his function was mechanical; "'it wouldn't be much of a trick to replace *him* with a gadget'", as one of his colleagues remarks (*PP* 77). As '[t]he Messiah of the Ghost Shirt Society' he remains a mechanical puppet:

A moment later they emerged with a man on their shoulders. In the midst of their frenzied acclamation, he was marionette-like. As though to perfect the impression, bits of wire dangled from his extremities (*PP* 290).

The mechanical, ‘marionette-like’ quality of the protagonist, which is arguably determined by ‘the circumstances of his birth and training’, precludes his ability to make decisions: the potential for free will (*PP* 170).

The implications of the father-son relationship epitomise the notion of an American inbred instinct for technology: a heritage that determines the trajectory of a nation, mirrored in the characterisation of the protagonist. The moment the revolution has successfully overturned the system ‘the people of Ilium [are] eager to recreate the same old nightmare’ (*PP* 307). Having destroyed all the machinery that provoked the rebellion; people crowd one another excitedly ‘as though a great wonder were in their midst’, attempting to repair soda machines and electric motors (*PP* 304-5). The progress professed by the ideology of the system, and the change made possible by the revolution, ultimately fails as the people are up against the gadgeteering instinct in themselves (Pettersson, 80).

Player Piano explores ‘the mechanics of being a human being, mechanics far beyond the leverage of free will’ (*PP* 287). In other words, the novel arguably carries an argument for technology as an inherently human quality, a mechanical instinct, as opposed to an external force threatening the human condition. However, in addition to the deterministic logic, the novel evokes nostalgia for aspects of the human condition that have no part in a mechanised society. The lament of the train conductor described in the above provides an image of nostalgia, more specifically, nostalgia for community: the conductor does not reminisce about his practical work, rather about memorable instances of contact with other people. In the novel machines are doing ‘America’s work’, work that includes everything from a housewife’s duties to political decision-making (*PP* 51). The social consequence of this development is voiced through one of the characters in the novel, Ed Finnerty: “‘It’s the loneliness,” [...] “It’s the loneliness, the not belonging anywhere”” (*PP* 82). Ed Finnerty

is Proteus' friend and former colleague at the Ilium Works. Finnerty returns to Ilium having recently quit his high-ranking job in Washington as the position did not assuage the lack of belonging (ibid.). The oldest building at the Ilium Works, 'Building 58's north end [...] the original machine shop set up by Edison in 1886', is still intact, though replaced with new machinery on the inside elsewhere in the same building (*PP* 12). 'Paul felt better when he got into Building 58' as it offers him an opportunity to 'look from the old to the new and see that mankind really had come a long way' (*PP* 11-2). Proteus keeps a picture in his office of the men working at the original shop:

In each face was a defiant promise of physical strength, and at the same time, there was the attitude of a secret order [...]. The pride in strength and important mystery showed no less in the eyes of the sweepers than in those of the machinists and inspectors, and in those of the foreman, who alone was without a lunchbox.

The depiction of the group of men, which has the atmosphere of 'athletic teams and fraternal organizations', serves as a relic to the protagonist (*PP* 13). Looking 'from the old to the new' Proteus is unimpressed by the 'humble and shoddy' past he witnesses in Building 58 (*PP* 12). However, the image of pride, strength and fraternal men evoke nostalgia for a communal human condition that has been lost in a completely mechanised society.

The Body In Crisis

In addition to nostalgia for community, the picture Proteus keeps in his office evokes nostalgia for an embodied man with 'a defiant promise of physical strength' (*PP* 13). Throughout the narrative, epitomised in the characterisation of the protagonist, there is a notion that the self as *body* is dismembered. The first chapter of the novel traces a brief history of devaluation of the human body; 'the First Industrial Revolution devalued muscle work, then the second one devalued routine mental work', 'the third one's been going on for some time [...] machines that devalue human thinking' (*PP* 18-19). Aside from being a passive receiver of consumer goods, the human body no longer has a function in the economy of the society being depicted. The economy in Ilium New York is based

on a 'hierarchy that measures men against machines' and seeks to eliminate 'human error through machinery' (*PP* 25). In the production line, people are 'about as reliable as a putty ruler': 'Hangovers, family squabbles, resentments against the boss, debts, the war – every kind of human trouble was likely to show up in a product one way or another' (*PP* 18-9). The machines however, are 'entertaining and delightful': As the protagonist observes the machinery in Building 58 he has 'the impression of a great gymnasium, where countless squads practiced precision calisthenics—bobbing, spinning, leaping, thrusting, waving...' (*PP* 13-4). The juxtaposition of perfected machinery with a lack of bodily agency is central to how the novel imagines conjunctions of human and machine.

Throughout the narrative the limit between human and machine, artificial and organic is obfuscated. In the early stages of the Second Industrial Revolution, Proteus and his colleagues were responsible for recording human movements onto tapes that subsequently worked the machines. Proteus observes the machine being worked by one of the first recordings he made, the recording of the master machinist Rudy Hertz: 'this little loop in the box before Paul, here was Rudy as Rudy had been to his machine [...] Rudy, the turner-on of power, the setter of speeds, the controller of the cutting tool. This was the essence of Rudy as far as his machine was concerned, as far as the economy was concerned [...] (*PP* 15). By having his 'essence distilled' the individual Rudy Hertz is reduced to a mechanism as opposed to the man he was: the small, polite man with the big hands and the black fingernails [...] the man who thought the world could be saved if everyone read a verse from the Bible every night [...] the man who adored a collie for want of children' (*ibid.*). The machine however is amplified beyond human capability: 'Paul could make the essence of Rudy Hertz produce one, ten, a hundred, or a thousand of the shafts' (*PP* 15). In her reading of the novel Alex Goody (2011) argues that 'the machine appears to replace the human, not just merely in terms of mechanical actions, but in the very essence of what it means to be human' (152). The thinking computer EPICAC XIV is a perfected 'brain': 'EPICAC XIV could consider simultaneously hundreds or even thousands of sides of a question utterly fairly, [...] was wholly free of reason-

muddying emotions [...] never forgot anything [...] EPICAC XIV was dead right about everything (PP 109). EPICAC XIV is described as ‘the greatest individual in history’, and the president of the United States as a ‘gorgeous dummy’ (PP 111-12). The latter echoes the depiction of the protagonist as a ‘marionette-like’ mechanical puppet and the ‘mechanics’ of his wife Anita (PP 290). The depictions of the characters in the novel as automatons are juxtaposed with a personification of the machinery (Goody 151). The two front seats of a car are described as they ‘lay down side by side like sleepy lovers’, the mechanism controlling tickets on a train is referred to as ‘a son-of-a-bitch’ (PP 10, 227). The above examples evoke the notion that the human body has been made superfluous while bodily agency and attributes of personality have been superseded by machines.

There is one scene in the narrative where the protagonist assuages his sense of disembodiment by asserting his superiority over a machine. He is tricked into entering a game of chess with Checker Charlie, a robot with a ‘brain’ and ‘memory’ and ‘world’s champion checker player’ (PP 55). The robot malfunctions during the game due to a loose connection and Paul wins the game: ‘Morale and *esprit de corps*, which Paul hadn’t felt in any undertaking for years, had sprung up [...] in the course of the exhilarating humiliation of Checker Charley’ (PP 61). None of the engineers supervising the game enjoy the outcome as Proteus does: ‘Tragedy was in every face. Something beautiful had died’ (PP 58).

Throughout the narrative the protagonist is depicted as in a quest for *nature*, or *the natural*, in the technological landscape. In this context, an idea of the circular, or stagnation as opposed to progress, becomes readable in the persistent failure of this quest in a technological landscape. In a scene early in the narrative: Proteus glimpses ‘the only life visible through a narrow canyon between buildings 57 and 59, a canyon that opened onto the river [...]’ (PP 18). Through the canyon he sees a father and a child playing in the sunlight, the two see Proteus staring at them and wonder at seeing ‘a living thing in the Ilium Works’ (ibid.). Proteus’ wife Anita is barren and family life can only be an object of observation for the protagonist (PP 8). This is one of several

examples in the narrative of the protagonist estranged from distinctly human needs that are associated with the human body and nature. Moreover, it is interesting to note how the space between two buildings is depicted as a geological phenomenon. The latter suggests how the constructed nature of the protagonist's environment may be the only nature available to him, who will remain the "surprisingly alive" character observing the natural flow of a river.

The imagery obfuscating limits between artificial and organic evokes a notion of futility with regards to rearticulating an essence of the natural. This notion is further accentuated by the depictions of nature in the narrative. When Paul Proteus attempts to keep an ominously black cat around his office it gets frightened by a sweeper machine, escapes over an electrical fence and ends up 'dead and smoking, but outside' (*PP* 18). The moment before the cat dies on the other side of the fence, Paul Proteus observes the machinery in one of the buildings:

[...] and he turned his head in delight to watch a cluster of miniature maypoles braid bright cloth insulation about a black snake of cable. A thousand little dancers whirled about one another at incredible speeds, pirouetting, dodging one another, unerringly building their snug snare about the cable (*PP* 16).

A maypole evokes an image of spring, and an otherwise "dead" cable morphs into a black snake in Proteus' vision of the machinery. This vivid description of technology stands in stark contrast to the fate of nature in confrontation with technology, symbolised by the 'dead and smoking' cat (*ibid.*).

The protagonist's quest for nature, a natural life 'by hands and wits', arguably arises from an estrangement from his bodily self (*PP* 134). Paul Proteus experiences the lack of a bodily self when he realises he is 'nothing more than his station in life': 'A vague panic welled up cold in his chest [...] He felt oddly disembodied, an insubstantial wisp, nothingness, a man who declined to be any more' (*PP* 126). Paul Proteus is appalled by the thought of himself being 'so well-integrated into the machinery of society and history as to be able to move in only one place, and along one line' (*PP* 37). The protagonist attempts an escape from the machinery he has been born into by

exercising his freedom to quit the system: ‘Somewhere outside of society, there was a place for a man – a man and wife – to live heartily and blamelessly, *naturally*, by hands and wits’ (PP 134). He envisions farming as a natural way of life where the body is rendered useful: ‘Like so many words with a little magic from the past still clinging to them, the word “farming” was a reminder of what rugged stock the present generation had come from, of how tough a thing a human being could be if he had to’ (PP 135). There is still one farmhouse left on the edge of town that has been overlooked by the national farming system, and Proteus decides to buy it and eventually move there with his wife. When he finally goes to his farm – ‘in the manner of a man dedicating his life to God’ – and asks the caretaker of the place to put him to work ‘guiding the hand of Nature’, he discovers that the hand he grasps is ‘coarse and sluggish, hot and wet and smelly’ (PP 234). He never goes back to the farm, which marks another instance of the impossible return to a life where the body is rendered useful and ‘dealing directly with nature’ (PP 127).

Despite Proteus’ futile return to nature: the protagonist engages in modest protests towards the implications of life in the technological landscape, all of which evoke notions of nostalgia.

Although he is ‘the man with the highest income in Ilium’ he drives a cheap and old Plymouth, as opposed to the voice-controlled cars available (PP 27). Moreover, he keeps a rusty pistol as ‘a harmless antique’ (ibid.). When he goes to inspect the farm he decides to buy, he indulges ‘an atavistic whim’ and sets his watch to correspond with a grandfather clock ‘off by twelve minutes’ (PP 120). However, the different atavistic whims he indulges in remain an aesthetic experience; ‘he was developing an appetite for novels wherein the hero lived vigorously and out-of-doors [...] woodsmen, sailors, cattlemen’ (PP 127). To the protagonist these characters have a mythical significance as he ‘doubted that a life could ever be as clean, hearty and satisfying in those books’ (ibid.). He nevertheless does not cease to imagine himself as these mythical beings: ‘like Wild Bill Hickock, like Dan’l Boone, like the bargeman on the book jacket’, a ‘Messiah’, a man encountering ‘ancient roadforks’ familiar in ‘folk tales all over the world’ (PP 212, 98, 278). Paul Proteus’ farm does not only represent *nature*, it is a ‘completely authentic microcosm of the past’ (PP 141). He

cannot successfully return to this previous state of an American life, epitomised by the pioneer farmer. The romanticised vision of this mythical figure in American culture proves ‘as irrelevant as a statue of Venus at the gate of a sewage-disposal plant’ (PP 234). The historical relics and mythical beings referred to in the narrative depict a nostalgia for a life where the body is indispensable to the essence of what it means to be human. However, in accordance with the deterministic logic evoked in the narrative; the American mythological past is rendered irrelevant to the progress of the protagonist and the people of Ilium New York. As Finnerty reflects: “If it weren’t for the goddamned people [...] always getting tangled up in the machinery” (PP 299). The human body and machinery are inextricably tangled up, and nostalgia remains an aesthetic as opposed to a possible return to an idealised past.

Crisis of American mythology: Freedom and Second Creation

Player Piano is a portrait of an imagined future, yet refers explicitly to significant historical events and people that are specific to an American context. The futurism of the novel is thus located on a historical continuum. Paul Proteus looks out the window in his office:

Here, in the basin of the river bend, the Mohawks had overpowered the Algonquins, the Dutch the Mohawks, the British the Dutch, the Americans the British. Now, over rotten bones and rotten palings and cannon balls and arrowheads, there lay a triangle of steel and masonry buildings, a half-mile on each side – the Ilium Works. Where men had once howled and hacked at one another, and fought nip-and-tuck with nature as well, the machines hummed and whirred and clicked [...] (PP 9).

The historical echoes in ‘an old battlefield at peace’ suggest how the machines are the latest in a succession of victorious powers (PP 8). The latter has been made possible by developments in technology that are linked with historical people, such as Edison and Norbert Wiener. Goody (2011, 150) argues that the mention of Norbert Wiener, ‘a mathematician [...] way back in the nineteen-forties’, illustrates how the machine society initiated by Edison has moved, in stages, towards a

cybernetic age (*PP* 18). The thinking machines described in *Player Piano* embody a new Americanism, the consequence of a logical course of history (Goody, 150). Paul Proteus reflects that ‘the human situation was a frightful botch, but it was such a logical, intelligently arrived-at botch that he couldn’t see how history could possibly have led anywhere else’ (*PP* 107). The novel thus evokes a deterministic view on history. Furthermore, by outlining a lineage of oppressed people with the body of the American people the latest victim, the novel carries a textual negotiation of the American value of *freedom* and the myth of *second creation*.

The people of Ilium New York are provided for as ‘the lilies of the field’, living in prefabricated homes with picture windows, and machines doing the cooking, cleaning and IQ testing of every citizen (*PP* 3, 148). Consequently, people are left in a state of comfortable consumerism. This freedom from want, as well as a world without ‘mass starvation, mass imprisonment, mass torture, mass murder’, are the ‘fruits of peace’ made possible by ‘American know-how’ (*PP* 9-12).

‘Democracy owed its life to know-how’ as technological insight won the war (*PP* 7).

Simultaneously ‘thousands had been jailed under the antisabotage laws’ which suggests a totalitarian feature of the ruling system (*ibid.*). In this context, the novel negotiates the concept of *freedom*.

An understanding of the negotiation can be facilitated with one of Vonnegut’s contemporaries, Herbert Marcuse and his book *One-Dimensional Man* (1964). In the first chapter of this book he describes how a ‘comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom prevails in advanced industrial civilization, a token of technical progress’ (3). He argues that this unfreedom is a result of the manipulation of needs in industrial society, which is totalitarian ‘by virtue of the way it has organized its technological base’ (5). Marcuse distinguishes between true and false needs, and argues that false needs ‘have a societal content and function which are determined by external powers over which the individual has no control’ (7). The manipulation of individual needs into believing they are one’s own, when these are in reality ‘products of a society whose dominant interest demands repression’, echo the existence of the characters in *Player Piano* (Marcuse 7).

