HUMANISM AFTER ALL? DAFT PUNK'S EXISTENTIALIST CRITIQUE OF TRANSHUMANISM
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INTRODUCTION

The French dance music production duo Daft Punk have, since the pre-release publicity for their second album, *Discovery* (2001), used their music (and the accompanying paratexts of video clips, publicity photos, liner notes, and the costume and stage design of their tours) as an occasion to meditate on the relationship between technology and the human. Although their early efforts at exploring this relationship seem at best naïve—they initially claimed that an accident in their recording studio in September 1999 had transformed them into robots[1]—their later texts, such as the video clips that accompany their third album, *Human After All* (2005), display an increasing level of sophistication, not only in artistic but also in philosophical terms. Despite the fact that their music and its commercial success rely extensively on technologies of sound manipulation, digital reproduction, and new forms of online media, Daft Punk's recent examinations of the relationship between technology and the human are, to say the least, ambivalent. On the one hand, songs such as "Technologic" can be read as paeans to the possibilities that technology opens up to human existence, and the fact that the song was swiftly seized upon by advertising executives to sell Apple's iPod music player would support such a reading. On the other hand, the visual codes and semiotics of the song's video clip suggest that Daft Punk's vision of the technological is a much darker one than Apple might like to embrace.[2]

Nowhere else in the duo's *oeuvre* is their take on technology and the human more developed in its details and more ambivalent in its message than in their debut feature-length film, *Electroma* (2007). The film's plot can be summed up in a few sentences: a pair of robots dressed in the same leather jackets and helmets that Daft Punk themselves wear, dubbed 'Hero Robot #1' and 'Hero Robot #2' in the film's credits, embark upon a journey to become human. They drive to a small town in Inyo county, California, populated by other robots, and enter

a facility where a group of mysterious assistants clad in white use flesh-coloured latex and wigs to construct mimetic human faces on the duo. The duo then walk back through the town, where their faces melt in the sun, and they are chased by the other robots. The hero robots flee to an abandoned restroom, where they discard the remnants of their latex faces. Discouraged, the duo embark on a lengthy walk through the desert, which culminates with a montage of aerial shots of the desert and the only image of a human body part in the film: a disembodied woman's pubis and vulva. After this montage, Hero Robot #1 stops in his tracks, and Hero Robot #2 assists him in self-destructing by pressing a switch on his back. After a short countdown, Hero Robot #1 explodes. Hero Robot #2 gathers his remains into a pile, then continues on. After a short while, Hero Robot #2 stops walking and attempts to self-destruct, but cannot reach the switch on his back. He takes off his faceplate, smashes it on the ground, then uses a shard of it as a burning glass to set himself on fire. The final shot of the film is a long tracking shot of a blazing Hero Robot #2 walking slowly through the desert night. What are we to make of this film?

This paper will read *Electroma* as an existentialist[3] critique of one of the transhumanism movement's central theses: that death is a harm. In order to do so, I will examine the ways in which *Electroma* can be read as a micro-drama of coming into Sartrean authentic being, and I will argue that the film presents the moment at which the first of its robot protagonists gives up on his quest to become human as the very site of the robots' becoming-human. I will then examine the role of gender in Daft Punk's vision of the posthuman, and argue that *Electroma*'s critique of transhumanism relies on sexist structures of thought outlined in *Being and Nothingness*. Finally, I will conclude by examining Donna Haraway's paper "A Cyborg Manifesto" and its potential ability to complicate *Electroma*'s notion of the cyborg.

TRANSHUMANISM, EXISTENTIALISM, AND DEATH

The term 'transhumanism' entered the English language in 1957, in Julian Huxley's book *Religion Without Revelation*. Huxley writes:

> The human species can, if it wishes, transcend itself—not just sporadically, an individual here in one way, an individual there in another way—but in its entirety, as humanity. We need a name for this new belief. Perhaps transhumanism will serve: man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature.[4]

The application of the term has changed little since Huxley coined it. Indeed, Nick Bostrom—the founder and current chair of the both the World Transhumanist Association (recently given the more anodyne appellation Humanity+) and Oxford University's Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies, as well as a member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Evolution and Technology* (previously the *Journal of Transhumanism*)—gives Huxley a central place in his history of transhumanist philosophy.[5] Bostrom, whose prominent standing within the transhumanist movement allows his statements to be read as a rough synecdoche of the broader movement's perspective, provides a succinct description of transhumanism in his rebuttal to Francis Fukuyama's recent claim that transhumanism is "the world's most dangerous idea:"

> Transhumanists believe that, while there are hazards that need to be identified and avoided, human enhancement technologies will offer enormous potential for deeply valuable and humanly beneficial uses. Ultimately, it is possible that such enhancements may make us, or our descendants, 'posthuman', beings who may have indefinite health-spans, much greater intellectual faculties than any current human being—and perhaps entirely new sensibilities or modalities—as well as the ability to control their own emotions. The wisest approach *vis-à-vis* these prospects, argue transhumanists, is to embrace technological progress, while strongly defending human rights and individual choice, and taking action specifically against concrete threats, such as military or terrorist abuse of bioweapons, and against unwanted environmental or social side-effects.[6]

