The *Death* Drive

'Technology is never grasped except in the automobile accident, that is to say the violence done to technology itself and the violence done to the body. It is the same: any shock, any blow, any impact, all the metallurgy of the accident can be read in the semiurgy of the body.' 1

Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1994

'Death Drive' explores the correlation between the prosthetic extension that technology often symbolically provides to the human body, in this case the car, with the 'aesthetic-prosthetic' extensions of the human body, specifically on the sexualised 'archetypal' female we experience in contemporary media, and the subtle violence that can be potentially exchanged. The work also explores Baudrillard's 'Cloning' theories in particular relation to this feminine stereotype and the media's 'spectacular' thirst to replicate this 'look', resulting in not only the unavoidable loss of the 'original' [the 'real'?], but also the over-production of an 'object' to its inevitable fruition – the *simulated* 'hyper-real'. Sigmund Freud's *'Death Instinct'* provides the narrative and Roland Barthes' theories on how images engage our subversive interest provides the aesthetic underpinning.

One reaction to the themes of transferable violence of technology to or from the body suggested grafting of mechanical prosthetics to the human form [Steampunk art for example], however after the examination of scrap cars, what interested this investigation was the spent, 'subtle' violence that now embodied these defunct metallic forms and how this could be applied to 'eroticism' and 'femininity'. Predictably the cars offered an expected semiotic of masculine potency [essentially a technology produced by and for men] that is frequently exploited to display status and to encourage the commonly more observable male propensity to validate the libido and ego instincts, however they also presented a deferred female sexuality not only in the simulation of its invaginated cuts and incisions, but also in their now 'abused' vulnerability.

1. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* Crash*, 1994, p112

Through the juxtapositioning of this technologically phallic semiotic and one of the currently favoured modes of 'manufactured' femininity, in this case the 'modified' facial expressions, awkward poses and promiscuous costume that constitutes the graceless glamour and uneasy erotica that often appears in car magazines [see fig 1 in appendix], the potential for exchange of violence, eroticism, instincts and sexuality that one would assume should be vastly more male motivated, was paradoxically transferable to and from both 'sexes' with equal menace and authority.

Although the opening quote from Baudrillard's debate entitled *'Crash'* specifically discusses the same titled novel by J. G. Ballard published in 1973 [a dystopian account of subversive sexual gratification centred around victims and spectators of traffic accidents], his principles of how body and technology can reflect 'their bewildering signs through each other' 2, provided a conceptual perspective that facilitated a more subtle reworking of this semiotic relationship. The symbolic 'death' of the car, the potential death or injury of the occupants, the impotent legacy of the once potent symbol of masculinity, the spent but tangible violence of the original traffic accident, the torn, bruised exteriors and interiors is mirrored and yet appositionally evident in this 'modified' ['modernised', perhaps even 'mechanized'] version of femininity; the forceful sexual poses, the overtly sexualised maybe even masochistic intent, the damaged respect for body [mind and integrity] and the seemingly voluntary inclusion in these spaces of expended yet exploitable destruction – a 'vision of a body delivered to 'symbolic wounds', of a body confused with technology in its violating and violent dimension, in the savage and continual surgery that violence exercises' 3.

Although the work produced is not visualised as explosively as Baudrillard describes above, the representational values are still a logical extension of his theoretical framework, as they are 'subtly' rather than 'explicitly' layered, both physically and psychologically, with the implications of sexual objectification and gratification, signifying the cultural and social dynamics present in much modern-day female representation – the 'wounds' of the car symbolically superimposed onto the feminine psyche, indicating a mutual and perpetual sequence of threat, vulnerability and eroticism, along with a paradoxical degree of 'femme fatale' predatory authority that fuses to ultimately define this particularly mode of 'femininity'.

Here technology and femininity are not only linked through violence [potential or actual], but also in their shared path to mutual annihilation of both identity and significance; the car is to be crushed, it has no usefulness, offering only remnants of potency. Similarly the 'feminine' worth, ego, and desire to escape is equally crushed, diminished; a deliberate and self–induced path to destruction.

2. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* Crash*,* 1994, p112
3. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* Crash*,* 1994, p111

Here Freud's 'Death Drive', or 'Death Instinct' theory is introduced to narrate the themes. Freud suggests this instinct motivates an individual to 'reduce life to an inorganic state, state of absolute stasis' 4, not necessarily with any aggression to 'others' however, as it is primarily motivated to destroy 'self', negating psychological and metaphysical tensions to zero. The death drive narrative firstly encourages vulnerability and jeopardy through bruising the 'ego', thus damaging 'integrity', and then presents an 'other', a 'cloned' version of femininity, intent on provoking 'displeasure when confronted with its mirror-image' 5, that it hopes will aid the eventual metaphorical destruction of 'self'. This 'clone' concept here is an important one. The protagonist is dressed in the same costume throughout, but has subtly different facial manipulations in each image 'so that the subject is simultaneously itself and never resembles itself again, which haunts the subject like a subtle and always adverted death' 6; designed to 'look like' but be imperceptibly not the 'same'. The choice to use the same model and costume is not only a comment on the craving to produce duplicates of what modern media and society perceive as 'desirable', but also on the death of the 'original', where only 'hyper-real' versions exist, as when this 'reproduction' is further copied, it 'removes the thing reproduced from the realm of tradition' 7, or in this case 'reality', as 'it substitutes for its unique incidence a multiplicity of incidences' 8.

The white-sheeted clone signifies the distorted mirror image; a 'hologram' of the original, and this 'other self' encourages the protagonist to fulfill her unconscious goal, manifesting as the 'dead twin that is never born in our place, and watches over us by anticipation' 9. Initially separated from her own image, the 'original' clone is eventually faced with this 'other', and when this expectancy is fulfilled, 'when the double materialises, when it becomes visible, it signifies imminent death' 10.

Although not explicit, the images suggest the cars are desirable and highly powered, achieving the narcissistic tendencies to endorse the 'eroticism' displayed and the overt sexuality offered. Naturally the higher the power of the car the higher the risk of death or injury, and the images suggest these are 'modified' cars like those found in 'Max Power' magazine [see fig 2 in appendix]; modified to ultimately achieve greater status, libido and ego. This 'modification' is mirrored in the protagonist's 'femininity', not only in her seductive artificially scaled features and exaggerated poses, but also by a desire to modify 'appearance' to fit a contemporary ideal; to satisfy and appeal. The cars literally and impulsively propel the occupants ever faster and therefore into ever more dangerous 'death drives', the car being the vehicle [symbolically and literally] for their ego instinct which is normally assigned to preserving 'life' through sexuality

4. Pamela Thurschwell, *Sigmund Freud, 2nd edition,* 2009, p87
5. Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,* 2008, p21
6. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* Clones, 1994, p95
7-8. Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,* 2008, p7
9. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* Holograms, 1994, p106
10. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* Clones, 1994, p95

and potency, however here it too is 'modified' by the death instinct, reinforcing the desire for risk further.

This desire for risk is not only evident through the masculinity of the technology but equally in the femininity of the subject; seemingly aware of her vulnerable situation which only serves to heighten the death drives' effectiveness; a willingness for jeopardy; the location's dangerous and hazardous qualities again paralleled in her. Clearly there are two 'drives' operating in this scenario; the death drive has only one purpose - that of negating the entity, but evidently the 'sex drive' is also present. Here the 'sex' element of the drive splits off from its 'life' preserving role fusing with the ego instinct to create a sadistic intent that, although is predominantly latent, is always potentially functional as 'from the very first we recognised the presence of a sadistic component in the sexual instinct' 11. It is this potential that can accelerate the death drive; pain, injury or death [masochistic or sadomasochistic] is an undeniably potent element of the sex drive that purifies the exchange of sexuality and violence, so here 'death and sex are read on the same level as the body' 12.

Although the emerging sadistic themes have a degree of morality attached, a judgment is not passed, however there is a level of transparency that reveals a tone of 'concealed self-disgust' 13 that manifests into 'a kind of exorcism… rather than a will to action' 14, as neither 'femininity' nor 'technology' is pictured engaged in their sexual or violent potential, the themes subtly trace the 'un-subtleties' of the metaphorical violence exchanged.