Their unfreedom resides in their exclusion from participation in ‘enterprises that make them feel useful’, a participation Marcuse arguably would name a true need (PP 271). Replacing this true need is the false need of total security: ‘a *complete* security package’ (PP 153). The characters in the novel fail to ‘get along anywhere outside the system’ because they have been made ‘slaves’ of the false need of security and idleness (PP 135, 252). Free time to watch television appears to have replaced freedom (PP 152). Despite having the right to ‘free speech, freedom of worship, the right to vote’; ‘[m]achines and organization and pursuit of efficiency have robbed the American people of liberty and the pursuit of happiness’ (PP 282).

Marcuse argues that the traditional terms of economic, political, and intellectual liberties need to be redefined in negative terms as to apply to his contemporary society. Thus, ‘[p]olitical freedom would mean liberation of the individuals *from* politics over which they have no effective control’ (Marcuse 6). *Player Piano* illustrates a similar argument in depicting a society where politics and government are separated. Instead, government and machines are as integrated as a patient with a ‘diseased brain’, which again ‘have exceeded the personal sovereignty willingly surrendered [...] by the American people’ (PP 281-2). The novel arguably negotiates the American value of freedom as equal to emancipation from material needs, and rearticulates freedom as liberation *from* ‘the machinery of society’ (PP 37).

In his book *America as Second Creation: Technology and Narratives of New Beginnings* (2003), David E. Nye describes how most Americans in the 19th century believed in the simple story that the natural world was incomplete and needed technological improvements that would express the pattern latent in it (9). Technological foundation stories are literary representations of this belief: In the technological foundation story the original landscape disappears and is replaced by a second creation, aligning humanity with a god-like figure and nature subdued and transformed (Nye 13). Nye points out the importance of the technological foundation story in American mythology: ‘The narrative has become so deeply embedded in American thinking that it has ceased to be merely a story. It has become a national myth of origin.’ (292).

The myth of second creation relies on the ‘proposition that America was empty, undeveloped space waiting for the fructifying touch of a new people’ (ibid.). The reality was that new technologies disturbed or displaced other peoples, predominantly the Native Americans, and counter-narratives resist or reimagine this technological change (Nye 17). The work of Henry David Thoreau is an example of a counter-narrative tradition focused on damage to the environment (Nye 293). There is an explicit reference to Thoreau in *Player Piano*. Paul Proteus warns Finnerty that the cops are after him and warns him that he can be jailed, to which Finnerty responds with an anecdote about Thoreau and Emerson: “[...] Thoreau was in jail because he wouldn’t pay a tax to support the Mexican War. He didn’t believe in the war. And Emerson came to see him. ‘Henry’, he said, ‘why are you here?’ And Thoreau said, ‘Ralph, why *aren’t* you here?’” (PP 132). Paul then reflects that ‘the big trouble really was finding something to believe in’ (ibid.). *Player Piano* is arguably not a technological foundation story, neither is it a counter-narrative. However, the juxtaposition in the text of the privilege and spirituality of the managers and engineers with the displaced people of Ilium illustrate a negotiation of the national myth of origin. In the text, the narrative of second creation is no longer ‘something to believe in’, which evokes the notion of a crisis of American mythology (PP 132).

The managers and engineers have ‘the sense of spiritual importance in what they [are] doing’ (PP 62). Kroner, the manager of the Eastern Division, ‘personified the faith, the near-holiness, the spirit of the complicated venture’ (PP 45). Reverend Lasher argues how the ‘crusading spirit of the managers and engineers’ arise from their own belief in advertisements dating back to World War II: ‘those ads about the American system, meaning managers and engineers, that made America great. When you finished one, you’d think the managers and engineers had given America everything: forests, rivers, minerals, mountains, oil—the works.’ (PP 87). The advertised second creation brought about by the managers and engineers aligns them with god-like figures. This notion arrives at its apex in a play held every year at the Meadows, the annual gathering of the managers and engineers, and serves as an allegory for the spiritual importance of their work. In short, an old man

‘with a white beard reaching to his waist, wearing a long white robe and golden sandals’ enacts the role of the Sky Manager, the embodiment of the spirit of engineering (*PP* 192).

Reverend Lasher, one of the leaders of the Ghost Shirt Society, ‘used to tell [the congregation] that the life of their spirit in relation to God was the biggest thing in their lives, and that their part in the economy was nothing by comparison’ (*PP* 86). The people of Ilium have been engineered out of their part in the economy ‘and they’re finding out – most of them – that what’s left is just about zero [...]. For generations they’ve been built up to worship competition and the market, productivity and economic usefulness, and the envy of their fellow men – and boom! it’s all yanked out from under them.’ (*ibid.*). Reverend Lasher describes the ‘spiritual disaster’ in Ilium where there is no higher purpose to worship, a whole culture ‘shot to hell’ (*PP* 120, 86).

The contrast between a displaced people, whose religion and culture is rendered irrelevant, and an elite with a self-serving purpose has its echoes in American history. The reference is made explicit in the novel in the name of the revolutionary group the Ghost Shirt Society. The Ghost Dance religion was the last bastion of Native American resistance to white settlement, and the Ghost Shirts their militant branch (*PP* 260). The novel suggests that history has come full circle: “‘The machines are to practically everybody what the white men were to the Indians. People are finding that, because of the way the machines are changing the world, more and more of their old values don’t apply anymore’” (*PP* 261). The white minority and their technological superiority over the Native Americans have returned as a white minority and their technology that is superior to the people of Ilium, both courses of history leading to a whole culture ‘shot to hell’ (*PP* 86). The imagery employed in the narrative further dissolves the boundary between the fate of the Native Americans and the fate of the people in Ilium. Proteus’ wife Anita counts the ‘scalps’ of the people who competed with Proteus for his job, and lost (*PP* 125). The use of the image of scalps is determined by the ideology of the system embodied by Anita’s mechanics: her disturbingly rational and systematic approach. Furthermore, there are other allusions to the casualties of history’s progress in the novel. Anita has decorated her home in a colonial style: ‘An iron cauldron, big enough to boil a

missionary in, swung at the end of a long arm in the fireplace, and below it, like so many black offspring, were a cluster of small pots' (*PP* 103). The depiction of the fireplace alludes to the fate of coloured children in a colonial past, transformed into an aesthetic to be enjoyed by the beholder.

In light of the novel's negotiation of the myth of second creation: the textual representation of American history evokes criticism of the transformation of violence and submission into an aesthetic experience, whether it is a fireplace, or a myth. However, there is one of history's aesthetic qualities that is not undermined in the novel: the significance of a revolution as a symbol. Importantly, this aesthetic is not linked with a specifically American context, it rather points to the universal significance of *integrity*. In the midst of his crisis the protagonist is relieved by an attack on his integrity as the only call to action in a society where there is nothing to believe in: 'For once his dissatisfaction with his life was specific. He was reacting to an outrage that would be regarded as such by almost any man in any period in history. He had been told to turn informer on his friend, Ed Finnerty. This was as basic an attack on integrity as could be [...]' (*PP* 125). Arguably, the relief arises from the protagonist's identification with the origin of his dissatisfaction. The aesthetic of nostalgia that characterises the narration evokes images of community, embodiment and historical relics associated with agency (such as Proteus' rusty pistol). Yet, perhaps most importantly, these images share an association with integrity, the threat to which 'any man in any period in history' would react (*ibid.*). The naming of the revolutionary group the Ghost Shirt Society evokes nostalgia for integrity, as the Native American resistance failed, yet proved "'[t]hat being a good Indian was as important as being a good white man – important enough to fight and die for, no matter what the odds [...]' (*PP* 300). By the end of the novel, Proteus observes Lasher, 'the chief instigator of it all', and sees the he is contented by having 'created the revolution as a symbol' (*PP* 306). Lasher toasts the other rebels: "'To all good Indians [...] past, present and future. Or more to the point – to the record'" (*PP* 306). The protagonist joins in on the toast, which elicits the following reaction from a previous member of Ilium Historical Society: "'This isn't the end, you know [...]. Nothing ever is, nothing ever will be – not even Judgment Day.'" (*PP* 263,

307). The ending of the novel affirms the notion developed throughout the text: what is seemingly the end, thus the beginning of the new, is bound to be repeated as a natural course of history bound by fate outside of human control. The record affirming man's integrity will nonetheless remain as a symbol of human dignity in the technological landscape.

Chapter 2, *Crash*: ‘Aesthetic of Defamiliarization’

An intellectual nexus can be traced between the two narratives *Player Piano* and *Crash*, specifically with regards to the question whether progress – or rather the possibility of a linear characterisation of the protagonist – is possible when the psychology of the subject is confronted with technology. *Player Piano* undermines an ideology based on technology as instigator of freedom and historical progress by foregrounding determinism and a circular view on history. *Crash* appears less explicit in terms of its political position. However, in *Crash* the omnipresent mechanisation of society is translated into the image of circling traffic patterns: a landscape that constricts the potential for progress by an illusory energetic movement. The psychological trauma of a car crash epitomises this notion in the text. In *Player Piano* the characters are displaced from work and bodily agency, which results in nostalgia for a historical period when the body was useful. In *Crash*, the characters are similarly subject to a loss of control, yet in a society where body and technology are increasingly, and brutally, fused together. In the text, technology perverts and deconstructs the body and images of defamiliarization serve to illustrate the human condition in a technological landscape.

‘Crisis of Narration’: the Quest for the Real in the Technological Landscape

‘We live inside an enormous novel. It is now less and less necessary for the writer to invent the fictional content of his novel. The fiction is already there. The writers task is to invent the reality’ J.G. Ballard.

This quote is from Ballard’s introduction to the 1995 edition of *Crash*, in which he describes *Crash* as ‘an extreme metaphor for an extreme situation, a kit of desperate measures only for use in an extreme crisis’ (Introduction). The crisis is arguably his own; life inside ‘an enormous novel’ has made ‘the techniques and perspectives of the traditional 19th century novel’ insufficient in order to illustrate a representation of reality in literature (Introduction). Ballard describes the reality he observes as ‘a world ruled by fictions of every kind’, from advertising to the television screen, the sum of which is metaphorically represented as ‘an enormous novel’ (Introduction). According to

Ballard, 'the writer knows nothing any longer' and all he can do is offer the reader 'the contents of his own head' (Introduction). Consequently, from Ballard's description of the position of the writer in the 20th century it is possible to infer a 'crisis of narration', for which *Crash* is an 'extreme metaphor' (Introduction). The following will explore how this crisis is mirrored in the narration of *Crash*.

In his book *Narrative in Fiction and Film: An Introduction* (2000), Jakob Lothe emphasises that 'the narrator in a narrative text must be clearly distinguished from the author of the text' (20). The name of the narrator in *Crash*, James Ballard, appears to invite a reading based on the obfuscation of the distinction Lothe describes. However, adhering to the importance of this distinction the present discussion will not argue that the narrator James Ballard exists outside 'the linguistic structure which constitutes him' (21), more specifically in the physical shape of the author James Graham Ballard. Nevertheless, several themes and aesthetic qualities in the narrative, partly expressed through the narrator, invite the implied reader to explore *Crash* as an expression of an author's crisis of narration. The following argument is based on the dialectic between the literary persona, J.G. Ballard, who voices the introduction, and the narrator in the main body of the novel, James Ballard. This dialectic serves to illustrate the notion of a crisis of narration.

Ballard argues in the introduction how 'Freud's classical distinction between the latent and manifest content of the dream, between the apparent and the real, now needs to be applied to the external world of so-called reality' (Introduction). In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) Freud illustrates this distinction by comparing the dream with a picture-puzzle: by replacing 'each separate element [of the dream] by a syllable or word that can be presented by that element in some way or another [...] [t]he words which are put together in this way are no longer nonsensical but may form a poetical phrase of the greatest beauty and significance.' (382). In his book *The Psychological Fictions of J.G. Ballard* (2009) Samuel Francis notes that Ballard is 'problematically claiming for his [...] fiction a quality of latent psychological meaning akin to that claimed by Freud for the dream' (67). Francis queries whether a reading of Ballard's fiction in accordance with this logic is

possible without ‘the expertise of the psychoanalyst and the access to free associations from the dream content otherwise available to the analyst in the psychoanalytic encounter’ (67). It is nonetheless interesting to approach the novel as a series of seemingly nonsensical images, that may form ‘a poetical phrase’, when assembled from the ‘dreamlike logic’ of the narration (C 98). The technique that emerges from this idea, which is manifested in the text, is arguably the ‘kit of desperate measures’ employed to assuage Ballard’s crisis of narration in the technological landscape.

One of the aesthetic qualities of *Crash* can be described as a *blending of subject and object*. Corin Depper (2009) notes that Ballard¹’s decision to give the narrator his own name creates a *malerisch* blending of figure and ground (61). The author as *subject*, from whom the contents of the novel originate, blends with the *object* that is the novel. This notion is further developed as the ideas suggested in the introduction are mirrored in the following narrative. Ballard argues that ‘[t]he most prudent and effective method of dealing with the world around us is to assume it is a complete fiction’. Reality no longer serves as a point of reference for literary production as the fiction ‘is already there’. Furthermore, in his description of the writer’s position Ballard queries whether the “artificial horizon” of literature – a linear narrative, measured chronology and ‘consular characters grandly inhabiting their domains within an ample time and space’ – can provide a framework within which to articulate reality (Introduction). James Ballard’s experience of the external world echoes Ballard’s own: ‘I realized that the entire zone which defined the landscape of my life was now bounded by a continuous artificial horizon [...]’ (C 40). The aesthetic qualities of the novel reflect a *breaking down of clear lines*, arguably in order to explore reality beyond the artificial horizon of life and literature in the technological landscape.

The *malerisch* quality is characteristic of the narration of *Crash*; there is a continuous notion of breaking down clear lines (Depper, 60-1). This can be exemplified by the transition between the

¹ From this point on *Ballard* refers to the narrator of the introduction, a textual embodiment of an author, and *James Ballard* refers to the narrator in the main body of the novel.

chapters, which blur in the continuity of the narrative. Chapter 3 ends with the following depiction of James Ballard's erection: 'the brief glimmer of my first erection since the accident, stirred through the cavernosa of my penis' (C 27). The immediacy of the glimmer of an erection continues in chapter 4 as '[t]his quickening impulse', without temporal, spatial or linguistic distance.

In a similar manner the distinction between narrative elements such as doctor and patient becomes increasingly confused (Depper 61). After a car crash Dr. Helen Remington is under the care of Dr. Robert Vaughan who is not a physician, but a computer scientist with a Phd. His relationship with James Ballard is depicted as a 'skilled partnership of surgeons': their sexual behaviour and fantasies 'the only means of re-energizing [the] wounded and dying victims' (C 157). In perhaps the most unsettling example, there is a notion of breaking down the line between the subject and *death* as object. A quote from the narrator's wife Catherine may serve to illustrate this notion: 'They bury the dead so quickly - they should leave them lying around for months' (C 33). The voyeuristic and unsentimental wish to observe death as an object, embodied in the dead, stand in stark contrast to the following quote:

A policeman with a broom scattered lime on the blood smeared concrete beside the sports car. With careful strokes as if frightened of working out the complex human arithmetic of these injuries, he swept the darkening clots against the verge of the central reservation (C 127-8)

Jeannette Baxter makes the following commentary on this quote:

Notably, the official, instantaneous reaction to this violent display of contorted flesh and metal is to whitewash its history. With cautious brushstrokes the underlying physical and psychological realities of the car crash are overlaid and concealed before being swept aside and out of view. It is precisely this repression of material realities by dominant cultural systems which Ballard's art counters (103).

Throughout the novel ‘the underlying physical and psychological realities of the car crash’ is conveyed in images and the development of the characters (ibid.). The characters in the novel are rehearsing their deaths in car crashes, as well as chasing after accident scenes in the traffic circulating London (C 1, 185). The narrative leaves death ‘lying around’ as the characters and their, at times fatal, injuries are depicted in detail (C 33). Moreover, the inevitability of death is recreated in accident scenes, as opposed to making it an object that can be instantly ‘swept away’ (C 33, 127). The artificial horizon of life where death is repressed is effectively being negated.