Regardless of the merits or feasibility of potential transhumanist technologies, it is clear that several prominent voices within the transhumanist movement regard death as a harm.[7] Bostrom's account goes so far as to claim that the human desire to either defeat death or, at least, to prolong life as much as possible, is the impulse behind *all* human technological innovation:

> Ceremonial burial and preserved fragments of religious writings show that prehistoric man and woman were deeply disturbed by the death of loved ones. Although the belief in an afterlife was common, this did not preclude efforts to extend the present life. … The boundary between mythos and science, between magic and technology, was blurry, and almost all conceivable means to the preservation of life were attempted by somebody or other. Yet while explorers made many interesting discoveries and alchemists invented some useful things, such as new dyes and improvements in metallurgy, the goal of life-extension proved elusive.[8]

The universality of the life-extension instinct can, Bostrom claims, be proven by its ubiquity in myth (including, for instance, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*).[9] Having accorded the life-extension instinct its proper place as the ground upon which all technological advances must be made, Bostrom goes on to detail its significance in current transhumanist thought. The journalist Brian Alexander, as a skeptical witness to a U.S. anti-ageing medicine conference, puts the case more bluntly: he describes its 200 attendants as united "in one belief: death was just damn unfair."[10]

We might begin to map the continuities and discontinuities between transhumanism and existentialism by examining their relationship to humanism. In both cases, I will rely on two texts, each delivered by an acknowledged leader of either the transhumanist or existentialist movement: Bostrom and Jean-Paul Sartre, respectively. Both of these texts were composed in defence of their respective movement against strong criticism by their contemporaries: Bostrom's history in the light of Francis Fukuyama's aforementioned criticism,[11] and Sartre's lecture *Existentialism is a Humanism* in response to what he perceived as the term's continual misuse by its Catholic and communist detractors and in the press.[12] Both authors, in order to defend the movements of which they are the figureheads, claim that their movements are forms of humanism. Bostrom's history traces transhumanism's lineage through the rational humanism of Condorcet, Kant, and Newton.[13] In Bostrom's strongly teleological view of technology and its history, transhumanism becomes the logical extension of humanism, an affirmation of Kant's "*sapere aude!*"[14] Similarly, Sartre counters the claims of his attackers not by defending existentialism's supposed nihilism and anti-humanism, but rather by defining existentialism as a radical and thoroughgoing version of humanism, and counter-intuitively claiming that what his detractors find most upsetting about existentialism is, in fact, its relentless humanistic optimism: for Sartre, existentialism cannot "be called a pessimistic description of man, for no doctrine is more optimistic, since it declares that man's destiny lies within himself."[15]

Aside from these pointed polemics (and their concomitant tendency to decontextualise the history of philosophy and distort complex intellectual positions to suit the exigencies of the authors' theses), these texts share a similar view of human capacities. Despite the fact that Bostrom claims that transhumanism's opponents, pejoratively dubbed "bioconservatives," find some solace in "various Continental philosopher's [*sic*] critiques of technology, technocracy, and the rationalistic mindset that accompanies modern technoscience,"[16] it is not at all clear that a transhumanist perspective is necessarily incompatible with the version of existentialism promoted by Sartre in *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Consider Sartre's definition of the human in *Existentialism is a Humanism*:

> Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be, and since he conceives of himself only after he exists, just as he wills himself to be after being thrown into existence, man is nothing other than what he makes of himself.[17]

Sartre's position here is not at all dissimilar to Julian Huxley's previously-cited claim that "[t]he human species can, if it wishes, transcend itself,"[18] although there are some important differences. Huxley deploys the verb "to

transcend" in its common English-language form, namely, "to pass beyond, to exceed."[19] Sartre's deployment of the same verb in both *Existentialism is a Humanism* and *Being and Nothingness* is underpinned by Sartre's ontology of Being-in-itself and Being-for-itself, and is informed by the term's prior deployment in both Kant and Husserl (certainly, too, Sartre would disdain Huxley's use of the term "human nature," a sin for which he chastises Diderot, Voltaire, and Kant).[20] Regardless, as Mary Warnock explains, the term 'transcendence' in Sartre "often refers simply to the process whereby the For-itself goes beyond the given in a further project of itself."[21] The distinction here is one of scope: Sartre is concerned with the individual, Huxley with the species. We need not perform too much conceptual violence in order to fit transhumanism's central concern of transcending the limitations of human embodiment towards a more stable and robust life-form into Sartre's definition of the human For-itself as that which "surpasses its facticity (*i.e.*, to be either *given* or past or body) towards the in-itself which it would be if it were able to be its own foundation."[22]

There is, of course, a great deal of disagreement amongst transhumanists about which of Bostrom's "human enhancement technologies" would best serve humanity in its self-transcendence.[23] Key amongst them, however—and the one that Daft Punk deal with directly in *Electroma*—is the notion of 'uploading,' which would entail, in Bostrom's account:

> creat[ing] a sufficiently detailed scan of a particular human brain … from this scan, reconstruct[ing] the neuronal network that the brain implemented … [and] emulat[ing] the whole computational structure on a powerful supercomputer. If successful, the procedure would result in the original mind, with memory and personality intact, being transferred to the computer where it could there exist as software; and it could either inhabit a robot body or live in a virtual reality.[24]

In technical rather than common usage, the term 'robot' denotes a programmable machine that is designed to perform tasks in the place of a living agent,[25] and indeed robots are an integral part of contemporary industrial production. Unlike humans, though, for robots essence precedes existence: like Sartre's example of the paper knife, they are built for a purpose, and their instrumentality is their essence.[26] As automata, robots do not possess the nihilating ontological structure of the For-itself: they cannot nihilate their programming and in so doing freely choose to perform another task; they therefore cannot transcend their facticity in order to become Beings-for-themselves.[27] The etymology of the word *robot* reveals the immanent nature of the robot's existence: the term is derived from the Czech *robota*, "forced labour."[28] The cyborg, however, is a different proposition: a portmanteau of 'cybernetic' and 'organism,' the term 'cyborg' refers to "an integrated man-machine system."[29] The transhumanist fantasy of 'uploading,' if the software mind were uploaded into a robotic body, would create cyborgs rather than robots.

As Sartre makes clear in *Being and Nothingness*, "the for-itself attempts to escape its factual existence (*i.e.*, its being there, as an in-itself for which it is in no way the foundation), and … this flight takes place towards an impossible future always pursued where the for-itself would be an in-itself-for-itself—*i.e.*, an in-itself that would be to itself its own foundation."[30] Sartre identifies the In-itself-For-itself as the "uncaused cause" of Aquinas' cosmological argument; thus "To be man means to reach toward being God."[31] Sartre takes care to state "that while the *meaning* of the desire is ultimately the project of being God, the desire is never *constituted* by this meaning; on the contrary, it always represents a particular discovery of its ends."[32] Despite this caveat—in the light of which nearly *any* human project can be read as a sublimated desire to become God– it is more transparently the case in the transhumanist ideal of uploading than most other human projects. The human being uploaded into a robotic body would not only have cheated death, but, importantly, it would be an In-itself (a robotic body) that is to itself its own foundation—that is, a For-itself that willed itself to be an In-itself of its own choosing. In Sartrean terms, the cyborg not only offers the possibility of immortality, but also of the resolution of the interminable dialectic of the In-itself and the For-itself.

DAFT PUNK'S VISION OF THE POSTHUMAN

Electroma offers us a compelling vision of a posthuman, cyborg world. Various textual clues indicate that the world of *Electroma* was once inhabited by human beings: the robots live in houses like contemporary Western houses, drive late twentieth-century cars, and the toilets in the restroom in which our heroes discard their latex faces (here reconfigured as faeces) still function. It is clear, in the robots' comportment and motility, that they were once human: each moves and occupies space in much the same way as a contemporary (and therefore gendered) Westerner.

While the film offers us a vision of the cyborg posthuman future, it also implicitly denies that the cyborg would, in fact, be the resolution of the interminable dialectic, or the In-itself-For-itself. Quite the opposite: it portrays the cyborg as "for-itself-in-itself," a term coined by Iris Marion Young to describe the contradictory nature of women as transcendent beings "*overlaid* with immanence."[33] We can see this clearly in the scene in which our hero robots drive through the robot town, observing the lives of their fellow robots, who mimetically perform household chores and other projectless tasks that recall Beauvoir's discussion of the immanent and Sisyphean task of housework.[34] That there are male robots and female robots here seems not to matter: although the tasks are clearly gendered—a female robot minds the robot children in the park; the police robots are male—each robot's existence is equally oriented towards Life rather than Spirit.[35] Indeed, the very fact that the film insists on calling these beings "robots" rather than the etymologically correct "cyborg" indicates that these beings' lives are immanent rather than transcendental.[36] In short, having succeeded in the project of transcending death, these beings have no further projects and nothing else left to transcend—thus they lead lives of bad faith, mistakenly understanding themselves as little more than automata.

Therefore, our hero robots' journey to humanity is not a mere physical journey. It is instead a journey from bad faith to authenticity, and one that takes the form of a re-enactment of Sartre's ontological ekstases by which Being-for-itself distinguishes itself from and nihilates Being-in-itself: the ekstases of temporality, reflection, and Being-for-others.[37] To put it another way, the robot's interior journey from immanence to freedom is presented in narrative terms as a more primordial journey in which Being-in-itself nihilates itself and in so doing becomes Being-for-itself. Even before the outset of the film, we know that the robots have a project of becoming-human, and this implies two of the three ekstases: the ekstases of temporality (a *project* implies a past that is to be transcended, a present that is geared towards that transcendence, and a future in which the project is completed) and reflection (the robots must take themselves to be both objects and subjects in order to transform themselves). Furthermore, we first encounter our heroes at the beginning of their voyage: in the opening scene of the film, they enter their car and begin driving. In Sartrean terms, they are *in flight*. For Sartre, "The for-itself is a pursued-pursuing. … let us note that the for-itself is not *first* in order to attempt *later* to attain being … This pursuing flight is not given which is added on to the being of the for-itself. The for-itself *is* this very flight."[38] Yet *Electroma* starts from a standstill: a series of still shots of rock formations precedes the hero robots entering the car. Thus the car journey to Inyo County symbolically changes our robots from stationary Beings-in-themselves to a line of flight which becomes, or rather *is*, the Being-for-themselves of these two robots. They have, in the very taking up of their project of becoming-human, recaptured one of their modes of being: that is, Being-for-itself.

