THE ROADS AHEAD: ANTHROPOMORPHIZED CARS IN FILM

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A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green
State University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

April 2023

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores the representation of anthropomorphic car characters in films using three examples of notable films featuring such characters: the American animated comedy *Cars* (2006), the American horror adaptation *Christine* (1983), and the French body horror film *Titane* (2021). Using a combination of theoretical frameworks that include Marxist, feminist, queer, and postmodern approaches, these readings investigate how each film's portrayal of anthropomorphic cars reflects the relationship between cars and humans. Each chapter explores an in-depth reading of one of the films and investigates how the film reflects both optimistically and pessimistically on the convergence of cars and humans. Such a convergence manifests in the incorporation of cars into everyday life and work for many people, but it also involves cultural associations between cars and humans, like ways in which cars come to stand for individual human traits. As each reading demonstrates, this can create situations where exciting new, boundary-crossing possibilities manifest, but it can also allow for oppressive forces to limit the human body to strict, hegemonic standards. This thesis further argues that these three films also contain strategies for pushing against this limiting mode of convergence through interpersonal connection and the embracing of queer possibilities.

For Annedore Prior (1926-2018)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my committee, Jeff Brown, Becca Cragin, and Heath Diehl, for all of their guidance and time that they provided in putting together this thesis. I would especially like to highlight their help at every stage of this project with questions big and small, incredible support and encouragement, and formative feedback that pushed me to seek new roads.

I would also like to thank my parents, Mike and Cheryl Mecchi, for all of their support throughout all of my educational pursuits and through the process of finishing this weird and fun project. I am also incredibly grateful for the unconditional support of my friends and extended family.

I wish to thank Beka Patterson for everything she does for graduate students in the School of Cultural and Critical Studies to make their academic lives easier. I also wish to thank Amílcar Challú for his guidance towards some of the sources in this thesis, especially Paul Sutter's *Driven Wild*. Finally, I thank Logan Sander, Sam Chang, Ruth Chang, and Alex Lim at Midstory for allowing me to work on projects that helped inspire a thesis at the intersection of film studies and transportation history.

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INTRODUCTION

Gary S. Cross opens his book *Machines of Youth*, "In modern America, growing up has meant getting the driver's license, buying, driving, and maybe crashing the first car; the ritual of being picked up for the date and 'making out' in the front or back seat; even the pleasures of repairing, customizing, or racing that car."[1] These milestones of the idealized American teenage life speak to the ubiquity of the car. In fact, if the movies are anything to go by, it seems like the experience of owning/driving/riding in a car is a universal American experience. Not only that, but it is also a fairly ubiquitous experience in many other parts of the world, as well. In films from all over, characters drive cars, ride in cars, own cars, rent cars, and even smash cars into pieces in fits of rage or high-speed chases, just as people do, to varying degrees, in real life. Cinematic automobiles also frequently serve as places for characters to bond with each other or have knock-down, dragout arguments that change their relationship forever. They are places to scream, laugh, cry, break down, give good news, receive bad news, kiss, have sex, give birth, consider life's most important questions, reveal major secrets, die, and, of course, live. Now, this is not solely the fantasy of Hollywood or the film industries of various countries and sizes that churn out similar images. Of course, these experiences often reflect real uses of and attitudes toward cars, although there is a nonzero chance that the repetition of these images in the movies and across popular culture has reinforced the associations of cars with important life events, emotional moments, and human connection off screen.

One of the most common ways in which the film industry tends to appropriate the image of the car beyond its more official uses as a tool for human transportation is by equating the human body with the car body. Often, as in *The Fast and the Furious* (*F&F*) franchise and the

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[1] Gary S. Cross, *Machines of Youth: America's Car Obsession* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 1.

James Bond franchise, this occurs in the association of cars with their owners. The drivers in the *F&F* movies tie their identities strongly to their cars and their ability to race, in essence making their cars extensions of themselves. James Bond himself, meanwhile, has become inexorably associated with his fancy, gadget-laden cars, especially the iconic Aston Martin DB5, also making the car a part of his masculine, effortlessly cool identity. These connections have been and can be explored in more detail elsewhere, but they highlight one of the most direct connections between car and human in film: that of the consumer good taking on elements of the owner. Everything from gender to race and sexual prowess to physical strength can be represented through these movie cars. These relationships are complex and worthy of study, to be sure, but they are not the subject of this study. They are, instead, the first step in demonstrating how relationships between cars and humans move beyond simple relationships like ownership and the metaphorical connection of commodity and consumer into more direct, and yet more complex, arrangements of anatomization.