The representation of this 'subtlety' was as important as the unprejudiced tone; it may have been easy to shock the observer with sensationalist imagery but are we really disgusted anymore?   Contemporary culture has already seemingly exploited much of the 'extreme' visions possible; constant 'real' and graphic news images, ever more 'realistic' and gruesome effects in computer games and films, the savagery of hard-core pornography [consenting, unconsenting, pedophilic] etc. A recent example is the 2009 film 'Antichrist' directed by Lars von Trier, in which we not only see 'real' sexual penetration but also utterly realistic sadomasochistic genital mutilation. Although the vast majority of the public may not have seen many examples of extreme 'culture', the realm in which society is shocked is continually diminishing - 'it is true in a sense that nothing really disgusts us anymore. In our eclectic culture, which embraces the debris of all others in a promiscuous confusion, nothing is unacceptable' 15, therefore although the themes of the work are subversive, they not perverse or fetishistic, they simply offer the 'capacity for negating reality, for setting up an 'other scene' in opposition to reality' 16.

11. Sigmund Freud, *On Metapsychology,* Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1984 p327
12. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* Crash*, 1994 p113
13-14. Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil,* 1993, p72
15. Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil,* 1993, p73
16. Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil,* 1993, p14

In examining this delicate approach to 'subversion', philosopher Roland Barthes proposes it is 'not when it frightens, repels, or even stigmatises, but when it is pensive, when it thinks' 17. Developing this further he identifies what makes us examine an image more closely, the thing that engages us beyond the 'superficial interest' one might feel towards the faces, people, location, sociology etc. This surface curiosity he coins as 'Studium' and it is this that requires agitation for the observer to become consumed more deeply. Although this need not be shocking it does require a degree of metaphorical violence to jolt the observer from the potential triviality offered by the studium.

Barthes appropriates the Latin word 'Punctum', to define 'this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument' 18, and he relates this directly to the literal 'punctuation' of the studium. His use of the words 'wound' and 'mark' in the previous quote and 'accident' and 'bruise' in the quote below, resonates with not only this investigation's 'metaphorical violence' theme, but also his analogy of 'pricking' the observer and the image being 'speckled with these *sensitive* points' 19, advocates the possible subtle nature of achieving poignancy without shock – 'the punctum is that accident that pricks me [but also bruises me]' 20.

Barthes' last quote offers significance in not only its underlying 'wounding' tone, but also in its suggestion that only 'subtle' abrasions to the studium's surface are needed to perforate the initial reading. This 'pensive' probing allows a delicate examination of, in this case, violence and sexuality in a controlled manner, which is contradictory to the naturally associated ferocity of violence.

To demonstrate this the latter filmic images in the series display a punctum of motionless brooding silence and a delicate melancholic tranquility. This particular approach to 'punctuation' is also evident in the work of Gregory Crewdson, in particular his 'Twilight' series [1998 – 2002, fig 3 and 4 in appendix] in which he achieves a contemplative tone that is only ever 'suggestive' of trauma, presenting metaphors of 'psychological anxiety, fear and desire' 21, that manifest into psycho-sur-real situations that again fall into the realm of 'cloning' and the mirror image, where eventually they 'only encounter themselves and their agony' 22. His use of punctum is further enhanced through consistent focus and dynamic colour to achieve a 'hyper-real' palette that accentuates not only the filmic styling to appear like 'mental residues of environments perhaps visited, perhaps only ever seen in other photographs or films' 23 but to produce an 'optical unconscious' 24 that exaggerates the 'uncanny', the serenity of the images and their 'unnatural'

17. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 1993, p38
18. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 1993, p26
19-20. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 1993, p27
21. Stephan Berg, *Gregory Crewdson 1985 - 2005,* 2005, p11
22. Stephan Berg, *Gregory Crewdson 1985 - 2005,* 2005, p19
23. David Campany. *Art and Photography,* 2007, p33
24. Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,* 2008, p30

stillness, creating 'an illusion that – unlike a copy – is superior to reality in that it recreates and perfects the original' 25.