But, in narrative terms, they are not yet human. In order for this to occur, they must pass through the third ekstasis: that of Being-for-others.[39] This they accomplish, in the film's narrative logic, after their transformation into false humans. Although this transformation does not *make* them human, it does break the visual codes through which the members of the robotic community identify each other as part of the Same. Their arrival into town in their human suits therefore carries with it the shock of alterity: their different appearance signifies them as Other. Here the film lingers on the disquieting effect on the robot population of our hero robots' transformation: the town robots stop their work or play to stare at them, and it is precisely through the look that our hero robots come to realise that they have a being for others. The fact that the robots are chased into the abandoned restroom renders in narrative form the ontological tussle of mutual objectification and conflict that

Sartre describes as the primary relationship to the Other.[40]

Having discarded their disguises, and having seemingly failed at their project of becoming human, our robots now embark on their long trek through the desert. In coming to terms with their failure, the robots have grasped that their attempt at becoming human was made in bad faith: not the more common bad faith of the person who denies their ontological freedom and thinks of themselves as a determinate being (the bad faith of the café waiter), but the bad faith of the being that denies its own situation in order to emphasise its transcendence: the bad faith of Sartre's homosexual, who cannot accept what he supposedly is.[41] Although the town's robots are guilty of bad faith in leading lives of immanence, our hero robots are also guilty of bad faith: quite clearly, the robots cannot become human merely by applying latex to their faces. Having grasped their failure, and the bad faith implicit within their attempts to realise their project of becoming human, the robots now feel the full force of responsibility for their actions. The desert thus symbolises their abandonment: the robots "are left alone and without excuse … condemned to be free."[42] Yet at the very moment the robots grasp their failure, and their responsibility for the consequences of it, the film presents us with a significant visual clue: the image of the vulva and pubis. The visual codes of the film present this piece of human anatomy in absolute contradistinction to the bodies of the hero robots: the naked and exposed vulva represents "real" humanity. In a gendered social context where the vulva is understood teleologically as the organ *par excellence* of sexual reproduction and birth, the symbolism of this moment is obvious: in the depths of their failure, the robots are born as human. The seemingly inhospitable desert of abandonment and anguish, feminised through the eroticising gaze of the montage, becomes the source of human life.[43]

GENDER AND THE POSTHUMAN

It is at this point in the film that its earlier myopia about gender comes into focus. The earlier scenes in Inyo County present gender in the posthuman world as little more than a vestigial trace of past humanity: one could argue that Daft Punk are doing little more than dramatising Donna Haraway's claim that "the cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world."[44] However, the reduction of gender from (human) bodily sexual difference to what appears to be a mere choice in clothing and (cyborg) bodily comportment demonstrates that gender here is absent only insofar as the cyborg, in Daft Punk's vision of the posthuman, becomes the universal male. Jacques Derrida describes the process by which the utopian elimination of gender becomes a re-inscription of the male/same:

> The determination of sexual difference in opposition is destined, designed, in truth, for truth; it is so in order to erase sexual difference. The dialectical opposition neutralises or supersedes … the difference. However, according to a surreptitious operation that must be flushed out, one insures phallocratic mastery under the cover of neutralization every time. These are now well known paradoxes.[45]

In the posthuman world of Inyo County gender is at best a vestigial trace of a past humanity. Indeed, the more salient difference for these robots seems not to be gender but division of the robots into two models differentiated by helmet designs. Thus we see two robots of the same model, one 'male,' one 'female,' being wed—a parodic vision of the future that shows the elimination of sexual difference through the processes of technological (re)production. In this context we might therefore read Daft Punk's display of the vulva as a reminder of the necessity of sexual difference in the project of being-human. Certainly, by revisiting and restaging the moment of birth as the signifier of the robots' becoming-human, Daft Punk appear not to disavow what Luce Irigaray has termed the "forgotten vagina,"[46] that which allows for passage between states of being: in this case, from robot to human. This act of remembrance would insist, therefore, on the privileged role of "the maternal-feminine."[47] Yet the context of this vaginal image complicates such a reading. Firstly, the vagina functions as a synecdoche for the complete woman: in this brief image, we see only the ridges of the woman's hips, her pubis, and her vulva. There is no face, nor any other body parts that could inscribe this female body as a unique or individuated female body. It is indeed as though the most salient feature of women in *Electroma* is their sexual anatomy: *tota mulier in vagina*.[48] Furthermore, this female body is, through its positioning in the

montage of desert shots, rendered contiguous with nature, and thus stands in a metonymic relationship with nature. Nature is here feminised, and the feminine naturalised.[49] Finally, the context implicitly reduces the feminine to the reproductive through the interplay of images of barrenness and fecundity: women's bodies are both the barren desert and the oasis teeming with life. In either case, they are to be understood in relation to their capacity to reproduce.

