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Review of Nicholas Daly, Literature, Technology, and Modernity, 1860-2000.

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Nicholas Daly, Literature, Technology, and Modernity, 1860-2000. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. viii + 161 pp. ISBN 0521833922.

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In the nightmarish conclusion of Zola's *La Bête Humaine* (1890), a driverless train full of soldiers bound for the Franco-Prussian frontier hurtles at exponential speed toward a certain crash. Figured as a ravenous juggernaut, the locomotive has superseded the human culture which produced it and now wreaks destruction with grim indifference: "What did it matter what victims it crushed in its path! Was it not, after all, heading into the future, heedless of the blood that was spilled? And on it sped through the darkness, driverless, like some blind, deaf, beast turned loose upon the field of death . . ." (367-8). Zola's depiction of the machine as pitiless destroyer of both human bodies and humanism was by no means an uncommon one at the *fin-de-siècle*, nor indeed, as the popularity of contemporary techno-paranoia films such as *The Demon Seed* (1977) or *The Terminator* (1984) makes clear, has it abated in more recent times.

But, as Nicholas Daly's impressive *Literature, Technology, and Modernity, 1860-2000* is keen to remind us, such dystopic visions, however prevalent, constitute only a small portion of the wide range of the often ambivalent cultural, emotional, and erotic responses evoked by technological modernity over the last hundred and fifty years. Broad in disciplinary and historical range, Daly's book recovers and sheds new light on various literary and cinematic encounters with machine culture, including Dion Boucicault's railway melodrama, *After Dark: A Drama of London Life* (1868), Wilkie Collins's sensation novel, *The Woman in White* (1859-60), Rudyard Kipling's short story, "Mrs Bathurst" (1904), and the literary and film versions of both Elinor Glyn's *It* (respectively, 1926 and 1927) and J.G. Ballard's *Crash* (respectively, 1973 and 1996). Eschewing the presentism that could all too easily attach to such a project, Daly is more interested in demonstrating the persistence of Victorian anxieties and desires about the machine in our own age than in scrutinizing the earlier texts for signs of a prescient postmodernism. The result is a compelling, nuanced, and often original study that will be of interest to Victorianists and film studies scholars alike.

One of Daly's greatest strengths as a writer is his unerring instinct for the interesting, a skill amply demonstrated at the beginning of Chapter One. Here he draws our attention to the curious craze for "locomotive engine and railway terror" (10) melodramas in the 1868 London theatrical season, noting that at least five playhouses featured near-identical scenes in which

helpless victims were rescued from railway tracks mere seconds before being struck by a train. What specific kind of gratification or catharsis, he asks, were Victorian audiences seeking in these ritualized dramatic encounters between unconscious bodies and speeding trains? Daly answers this question through analysis of Dion Boucicault's *After Dark*, the most successful of the 1868 railway melodramas. The play pits valiant aristocratic hero Sir George Medhurst against the wily Jewish usurer Dicey Morris, a character painted in all the bold strokes of mid-Victorian anti-Semitism. It is Morris who attempts murder-via-train in the play's sensational climax, a move that, according to Daly, links two kinds of anxiety about modernization: the first, about the (quite literal) impact of technology on the body, and the second, about the potential for racial contamination produced by Britain's newly-cosmopolitan society. The play's concluding triumph over the machine is simultaneously a triumph over the deviant foreign Other whose threat to the body politic of Britain is arguably no less considerable than the train's threat to the supine body lying in its wake. Daly's reading of race is somewhat standard here; one might wish that, rather than repeating the one-size-fits-all racial anxiety thesis so widely applied to Victorian texts, he had chosen to explore the subtle gender and class politics at work in the play's depiction of one man rescuing an unconscious Other from a clearly phallic icon of industrial modernity. Nonetheless, the reading is productive of further questions.

Drawing extensively on recent work on sensation fiction, Chapter Two expands upon and complicates the book's initial reading of Victorian popular response to technological culture. Where Chapter One documents the desire to beat the machine and thus revalidate the pastoral, Chapter Two focuses on the contrary impulse to merge with technology and assimilate its rhythms by reading those sensation novels -- i.e., M.E. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* -- which evoke the nervous experience of railway travel. Daly proposes what we might term a *Similia Similibus Curantur* hypothesis here, whereby the individuals internalize part of the trauma -- in this case, the shock of technological modernity -- which haunts them as a means of psychic inoculation: "The sensation novel . . . is a suspense machine, and that suspense works to retool the subject of modernity, who without some such training risks being overwhelmed by modernity -- of melting along with the ground under his or her feet" (52).

Victorian scholars will be familiar with the novels discussed here, and to a certain extent, with the line of argumentation taken -- Daly clearly acknowledges his debt to those earlier critics, such as D.A. Miller, who previously theorized the connection between sensation fiction and the body, although Daly is careful to signal his difference from them. Where Miller thought that the nervous reaction evoked by sensation novels worked to police gender divisions, Daly suggests that it functioned more positively to acclimatize readers to the modern age. This reading is intriguing, and one

wonders how it might illuminate novels outside of the well-established sensation canon. As I read this chapter, my thoughts continually turned to Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907), an exemplary testament to the "shock" of modern cosmopolitan life which ends with heroine Winnie Verloc's suicide by jumping from a moving train. How might Conrad's impressionistically rendered late-century invocation of traumatic modernity compare with that found in the earlier, more formally realist, sensation novels such as *The Woman in White* or *Lady Audley's Secret*? The fact that Daly's argument has implications for a wider range of texts than he is able to address in this slim volume is, again, an indication of its strength.