The aesthetic devices in the novel appear to ‘invent reality’ in a textual endeavour to counter the implications of living in ‘a world ruled by fictions of every kind’. In a literal manner, the depictions of the car crashes blend the subject with the object as car in a confrontation of body and machine, life and death. Furthermore, this notion of *blending* appears as a quest for both material – and existential realities as they have been repressed ‘by dominant cultural systems’ (Baxter 103). James Ballard’s car crash obfuscates the physical limit between his body and the car. Moreover, the crash dissolves the boundary between the aggressive fiction of ‘billboard harangues and television films of imaginary accidents’ and the reality of a crash: ‘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, with the hostile gaze of other people, and the fact of a dead man’ (C 28). The quote suggests that his body is inscribed by an encyclopedia, a new and real language, as opposed to the fictional threat of an accident promulgated by the technologies of advertisement.

There is another example in the text of bodies inscribed by fictions, bodies that are re-imagined as their real counterpart. In other words, the novel negotiates the epitome of a negation of death and decay as it is manifested in celebrities and advertising. The “fiction” of eternal beauty, embodied by actresses such as Elizabeth Taylor, Greta Garbo and Brigitte Bardot, and promised by advertising, is deconstructed in the novel (C 99). The character Robert Vaughan dreams of dying in a car crash

with Elizabeth Taylor; 'his only true accident' (C 1). While planning for the crash he rearranges her body in a series of images:

'The walls of his apartment near the film studios at Shepperton were covered with the photographs he had taken through his zoom lens each morning as she left her hotel in London [...] At his apartment [James Ballard] watched him matching the details of her body with the photographs of grotesque wounds in a textbook of plastic surgery' (C 1).

Vaughan's devising of the death of Elizabeth Taylor evokes a voyeurism distinct from a fascination with the beauty of the film actress; Vaughan deconstructs the surface of her appearance into 'a broken mosaic', a contrast to her appearance on a television screen (C 3).

In order to assuage an experience of crisis, and bring forth the real, Ballard devises an aesthetic that can be described with the words of the critic Nicholas Ruddick as 'the liberation of a "deep" real associated with the unconscious' (Francis 107-8). There is a notion of "setting free" 'that real world of violence calmed and tamed within our television programmes and the pages of news magazines' (C 26). He devises this 'liberation' by using the car as a 'total metaphor for man's life in today's society', more specifically, the cultural significance of the car as a vehicle of attraction and simultaneously death (Introduction). James Ballard's experience of 'potent confusions of fiction and reality' echoes Ballard's argument in the introduction. The narrator sees his surroundings as a 'huge accumulation of fictions' and the crash 'the only real experience [he] had been through for years' (C 45, 28). To the narrator the crash is real because the experience allows for a "setting free" of the unconscious association between sexuality and violence. After the crash James Ballard becomes obsessed with 'the sexual possibilities of everything around [him]', more specifically, the sexual possibilities of violence. James Ballard thus becomes the embodiment of the ideas suggested in the introduction, more specifically, as a 'nightmare marriage between sex and technology'. The latter can be identified in the novel in the imagery employed to depict the marriage between James Ballard and his wife Catherine. After the crash, Catherine sees Ballard as an 'emotional cassette', a

technology that allows ‘experience of a type her own life and sexuality had taught her to understand’ (C 26, 38). Catherine’s ‘pleasantly promiscuous mind, fed for years on a diet of aircraft disasters and war newsreels, of violence transmitted in darkened cinemas, made an immediate connection between [James Ballard’s] accident and all the nightmare fatalities of the world perceived as part of her sexual recreations’ (C 34). In other words, their marriage becomes a nightmare marriage between sex and technology.

Ballard’s crisis of narration, as it is described in the introduction, and the narration of the main body of the novel amount to an aesthetic of defamiliarization: the two texts depict an ontological crisis where author and narrator are estranged from their environment as a source of reality. Another quotation from the narrative may serve to connect the above argument with the following:

The enormous energy of the twentieth century, enough to drive the planet into a new orbit around a happier star, was being expended to maintain this immense motionless pause (C 124).

The narrator’s description of a traffic jam, and the paradox of enormous energy accumulated to serve immobility, suggest the political position of the narrative; the ‘metalized landscape’ of technology precludes progress (C 50). *Traffic* as either an ‘immense motionless pause’ or as a ‘constant and unchanging’ pattern mirror the narrative structure as a whole (C 124, 50). The novel starts with a depiction of Vaughan’s death, a point to which the narrative returns (Francis 112). The intervening plot is a series of images depicting enormous energy brought to a halt in orgasms and the crashes that roused them. The break in linearity, superseded by circular movements that can only end in acknowledging the inevitability of death, echoes Ballard’s ‘crisis of narration’ as well as James Ballard’s trauma, both subjects in a technological landscape.

Crisis as Trauma: the ‘Compulsive Return’

Some critics, among them Jean Baudrillard, have made distinctly un-psychological readings of *Crash* (Francis 108). However, if a psychological reading is attempted, a different dimension of

symbolism can be identified, one that is not void of affect and emotion as Baudrillard argues. To the contrary, there are strong emotions at play in the narrative, yet they are filtered through the experience of trauma. The following will explore the presence of trauma in *Crash* and how it disrupts a linear development of the characters' psychology. In this context an understanding of crisis will be developed in light of Freud's theory of the development of traumatic neurosis.

In *Crash* technology has a traumatising potential, represented by car-crashes, and is consequently the force pushing the characters into an orbit around the experience of the accident. Once again, if the novel is conceived of as an 'extreme metaphor'; the orbiting, circulating psychology and physical movement of the characters is an allegory of the traumatised mind. The character James Ballard 'is unable to point [his] car' in the direction he is meant to go and he imagines his head as fitted 'with a powerful gyroscope that pointed only towards the foot of the airport flyover', which is where he had his accident (84). This experience of a compulsive return to the scene of the crash is symptomatic of trauma, as described by Freud in his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Here, Freud regards traumatic neurosis 'as a consequence of an extensive breach being made in the protective shield against stimuli', leading to compulsively repetitive dreams and other behaviours understood as 'endeavouring to master the stimuli retrospectively' (31-32). The car can be regarded, in a literal and symbolic sense, as a 'protective shield': it is designed to protect the human body in the event of a collision with another physical object, in a symbolic sense it has a domesticated interior encapsulated by a strong shield protecting the private – from the brutal public sphere. The breach of this 'protective shield' will in both a literal and a symbolic sense be traumatising: the imminence of death by a threatening destruction of the physical body, and the forced exposure of the private in the public domain. Accordingly, two dimensions of a 'compulsive return' can be identified.

A compulsive, psychological and physical return to 'the scene of the accident', at the mercy of the 'powerful gyroscope' of trauma, is a persistent element in the novel. This narrative structure can be viewed through Freud's idea of 'mastering the stimuli retrospectively'. All the characters in *Crash*

have already, or are about to be, involved in a car crash. The trauma of the crash disrupts the characters' lives and they are subsequently drawn to the figure of Robert Vaughan 'whose deformed postures reveal the secret formulas of their minds and lives' (9). Vaughan has himself been involved in a serious crash on his motorcycle, and this 'secret formula' involves 'giving each of [the characters] what [they] most wanted and most feared' (76). The latter can be exemplified by re-enactments, imaginary or real, of the threat of bodily destruction. In Freud's words this process is part of mastering the stimuli 'by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis' (32).

The surprise element of trauma eliminates 'the profound feeling of foreboding' associated with anxiety, the return to which James Ballard experiences as 'a long punitive expedition into [his] own nervous system' (C 85, 159). The repetitive nature of trauma appears in Ballard immediately after he crashes as 'the narrow angle between the bonnet and fenders seemed to [his] exhausted mind to be repeated in everything around [him]' (C 13). Upon watching the traffic from his balcony after he has returned home he feels 'an undefined sense of extreme danger, almost as if an accident was about to take place involving all [the cars he is watching]' (C 37). In a third example he watches the 'traffic that seemed about to re-enact a slow-motion dramatization of [his] crash' (C 56). In accordance with these visions of repetition, the structure of the narrative traces how James Ballard confronts and relives the traumatic accident, alongside and finally in a physical union with Robert Vaughan. Vaughan has made himself a "guide" to the post-crash life of injured people, indulging in their wounds and recreating crashes for, and into them. When James Ballard is moved from the scene of his crashed car, he '[a]lready [...] felt isolated from the reality of this accident' (C 15). Yet, he 'can still remember with the painful accuracy of a never-to-be-eluded nightmare' the two vehicles he missed and the one he hit on the day of his crash (C 11). Vaughan's violent behaviour and 'perverse logic' bridges these incongruent emotions as a physical representation of the subconscious nature of trauma. James Ballard 'is unconsciously steering [himself]' into Vaughan's path, who represents the inescapable 'compulsive return', and acknowledges the need 'for some

positive response to [James Ballard's] crash' (C 119, 81). This response is only positive through an understanding of it as the mind's compulsive mechanism of 'mastering the stimuli' (the accident), as the actions themselves are destructive. It is an example of the subconscious attempt to retrospectively process the stimuli caused by the threat of bodily deconstruction in the crash.

In a reading of *Crash* similar to the one presented above, Samuel Francis (2011) points out 'the novel's obsessive fixation with epidermal wounds, whether the blood-blister on Helen Remington's dead husband's hand or the gradually changing pattern of bruises on James Ballard's chest after his crash' (112). Francis argues that these fixations inscribe on the characters' physicality Freud's image of trauma as a breach in the organism's protective shield (ibid.). Francis also argues that the structure of the narrative mirrors the development of trauma; originating from Vaughan's collision to which it inexorably returns (Francis 112).

James Ballard reflects on his wife's description of how their personal possessions were scattered after the crash:

The isolation of these pieces of our lives, as if intact memories and intimacies had been taken out of doors and arranged by a demolition squad, was part of the same remaking of the commonplace which in a tragic way I had brought about in the death of Remington' (C 39)

This quote juxtaposes the two dimensions of 'compulsive return' as outlined in the above. James Ballard thinks back and compares two consequences of the breach in the 'protective shield against stimuli', a protection usually provided by the car that is now destroyed. Firstly, the forced exposure and 'isolation' of private 'memories and intimacies' and secondly the deconstruction and subsequent death of Remington. A continuous process of defamiliarization can be identified in the narrative by this 'remaking of the commonplace' (C 39). The three central commonplace elements being remade are the car, the human body and human sexuality. So far this chapter has not properly addressed the ubiquitous references to sexuality in the narrative. At this point, this will be approached as a metaphor for the obfuscation of the limits between the public and the private.

The forced exposure of the private in public repeats itself in several sexual acts in the novel. The nature of James Ballard's sexual relations with his wife changes after the accident, a change he describes as 'the beginnings of a new sexuality divorced from any possible physical expression' (C 24). The couple continue to express sexuality physically, but the act always involves an element of simulacrum such as descriptions of an 'elaborate fantasy' about someone not involved in the act, or descriptions of James Ballard's damaged car (C 24, 33). The sexual acts they engage in with other people are always carried out in public spaces, preferably in moving cars. Helen Remington and the other characters 'enter that period of unthinking promiscuity through which most people pass after a bereavement' (C 96). Although it is primarily Helen Remington who is confronted most brutally with death, all the characters are bereaved of a wholesome shield against stimuli. In one example, James Ballard is '[w]ithout thinking[...]suddenly tempted to reach forward and take [Vaughn's] penis in [his] hands' (C 70). This is the first in a series of sexual impulses between James Ballard and Vaughan, yet in the event of a consummation of a sexual act it would be 'as stylized and abstracted as those recorded in Vaughan's photographs (C 82). Vaughan photographs intimacies performed by unknowing people in cars, and a sexual act between him and Ballard would involve the same exposure of privacy and 'the erotic dimension [...] absent' (C 81). The lack of eroticism in these sex-scenes can in this context be viewed as a result of the "non-sexuality" of acts that are 'divorced from any possible physical expression'. In other words, the acts are not erotic because they are compulsive returns to conjunctions of the ultimate privacy and the brutal public, initiated by the trauma of the crash.

As described previously, Robert Vaughan can be viewed as an embodiment of the 'compulsive return', this is similarly relevant in this context of its 'second dimension'. James Ballard says to his wife Catherine: 'It isn't sex that Vaughan is interested in, its technology' (C 93). Vaughan is more or less continuously engaged in sexual activities, yet the framing of the acts always involves a technological presence. Vaughan's sexual acts are frequently mediated by a voyeuristic zoom lens or enlarged pictures of an otherwise private body. He forces his own sexuality on other people, and

forces other people's sexuality into a mosaic of his own obsessions. James Ballard can 'never leave' Vaughan 'as long as he [provokes him] with his own sex', because this provocation retraces the experience of an involuntary display of privacy within the 'nightmare logic' of trauma (C 2, 15).

The Spectres of Technology: Defamiliarization and the Uncanny

The process of defamiliarization has been described by the Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky. By disrupting the modes of ordinary linguistic discourse literature 'makes the familiar seem strange' and thus renews the readers sensation of life ("Art as Technique", 1916, 16). The linguistic dynamic of a new sensation of the familiar, shares similarities with the psychological dynamic of the "uncanny", as they both partake in the 'remaking of the commonplace' as it is described in *Crash*.

In addition to the concept of defamiliarization, the "uncanny", a concept from psychoanalytic theory, can be employed in order to investigate an aesthetic quality within the narration of *Crash*. In his 1919 essay Freud defines "uncanny" as 'something repressed which *recurs*': 'for this uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old – established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression' (13). Freud identifies uncanny experience with the traumatic 'compulsive return', and the aesthetic product of the uncanny pervades the narrative in *Crash*. This can be exemplified in the character Robert Vaughan, whose ambiguous existence within the narrative gives an uncanny effect. He disappears and returns unannounced, his life a 'temporal no-zone' as an embodiment of the repressed trauma which repeats itself (C 138).

Furthermore, he embodies a liminal state between life and death, human and machine.

There are several references within the narrative to Vaughan's resurrection, in one example he is 'covered with flies like a resurrected corpse' (C 172). Vaughan is described as 'an ugly machine', his body with 'an unhealthy and metallic sheen, like the worn vinyl of the car interior' (C 2, 71).

The limit between Vaughan and his car is increasingly difficult to discern. Vaughan is not attractive outside the car and the car disintegrates without his presence (C 94, 181). But perhaps most interestingly; even though he is not physically there, 'like a spectre', his presence can be felt (C

178). James Ballard describes how he is haunted by this spectre: '[...] I was continually aware of Vaughan's presence. He no longer followed me, but seemed to hover like an invigilator in the margins of my life, for ever monitoring my head' (C 50). By the end of the novel James Ballard is increasingly convinced that Vaughan was 'a projection of [his] own fantasies and obsessions' (C 181). Even though the narrative goes on to describe Vaughan's death in a car crash, this notion is never completely affirmed or discarded. In accordance with this thesis' approach to Vaughan, described in the previous subchapter, as an embodiment of the 'compulsive return', he is arguably finally revealed as such. A mere projection of a psychological condition, that can never really die because he will continuously be 're-born through those twisted radiator grilles and cascading windshield glass', of accidents waiting to happen (C 172).