The implicit sexism of this construction of women is reflected in Sartre's own work. In principle, Sartre's existentialism cannot support sexist notions of 'woman's essence,' since existentialism will admit no talk of human nature or essences.[50] As Margery L. Collins and Christine Pierce make clear, to deny 'essences' or 'natures' of all kinds is a *de facto* feminist stance: "one would not expect to find sexism in Sartrean psychology because Sartre denies the concept of human nature and therefore its legitimacy as a source of human values. Such a view disallows the argument that roles are natural as a basis for assigning particular roles to women. Indeed, anyone who uses such arguments would be guilty of bad faith."[51] Yet, as Collins and Pierce aptly demonstrate, both Sartre's philosophy and his fictional works demonstrate a continued reduction of female figures and characters to essences. For Collins and Pierce this contradiction is at most a regrettable matter, perhaps the function of lingering traces of sexism in the author: "It is gravely disappointing that a major contemporary effort to refute the existence of human nature and its legitimacy as a source of human values fails to encompass women, one of the groups of human beings to suffer most from essentialist views," they write in conclusion.[52] In this sentence we can see two claims at work: 1) that Sartre's sexism is profoundly out of tune with his philosophical system, perhaps because of highly personal and idiosyncratic reasons; and 2) that the system is nonetheless salvageable if others can adhere more strictly to its tenets and remain vigilant about the possibility of sexism entering the theoretical through imagery and metaphor.

Michèle le Dœuff's investigation of similar passages of *Being and Nothingness* in *Hipparchia's Choice* highlights the same sexism, but arrives at a different conclusion. For le Dœuff, the sexism of *Being and Nothingness* is not incidental to the text and therefore possible to excise in a more thorough and self-consistent application of existentialist theory. To reach this point we must engage with le Dœuff's earlier work in *The Philosophical Imaginary*, which begins with the observation that although there is infamously very little agreement about what, exactly, philosophy constitutes, there is no disagreement about what is *not* philosophical: philosophy, according to its post-Socratic practitioners, "is not a story, not a pictorial description, not a work of pure literature. Philosophical discourse is inscribed and declares its status as philosophy through a break with myth, fable, the poetic, the domain of the image."[53] That having been said, if "one goes looking for this philosophy in the texts which are meant to embody it, the least that can be said is that it is not to be found there in a pure state. We shall *also* find statues that breathe the scent of roses, comedies, tragedies, architects, foundations, dwellings … in short, a whole pictorial world sufficient to decorate even the dryest 'History of Philosophy'."[54] What are we to make of this distinction? If the image is merely a supplement to the theoretical text, either as the trace of a universal pre-rational psyche or as a pedagogic aid, then we can say it is properly extra-philosophical.[55] Yet the presence of these images opens the philosophical system up to the extra-theoretical world of pictorial representation, literature, poetry, and socially-produced meaning. Imagery says more than the text can say, therefore, at the very least, "the interpretation of imagery within philosophical texts goes together with the search for points of tension in a work. In other words such imagery is inseparable from the difficulties, the sensitive points of an intellectual venture."[56] More strongly stated, this hypothesis indicates that "the meaning conveyed by images works both for and against the system that deploys them. *For*, because they sustain something which the system itself cannot justify, but which is nevertheless needed for its proper working. *Against*, for the same reason—or almost: their meaning is incompatible with the system's possibilities."[57]

We can see in these introductory comments the kernel of both le Dœuff's critique of Sartre and her philosophical admiration for Beauvoir.[58] The imagery in *Being and Nothingness* in this analysis says what the theoretical system itself cannot: it thus mobilises highly-sexed and highly sexist images to support arguments that its philosophical system could not in itself pose. So, for instance, Sartre's problematic passages on the slimy are not to be understood merely as authorial aberrations but as integral to existentialism as such. Sartre writes that the slimy

invites me; for a body of slime at rest is not noticeably distinct from a body of very dense liquid. But it is a trap. … [the slimy] leaves its traces on me. … Slime is the revenge of the In-itself. A sickly-sweet, feminine revenge which will be symbolised on another level by the quality 'sugary'. … A sugary sliminess is the ideal of the slimy; it symbolises the sugary death of the For-itself (like that of the wasp which sinks into the jam and drowns in it).[59]

The sexism of this passage ought to be self-evident, particularly given the synecdochic and metonymic relationships between jam, sugar, the domestic, and the feminine. The slimy death of the For-itself becomes even more keenly gendered when Sartre begins talking about the tendency to fill holes as "one of the most fundamental tendencies of human reality."[60] The hole *par excellence* turns out to be, unsurprisingly, the vagina. "The obscenity of the feminine sex is that of everything which 'gapes open'. It is an *appeal to being* as all holes are. In herself woman appeals to a strange flesh which is to transform her into a fullness by penetration and dissolution."[61] This appeal to being is not reciprocal: if woman calls for a strange flesh to make her lack into a plenitude, then man fears her lack because it may hungrily devour his penis and castrate him. As a hole, and a slimy, feminine one at that, the vagina represents for Sartre nothing less than the call of the In-itself to the For-itself which must die (as the wasp dies) in sugary slime as it attempts to plug the obscene hole.