In the commodity-user framework, the car may represent the muscular stature or impressive penis of the action star, or perhaps any number of other qualities depending on the inventiveness and depth of the film or the critical lens of the viewer (*F&F* signals family, racial diversity, and power under capitalism, *Bond* signals empire, globalization, and the tension between the traditional and the newfangled). What this project seeks to examine is the films in which this connection is deepened by a more literal relationship connecting car and human bodies. The Pixar film trilogy *Cars* and its many spinoff media, for instance, propose a world in which cars are alive and autonomous, and in which they have taken on human anatomical elements. Windshield eyes and disturbingly/amusingly pink tongues signal a strange relationship in which humanity does not seem to exist, except in anthropomorphic car form. This relationship

is, at first glance, simpler than the metaphor of the driver and the driven, as the car becomes the human (or vice versa, depending on the viewer's perspective) and that is all. The complexity comes with the fact that this relationship does not have an easy analogue in real life. Viewers may not be able to relate to the Nos-fueled cars of the *F&F* movies, but many understand what it's like to own a car and drive it. Audiences will never experience, however, the specific relationship between cars and humans in *Cars*, namely, that neither cars nor humans as we know them exist, only an in-between. It is this in-between place that becomes most fascinating.

While it is easy to write off the anthropomorphic cars of *Cars* as simply a marrying of ubiquitous American car culture with the tendency of children's entertainment to make the human out of the non-human, these relationships clearly continue into other films for other audiences, as well. In addition to the many movies in which car ownership becomes important to forming identity and mapping the human body and the car body onto one another, many movies for adults explore the world of the in-between more explicitly. *Christine*'s titular killer car is not only anthropomorphized (albeit to a lesser degree than the cars of *Cars*), but she also forms an explicitly romantic and sexual relationship with her owner Arnie. *Titane* is one of the most recent films to capture the space in between the car and the human, as it features an unexpected sexual union between a serial killer and a sentient car she sensually dances on professionally. This union leads to a pregnancy and perhaps one of the most complex and explicit in-between spaces offered by these movies. These films will form the basis for this project's examination of the anthropomorphic car on film, by each representing the car as not only a body or a representation of the human body, but as an in-between space bridging the gap between car and human.

While these films seem fairly distinct on the surface, they share much in common, although their differences should be noted here and will be kept in mind throughout this project.

Cars and its sequels are Hollywood-produced animated films aimed at children. *Christine* is a Hollywood horror film that draws inspiration from the novel of the same name by one of the best-selling authors in contemporary America, Stephen King. *Titane* is a piece of French body horror with roots in the French extremity movement.[2] The connections among these films seem to run in groupings: two American films with one French, two films marketed at adults with one for families, two mainstream Hollywood productions with one for more cinephilic audiences, two original screenplays with one novel adaptation, two horror films with one comedic adventure. What links all three films, however, is their content, as opposed to what categories the films occupy. These are films steeped in American car culture,[3] a reflection on car/human convergence, and the use of the car/human hybrid body to represent the commodification and objectification of humans (especially women, in terms of objectification).

Definitions

This thesis utilizes the terms "car/human convergence" and "car/human hybridity" frequently to refer to the state of the relationship between cars and humans. Car/human convergence describes the relationship between cars and humans as it has become closer over time. Since the popularization of the car, humans have become increasingly reliant on their cars to access everyday life in the places that have had widespread access to cars the longest. This is especially true in the U.S. where car-based transportation is more dominant than public transportation or walking in many parts of the country. This convergence describes not a straightforward attachment to the car, however, but rather a connection between humans and cars such that the car becomes a part of the human and vice versa.

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[2] See Guy Austin's "Biological Dystopias: The Body in Contemporary French Horror Cinema."
[3] *Titane* is a French film, but as will be discussed further in the third chapter, French car culture is historically connected to American car culture.