In Freud's essay on the "uncanny" he refers to another perspective on this psychological concept, one that is described by E. Jentsch. Freud does not agree with his perspective as an exhaustive approach to the "uncanny" feeling, yet it can provide another aesthetic image of the psychological effect of a technological landscape. Jentsch describes "uncanny" as 'doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate' (Freud 5). At the Road Research laboratory James Ballard, and '[t]he audience of thirty or so visitors', watch a re-enactment of a car crash on a television screen: 'As we watched, our own ghostly images stood silently in the background, hands and faces unmoving while this slow-motion collision was re-enacted. The dram-like reversal of roles made us seem less real than the mannequins in the car' (C 103-4). The depiction of the scene evokes a spectral image of the human body; the juxtaposition of the animate and inanimate on a technological surface confuses the identification of a lifeless object. When James Ballard is recovering from his accident at the hospital his wife Catherine compares him to 'someone's victim at Madame Tussaud's' (C 20). His appearance as an inanimate wax-figure echoes through a description of Catherine as a doll and Helen Remington putting on her clothes 'like a department-store window-dresser jerking a garment on to mannequin (C 92, 96). There are several other references to people as mannequins;

this persistent imagery can be viewed as the psychological effect of an uncanny defamiliarization of the human presence in a technologized landscape.

Chapter 3, *The Circle*: 'Aesthetic of Transparency'

In *The Circle* an idea of the circular, stagnation as opposed to progress, is conveyed through the development of the protagonist Mae Holland from an autonomous individual towards a virtual version of herself that appears to be defined by the norms of Social Media. The protagonist appears increasingly trapped inside the Circle under the constant surveillance of a deified technological presence. In the Circle's rhetoric the word surveillance is replaced by transparency and the novel traces how the protagonist, and increasingly the world, 'go transparent' (TC 220). The condition of being transparent demands constant observation of the body, controlled by technologies such as sensors measuring bodily functions. Moreover, being transparent may be understood as "to cast no shadow". The notion of the subject as shadowless has a dual function in the narration of *The Circle*. The company's ideology promulgates a shadowless existence as it may be understood in moralistic terms: 'the perfectibility of human beings' is made possible by omnipresent surveillance as people 'don't have to be tempted by darkness anymore' (TC 291). As a narrative aesthetic in a dialectic with the ideology of the company, the nature of the shadowless evokes ideological criticism. This dual function will be further explored in the following.

Ontological crisis: Aestheticization of Technology in a Religious Context

I have previously argued how, in *Player Piano*, the textual representation of American history suggests an inherent and characteristically American instinct for technology. The genesis of the nation was arguably induced by technological means and *Player Piano* appears to argue that the instinct this process gave birth to has survived the course of history. In a similar manner, *The Circle* alludes to American history as an echo of the mentality of the novel's characters, more specifically, as 'the unrestrained Manifest Destiny of it all' (TC 368). In addition to this explicit reference, the novel describes the company's ideology as a resurgent Puritan mentality. The protagonist Mae Holland was recruited to work at the Circle by her friend Annie, who 'came from money, generations of money [...]' (TC 13). Mae wonders how it was possible 'that this scattershot and

ridiculous person [...] had risen so quickly and high through the Circle?', and reflects that it was a testament to 'Annie's inner will, some mysterious and core sense of destiny' (TC 14). 'Annie's family line went back to the *Mayflower*', and her job at the Circle is to communicate with authorities in other countries spreading the company's ideology – which increasingly becomes revealed as a belief in 'the perfectibility of human beings' (TC 360, 291). In light of Annie's lineage, her 'core sense of destiny', and her work of spreading an ideology that envisions a shadowless humanity: the character serves as an embodiment of the American belief in Manifest Destiny and Puritanism (TC 14). In his article "Psychoanalysis in the Age of Bewilderment: On the return of the oppressed" psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas (2015) describes the Puritan mentality as 'the idealized self aiming to save the world through the display of an exemplary being' (2). Manifest Destiny and Puritanism arise from distinct periods in history, yet share the conception of an innocent population serving as exemplary beings – destined by god to spread their ideals. The description of the character as 'scattershot and ridiculous' conveys the novel's critical perspective on the propagation of these beliefs. Despite the importance of Annie's lineage, her last name is never referred to (the full names of the other central characters are included in the text), which develops her symbolic function in the narrative. Annie's important position in the company establishes an association in the text between technology and religion; the porous limit between the two conveys one of the novel's central critical perspectives.

In *The Circle*, the omnipresence of technology is enabled by the inventions of the digital age. The digital tools provided by the company The Circle dissolves the barriers between the user, the net, and the world into one seamless experience, TruYou – a new self (Webb). This new digital self is under constant surveillance through online activity, in addition, the physical self is being watched by tiny cameras being placed around the world. In short, people are always watching and always being watched. In accordance with the company slogan 'PRIVACY IS THEFT', every human activity can and should be monitored, with the moralising effect that people 'don't have to be tempted by darkness anymore' (TC 303, 291).

In this context the novel traces *the fall* of the protagonist. Importantly, Mae Holland's *fall* is only framed as such by the impossible expectations for moral behaviour posed by the company ideology. The novel depicts the protagonist's loss of innocence, the threat of being thrown out of "Eden" a constant measure for correction of her behaviour and attitudes. The aesthetization of technology in a religious context effectively makes Mae Holland a firm believer in the omnipotent eye of god, the latter made manifest by the circular, eye-like shape of the company logo. As a narrative technique the process evokes the notion of an ontological crisis in which the protagonist confuses reality with its replacement in virtual space.

'MY GOD[...]. It's heaven', the protagonist reflects upon entering the Circle's campus for the first time (*TC 1*). It is 'shaped by the most eloquent hands' into an Edenic garden with squealing children, soft green hills, a fountain, fruit trees, and everything covered by a blue sky (*TC 1*). However, the image of 'eloquent hands' that have considered even the smallest detail of the landscape shapes the lasting impression of this opening description. It calls attention to the constructed nature of the landscape, its aesthetic qualities a seducing image rather than the presence of nature's innocence. It simultaneously calls attention to the narrative construction by inviting one to notice the eloquence of the writing hand of the implied author. Accordingly, from the first page of the novel it is possible to identify a central theme, and an ambition on behalf of the implied author: to place the aesthetization of technology in a religious context and to reveal the deceptive qualities of this aesthetization.

These two elements come together when the protagonist enters the part of campus that makes up the Circle's workplace: 'She pushed open the heavy door. The front hall was as long as a parade, as tall as a cathedral' (*TC 3*). Firstly, the image of pushing open the 'heavy door' of an office building made entirely of glass – where the elevator recognizes your face and subsequently welcomes you – creates a break in the otherwise 'immaculate' image of the Circle's headquarters (*ibid.*). Secondly, comparing the front hall with a cathedral is an obvious religious reference to a place of worship, and further, to the worship of icons. The guided tour Mae is given by Annie continues in the same

ominously foreshadowing mode. Annie shows Mae a painting of the founders of the company, nicknamed the Three Wise Men. In the painting they are ‘arranged in a pyramid’: ‘[t]he more she looked at it, the stranger it became. The artist had arranged it such that each of the Wise Men had placed a hand on another’s shoulder. It made no sense and defied the way arms could bend or stretch’ (*TC* 19, 25). The painting sums up the deceptive nature of the holiness of the Three Wise Men; an icon made to be worshipped in the pyramid shape of a Holy Trinity, yet on closer examination, this impression is superseded by the appearance of a three-headed monster. Eamon Bailey, one of the heads in the painting and ‘the public face of the company’, has a library where the ‘ceiling [is] stained glass, a fevered rendering of countless angels arranged in rings’ (*TC* 26). The depiction of angels arranged in an image of the company’s logo is contrasted with another presence in the library: ‘A model of the *Spruce Goose* – or was it the *Enola Gay*? – hung from the ceiling’ (*ibid.*). The two military aircrafts serve as potent images of man’s technological hubris and destruction; their placement next to the religious image suggests an eerie presence.

The text continuously juxtaposes the perfection of the Circle’s campus, its founders and employees, with subtle contrasts presented to the implied reader, effectively illustrating the illusion the protagonist is made part of. For instance, at the first party Mae attends she meets Francis. The first time she sees him, the sun is shining and his glasses are ‘reflecting blue’. His blue-eyed appearance is established when Mae looks at his still ‘blue glasses’ shortly after holding ‘her bottle up to the moon’ (*TC* 34-5). Francis’ blue eyes also reflect the uncritical faith Mae is about to internalize; she subsequently likens Francis, ‘unlike anyone she’d ever known’, with ‘evidence of God’ (*TC* 36). The discovery of a new species, like a frog or in this case Francis, seems to Mae to ‘confirm some divine showman, some celestial inventor’ (*TC* 36). Everywhere Mae looks within The Circle campus there is beauty and plenty, and images and rhetoric lead her to associate the abundance with a divine presence.

Before Mae begun her employment with the Circle, she was living in her hometown working for a utility company. Life at the Circle is the complete opposite of life in the ‘abyss in which she’d spent

the last few years' (TC 8). In addition to providing a sense of aesthetic relief to the aesthetic 'horror' of the outside world, the company saves her parents from an undignified life (TC 7). Her company insurance covers her father's MS illness thus saving her parents from life battling the merciless insurance companies of the outside world. Effectively, the company maps out life inside the Circle as paradise, and the outside world as an environment closer to hell. This mapping out of order versus chaos makes Mae increasingly dependent on life on campus:

Increasingly she found it difficult to be off-campus anyway. There were homeless people, and there were the attendant and assaulting smells, and there were machines that didn't work, and floors and seats that had not been cleaned, and there was everywhere the chaos of an orderless world. (TC 370)

The contrast between her previous life, and the illusion of perfection in her present, makes her constantly afraid of being banished from the Edenic garden that is the Circle. However, life in paradise comes at a cost: Mae trades away her privacy for the benefit of being constantly watched and judged in accordance with the company ideology. Mae gets corrected each time she fails to uphold a continuous level of online activity, failure for which she scolds herself: 'What kind of person was she? More than anything she was ashamed' (TC 189). Every action at odds with the company ideology becomes framed as immoral, thus laying the ground for *the fall*.

The protagonist arrives at the apex of this process after having borrowed, and returned, a kayak after a rental shop's closing hours. The act is observed by cameras placed at the beach where the rental shop is located, and framed as a crime, 'probable theft', by 'a citizen who doesn't want to be identified' (TC 271). The owner of the rental shop, Marion, identifies Mae as a regular customer when the police arrive at the beach: "'This is Mae Holland. She rents here all the time. She has the run of the place. How the hell did this happen? What's going on here?'" (ibid.). The police do not arrest her. Nevertheless, when Mae is confronted with the episode at the Circle the following day her act is framed as immoral as it is full of '[l]ies and aversions', in addition to her lack of concern

for her family as she didn't wear a life-preserver (*TC* 276). She is made to publicly repent this minor sin on stage in an auditorium in front of thousands of employees at the Circle. As a means of obtaining forgiveness from "god" in the shape of the company, she goes 'transparent' (*TC* 304). The latter entails life with a camera around her neck, filming her every move, and allowing anyone with a circle account to watch. The kayak-episode becomes *the fall* in the eyes of the threatening god of technology. The only way of remaining in paradise is to become an inseparable part of the eye itself.

The fall of the protagonist serves as an example of an ontological crisis as she is forced to abandon reality in favour of its virtual version. The kayak-episode represents a formative event in the development of the protagonist: her transition from an autonomous individual to a 'transparent' virtual version of herself (*ibid.*). At the moment she decides to borrow the kayak the narrative conveys her internal monologue on whether the act is acceptable or not: 'Was it theft?' (*TC* 264). She decides that Marion, given her 'free spirit', is likely to approve (*ibid.*). When her reasoning fails to persuade her superiors at the Circle, she gives in to the laws of morality as they are determined by the company. As neither the police nor Marion claims she has acted at odds with norms or law, it provides an example of an "invented" crime; it is a crime that is only framed as such by a company that can manipulate information – in this example from a religious perspective – provided by observing cameras. The nature of an act is thus decided by a virtual version of its moral implications.

In addition to the god of technology, another shadowless metaphorical presence in the text may serve to illustrate Mae Holland's ontological crisis. Book II of *The Circle* starts with the depiction of a shark: 'It was a bizarre creature, ghostlike, vaguely menacing and never still, but no one who stood before it could look away' (*TC* 307). The shark has been retrieved from the Marianas Trench, a project led by Stenton, one of the Three Wise Men. The animal appears ghostlike as it is 'near-translucent' and 'ethereal' in its movements, continuously circling its aquarium in the hunt for prey. When the animal consumes its pray, the process is visible: 'given the sharks translucent skin,

which allowed an unfettered view into its digestive system' (*TC* 307-8). The image of the shark, 'omnivorous and blind', yet simultaneously with a 'malevolent stare', may be read as a metaphor conveying the ideological criticism of *The Circle*.

The depiction of the shark, and the subsequent feeding of the insatiable animal, succeeds the scene where Mae Holland goes 'transparent' (*TC* 304). Similarly, she is devoured by 'this new era of transparency' much like 'the lobster was being processed, inside the shark, in front of her, with lightning speed and incredible clarity' (*TC* 383, 316). Simultaneously, the 'malevolent' stare of "the shark", the Circle, is always on her. The notion of the ideology of transparency and its omnivorous potential arrives at an apex when the shark is introduced to several other creatures retrieved from the Marianas Trench. Mae observes the shark entering the aquarium which contains, amongst other animals, an octopus and a seahorse with 'thousand babies': 'It ate everything, and deposited the remains quickly, carpeting the empty aquarium in a low film of white ash.' (*TC* 477). Prior to the event 'Mae seemed sure that the shark couldn't be their predator – after all Stenton had found them all in close proximity [...]' (*TC* 475). The process is watched with great fascination by the Three Wise Men, Mae and her watchers, who are 'now one hundred million, many of them terrified, many more in awe and wanting more of the same' (*TC* 477).

The shark as an omnivorous 'machine going about its work' is arguably a metaphor for the Circle as "a machine of omnivorous destruction": the company sees everything with its 'malevolent stare' without being seen (*TC* 476, 307). The metaphor is explicitly articulated through the voice of one of the characters in the narrative; 'Ty, born Tyler Alexander Gospodinov, [...] the first Wise Man' (*TC* 19). He invented TruYou and subsequently hired the other two Wise Men, which led to the genesis of the company the Circle. Mae enters a relationship with Ty, who presents himself as 'Kalden', concealing his identity. Ty turns from creator to critic of the company, and their relationship ends when Ty, now under his true identity, wants Mae's help to reveal the company; '[t]he fucking shark that eats the world', in 'a totalitarian nightmare' (*TC* 480-1). The rhetoric of transparency has political implications as the company claims it will strengthen democracy; '[t]here would never

again be a politician without immediate and thorough accountability’ and ‘no more back rooms, no more murky deal-making’ (TC 240-1). However, the narrative reveals how the invisible “shark”, the all-seeing eye of god, is totalitarian in its nature as it absorbs everyone and makes outcasts and criminals of those who object: ‘every time someone started shouting about the supposed monopoly of the Circle [...] soon enough it was revealed that that person was a criminal or deviant of the highest order. One was connected to a terror network in Iran. One was a buyer of child porn.’ (TC 240). The novel conveys how this form of totalitarian control involves power over information that can be manipulated, held back or disclosed to ensure the company’s position. In other words, the Circle is dismantling democracy in the name of ‘a purer kind of democracy’ (TC 415). The political implications are invisible, transparent, to faithful believers such as Mae Holland who sees the punishment of dissenters as ‘poetic justice’ (TC 240). Near the end of the novel, Mae declines to help Ty and ‘with a duty that felt holy, she’d told the world about Kalden being Ty’ (TC 490). The protagonist appears to have accepted the “religion” of the company, failing to see the true nature of the ‘shark that eats the world’ (ibid.).