This imagery, and its conflation of the feminine with slime, passivity, death, and the In-itself (while the masculine stands for plugging holes, activity, life, and the For-itself), is not peripheral to Sartre's work. Indeed, it is a structural necessity. We may recall that, for Sartre, all human projects can be understood as the expression of an atavistic desire to reconcile the In-itself and the For-itself into the In-itself-For-itself, or God. Slime and holes represent in this system the end of the For-itself and the impossibility of that project. Thus, as le Dœuff puts it, woman is that "counter-figure [who] should undo the work of integration and persistently compromise the For-itself in order to ensure that this 'God' fails and thus that the For-itself's projects of conquest can continue indefinitely."[62] Sartre therefore presents in *Being and Nothingness* the "story of a failed God, contrasted with woman, who fails because of woman, or thanks to her, since his defeat allows him to start his conquests all over again."[63] This aspect of le Dœuff's critique is rendered startlingly visible in *Electroma*. As we have noted above, the moment of the robots' becoming-human is metaphorised as birth by the interspersion of a human vulva in the desert montage. Nevertheless, directly after this shot, Hero Robot #1 begins his suicide attempts. The narrative proximity is revealing: the vulva is the source of both death and life. While the robots have succeeded in their project of becoming-human, they have only done so through recourse to a symbolic feminine whose function mirrors that of the symbolic feminine in *Being and Nothingness*—to provide both the limit of human projects and the source of their constant renewal. Although *Electroma's* parodic display of the vestigial traces of gender in the posthuman world of Inyo County indicates a compelling critique of the potential for transhumanist technologies to obliterate sexual difference, when Daft Punk return to sexual difference as the *sine qua non* of the human their vision of sexual difference is clouded by the sexism implicit in Sartrean existentialism.

CONCLUSION: BEYOND EXISTENTIALIST CRITIQUE

Although existentialism proves to be a rich framework within which Daft Punk articulate a critique of the naïve technological triumphalism of transhumanism, it cannot, in the end, account for the gendered nature of the posthuman. For this, we must turn to non-existentialist sources, one of the most prominent being Donna Haraway's 1985 paper "A Cyborg Manifesto." In this final section I will briefly discuss Haraway's paper in relation to the thematics of *Electroma* and indicate how Haraway's understanding of the cyborg can productively complicate the use of cyborg figures in a critique of transhumanism.

We must note from the outset that Haraway's cyborg and Daft Punk's robots are remarkably different things. A key distinction between Haraway's understanding of the cyborg and the cyborgs presented in *Electroma* is that of temporality. The robots of *Electroma* inhabit a posited future where humans as such do not exist; their posthuman world is temporally disconnected from the world of the film's consumers. Haraway's cyborgs, in contrast, are present to her readers, indeed *are* her readers: "By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are

all chimeras, theorised and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics."[64] Thus the cyborg is a "creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction,"[65] and science fiction provides us with an area to contest definitions of the cyborgs that we are in the process of becoming—or perhaps already are. For although the cyborg is, in terms of its historical genesis in and through systems theory and informatics, "the awful apocalyptic *telos* of the 'West's' escalating dominations of abstract individuation" and "the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism," Haraway nonetheless articulates the subversive capacities immanent within the figure of the cyborg: "But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential."[66] The cyborg is thus, for Haraway, a figure to remain *contested* in concrete political action:

> It is entirely possible, even likely, that people who want to make cyborg social realities and images to be more contested places—where people have different kinds of say about the shape of their lives—will lose, and are losing all over the world. One would be a fool, I think, to ignore that. However, that doesn't mean we have to give away the game, cash in our chips and go home. I think that those are the places where we need to keep contesting.[67]

While Haraway makes explicit the fact that her cyborg is utopian, her cyborg functions as a politically-motivated fiction that speaks to the exigencies of 1980s socialist feminism. Her cyborg is a hybrid creature that moves between the registers of theory and fiction; it "is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity."[68] As such, it ought not be recuperable to the project of teleological transhumanism, although Bostrom's "History of Transhumanism" cites the essay's famous concluding sentence—"I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess"—as though it were an endorsement of his cause.[69]

Perhaps the largest distinction between Haraway's cyborgs and Daft Punk's robots is that Haraway's cyborg is part of a sustained theoretical project to think beyond humanism and human subjectivity, whereas Daft Punk's robots are clearly little more than upgraded humans, or Humanity+. Each robot is an individual unit rather than a partial creature; although the robots are an amalgamation of human and machine, the machine component is understood to have no volition, to be subordinated to the human. As such, they are profoundly *humanist* creatures, as can be demonstrated by their relationship to the symbolic maternal as represented by the vulva. Haraway writes that "An origin story in the 'Western', humanist sense depends on the myth of original unity, fullness, bliss and terror, represented by the phallic mother from whom all humans must separate, the task of individual development and of history, the twin potent myths inscribed most powerfully for us in psychoanalysis and Marxism … The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust."[70] To psychoanalysis and Marxism we may add existentialism, which casts the essence of humanity as the nihilating power of consciousness to carve up the original unity of the In-itself, and sees in holes and slime the inevitable, cyclical return to an original state of non-being. Daft Punk's robots may long to return to a state of being-human, but in dreaming of a prelapsarian state they have proven themselves only too human. If we are to believe both Bostrom and Sartre when they claim that their doctrines are extensions of humanism, then we must recognise that an existentialist critique of transhumanism will only return us to the humanism that underpins them both; had they succeeded in becoming human, Daft Punk's robots may have found themselves dreaming of becoming robots once more ∎