The notion that Crewdson's protagonists ultimately 'only encounter themselves and their agony' is relevant to another artist's work, that of Cindy Sherman. Her 'Headshots' series [2000 – 2002, fig 5 and 6 in appendix] is a collection of self-portraits in which she alters her image to replicate archetypal American women; her characterisations are often grotesque in nature with make up and facial features overly accentuated; her motives are brutal and satirical, exploring psychological issues of attraction and disgust inherent in American femininity and its media representations. Although Sherman's work is perceived as a series of 'different' characters, she is playing all the roles, so here we not only consider 'cloning' and the examination of 'archetypes' and gender roles present in contemporary culture [a result of an 'accumulation of culturally received personae' 26 that is presented as a 'set of poses and imitations learned from popular culture' 27] but also the psychological 'wounds' these stereotypes suffer [or maybe even encourage].

These 'learnt poses' often create a duplicity of readings that is particularly relevant to this investigation; the uncomfortable zone between the vulnerability of a female and the infused eroticism this can create. This unintentional but still identifiable sense is habitually involuntary, and an almost exclusively male reaction, generated from the representation of women in modern media, 'in the way that many horror movies which involve no explicit sex at all give an erotic spin-off just through having a terrified women constantly in vulnerable positions' 28. The involvement of principally male viewers in this automated cycle of reading relates to the manner in which the 'images speak not only to him but from him' 29, and although the reaction is disturbing, it is usually ephemeral, and 'normally' quickly extinguished. This correlation between female vulnerability, threat and eroticism and the male gaze, libido, ego and its associated 'power', not only exists in Sherman's work, and the themes discussed earlier, but is also one of the regulating and 'archetypal' indexes of contemporary 'femininity'. This menace and vulnerability is a doubly potent concept in Sherman's work in that the 'femininity' itself appears 'trapped in the image' 30, so not only is the subject 'trapped' by her situation; unable to react or escape, but this 'version' of femininity is also 'trapped' in the perpetual cycle of threat – vulnerably – male gaze – eroticism.

However, this 'threat' and 'vulnerability' can also be converted to create a version of 'femininity' that is both contradictory and complimentary to the one prescribed above; the 'Femme Fatale'.

25. Stephan Berg, *Gregory Crewdson 1985 - 2005,* 2005, p11
26-27. David Campany. *Art and Photography,* 2007, p32
28. Judith Williamson, *Consuming Passions,* A Piece of the Action, 1988, p102
29. Judith Williamson, *Consuming Passions,* A Piece of the Action, 1988, p95
30. Judith Williamson, *Consuming Passions,* A Piece of the Action, 1988, p105

Here the 'threat' is not received from the male gaze, it is the male gaze that is exposed to it, the potent eroticism masquerading as vulnerability this time 'traps' the male instincts in the metaphorical 'frame', as this version of femininity 'embodies a threat to moral and social order' 31, that still excites the male gaze but equally disturbs it as it unknowingly relinquishes control over the exchange. Here both versions of femininity have the same constituent parts; erotic damaged vulnerability, be it the 'genuine' archetypal women in danger, or the duplicitous version that simulates she is defenseless, however they achieve very different results by effecting the same instincts.

However much we [principally men] deny these automatic instincts' credence or existence it has the potential to snare us, often providing an unforeseen and unwelcome punctum; whether its the fantastical promise of sexual dominance and deviance from a perceived 'integrity damaged' [and therefore vulnerable] femme fatale or the faintest arousal when even the simplest 'distress or passivity of the women figures feels faintly pornographic' 32. Both mislead the observer into believing the images are merely 'seductive, colourful, luscious and engaging, and then you realise what you're looking at is something totally opposite' 33.

This 'totally opposite' interpretation occurs when the punctum reveals itself as an agent of pensive prevention, in that it obstructs the initial reading, subtly diverting it away from the original rational understanding; philosopher Jacques Rancière suggesting that 'pensiveness in fact thwarts the logic of the action' 24. It does this by contradictorily extending the 'frozen' action by offering another faint but perceptible additional coating of meaning [or narrative], yet simultaneously 'puts every conclusion in suspense' 35, as it endeavors to disrupt the relationship between the narration 'evident' and the manifestation of the image. The pensive nature of the punctum is equally supplementary to the logic the narrative action depicts whilst it instantaneously arrives 'to suspend or rather duplicate it' 36. This 'punctuated' confusion, or more accurately 'fusion', provides both narrative extension and deferment of total assumption, creating a further realm in which the spectator experiences the image. Barthes coins this other realm the 'blind field' and is produced when the punctum refers to a sense of meaning [pre or post to action/sensation shown] outside the frame of the image, not simply a gaze or an action directed past the frame, but a 'kind of subtle beyond – as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see' 37.