Crisis of homogenization: Sight over Insight in the Technological Landscape

In his article “Psychoanalysis in the Age of Bewilderment” (2015), psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas describes what he sees as the profound changes offered by technology to the workings of the individual’s psychology. Bollas points out how the social media technology of the 21st century allows for an identification of the self with the technological object: ‘The workers in the assembly lines of the 19th century were estranged from their positions, but the 21st century self identifies himself as *part* of the machinery of communication, not simply a figure who assembles and works the object.’ (11). Bollas argues further how the globalised technologies of communication ‘promotes a global-self, a uniform being’ and describes the effect of homogenization on the self: ‘the need to eradicate difference and fashion a world of common beings. The promotion of homogeneity aims at the reduction of difference, the lessening of tensions, and the presumed increase in the productive potential of the human being.’ (16). The self as a technological object,

engaged in a process of homogenization in a global virtual reality, resonates with the depiction of the technological landscape in *The Circle*: the novel illustrates how the new self, the ‘TruYou’, mediates human experience and transforms diversity into ‘the one truth’ of the ‘global community’ (TC 21, 297, 446).

The Circle traces the protagonist in a process of homogenization: on the first page of the novel Mae Holland enters the Circle campus ‘trying to look as if she belonged’ (TC 1). The depiction of Mae wanting to blend with the environment continues as she moves further into the buildings on campus. Her face is constantly mirrored in an array of technological surfaces where Mae sees herself ‘looking worried [shaping] her mouth into a smile’ (TC 3). A few pages later Mae is horrified by a prank Annie subjects her to, yet she forces her mouth ‘to indicate some level of satisfaction’ (TC 8). Images of the protagonist composing her face ‘to look neutral’ continue throughout the novel (TC 88). Furthermore, the protagonist increasingly becomes an integral part of the technological surfaces that mirror her emotional expressions. Mae deposits her fingerprints and her birth certificate, and is given a tablet with her name inscribed on it. From her old laptop to this new digital device provided by the company, she is helped to transfer all her ‘stuff’, making the transition complete (42). The fingerprint ink developed by the company is invisible and the tablet ‘a gleaming object, translucent, its edges black and smooth as obsidian’ (TC 41-2). Mae Holland is ‘installed’ in life at the Circle, evoking the notion that her identity is transformed into a set of data, her old self becoming invisible, transparent, her new self a gleaming object (16).

The reality offered by the Circle through its digital tools, transforms subjectivity into ‘a logical model, a rhythm’ to which ‘[e]verything and everyone’ hews (TC 92). Mae’s work in Customer Experience at the Circle includes her in the same logical model, ‘a comfortable rhythm’; she answers ‘requests and questions [with a] menu of boilerplate responses’ on one screen, communicates with her superiors on a second, and lives her online social life on a third (TC 55, 49, 99). Consequently, Mae’s existence is consumed by technological objects, a notion that arrives at its apex when Mae goes transparent ‘in the interest of sharing all she saw and could offer the world’

(TC 304). It is interesting to note how Mae's essence increasingly becomes what she sees, or rather what the camera on her chest sees, which defines what she can 'offer the world', as opposed to experience drawn from her internal world. The novel depicts how she walks around campus carrying her *self* as a 'bracelet'; 'through a small frame on her right wrist' she can see 'what the camera was seeing' (TC 312). On the same bracelet she can monitor her viewers' reactions to what she says, observes and eats, which epitomises her process of homogenization as she constantly adjusts her behaviour to the demands of the crowd of watchers; 'transparency had taught her to measure every word' (TC 407).

The notion of human beings as technological objects may be exemplified by another scene in the *The Circle*. Mae accompanies Kalden to an underground level on campus where he shows her 'a large room, about the size of a basketball court, dimly lit but for a dozen spotlights trained on an enormous red metallic box, the size of a bus' (TC 218-9). The box is a storage unit for all the information processed through the camera of the first 'transparent' individual (ibid.) Mae says to Kalden: "'It looks like some kind of Donald Judd sculpture'" (TC 219). Kalden responds by quoting the artist: 'Things that exist exist, and everything is on their side' (ibid.). The allusion to the American artist evokes an image of a human being reduced to a material object, the metaphysical qualities traditionally associated with an essence of humanity rendered irrelevant by technological creativity.

The novel depicts how the protagonist comes to accept the material reality of herself as a stream of data – her subjective life increasingly eliminated. Mae feels 'mortified' when algorithms are used to create 'a matrix of [her] preferences' to benefit the presentation of a new digital tool (TC 125). What is presented as her 'essence' is in fact only 'some kind of mirror, but it was incomplete, distorted' (TC 125). She subsequently becomes obsessed with perfecting her technological mirror image, her essence, while her subjective experience deteriorates; drinking herself to sleep, increasingly estranged from her parents, and a 'wave of despair' gathering in her chest (TC 334, 195). To distract herself from 'a fathomless blackness spreading under her' she works relentlessly

seeking validation from the global community; she felt the tear opening up in her again, larger and blacker than ever before. But then watchers from all over the world had reached out, sending their support, their smiles – she'd gotten millions, tens of millions [...] (TC 333, 465). The protagonist's virtual existence becomes an accumulation of images, 'beaches in SriLanka and Brazil [...] a Namibian desert', and short messages from customers validating her as 'a role model and inspiration', herself a spectacle of entertainment to millions of watchers (TC 333-4, 328).

The subject as spectacle has been of wide concern to a number of theorists in the 20th century. In his book *The Society of the Spectacle* Guy Debord (1967) expresses his views on the proliferation of technological images in society:

'The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation' (12).

By the end of *The Circle* '[t]en million people were now transparent, the movement irreversible' (TC 490). The novel appears as an actualisation of Debord's criticism as worldwide transparency leaves out the necessity of experiencing life directly. The SeeChange cameras (small unnoticeable cameras placed all over the world) 'opens up the possibility of visual surrogates' and the only place a person needs to look or go is to their screen (TC 70). The novel's critical position to technological representation of reality is voiced through the character Mercer – Mae's ex-boyfriend who still lives in their hometown. Mercer criticises Mae for looking at him 'through a hundred other people's eyes' as one of the effects of her technologically mediated existence (TC 131), an echo of Debord's idea of the spectacle as 'a social relationship between people that is mediated by images' (12). The text provides several examples of Mercer's criticism of the social universe Mae represents: 'You comment on things, and that substitutes for doing them. You look at pictures of Nepal, push a smile button, and you think that's the same as going there.' (TC 261). In Debord's words: 'All that was once directly lived has become mere representation' (12).

In his essay “The Ecstasy of Communication” Jean Baudrillard (1987) devises an image of human bodies as ‘monitoring screens’, reminiscent of the subject as spectacle (20). Furthermore, Baudrillard imagines the body as in ‘the same position as the astronaut in his bubble, existing in a state of weightlessness which compels the individual to remain in perpetual orbital flight and to maintain sufficient speed in zero gravity to avoid crashing into his planet of origin’ (22). From Baudrillard’s argument it may be possible to infer a notion of the body absorbed by cyberspace removed from the physical realities of existence, the ‘planet of origin’ (ibid.). *The Circle*’s textual engagement with the notion of an existence without limits in cyberspace is suggested in the novel’s epigraph:

‘There wasn’t any limit, no boundary at all, to the future. And it would be so a man wouldn’t have room to store his happiness. John Steinbeck *East of Eden*’

The epigraph to *The Circle*, a quote from John Steinbeck’s novel *East of Eden*, introduces an important theme in the novel: the psychological implications of an existence without limits. The limits between private and public, insecurity and knowledge, individual and group, artificial and human are throughout the novel, at an accelerating pace being dissolved. Accordingly, the lack of ‘room to store [...] happiness’ can perhaps best be understood as a metaphorical space; a psychological experience of loss, a removal from the ‘planet of origin’ in the potential space of virtual reality.

Central to the ideas of Debord and Baudrillard is what may be described with the words of Christopher Bollas (2015) as the prevalence of sight over insight:

We seem drawn to the sights of life often found in the mediated universe. We may be sightfully informed (that is we have memories of what we have seen) but have comparatively little insight. Insight is not possible without consciousness being directed towards the internal world, or, without interest in the psychodynamics of our own being. (16).

In *The Circle* the motif of transparency arguably illustrates the importance of a differentiation of sight and insight. Under the dominance of an ideology of transparency, the novel depicts its characters as shadowless technological spectacles, a condition that perpetuates observation of each other and the world, which again precludes the potential for reflection – insight.

Mae Holland's crisis appears as a return of "the shadow", 'a pain that was spreading its black wings inside her'; the blackness screams at her, demanding her attention, which is consistently directed at her efforts to blend with the environment (*TC* 410, 375). Mae Holland's kayaking trips provides her with relief from the insistent homogenization she is subject to at the Circle. Moreover, in Bolla's words, her consciousness is directed towards her internal world; grieving her father's MS illness, crying and imagining the lives in the ocean beneath her:

There were leopard shark in this part of the bay, and bat rays, and jellyfish, and the occasional harbor porpoise, but she could see none of them. They were hidden in the dark water, in their black parallel world, and knowing they were there, but not knowing where, or really anything else, felt, at that moment, strangely right (*TC* 82-3)

She emerges from the kayaking trips feeling calm and strong. To be transparent, or rather "to cast no shadow", may be read as one of the novel's central critical perspectives on the human condition in the technological landscape. Transparency precludes the darkness, 'the black parallel world' needed for reflection – insight. In the darkness people 'make up all kinds of stories', stories in which humanity can be reflected, a process made impossible by the 'perpetual light' gleaming from technology (*TC* 297, 491).

Part II 'Infantilization in the Technological Landscape'

'There's nothing to do but to find a womb suitable for an adult and climb into it.' *Player Piano*

Player Piano, *Crash* and *The Circle* are three novels that illustrate a vision of the future based on technology. Yet, as the technologies develop the state of humanity does not improve, it rather returns to a previous, less developed state. The image of an adult climbing into a womb, serves as an example, with an obvious reference to an infantilized subject. The notion of infantilizing societies is central to all three narratives, and an approach that explores this presence uncovers political as well as psychological connotations of human existence in the technological landscape.

Children of Totalitarian Regimes

There is a link between totalitarianism and the obfuscating limit between technology and religion in the three novels. As Milan Kundera observed; "Totalitarianism is not only hell but the dream of paradise – the age-old dream of a world where everybody lives in harmony, united by a single common will and faith, without secrets from one another..." (Roth 95). As Part I of this thesis has argued, in *Player Piano* and *The Circle*, technology becomes the tool by which paradise can be resurrected; freedom from want through industrialization, freedom from sin through complete surveillance. However, what appears as a form of technocommunist, or 'infocommunist' as it is named in *The Circle*, necessitates the participation of everyone (TC 484). As Paul Proteus describes it: 'There is no middle ground' (PP 274). Either you are with or against the system, rebels are killed and discourse at odds with the ideologies in power is banished. Totalitarian regimes are thus introduced. Imbedded in totalitarianism is also a control over private as well as public life. This can be exemplified in *Player Piano* in the mass-production of identical homes, and in *The Circle* by the ideology of transparency. Every means of control is implemented in the name of resurrecting paradise. *Crash* provides a different image of the connection between religion and technology, one that is perhaps more accessible through psychoanalytic than political theory. However, in *Crash* there is a lingering notion of the totalitarian in the inescapable nature of the technological

landscape. The ring road of *Crash*, from which the only escape is offered through death, echoes the political position of the other two narratives.

It is useful to consider the totalitarian nature of politics, and how it is presented in the three narratives, as this is relevant for the concept of infantilization. Totalitarian regimes involve the adult status reduced to a child's by a complete dependency on an outside power. The totalitarian serves as a political framework for the infantilizing effects of technology as it is presented in the three texts at hand. Technology, by virtue of its symbolic presence in the lives of the characters, has a strong shaping force on the development of their psychology. Among the psychological phenomena the three narratives depict, *infantilization* gives common ground to how a critique of the psychological effects of technology is conveyed. The following will further explore the process of infantilization of the adult characters in the three narratives.

Paul Proteus and the Oedipus complex

Player Piano articulates a view on psychology where human behaviour is motivated by forces outside of conscious control. The characters are subject to 'the mechanics of being a human being, mechanics far beyond the poor leverage of free will' (PP 287). The deterministic discourse on psychology, as opposed to 'free will', resonates with the writings of Sigmund Freud. From a psychoanalytic perspective human behaviour is determined by unconscious drives and the nature of psychological conflicts in early childhood. The following will explore the characterisation of Paul Proteus through a psychoanalytic reading; a reading made readily available by the narrative's engagement with a discourse on the 'subconscious' (PP 285).

The infantilizing potential of technology is in *Player Piano* narrated through the protagonist's Oedipus complex. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) Sigmund Freud takes up the myth of King Oedipus 'who slew his father Laius and married his mother Jocasta' as the fulfilment of childhood wishes (262). In Freud's argument, which he derives from the symbolic presence of dreams, '[i]t is the fate of us all, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and

our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father' (ibid.). Although the definition and implications of the term *Oedipus complex* is modified throughout Freud's work, it remains a fundamental conflict during early childhood development. When resolved unsuccessfully the conflict can result in neurosis (Freud 260). Francis (2011) describes the result of a *successfully* surmounted Oedipus complex:

By identifying with the father as a means of compensating for its own abdication of its desire for the mother the subject internalizes the father as a representative of authority and of socially instituted prohibitions; in effect the individual now carries around within itself an agency representative of the parental influence which is responsible for the impulses towards self-control and social responsibility, and therefore also of conscience and guilt (34).

Freud uses the term 'introjection' for the process where the child internalizes the parents as the super-ego, and can subsequently function in the manner described in this quote (*The Language of Psychoanalysis*, 1985, Laplace & Pontalis 229). Paul Proteus suffers from 'periods of depression' (*PP* 12). The development of this neurosis and its connection with an unresolved Oedipus complex are traced throughout the narrative.

The protagonist's Oedipus complex is referred to explicitly in the narrative. Paul Proteus is on trial for treason and the prosecutor claims the following:

I submit that this man before you is little more than a spiteful boy, to whom this great land of ours, this great economy of ours, this civilization of ours, has become a symbol of his father! A father whom, subconsciously, he would have liked to destroy [...] Call it Oedipus complex, if you will. (*PP* 284)

The 'spiteful boy' and his desire to destroy his father, comes to the surface in this scene. However, there are several key narrative elements leading up to this realisation.

If not spiteful, Paul Proteus appears repeatedly in the narrative as a “boyish” figure; ‘you’re *such* a little boy sometimes’, says his wife Anita, and he descends ‘into the maelstrom’ of her sexuality (*PP* 169). Anita’s reference to Proteus as ‘a little boy’, and their subsequent sexual act, is not the only example of an Oedipal nature: the protagonist harbours an Oedipus complex, which increasingly becomes clear through a projection, as opposed to introjection, of his mother-wife (Broer 184). Each night Proteus makes his bed into ‘a dark muffled womb’, he curls up tightly pulling the comforter ‘over his face’, lying next to his wife (*PP* 60). He returns to this infantile state in their bed, and through their relationship. Specifically, his relationship with her breast or ‘bosom’: ‘the drugging warmth and fragrance of her bosom’ has a soothing effect on him and makes him compelled ‘to tell her everything, to mingle his consciousness with hers’ (*PP* 126). This confusion of oneness between himself and his mother-wife is only momentary, his ‘wisdom’ returns, yet reappears when he encounters a prostitute ‘with bosoms like balloon spinnakers’ (*PP* 126, 232). Although the end of his relationship with Anita is established, her presence returns to him in a dreamlike state in the shape of the prostitute with the ample bosom mumbling in her sleep: ‘As Paul dropped off once more, he murmured an automatic reply. “And I love *you*, Anita.”’ (*PP* 233). The Oedipal nature of the sexual act with the prostitute can be further exemplified: during the night with her, Proteus wakes up ‘from a dream in which he saw his father glowering at him from the foot of the bed’ (*PP* 233), seemingly scolding him for his desire for the mother-wife (Broer 184). This absent presence of his father further illustrates the protagonist’s unresolved Oedipal conflict.