This is accomplished in a number of ways. Technologically, cars become an extension of humans' bodies in that they are naturalized into a given culture's sense of mobility. The limits of the human body to navigate a space and what spaces a human body can reasonably navigate are expanded by car ownership. Economically, cars enhance the potential for humans to become consumers and laborers, as they allow transportation to work and to businesses where people can make purchases. Cars also have their own consumer cultures built around them, with commodity products ranging from air fresheners to floor liners and customized license plates to cars themselves. Arguably, cars also transform their drivers into commodities themselves, as will be outlined further throughout this thesis.

Finally, car/human convergence happens culturally, as well. Here, cars are made to be as significant as people themselves, especially by certain subcultures that take special care of their cars and see them as an emotional and personal investment in addition to a financial one. Further, the line between cars and humans is sometimes blurred in such a way that humans are degraded into being commodities and objects akin to cars. In naming conventions, for instance, cars and other vehicles are often referred to with feminine names and pronouns. This creates a situation where women and cars are put on the same plane of existence, a situation that will be further explored in the chapter on *Christine* below. On top of this, all of the ways in which cars have become important to people's lives outlined above in this introduction have created a schema in which people's daily lives are inseparable from the cars they own, drive, ride in, and even see others driving. For many people, car ownership is closely connected to identity and personality, but even for those who do not explicitly see cars as being a prominent part of their lives, they are still connected to cars as a method of personal expression. Customization options like bumper stickers, routines like washing the car, and physical reminders of the past like dents all create

important connections between the life of a driver and their car. Even the type of car one buys can signal a lot about them. There is a world of difference in the stereotype of a driver who owns a muddy off-road truck and the one who owns a hybrid SUV. Those stereotypes would not be possible if identity were not closely culturally tied to car ownership.

Car/human hybridity, on the other hand, describes an arrangement when the convergence of cars and humans has become more direct and literal. This thesis primarily uses this term to describe situations where cars and humans are combined in films to create anthropomorphic car characters. As seen in the second and third chapters, humans are often given the qualities of cars in these films, as well. Here, car/human hybridity is also at play, although in these cases the result is an automobilized human rather than an anthropomorphic car. In the context of this thesis, anthropomorphic cars are cars that display human features through physical appearance and/or agency. Anthropomorphic cars are primarily distinguished through the fact that they can move and act of their own volition, although they frequently also have a sense of personality and intelligence. Automobilized humans will be utilized less in this thesis, but the third chapter uses the term to refer to a person who has qualities of a car, primarily in the form of physical changes to the body.

This distinction also brings up the need to define another term: “carhood.” Throughout this thesis, the word carhood will be used to refer to the state of being a car or being car-like. It is an ad hoc reflection of personhood or humanity that will often be used as the opposite of those terms, since many of the discussions of car/human convergence in this thesis will place cars and humans on two opposite ends of a spectrum. The term is not necessarily the opposite of humanity in all cases, though.

Methodology

These elements will be analyzed through close readings of these films with a diverse theoretical basis to ground these readings. This analysis will not be strictly adhering to any particular theory or lens, but will instead draw from several sources in the areas of feminism, queer studies, body studies, postmodernism, and Marxism to provide a theoretical basis for the analysis. There is not much work on the specific films explored in this thesis, but more significantly, there does not seem to be much, if any, work in the field of cultural studies and film studies that explores the role of anthropomorphic cars. Previous studies of cars in cinema have focused on cars as spectacle, as in Paul Newland's "Look past the violence: automotive destruction in American movies" and Tina Kendell's "Staying on, or Getting Off (the Bus): Approaching Speed in Cinema and Media Studies." Others have focused on the cultural relationships between cars and humans without focusing on anthropomorphization, such as Samantha Cater's "Riding in cars as girls: discourses of victimhood, power and agency in *Beneath Clouds* and *American Honey*" and Jack DeWitt's "Cars and Culture: The Cars of 'American Graffiti.'" This thesis, then, will explore a new area of film studies and broach a relatively untouched topic that could inspire future research in the area of anthropomorphic cars and reading the car as a body in film and other popular culture media.