Daly's discussion of mid-Victorian sensation fiction is followed by a provocative, if tantalizingly brief, chapter on Rudyard Kipling's short story, "Mrs Bathurst," and its response to contemporaneous cinematic depictions of both human bodies in general, and the Boer War soldiers in particular. So frequently was the Boer War the subject of early cinematographic shows, argues Daly, that the two achieved an uncanny near-synonymy, with the result that literary depictions of the early cinema such as Kipling's automatically alluded to the conflict even if their plots never explicitly referred to it. Thus the story's protagonist, a British warrant officer (Vickery) driven mad and then to his death through his obsession with the newsreel image of his former lover Mrs Bathurst, stands in for all of the British war dead, his fate testifying to both the fatal allure of the cinema and the extent of Britain's national trauma in the wake of its heavy losses. "In the end," concludes Daly, ". . . he has literally joined the army of the war dead . . . [W]hile the story's displacements first make it difficult to see that it is a war story, the ending reminds us of the other 22,000 British soldiers . . . who disappeared in the South African interior" (75). Daly's thesis here, albeit intriguing, seems incomplete and under-explored: if Vickery symbolizes the war dead, does the cinematic apparatus itself then take up the position of the war machine? If so, how? In what way might the effects of film viewing compare with the destruction of modern warfare? Does the cinematograph memorialize the dead or, as the story's trajectory seems to suggest, create them? Daly's answers to these questions are implicit at best; there is more analytic vagueness here than in any of the other chapters, a fact perhaps occasioned by the story's stylistic and thematic eccentricity. One wishes Daly had taken a bit more space to work out the full implications of this undeniably rich interpretive route.

The book's final two chapters continue the focus on cinema or, as Daly calls it, following *avant-garde* filmmaker Hollis Frampton, "the last machine." For Daly, the cinema clearly stands as one of, if not the, most important twentieth-century vehicles for the technological transformation and mediation of human bodies. This function is perhaps nowhere better exemplified in early twentieth-century film than in the "It" phenomena associated with screen siren Clara Bow. Originated by society novelist

Elinor Glyn in her 1926 novella, *It*, the concept initially described a form of irresistible, primitive sexual appeal that seemed to precede modernity -- to have "it" was to be possessed of an animal attractiveness which, like vampirism in Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), "mere 'modernity' cannot kill" (67). The story's screen translation redefined the locus of this sexuality to derive it instead from the Hollywood mass publicity machine and the frenetic dynamism of Bow's ultra-modern flapper girl presence: "At the centre of *It*[the film] . . . is the body of a new American girl, a body that seems to act as shorthand for modernization itself" (94). While the previous encounters between bodies and machines in *Literature, Technology, and Modernity* have been read in terms of anxiety, nervousness, and war trauma, the *It* phenomena is by contrast about sheer enjoyment. Bow's performance and star persona "offered a glimpse of pleasurable sexuality, something earthy, but also something light, even euphoric" (105). I must admit to finding this conclusion less interesting than the absorbing historical material about early Hollywood and the eccentric Elinor Glyn that surrounds it; indeed, Daly's organization here suggests that he felt the same way. Most of Chapter Four is devoted to fascinating anecdotes about the twenties film industry and, after delivering its underwhelming claim that Clara Bow presented a positive, modern version of eroticism to her female viewers, the chapter quickly returns to film history. This should not be taken as a complaint; indeed, the chapter is lively and informative. But its greater preoccupation with biographical/historical material than with interpretation does render it somewhat out of touch with the hermeneutic thrust of the rest of the book.

The book's concluding chapter describes the simultaneous fulfillment and reversal of mid-Victorian responses to technological modernity in J.G. Ballard's novel, *Crash* (1973), and David Cronenberg's subsequent 1996 film version of it. While the 1860s theatrical railway melodramas invited audiences to take pleasure in the body's evasion of the machine, *Crash*, as both novel and film, eroticizes the failure of such last-minute escapes. The novel's plot follows a group of car crash fetishists who actively pursue collision as an attempt to "re-inject meaning into a commodified, and thoroughly modernized world" (123). Daly's thoroughly modernist reading of the novel as a quest for, rather than emancipation from, meaning puts him refreshingly at odds with its postmodernist interpreters such as Jean Baudrillard. Daly shares Roger Luckhurst's conviction that Ballard's fiction is better explicated in the context of the post-war British *avant-garde* than in that of postmodernism's culture of the simulacrum; indeed, Daly extends this appraisal of *Crash*'s aesthetic lineage back even further to include Victorian melodrama, arguing that the novel's clinical pornography acts as an updated version of melodrama's privileging of the body as source of affect. By allying *Crash* with earlier texts and representational traditions, Daly is able to argue that contemporary culture remains invested in, and haunted by, the "intellectual separation of humans and machines" and "pastoral fantasies of

modernity thwarted" (135) engendered at the dawn of the industrial era. This framing works to give the book a coherence that, due to the diversity of its texts and wideness of its historical purview, it might otherwise lack.

Despite its occasional instances of interpretive underdevelopment, this book confirms the promise of Daly's earlier *Modernism, Romance, and the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge 1999) and establishes his reputation as one of the most interesting and important voices of the new generation of Victorian studies scholars. In his period-defying choice of texts, he invites us to recognize the intimate and often unacknowledged connections between the ages of steam and automobile, without ever indulging in simple-minded presentism or relying on whiggish narratives of progress. Eschewing both technophobia and technophilia alike, *Literature, Technology and Modernity* is a compelling meditation on our persistently ambivalent relationship with the all-mighty machine.