In the presence of images of his father, such as his father’s closest friend Kroner, Proteus, ‘in spite of himself’ feels ‘docile, and loving, and childlike’ (*PP* 44). It is ‘a matter beyond his control’ (*ibid.*). The development of the characterisation of Proteus moves from depression and projections of parental influence, towards ‘[a]n awakening conscience’ (*PP* 201). The first chapter of this thesis described the characterisation of the protagonist as in a state of vacuum: a crisis of progress. This notion is characteristic of the depressed state he is in. Notably, the depression is epitomised in a moment when he recalls a strong childhood memory of an otherwise absent father figure. When

accompanying his father to the annual Meadows gathering of managers and engineers ‘he’d worshipped his father for a little while’; in a transcendent moment ‘an inexpressibly sweet sense of eternal tragedy had passed between them’, as they both acknowledge the symbolic significance of the play they have just watched as ‘the heroic struggle against ingratitude’ (*PP* 200). In this moment Proteus’ identification with his father, and the subsequent internalization of the society he represents, is successful. It is a happy memory, its retrieval produces a moment where the Oedipus complex is dissolved: ‘It was as though a navigator, in order to free his mind of worries, had erased all the reefs from his maps’ (*ibid.*). When this moment of reminiscence passes, he returns to “the reef”, where he is stranded and ‘so damned lonely’, and ‘seeing himself dead’ (*PP* 201). Returning to the condition where he resents his father and the society he represents, his depression returns and ‘he decided he wouldn’t much mind being dead’ (*ibid.*).

This scene is key in the protagonist’s psychological development. It takes on further significance when Proteus subsequently quits his job, and in ‘an elemental situation’ hits a bartender (*PP* 212). Although quitting is misinterpreted as agreeing to become a spy for the system, and the bartender knocks him unconscious in return; seeing a loving image of his father initiates a psychological death and rebirth from which he emerges as a ‘big man’ (*ibid.*). The ‘little boy’ is thus left behind, when he somewhat saddened leaves ‘home’ represented by the Meadows (*PP* 169, 215). Upon leaving the meadows there is also a change in his relationship to Anita. It is ended with a kiss from which Anita has ‘absolutely nothing to gain’, she rather kisses him out of ‘the goodness of her heart’ (*PP* 226). Accordingly, she still appears as a mother figure he needs ‘like [he] never needed anybody’ in his life, however, the sexual nature of their relationship is abandoned.

The final resolution of the Oedipus complex is narrated through the trial introduced above. The trial becomes a therapeutic moment for the protagonist shortly after he is confronted with the Oedipal nature of his relationship with his father. As when stranded on “the reef” he is ‘suddenly [...] all alone, dealing with a problem singularly his own’ (*PP* 285). However, this time, meticulously hooked up to a lie detector, a strike of aggressiveness cannot save him from acknowledging his

internal conflict: ‘He looked down helplessly, wonderingly, at the wires monitoring every reflex God had given him with which to defend himself’ (ibid). Proteus says at last: “‘If my father were a petshop proprietor [...] I suppose I would be a subconscious dog poisoner’” (PP 285).

Paul Proteus goes on to help overturning the system, yet the dominant structure he finally surmounts is of a psychological nature. However, this process should not be read in isolation. The *paternalism* of the system, epitomised in the example of Proteus and his father, has an infantilizing effect on other characters in the narrative. As Thomas F. Marvin (2002) notes:

The human cost of living in a paternalistic system is one of the novel’s major themes. The system takes over the role traditionally played by fathers in nuclear families and reduces all people, regardless of age, to the status of children (36)

Paul Proteus’ Oedipus complex can accordingly be seen as a narrative motif that articulates the novel’s political ambition by revealing technology’s potential to bring about the ‘second childhood’ of the American people (PP 15).

Regression in *Crash* and *The Circle*

It is commonly known that emerging into adulthood involves the abandonment of certain emotions associated with childhood; the immediate nature of the relationship with parents, the realisation that one is not at the centre of the world, fantasies experienced as real, and so on. Laplanche and Pontalis (1973) note that ‘Freud often laid stress on the fact that the infantile past – of the individual or even of humanity as a whole – remains forever within us’ (387). In the psychical process there is thus a lingering potential for ‘regression’: ‘Applied to a psychical process of having a determinate course or evolution, ‘regression’ means a return from a point already reached to an earlier one’ (Laplanche and Pontalis 386). The process of infantilization this chapter wishes to explore can be approached through the concept of regression. Specifically through the concept of *temporal* regression, which ‘implies the existence of genetic succession and denotes the subject’s reversion to past phases of his development’ (ibid.). These ‘past phases’ can be related to ‘a regression as

regards the object, a regression as regards the libidinal stage and a regression in the evolution of the ego' (Laplanche and Pontalis 387). The following aims to show how the characterisations of the two protagonists in *Crash* and *The Circle* illustrate a regression to one or several of these stages.

Pleasure over Reality: Infantilized Landscapes

Firstly, it is useful to outline the two principles which, according to Freud, govern mental functioning: the pleasure principle and the reality principle. In accordance with the pleasure principle 'the whole of psychical activity is aimed at avoiding unpleasure and procuring pleasure (Laplanche and Pontalis 322). The reality principle modifies the pleasure principle: 'in so far as it succeeds in establishing its dominance as a regulatory principle, the search for satisfaction does not take the most direct routes but instead makes detours and postpones the attainment of its goal according to the conditions imposed by the outside world' (Laplanche and Pontalis 379). The pleasure-ego and the reality-ego instincts, distinct yet co-existent, are linked with these principles: 'The instincts, which function initially in accordance with the pleasure principle, gradually come under the sway of the reality principle, but this development is not so rapid nor so complete in the case of the sexual instincts since they are more difficult to 'educate' than the ego-instincts.' (Laplanche and Pontalis 320).

In this context, the technologized landscapes being depicted in *Crash* and *The Circle* can be characterised by an abandonment of the modifying effect of the reality principle, conditions imposed by the outside world are inside the worlds of these narratives frequently negated. Accordingly, it is interesting to note the aesthetic qualities of these landscapes. Quite literally the Circle campus is cut off from reality. As the previous chapter of this thesis described, the beauty and bounty of the Circle campus is contrasted with the chaos of the outside world. As Mae Holland simply puts it: 'Everything was done better here' (TC 41). Not only is logic and order characteristic of the society-in-miniature inside the campus walls: it seems to attend to several pleasures of an infantile nature. The food tastes like 'a more fatty bacon' the wine contains 'fewer calories and

more alcohol', the feeling of euphoria most matched by a circus (*TC* 30, 31, 163). Failing to attend one of these pleasure inducing meals, parties or events will lead to reactions paralleled only by a sulking child: 'It's like, if we were a kindergarten class, and one girl has a party, and only half the class shows up, how does the birthday girl feel?' (*TC* 178). In addition to "the disappointed birthday girl", the novel introduces a set of characters where limits between old and young are obfuscated. Annie, Mae Holland's friend 'still carried a piece of her childhood blanket around in her pocket' (*TC* 14). Mae Holland's boyfriend looks up at her 'with the wonderment of a boy at the zoo' (*TC* 379). A congressman is described as 'grey-haired but young', an appearance he shares with the Circle's founder and later usurper (*TC* 6) In the introduction to *Crash* J.G Ballard associates 'infantile' with 'multiplying options'; 'any demand, any possibility [...] can be satisfied instantly' (Introduction). No matter the aberrant nature of these demands, they are nonetheless satisfied. Moreover, the fact that they are aberrant makes the demands apt as illustrations of fantasies of omnipotence, immortality, and super-natural creatures that are part of the narrative and allude to infantile visions. In *Crash*, these visions are epitomised by Hollywood icons such as Elizabeth Taylor, James Dean, Greta Garbo and so on, their life and deaths compulsively recreated in an obsessive manner – once again in a disturbingly childlike outcry to "Do it again, do it again"!

Having introduced the infantile landscapes of *Crash* and *The Circle*, the present discussion will turn to the specificities of regression in the two novels. In his book *The Psychological Fictions of J.G. Ballard* (2011) Samuel Francis notes that Freud identifies two specific *temporal regressions* with psychoneurotic states: the regression of the ego to 'primitive narcissism' and of the libido to 'the stage of hallucinatory satisfaction of wishes' (120). The following aims to show how the psychological development of the two protagonists in *Crash* and *The Circle* illustrate a regression to these two stages, and how this development can be viewed as a result of life in a technologized landscape.

Religion as an Obsessional Neurosis: Robert Vaughan as God of Technology

The 'car as total metaphor for man's life in today's society' is once again useful to consider: the potency of the car as metaphor lies perhaps with its symbolic connotations bringing together the commercial, technological and simultaneously violent nature of 20th century civilization (C Introduction). Consequently, a reading based on the car as metaphor brings forth the colliding forces of human beings and civilization as it appears in the late 20th century, metaphorically presented in the car crash. The near death experience of a car crash brings forward a feeling of complete helplessness associated with the infantile state of being. In *Crash*, the event of a car crash induces the individual (subconsciously) to return to the image of the father as representative of civilisation; a form of *temporal regression* that is manifested in consciousness as faith in god(s). The previous chapter of this thesis argued how Vaughan bridges the incongruent emotions associated with trauma. In a similar manner, although from a different perspective, Vaughan can be viewed as embodying the incongruence between civilization and the human body.

In accordance with the view presented in the first chapter of this thesis; the character Robert Vaughan can once again be approached as the embodiment of a psychological condition. As previously noted, he 'annexes people to him', yet the religious connotations of this annexation, is yet to be established (C 93). In his book *The Future of an Illusion* (1961) Freud describes religion as 'the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity; like the obsessional neurosis of children, it arose out of the Oedipus complex, out of the relation to the father' (71). Freud argues that religion functions as a personification of the natural forces, the person projected onto these forces given 'the character of a father', and embodied by gods (24). Vaughan's god-like figure shares similarities with Freud's description of the 'threefold task' of the gods; 'they must exorcize the terrors of nature, they must reconcile men to the cruelty of fate, particularly as it is shown in death, and they must compensate them for the sufferings and privations which a civilized life in common has imposed on them' (24). Recalling Freud's claim that humanity forever carries its infantile past: religion as 'a store of ideas' is 'born from man's need to make his helplessness tolerable and built

up from the material of memories of the helplessness of his own childhood and the childhood of the human race' (25). Religion thus represents a god-child dichotomy, where the "child" obsesses over the god-as-father figure who can make sense of the complexities of adult life. The characters in the narrative are drawn to Vaughan, even obsessed by him. Vaughan hovers in the characters' minds, steering their behaviour in his direction, in a project culminating in suicide; nature's 'mysterious forces' of fate and inevitable death effectively controlled (C 12). As an image of a father/god Vaughan reduces the characters to the status of children, completely at the hands of his will.

The story tracing the experience of a car crash, the helpless state it represents, and the subsequent re-emergence into life, can be understood through the Freudian god-child dichotomy. More specifically, through the relationship between James Ballard and Robert Vaughan. However, it is not Vaughan's presence, but the accident James Ballard experiences, that initiates the protagonist's infantile condition. In the scene recounting the accident, he describes twice how he sees the woman he crashes into as a 'madonna', her 'untouched sexuality' presiding over the accident (C 12, 15-6). There are obvious religious connotations to this image, moreover it is interesting to notice how the image of a mother appears in the character's mind at the scene of the accident. Like a child he is subsequently 'lifted [...] from the car' and brought to the casualty hospital (C 15). The scenes describing his stay at the hospital thus introduce the *oral* and *anal* fixations that persist in the text. Throughout the novel the protagonist's reduction to the status of a child can be identified, in Freudian terms, as temporal regression to the primary libidinal stages, specifically the *oral* – and *anal* phases.

At the hospital James Ballard is rendered immobile, his knee-caps were fractured under the accident, and he finds himself completely at the hands of the nurses working there. In a helpless state '[l]ying there with a weak bladder', he observes how 'all these women around [him] seemed to attend only to [his] most infantile zones'; 'these starched women in all their roles reminded me of those who attended my childhood, commissionaires guarding my orifices' (C 22). One of these women is his wife Catherine, who puts a cigarette between his lips, and when reaching for it to be

returned, James Ballard holds on to it 'like a child' as the cigarette reminds him of her nipples (C 22). The depictions of the female characters in the text construct an infantile vision of the male characters. Specifically, as in the example just noted, the women attend the *oral* fixation of the male characters: the women are wiping James Ballard's mouth, 'rolling the cigarettes' being smoked, and their ubiquitous exposed breasts and erect nipples are a continuous obsession for the male characters (C 77).

As James Ballard observes the nurses handling his body, he is also imagining parts of their bodies. He finds himself thinking of one of the nurses' 'natal cleft'; 'When had she last washed this moist gully? During my recovery, questions like this one obsessed me as I talked to the doctors and nurses.' (C 19). The protagonist's incessant obsession with the 'sexual possibilities of everything around [him]', is dominated by fixations on bodily orifices, his own as well as the ones of every other character (ibid.). These obsessions have been 'jerked loose' by the accident, an experience where the mind of the protagonist is in 'physical confrontation with the body', and the body is in an infantile state as an 'inexhaustible encyclopaedia of pains and discharges' outside of conscious control (C 29). As opposed to an adult who can control the holding and letting go of discharges from the bodily orifices, the car crash removes control over these processes. This notion is recreated throughout the narrative in multiplying car crashes where the erotic, or rather libidinal, focus remains on these 'infantile zones'; oral, anal, and on the breasts of perverted mother figures.

The god-child dichotomy can be exemplified through the relationship between James Ballard and Robert Vaughan. Vaughan hovers 'like an invigilator' monitoring James Ballard's head, steering the protagonist's behaviour in his direction (C 50). Vaughan's presence is always felt, which again determines James Ballard's behaviour; as Vaughan's 'disciple', James Ballard accepts his 'perverse logic', and subsequently behaves according to his demands (C 156, 5). Notably, before Vaughan himself experienced 'some terrible collision on the motorway in the North', he was 'no more than a pushy careerist with a Ph.D.' (C 48-9). His accident turned him from a computer-specialist, a representative of science, into someone carrying 'a strain of naive idealism, his strange vision of the

automobile and its real role in our lives' (C 49). In other words, Vaughan abandons science in favour of 'his strange vision', a transformation that creates associations of a religious awakening. In addition, an interesting contrast in the narrative illustrates James Ballard's "conversion" to Vaughan as god. James Ballard first meets Vaughan 'at a time when [Vaughan's] obsessions were self-evidently those of a madman' (C 11). This self-evident madness is by the end of the narrative superseded by a vision of Vaughan as an 'ugly golden creature': 'Vaughan's skin seemed to be covered in scales of metallic gold as the points of sweat on his arms and neck fired my eyes' (C 165). The protagonist describes Vaughan in this manner when the two men are about to engage 'in an act of sodomy', their physical union. Arguably, James Ballard accepts Vaughan as a being of light, a source of wisdom that cannot be found in science.

The notion of being reborn after a confrontation with the fragility of life, echoes through several of the characterisations in the narrative. In one example, Gabrielle 'had been reborn within the breaking contours of her crushed sports car' (C 79). However, her- and the other characters' 'rebirth' is only arrived at when Vaughan, quite literally, sees them in his image: in the 'sequence of pictures' he assembles, recording the effects of the accidents on the characters lives (C 80).