NOTES

1. Chris Gill, "Robopop" *Remix Magazine*, May 1 2001, available online at http://remixmag.com./mag/remix_robopop. The song consists of the lyrics "Buy it, use it, break it, fix it, trash it, change it, melt, upgrade it …" repeated in a robotic monotone over a compulsive dance beat. The Apple iPod commercial (perhaps unsuccessfully) attempts to co-opt these lyrics into a celebration of the elasticity of information flows by matching the music with dancing human silhouettes, while the official video offers a darker vision: in it, a small, skinless and childlike robot repeats the mantra from atop a pyramid that looks out into a desert wasteland. It is worth noting here that the Daft Punk themselves created and directed all of the videos for the singles from *Human After All*, and that *Electroma* was conceived and filmed as part of this process. These clips can be easily found online, through sites such as YouTube.

2. The term 'existentialism' can be applied either broadly, to the figures that Jean-Paul Sartre names 'existentialist' in his lecture *Existentialism is a Humanism* (including Karl Jaspers, Friedrich Nietzsche, Søren Kierkegaard, and Martin Heidegger), or more narrowly, to the thought of Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. In this paper, I will restrict the use of the term to the latter, narrower sense of the term.

3. Cited in Nick Bostrom, "A History of Transhumanist Thought" *Journal of Evolution and Technology* 14:1 (2005), 6.

4. See *Ibid*.

5. Nick Bostrom, "In Defense of Posthuman Dignity" *Bioethics* 19:3 (2005), 203.

6. This is not to say that all transhumanists believe that death is a harm, or that it is indeed possible to achieve immortality. For example, insofar as the French artist Orlan can be considered a transhumanist, her work certainly does not subscribe to the same technological triumphalism and disinterest in the embodied nature of subjectivity that Bostrom's account of transhumanism valorises. However, such voices are comparatively rare in the transhumanist movement.

7. Bostrom, "A History of Transhumanist Thought", 1.

8. *Ibid*. We may note here that not all philosophical treatments of *Gilgamesh* come to the same conclusion: indeed, Jan Patočka reads in *Gilgamesh* an affirmation of "the dark power of finite life, ever exhausting itself, ever requiring care and protection." Cf. Jan Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*. Trans. Erazim Kohák. Chicago and La Salle: Open Court Press, 1996, 19–21.

9. Brian Alexander, *Rapture: A Raucous Tour of Cloning, Transhumanism, and the New Era of Immortality*. New York: Basic Books, 2003, 52.

10. Bostrom, "A History of Transhumanist Thought", 24.

11. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Trans. Carol Macomber, Ed. John Kulka. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007, 17–20.

12. Bostrom, "A History of Transhumanist Thought", 2.

13. Cf. *Ibid*., 4.

14. Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 40.

15. Bostrom, "A History of Transhumanist Thought", 23. Although Bostrom doesn't name the Continental philosophers about which he might be speaking, this barb is quite clearly aimed (at least in part) at Heidegger's essay "The Question Concerning Technology" and its criticism of advanced forms of technology enframing the world as "standing in reserve". Cf. Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology" *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Trans. William Lovitt. New York: Harper and Row, 1977, 3–35.

16. Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 22.

17. Cited in Bostrom, "A History of Transhumanist Thought", 6.

18. Cf. *OED Online*, 2nd ed., *s.v.* "Transcend."

19. Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 21–22.

20. Hazel E. Barnes, "Key to Special Terminology" in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: an Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*. Trans. Hazel E. Barnes. New York and London: Routledge, 2005, 655.

21. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 384. The terms "In-itself" and "For-itself" are inconsistently capitalised in this edition; I have capitalised them in my own text and made no modifications to their inconsistent use in direct quotations.

22. The details of several proposed technologies, as well as some discussion about their comparative merits, can be found in Bostrom, "A History of Transhumanist Thought".

23. *Ibid.*, 9.

24. *OED Online*, 2nd ed., *s.v.* "Robot."

25. Cf. Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 21.

26. The fear that, through developments in artificial intelligence, computers and robots may one day nihilate their programming and discover a kind of ontological freedom that was previously the sole domain of the human propels a great deal of contemporary science fiction, including James Cameron's popular *Terminator* franchise. Fortunately, aside from the system crashes that plague the Microsoft Windows operating system, computers and robots seem no closer to this ontological revelation than they were in 1984, when Cameron released the first *Terminator* film.

27. *OED Online*, 2nd ed., *s.v.* "Robot."