31. Judith Williamson, *Consuming Passions,* Consuming Passions, 1988, p173
32. Judith Williamson, *Consuming Passions,* A Piece of the Action, 1988, p102
33. Cindy Sherman, *Unknown, 1990-1991*
34-36. Jacques Rancière*, The Emancipated Spectator,* 2009, p123
37. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 1993, p59

The use of the word 'desire' here has resonance with the sexual themes discussed earlier, as this punctum induced blind field can differentiate the realms in which 'sexuality' and, more importantly for the pensive success of Sherman's work and my own, 'eroticism' is encountered. Barthes suggests that punctum is void in images that are more 'pornographic' than 'erotic', with the former presenting a system of sexual imagery that symbolises a 'motionless' object, in that it does not offer a sense of the 'beyond'; these symbols 'do not emerge, do not leave' 38 the metaphorical limits of the mise-en-scène; there is no 'blind field' to encounter as 'everything happens within frame' 39, and we as spectators have very little, if any role in the animation of the image; we are in essence 'trapped' in the frame with the subject. Erotic imagery on the other hand is invariably littered with numerous points of punctum, giving us the opportunity to see beyond the surface studium of the sexuality depicted, and 'animate' the narrative [and eroticism] ourselves. Here the sexuality [or sexual organs] is not the principal objective, 'it may very well not show them at all' 40, and thus the 'pensiveness' of the blind field is created allowing the narrative [or figurative] extension to begin.

All the works discussed 're-represent' another 'truth' through various manipulations of the punctum to create 'other' readings of self, the double, eroticism, sexuality, violence and vulnerability. They attempt to reconstitute a perceived 'known reality', or something that appears 'real' whilst simultaneously heightening [and perfecting] its original 'reality'; a distorted mirror, a clone that is recognisable as both 'self' and 'other'. Therefore they are 'simulated' truths, portraying 'hyper-reality' through the punctured metaphysical pinholes of the studium that allow this 'other' to shine through – all the images challenge 'the frontier between the true and false, the real and the unreal, the certain and the uncertain' 41.

The punctum found in all the works discussed is not only pensive and subversive but seemingly 'death driven'; all offer a degree of dark reality; a morbid fascination with vulnerability.

According to Freud, the life instincts of sexuality and ego operate to keep in check the death drive, however these reflexes can serve to strengthen the death instinct's influence and ambition, as the ruthless and ambitious ego and sex instincts become collaborating agitators to the destruction of 'self'. This underlying symbolic violence to self and its consequent symptoms although often faint, are resolute and tangible, serving to intensify the punctum, which in turn, patiently and deliberately exposes these 'simulations' in high-definition-hyper-reality.

38-39. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 1993, p57
40. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 1993, p59
41. Contributor not credited, *Aesthetica Magazine,* 2012, p84

Appendix:

Fig 1:

Image source - **http://www.flickriver.com/photos/bootsman/tags/womeninboots/**
Max Power Live Exhibition 2006
Website accessed 28th August 2012

Fig 2:

Image source - **http://www.sourcesounds.com/gallery/max-power-magazine-source-feature/**
Max Power Magazine cover – cover date unknown
Website accessed 28th August 2012

Fig 3:

Image source -
http://www.artnet.com/usernet/awc/awc_workdetail.asp?aid=424261590&gid=424261590&cid=75394&wid=424300889&page=4
Untitled, 1998

Fig 4:

Image source -
http://www.artnet.com/usernet/awc/awc_workdetail.asp?aid=424261590&gid=424261590&cid=75394&wid=424443105&page=6
Untitled, 2003

Fig 5:

Image source -
http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2012/cindysherman/gallery/8/#/5/untitled-397-2000
Untitled 397, 2000

Fig 6:

Image source -
http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2012/cindysherman/gallery/8/#/5/untitled-397-2000
Untitled 360, 2000

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