By worshipping Vaughan as god, the characters in the narrative – predominantly narrated through the protagonist – can make sense of the chaos of death: nature's 'mysterious forces' (C 12). James Ballard's anxiety follows from an experience in direct confrontation with 'the cruelty of fate' (TFI 24): he is 'saved [...] from being impaled on the steering wheel' by 'mysterious forces' (C 12). As opposed to seeing the experience as serendipitous, and the murderous potential of technology represented by the car instantiated, he attributes his survival to 'mysterious forces', the same mysterious forces killing another man. As with the gods Freud describes, Vaughan reconciles James Ballard to the cruelty of fate 'particularly as it is shown in death' (TFI 24). Vaughan rehearses his own death 'in many crashes', thus embodying the power to control life and death, or rather *appearing* to have this power, much like the illusory power of the gods Freud describes. The 'unseen powers of the universe' guiding the helplessness of being is thus projected onto Vaughan as

a god-like figure (C 35). The latter relieves James Ballard's anxiety: 'Vaughan's presence, somewhere around me on these crowded causeways, convinced me that some kind of key could be found to this coming autogeddon' (C 85). The 'key' appears to involve accepting the 'true significance of the automobile crash' that Vaughan introduces:

My horror and disgust at the sight of these appalling injuries had given way to a lucid acceptance that the translation of these injuries in terms of our fantasies and sexual behaviour was the only means of re-invigorating these wounded and dying victims' (C 3, 157).

Through Vaughan's "religion" death is impermanent; the 'wounded and dying' can be re-invigorated. The appalling reality of life is thus accepted in terms of a fantasy, a lucid acceptance that mirrors Freud's view of religion.

Samuel Francis (2011) notes that '*Crash* is a novel about fantasy' (118). Francis argues that '[i]n *Crash* James and Vaughan accelerate the Freudian emphasis on the reality of fantasy life to a hyperbolic extreme where it comes to occlude reference to material reality', more specifically, the narrative can be read through the Freudian concept of *phantasy* (ibid.). In Freud's view *phantasy* is the thought-activity that slips off with the introduction of the reality principle, and continues through the infantile satisfaction of wishes as a hallucinatory process (Francis 118). This process can be exemplified in child's play and adult daydreaming (ibid.). The hallucination takes on the quality of neurosis when *reality-testing* is abandoned in adult life; ' [...] '...phantasies possess *psychical* as contrasted with material reality [for] *in the world of the neuroses it is psychical reality that is the decisive kind*' (Laplanche and Pontalis 363). Under dominance of the pleasure principle infants lack the potential for *reality-testing* which is a 'mode of internal functioning of the psychical apparatus [...] which allows the subject to distinguish stimuli originating in the outside world from internal ones, and to forestall possible confusion between what he perceives and what he only imagines—a confusion supposedly fundamental to hallucination' (Laplanche and Pontalis 383, 382).

In Freud's analogies between obsessional neurosis and religion, he notes that religion 'comprises a system of wishful illusions together with a disavowal of reality such as we find in an isolated form nowhere except in amentia, in a state of blissful hallucinatory confusion' (*TFI* 71). To Freud then, religion remains a neurosis as it is essentially *phantasy* abandoned by *reality-testing*, which accordingly makes faith in religion a hallucination: the internal experience of the return of the infantile relation to a father figure (after an experience of complete helplessness in adult life) is confused with the external reality of a god. James Ballard's neurosis can be viewed as an abandonment of *reality-testing*, in favour of a fantasy-life, where psychical reality '*is the decisive kind*', and Vaughan, by virtue of his god-like figure, the embodiment of a religious illusion (Laplanche and Pontalis 363). In this context their relationship can serve as an example of the god-child dichotomy. *Crash* can be read as a narrative tracing the development of an obsessional neurosis, where the violence of real life in the technological landscape is accepted through a religious hallucination.

"Now we are all God": the Omnipotence of Thought and Narcissism in *The Circle*

An interesting contrast in the characterisation of the protagonist Mae Holland can be traced throughout *The Circle*. As chapter 3 of this thesis argued, she is described as in a state of crisis; she is consumed by the company the Circle and forced to abandon an autonomous self-hood.

Furthermore, she experiences the splitting of her internal world as a psychological rupture; she is haunted by visions of a tear in black cloth and the screams of thousands of underwater souls.

Moreover, as her tortured psychological condition intensifies throughout the novel, she becomes increasingly narcissistic. The simultaneity of a split self and self-absorption in the development of Mae Holland will be further explored in the following.

The notion of self-absorption, or rather narcissism, can be understood through psychoanalytic theory. In *Totem And Taboo* (1912-1913) Freud draws a parallel between the nature of thoughts in

children and primitive people. In his book *Reading Freud: A Chronological Exploration of Freud's writings* (2004) Jean-Michel Quinodoz succinctly describes this parallel:

The over-valuation of the power one attributes to one's own mental processes is an essential element in "narcissism", writes Freud, the stage in development during which the sexual drives have already found an object - but this object is the person's own ego. It may therefore be said that the omnipotence of thoughts in primitive peoples corresponds to an early stage of libidinal development - that of 'intellectual narcissism' - in which neurotic individuals also find themselves, either through regression or through a pathological fixation (124-5).

In this context, narcissism can be seen as an indication of an infantilized subject. More specifically through Freud's identification of two specific *temporal regressions* with psychoneurotic states: a regression of the ego to 'primitive narcissism' and of the libido to 'the stage of hallucinatory satisfaction of wishes' (Francis 120). As has been argued, in *Crash* James Ballard's process of infantilization occurs via the experience of a car crash and the subsequent regression of the libido to 'the stage of hallucinatory satisfaction of wishes'. In *The Circle*, Mae Holland's process of infantilization occurs via 'the abyss' of life in an American nowhere named Longfield, where she is rendered helpless in confrontation with her 'voracious' student loans and her father's MS illness (TC 8-9). She experiences the infantile need 'to be rescued, to be lifted', an echo of Ballard's accident scene, from the aesthetic 'horror' of her work in Longfield: 'The utility building, 3B-East, was a tragic block of cement with narrow vertical slits for windows. Inside, most of the offices were walled with cinderblock, everything painted a sickly green' (TC 8-9). From the point where she is offered a job at the Circle the novel traces her process of infantilization as a development of narcissism; 'a kind of neediness, pushiness—nudginess', as Mae's father names it, characteristics easily identifiable with children (TC 10). An exploration of Mae Holland based on psychoanalytic theory develops the notion of a narcissistically "childish" protagonist – towards an understanding of

her infantilized condition as an expression of a regression of the ego to ‘primitive narcissism’ (Francis 120).

In similarity with *Crash*, technology and religion intermingle in *The Circle*. Chapter 3 of this thesis described how Mae Holland exchanges an autonomous selfhood for life in the Edenic garden that is the Circle campus; the only way of remaining in paradise, becoming an inseparable part of the eye itself. The limit between the protagonist and the all-seeing “eye” of technology becomes increasingly obfuscated, a development that is juxtaposed with her obsession with eradicating the *unknowns* of existence. Arguably, this obsession functions as a fantasy of control of the environment: control of her virtual mirror image, the whereabouts and occupation of the other characters in the novel, and the complexities of life in nature. The perpetuation of this obsession is allowed by the constant inventions of the company. In Freudian terms, the technological inventions thus functions as a form of religion as they are ‘born from man’s need to make his helplessness tolerable’ and continuously seek to assuage this helplessness through surveillance and control (*TFI* 25). This notion is evoked in the novel by recurring descriptions aligning technology and religion: the company the Circle adopts a religious rhetoric where characters in the novel are made to choose between hell and paradise, darkness and light, shame and moral innocence. In *Crash* a control of the environment is assigned to a god-like figure, the character Robert Vaughan, a control James Ballard accepts as a religious hallucination. In *The Circle* the control is directed at the mental processes of the protagonist herself as she manoeuvres reality in virtual space. Mae Holland’s obsession thus takes the shape of narcissism as the power to control the environment is attributed to her own omnipotence, expecting people to stop ‘in admiration for the wonderful power of the tools at her disposal’ (*TC* 458).

From the first chapter to the last, *The Circle* traces how Mae Holland is given these powerful tools – advanced technologies that become an inseparable part of the body. Shortly after the protagonist arrives at the Circle she is sent to the company’s medical clinic. The doctor collects all her health information, and Mae unknowingly ingests a sensor that monitors her body from the inside. Mae is

finally equipped with a bracelet through which she can observe data on the general functioning of her body (*TC* 154). The array of observable measurements, such as ‘her heart rate’ and ‘step count’, gives her ‘a great sense of calm and control’ (*TC* 194). She subsequently experiences ‘a moment of sudden clarity’: ‘what had always caused her anxiety, or stress, or worry, was not one force, nothing independent and external – it wasn’t danger to herself or the constant calamity of other people and their problems. It was internal: it was subjective: it was *not knowing*’ (*TC* 194). It is interesting to note how, in the novel, technology gives a sense of control through mere observation as opposed to eradicating ‘independent and external’ “real” ‘danger’ (*ibid.*). Mae Holland observes every element of the environment from the inside of her body to the top of Mount Kenya, overreaching limitations of time and distance, and she reflects; by knowing ‘the future [...] there would be calm.’ (*TC* 194). The ideology of transparency brought about by the Circle technology echoes Mae Holland’s fantasy of control: ‘As we all know here at the Circle, transparency leads to peace of mind’ (*TC* 68). As the company is developing new technologies of control-through-surveillance, observation of every human activity takes the shape of a totalising worldview. As previously argued in this thesis, this worldview negates the horrors of existence as opposed to eradicating them. In this respect, the narrative evokes a notion that reality is abandoned in favour of ‘a great sense of calm and control’, of ‘peace of mind’ (*TC* 194, 68). This abandonment of reality is allowed by digital tools that appear to have a ‘wonderful power’ over the mental lives of the characters in the novel, as opposed to an external reality (*TC* 458). Omnipresence of technology is thus significant from a psychological perspective, as it mirrors an idea or fantasy regarding human control of the environment: a fantasy of control that increasingly appears as a narcissistic delusion.

Freud describes how primitive men solved ‘[t]he practical need for controlling the world around them’ on ‘animistic premises’ (*TT* 78). Animism, in Freud’s words, is a system of thought where primitive men would ‘people the world with innumerable spiritual beings’, spirits that may inhabit animate and inanimate objects (*TT* 77). In primitive thought ‘spirits are only souls that have made themselves independent’; souls that inhabit every element of the environment from objects, plants

and animals to the human body. Primitive men obtained mastery over these spirits, or souls, through magic (*TT* 78). From a psychoanalytic perspective, the basic premise behind the belief in the power of this magic is ‘the omnipotence of thought’ (*TT* 85): ‘primitive man had an immense belief in the power of his wishes. The basic reason why what he sets about by magical means comes to pass is, after all, simply that he wills it.’ (*TT* 83). Freud compares ‘the phases in the development of men’s view of the universe and the stages of an individual’s libidinal development’ (*TT* 90). In this comparison the animistic phase corresponds to narcissism ‘both chronologically and in its content’ (*ibid.*). In this context, it can be useful to compare the animistic system of primitive men to the technological ‘systems’ being developed in the novel (*TC* 30), as this comparison may serve to illustrate an association between Mae Holland’s fantasy of control and her regression to the stage of ‘primitive narcissism’ (Francis 120).

In *The Circle*, technology offers the possibility to view a human being in dualistic terms. The *body* is only a very limited vehicle carrying the *soul* of a given human being. ‘[V]isual surrogates’ can transport the soul to the most remote corner of the world, ‘SoulSearch’ can locate every human being on the planet and ‘every soul is connected’ via the online TruYou accounts (*TC* 70, 446, 484). The idea of a soul is thus arguably central to the ideology of the Circle. This notion is voiced through a man the protagonist encounters in a bar: “‘You and yours at the Circle’ [...] ‘you’re gonna save all the souls. You’re gonna get everyone in one place, you’re gonna teach them all the same things [...] ‘Now we’re all God. Every one of us will soon be able to see, cast judgement upon, every other.’” (*TC* 395). Mae Holland scoffs at what she perceives as the renderings of a drunken man. However, ascribing omnipotence to every human being, as opposed to one omnipotent god, is central to the ideological criticism in the narrative.

Primitive men saw the world peopled by independent souls as a way to control the world around them. The company the Circle is inventing technology that is placed in every element of the environment, thus opening new locations for the soul to inhabit. Furthermore, the company is increasingly in control of the souls inhabiting their systems. Every person acting at odds with the

ambitions of the company is soon enough revealed as ‘a criminal or deviant of the highest order’ (TC 240). Moreover, technologies are being developed to control nature’s forces, such as ‘figuring out how to disassemble tornadoes as soon as they formed’ (TC 237). Accordingly, the capabilities of technology, as they are described in the novel, serve the same purpose as magic did to primitive men. As an animistic technique, ‘[m]agic has to serve the most varied purposes – it must subject natural phenomena to the will of man, it must protect the individual from his enemies and from dangers and it must give him power to injure his enemies’ (TT 79). Psychoanalyst Luca Nicoli (2015) extends Freud’s argument on narcissism in primitive people and children. In his argument he draws a parallel between the omnipotence of thought and technology: ‘From a psychoanalytic point of view, [the] innovative and surprising capabilities [of the digital world] represent outright magical powers. Today, because of technological enhancement of human capability for connection that eliminates the limits of time and distance, the omnipotent idea becomes real immediately’ (“The Seduction of Digital Magic” 48). As in Nicoli’s argument, the omnipotent idea becomes disturbingly real in *The Circle*. Where primitive man sought to ‘obtain mastery over men, beasts and things’ by magical means (TT 78), the “magical” powers of the Circle ‘would change the world, immediately and permanently’ (TC 446).

Technology becomes an inseparable part of Mae Holland’s body, culminating at a point where she ‘now felt incomplete without them’ (TC 333). Moreover, the protagonist feels like ‘Wonder Woman’ – an iconic American superhuman cartoon character – wearing the camera around her neck and ‘a bracelet on each wrist’ (TC 312). The protagonist thus embodies the power to ‘change the world’ (TC 446). Moreover, she is increasingly aware of ‘the power she could yield in her position’ (TC 243). However, the characterisation of the protagonist evokes a notion that it is not primarily the world, or even her body, that changes under the influence of technology. Technology alters how she thinks about the other characters in the novel. As noted above, it is her mental life, or internal world, that can be controlled through the ‘wonderful power’ of technology (TC 458). In a literal sense the bracelet she wears ‘measures galvanic skin response, which allows [her] to know

when [she is] amped or anxious' (*TC* 154). Moreover, technology relieves her from the 'burden of uncertainty'; 'the wave of despair that was gathering in Mae's chest' (*TC* 195). The digital devices constantly at her disposal give her instant access to information and continuous connection to other people. The moment Mae Holland desires to know something or someone, the need is satisfied. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the digital devices under her control leaves her feeling as if she owns a 'magic wand'; a vehicle of 'omnipotent thought' (Nicoli 48). Consequently, the 'not-knowing' versus 'known' becomes more important to the protagonist than the reality of people and places (*TC* 196). In Freud's words '[t]hings become less important than ideas of things' (*TT* 85).

The process of infantilization of the protagonist, the 'regression of the ego to primitive narcissism', can be further explored through her relationship with the other characters in the novel. The *idea* of these characters' existence is increasingly more important to Mae Holland than their physical being. On Mae Holland's first day at the Circle she meets Francis Garaventa who is 'unlike anyone she'd ever known' (*TC* 36). She enjoys the surprise of meeting someone 'new and bizarre', taking the sudden appearance of Francis as 'evidence of God' (*ibid.*). It 'seemed to confirm some divine showman, some celestial inventor' (*ibid.*). The relationship between Mae and Francis is juxtaposed with the relationship between Mae and Kalden. After Mae and Kalden meet for the first time he is consistently difficult to locate, and shrouded in mystery: 'Everything and everyone else she'd experienced at the Circle hewed to a logical model, a rhythm, but Kalden was the anomaly. His rhythm was different, atonal and strange, but not unpleasant' (*TC* 92).