28. *OED Online*, 2nd ed., *s.v.* "Cyborg."

29. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 384.

30. *Ibid.*, 587.

31. *Ibid.*, 587–588.

32. Iris Marion Young, "Throwing Like a Girl" *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays on Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990, 148. The term "for-itself-in-itself" was coined later, in the piece "'Throwing Like a Girl': Twenty Years Later" *Body and Flesh: a Philosophical Reader*. Ed. Donn Welton. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998, 287. This appears to be a conscious reversal of Sartre's "in-itself-for-itself" formulation, although the term "for-itself-in-itself" has been used interchangeably with Sartre's terminology in several instances within the literature on Beauvoir—see, for instance, Sonia Kruk's "Beauvoir: the Weight of Situation" *Simone de Beauvoir: a Critical Reader*. Ed. Elizabeth Fallaize. London and New York: Routledge, 1998, 48.

33. Cf. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. Trans. and Ed. H.M. Parshley. London: Vintage, 1997, 449, 470. Indeed, Beauvoir's description of housework was considered so repetitive by Parshley that he excised pages of this material in his translation from the French; cf. Margaret Simons, "The Silencing of Simone de Beauvoir: Guess What's Missing From *The Second Sex*" *Womens Studies International Forum* 6:5 (1983), 562.

34. Beauvoir introduces these terms, derived from her reading of Hegel's master-slave dialectic, in *Ibid.*, 95–96.

35. As there is no dialogue in the film, the robots are only nominated as such in its credits and other paratexts such as the back cover blurb of the Australian release.

36. For a concise précis of the three ekstases through which the For-itself distinguishes itself from the In-itself, cf. Barnes,

"Key to Special Terminology", 651.

37. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 384.

38. Barnes, "Key to Special Terminology", 651.

39. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 276–326. Sartre's text uses the terms 'paederast' and 'homosexual' interchangeably.

40. *Ibid.*, 82, 86–87.

41. Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 29.

42. It is a given in post-Lacanian screen studies that the gaze of the camera is a specifically male gaze. Cf. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" *The Sexual Subject: A* Screen *Reader in Sexuality*. Ed. Mandy Merck. London and New York: Routledge, 1992, 22-34.

43. Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991, 150.

44. Jacques Derrida, "'Choreographies' An interview with Christie V. McDonald." *Deconstruction: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, vol. 2. Ed. Jonathan Culler. London and New York: Routledge, 2003, 292.

45. Cf. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Trans. Gillian C. Gill. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1985, 247.

46. Cf. Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1993.

47. Cf. Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 13.

48. Sartre's own work compares nature to feminine flesh, and the gaze of the scientist to a violation of that flesh in rape. Cf. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 599. Michèle le Dœuff offers a commendable critique of these passages in *Hipparchia's Choice*. Trans. Trista Selous. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007, 79–82.

49. Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 21–22.

50. Margery L. Collins and Christine Pearce, "Holes and Slime: Sexism in Sartre's Psychoanalysis" *Women and Philosophy: Towards a Theory of Liberation*. Ed. Carol C. Gould and Marx W. Wartofsky. New York: Putnam, 1976, 113.

51. *Ibid.*, 125.

52. Michèle le Dœuff, *The Philosophical Imaginary*. Trans. Colin Gordon. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1989, 1.

53. *Ibid.*

54. Cf. *Ibid.*, 6–7.

55. *Ibid.*, 3.

56. *Ibid.*

57. For more on le Dœuff's admiration of Beauvoir, cf. le Dœuff, *Hipparchia's Choice*, 55–133; for a more concise, albeit less critical account, cf. Michèle le Dœuff, "Simone de Beauvoir and Existentialism." Trans. Colin Gordon. *Feminist Studies* 6:2 (1980), 277–289.

58. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 630.

59. *Ibid.*, 634.

60. *Ibid.*

61. le Dœuff, *Hipparchia's Choice*, 87.

62. *Ibid.*, 88.

63. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 150.

64. *Ibid.*, 149.

65. *Ibid.*, 150–151.

66. Haraway in Constance Penley and Andrew Ross, "Cyborgs at Large: Interview With Donna Haraway" *Social Text* 25/26 (1990), 13.

67. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 151.

68. Cf. Bostrom, "A History of Transhumanist Thought", 24. Haraway, for her own part, refuses to be assimilated as a naïve celebrant of technology's potential, as is evident in the introduction to her *Reader*: "Too many people, forgetting the discipline of love and rage, have read the 'Manifesto' as the ramblings of a blissed-out, technobunny, fembot." Cf. Donna Haraway, "Introduction: A Kinship of Feminist Figurations" *The Haraway Reader*. London and New York: Routledge, 2004, 3. She also delivers a stinging rebuke to organisations such as Bostrom's Humanity+: "I can't believe the blissed-out techno-idiocy of people who talk about downloading human consciousness onto a chip." Cf. Donna Haraway in Nicholas Gane, "'When We Have Never Been Human, What Is to Be Done?' Interview with Donna Haraway." *Theory, Culture and Society* 23:7–8 (2006), 146.

69. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 151.