Initially, the two characters thus represent an intriguing surprise to her. However, as the narrative develops she is increasingly unable to enjoy the surprise of the unknown; 'But where was Kalden? [...] He had no right to disappear like this. She checked CircleSearch again; she'd looked for him a hundred times this way, with no success. But she had a right to know where he was. To at least know where he was, who he was' (*TC* 195). When the 'powerful tools', such as the search monitor, are unable to assuage her insecurities she turns to Francis: 'she needed someone who could be known. Who could be located' (*TC* 196). In addition to always locating each other through

CircleSearch, the encounters between Mae and Francis are consistently mediated by technology. They rate each other's sexual performances (in a manner reminiscent of children's games) on a scale from 1 to 100, a scale that is otherwise used by the company to measure their work-related efforts. In the scene describing Mae's first sexual encounter with Francis they observe Francis' pulse rising on his digital bracelet. 'Mae thrilled at her power over him', watching 'the numbers rise to 152' (*TC* 202). The scene comes to an abrupt end when 'a sound came from his mouth [...] just before he doubled over, his head jerking left and right until he crumpled on the bed, his head to the wall' (*ibid.*). She subsequently describes him as 'unappealing' (*TC* 203). This scene mirrors several of the encounters between the two characters; such as when Francis is 'emptying his shoe, sand pouring from it [and] biting off most of his fingernail', effectively ending Mae's 'reverie' about him (*TC* 36). She nonetheless continues to return to his unsatisfying company, consistently rating him a 100 (*TC* 413). Accordingly, it can be argued that the power Mae has over Francis as someone who can be monitored, rated and located is what continues to attract her to him.

The omnipotent idea, which may be viewed as a central element of the characterisation of the protagonist, estranges her from the reality of the other characters in the narrative. For instance, Kalden's non-existence online creates a kind of delusion: 'His invisibility began to feel intentional and even aggressive' (*TC* 172). Furthermore, when he appears directly in front of her, he seems unreal: 'Mae stepped back to take [Kalden] in, thinking maybe, somewhere on him, she would find some clue as to whether or not he was real—a real Circler, a real person' (*TC* 212). The unlimited potential for communication embedded in technology makes the limitations of real life experiences a violent contrast: 'Kalden's 'non-communication in a place like the Circle [...] felt like violence' (*TC* 234). In another example, Mae is confronted with the possibility that 3% of the company's employees might not approve of her. The latter is indicated by a rating through the digital tool 'Demoxie', a system where people are offered the alternative to either 'frown' or 'smile' at something or someone' (*TC* 405). Mae receives 368 frowns, which leads her to perceive the frowns as '368 votes to kill her': 'Every one of them preferred her dead' (*TC* 410). The recent examples

evoke the notion that the protagonist is engaged in a fantasy-life, where the omnipotent idea is the guiding premise. When her fantasy of control is challenged by reality, anxiety follows: ‘a pain that was spreading its black wings inside her’ (*TC* 410). She subsequently seeks refuge in her work, where she can control the lives of other people, the latter by validating the personal experiences and businesses of a random assemblage of people from Michigan to Florida: ‘Mae worked on, feeling the familiar tear, the growing blackness, but working through it, killing it [...]’ (*TC* 412).

As noted in the above, a juxtaposition of a split self and self-absorption can be identified in the development of Mae Holland. I have previously argued that the ‘the tear’ she is haunted by can be read as a dissolution of an internal world to negotiate experience in the limitless virtual space. The consistent return of ‘the blackness’; ‘the rip, the light trying to get through, the underwater screams’, can be explored from a different perspective (*TC* 374-5). This perspective can be approached through Freud’s description of the psychological impact of moral restrictions in *Totem and Taboo* (1912-13). Freud argues that repression of sexual instincts, hostility to other people and death, returns in the prohibitions involved in magical technique: ‘[Primitive man] turns his emotional cathexes into persons, he peoples the world with them and meets his internal mental processes again outside himself’ (*TT* 92). In an interesting parallel, repression of instincts is characteristic of life at the Circle. Eamon Bailey – one of the three founders of the company and the one who articulates the company’s ideological rhetoric – is ‘a believer in the perfectibility of human beings’ (*TC* 291). This perfect state involves the abandonment of every human desire from overeating to murder. Through constant surveillance the characters in the novel ‘don’t have to be tempted by darkness anymore’ (*ibid.*). ‘The blackness’ spreading inside Mae Holland arguably represents the return of the tempting ‘darkness’ of her unconscious desires, the ‘tear’ an image of her split-self as a complete repression of the libidinal drives. The prohibitions made possible by continuous surveillance through technology arguably represent a technique similar to the magic performed by primitive men.

Reality to Mae Holland equals the *virtual* reality she can manipulate. This notion echoes Freud's description of the omnipotence of thought of primitive people and children as 'their unshakeable confidence in the possibility of controlling the world and their inaccessibility to the experiences, so easily obtainable, which could teach them man's true position in the universe' (*TT* 89). The narrative depicts a protagonist who is indeed rendered remote from real experience, as technology is embedded in her body and screens erected everywhere she looks. Consequently, aspects of life beyond control in virtual reality are transformed into visions of malevolence. Freud describes how primitive people used magic to protect themselves from reality outside of their control, a technique that has survived in the mental functioning of neurotics. Neurotics similarly perform rituals that function as 'protective formula' to prevent disaster: 'If they are not charms, they are at all events counter-charms, designed to ward off the expectations of disaster with which the neurosis usually starts.' (*TT* 87). Primitive men, children and neurotics thus construct systems of thought that to them represent a psychological reality through which physical reality can be controlled. In *The Circle* the protagonist's neurosis, her visions of aggression, violence and death threats, are countered by frantic online activity, where her own thoughts regain control of the environment. She is subsequently 'feeling far better, feeling calm' (*TC* 412).

In addition to Mae Holland's omnipotent idea, the 'regression of the ego to primitive narcissism', can be read as manifested in her developing self-love (Francis 120). *Crash* traces the development of the relationship between James Ballard and Robert Vaughan, a relationship through which the protagonist finds 'the key' to the technological landscape and his place in it. In *The Circle* the process of seduction can be read as a love affair between the protagonist and herself. If Mae Holland is distracted from following up on her work-load, a recording of her own voice saying her own name is played. Listening to this recording sends 'a strange swirling wind through her': 'The voice seemed to lift Mae off her seat and spin her around. Every time she heard it, her heart sped up' (*TC* 230, 233). Furthermore, she hears wisdom in her own voice: 'somehow it sounded less like her and more like some older, wiser version of herself. Mae had the thought that if she had an older

sister, an older sister who had seen more than she had, that sister's voice would sound like this' (*TC* 232). As the imagined wisdom of her future self grows, her "external" relationships become increasingly irrelevant: 'She thought of Mercer and saw him as a shadow, quickly disappearing. She hadn't heard from him, or Annie [...] and she didn't care. Her parents hadn't said a word [...] and she found herself unconcerned' (*TC* 393). Freud describes 'narcissism' as the stage in development during which the sexual drives have already found an object – but this object is the person's own ego (Quinodoz 124). In light of Freud's writings, it is possible to trace a regression to this stage in the characterisation of the protagonist.

The Circle abounds with ideological criticism of the human condition in the technologized landscape. Near the end of the narrative Kalden, now revealed as Ty Gospodinov, hands Mae Holland 'a list of assertions under the headline "The Rights of Humans in a digital Age"' (*TC* 485). These assertions sum up several critical arguments that may be read throughout the narrative, such as: 'The ceaseless pursuit of data to quantify the value of any endeavour is catastrophic to true understanding' (*ibid.*). A lack of 'true understanding' is characteristic of the infantilized condition of the protagonist, and reminiscent of how Freud describes primitive people and children in 'their inaccessibility to the experiences, so easily obtainable, which could teach them man's true position in the universe' (*TT* 88). It is interesting to note that Freud did not identify neurosis with 'the scientific phase' in his chronological exploration of the 'phases in the development of men's view of the universe and the stages of an individual's libidinal development' (*TT* 90). He rather asserts that 'the scientific phase would have an exact counterpart in the stage at which an individual has reached maturity, has renounced the pleasure principle, adjusted himself to reality and turned to the external world for the object of his desires' (*ibid.*). *The Circle* narrates a technologized landscape where moral innocence represents the perfect human being, consequently, the desires of the individual are repressed and thus redirected from the external world and towards the self. Desires directed at the self, or rather ego, is the psychological foundation for the omnipotence of thought, an essential component of narcissism, and the guiding premise in the psychological development of

homo digitalis. In this context, *The Circle* can be read as a critique of technology where science is employed to solve epistemological questions through ‘digital magic’, as opposed to an adjustment to reality (Nicoli 47). An argument that is conveyed through the process of infantilization of the protagonist.

Conclusion:

The primary objective of this thesis has been to explore examples of the textual contrast between technological progress and psychological stagnation. *Player Piano*, *Crash* and *The Circle* offer different literary interpretations of human life in the technological landscape, yet share an engagement with a crisis of human subjectivity in confrontation with the machine. From this perspective, the three novels appear to be concerned, not only with the science of technology, but also technological means of production, which are seen to shape human experience into a product amongst other products, an object amongst others. In *Player Piano*, the subjective experience is challenged by a standardisation of the human experience. The translation of individual personality into irrevocable ‘personnel cards’ and the constant efforts to standardise the needs of the ‘statistically average’ American, together evoke the notion that human experience has become a product on the assembly line (*PP* 72, 149). The notion of the end of subjectivity is epitomised in *Crash* as James Ballard prepares for the coming ‘autogeddon’: a conflation of the automobile, the self and judgement day in a suicide where the body and the machine are brutally fused together (*C* 85). In *Crash* the end of subjectivity is thereby represented as a literal ‘subjecticide’, which appears as the only escape from the trauma of a collision between privacy, commercialism and technology. In a parallel to *Player Piano*, the machine becomes a measure of standardisation, or rather homogenization in *The Circle*. The collection of data on all aspects of human behaviour serves the ideology of the company that reduces subjective experience to the ‘one truth’ that equals surveillance with ‘the perfectibility of human beings (*TC* 297, 291). In other words, the novel depicts how subjective experience is transformed into its virtual version where the norms of the global community eradicate individual differences. As different technologies remove the protagonists from their subjective experience these characters appear increasingly estranged from the material reality of their bodies. Paul Proteus feels ‘oddly disembodied, an insubstantial wisp, nothingness, a man who declined to be anymore’, as he mirrors himself in the mechanics of his wife Anita (*PP* 126). The nothingness of the human body as it is projected onto the technological surface

is similarly characteristic of the ‘ghostly images’ of the human presence in *Crash*. In *The Circle*, notions of disembodiment are evoked by ‘the tear’ haunting Mae Holland, as she abandons the ostensible limitations of the material body in favour of a virtual ‘soul’ that may transport her to remote corners of the world, yet disturbingly far away from her internal world (*TC* 333).

It is interesting to note that technology is presented in the three novels, not only as a threat to the integrity of the body, but further, as a threat to the integrity of art. *Player Piano*, *Crash* and *The Circle* convey the notion that the metaphysical qualities of art necessitate the form of subjectivity that is undermined by a commercialisation of the human experience. In *Player Piano*, the ‘National Council of Arts and Letters’ is made up of machinery that sorts novels and readers into twelve book clubs, one of which is named ‘Dog Story of the Month’ (*PP* 219). The integrity of art’s potential to make ‘the familiar seem strange’ and thus renew the readers’ perception in order ‘to make one feel things’, as Shklovsky puts it (16), is completely abandoned ‘because of the economics of the thing’ (*PP* 219). In other words, all literary production is premeditated by surveys, ‘readability and appeal tests’; to make sure the book will be popular (*ibid.*). If a writer is ‘uncomfortable enough to wonder where people are, where they’re going and why they’re going there’, his book will not be accepted by the machinery, and literary production is thus reduced to affirming what is already known (*PP* 221). In *The Circle*, art and language have in a similar manner moved from the metaphorical to the materially known. In one example, a sculpture is raised on the Circle’s campus named ‘*Reaching Through for the Good of Humankind*’ (*TC* 346). The sculpture is ‘fourteen feet high’, made of glass and ‘representational’ as opposed to conceptual: an enormous hand reaches through a square, carrying the obvious symbolism of the Circle’s reach beyond the computer screen to benefit humanity (*ibid.*). The sculpture’s dimensions, transparency and lack of metaphorical qualities echo the nature of the Circle, which evokes the notion that the ideology of the company reduces the nature of art to automatic perception. By contrast, *Crash* appears as an attempt to break down the implications of a commercialised subjective experience, by articulating the ‘benevolent psychopathology’ of a fetishization of sex and death as a new and real language to counter the

artificial surface of advertising (C 112). The language of psychopathology conveyed in *Crash* is thus benevolent in its potential to defamiliarize ideas about technology, progress and the body. In this respect, *Crash* emerges as a work of art that counters the commercialised language of art that is an object of critique in *Player Piano* and *The Circle*.

The three aesthetic styles I have referred to in my analysis articulate images of the technological body that are far removed from the technological transcendence epitomised in Donna Haraway's vision of the cyborg. Haraway sees the dichotomy between artificial and organic as a limitation that constricts the potential to reconfigure ideas about what it means to be human. To Haraway, a negotiation of the essence of humanity could release the limitations of the oppressed bodies of the world, more specifically, coloured bodies and gendered bodies. By contrast, the nostalgia for bodily agency in *Player Piano*, the appearance of a defamiliarized image of the body in *Crash*, and the idea of transparency as a form of bodily oppression in *The Circle*, together represent examples of how the three texts negate the possibilities of technological transcendence as envisioned by Haraway. Furthermore, my reading of the development of the three protagonists based on psychoanalytic theory arguably reveals technological transcendence as a form of superstitious belief in religion and magic that endows the characters with omnipotent powers and narcissistic qualities. In other words, the idea of technological transcendence as a release from the constrictions of society is negated, through the portrayal of infantilized characters that appear increasingly helpless and childlike in their confrontations with technology.

The three texts convey a critique of technology based on its obfuscation of the limit between nature and culture, a dichotomy that Haraway seeks to negotiate. The images of the technological body evoked in the novels thus echo more succinctly Freud's idea of man as 'a god with artificial limbs': a fantasy of extension that invests man with god-like qualities, while simultaneously giving him 'a good deal of trouble on occasion' (*Civilization and its Discontents* 36). The imagined portraits of the future depicted in *Player Piano*, *Crash* and *The Circle* confirm Freud's prophesy that '[d]istant ages will bring new and probably unimaginable advances in this field of civilization and so enhance

[man's] god-like nature' (36). Moreover, the novels mirror Freud's encouragement to notice 'that modern man does not feel happy with his god-like nature' (37). At this point in my argument it is apposite to mention the gendered aspects of the debate over limits between nature and culture and technology's role in the dichotomy. The scope of this thesis has not allowed for a discussion of the portrayal of women in the texts at hand: mechanical figures wishing to be men, mercilessly handled prostitutes, and a blue-eyed worshipper of a trio of men, as in the case of Mae Holland. Such representations of women are juxtaposed in *Player Piano* with allusions to distinctly masculine heroes, 'like Wild Bill Hickock, like Dan'l Boone, like the bargeman on the book jacket' (212). In *Crash*, Robert Vaughan stares down at his 'half-erect penis' and subsequently looks at James Ballard 'as if asking [him] to identify this strange organ', a scene that evokes an image of castration, or rather, the notion of being estranged from an embodied masculinity (139). In *The Circle*, two men explicitly voice the ideological criticism the novel conveys. Mercer is driven to his own death and Ty Gospodinov is revealed as a usurper of the company, Mae Holland provokes both events, which creates a gendered perspective on technology's destructive potential. Accordingly, it is perhaps no coincidence that the novels' ideological criticism is best read through the writings of the man who theorized a female penis envy, as opposed to the feminist criticism of Donna Haraway. A study of *Player Piano*, *Crash* and *The Circle* – and perhaps other texts critical of technologized societies – based on feminist criticism could bring further insight into what may appear as a perceived threat to a distinctly masculine nature in the technological landscape.

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