Chapter Overview

This thesis is divided into three chapters, each focusing on an anthropomorphic car film and examining how that film uses anthropomorphism to explore car/human convergence. The chapters are ordered in a way that each chapter builds thematically on the last, as well. This order is not based on the order of release of the films or their popularity and, as such, is highly subjective. It is designed, however, to reflect on more pessimistic outlooks on car/human

convergence first before shifting to a more optimistic outlook. This is not to say that any of these films reflect a unilateral outlook or "message" about car/human convergence, but rather that this thesis' readings of these texts find a flow from pessimism to optimism in this ordering. Also, the first two chapters of this thesis offer small moments of optimism that can be used to understand the third chapter's discussion of hopefulness. The chapters will be divided as follows.

The first chapter analyzes the animated comedy film *Cars* (2006, dir. John Lasseter) in terms of how the film uses anthropomorphized car characters to imagine car/human convergence. In this movie, the convergence between cars and humans takes the form of a hybrid body that seems full of possibilities yet is shown to be quite limiting. The car/human hybrids of cars essentialize and naturalize the living body as a commodity above all else, and as a laborer second. This schema is based on existing cultural associations between cars and commodification in American culture, as well as the historical context of Route 66 and the relationships between humanity, technology, and nature that the popularization of cars in the U.S. transformed. Ultimately, though, the film does allow for some hope, as the film's happy ending relies on the fact that its car/human hybrid characters are able to transcend their limitations and their commodified bodies through connection to others and community building efforts.

This thesis' second chapter explores car/human convergence in the horror film *Christine* (1983, dir. John Carpenter), specifically focusing on how the film represents the title character, an anthropomorphic car, in relation to the film's human characters. The chapter first deals with a dominant, pessimistic reading of the film that focuses on how Christine represents the ultimate danger in watering down the problematic parts of American car culture. This reading also discusses how *Christine* frames car/human convergence in terms of commodification and gender.

The equation of women to cars in American car culture and the erasure of laborers in the commodification of cars both work to maintain hegemonic arrangements of gender and class. The chapter then presents an alternate reading of *Christine* that frames the film as a story that subverts hegemonic images of American car culture to represent queer possibilities. These readings are not presented as opposites, but rather two sides of the same coin. The film can be seen as simultaneously an indictment of the problems with American car culture and a potential use for the imagery of American car culture to subversively create room for queer possibility.

In the third and final chapter, the more positive readings of *Cars* and *Christine* reveal the basis for reading the French horror film *Titane* (2021, dir. Julia Ducournau) as an ultimately hopeful reflection on the power of car/human convergence to be a positive symbolic force, but only with active attention to queer, hybrid possibilities and interpersonal connection. *Titane* begins in a space of pessimism about the nature of car/human convergence, as it follows a misanthropic serial killer character who is obsessed with and attracted to cars. This chapter argues that the film's trajectory from this space to an ambiguously hopeful ending represents a further application of the values of connection and community outlined in *Cars* and the values of queer possibility and hybridity outlined in the latter reading of *Christine*. The chapter also explores *Titane*'s use of a single anthropomorphized car alongside several characters who could arguably be framed as automobilized humans in order to explore these optimistic spaces of possibility and connectedness. In doing so, the film argues for a new framing of car/human convergence that embraces in-betweenness and hybridity over the trajectory of humans moving toward carhood.

CHAPTER 1 - THE BODY SHOP: COMMODITY AND ANATOMY IN *CARS*

For many American audiences today, there are few anthropomorphic car texts that have made as much of a cultural impact as Pixar's *Cars* franchise, made up of a trilogy of films and several other spin-off texts such as television shows and comics. This is especially true of younger audiences, many of whom grew up watching these movies and engaging with the idea of the convergence of cars and humans through the car/human hybrid characters in the film. Unlike the horror aesthetics of *Christine* (discussed in the next chapter) and *Maximum Overdrive* or the action tropes of *Knight Rider*, though, *Cars* explores the convergence of humans and cars through a lighthearted, family-friendly, and comedic lens.[4] Despite this context of levity, the films' depiction of the hybridization of cars and humans is actually fairly complex when viewed from a critical lens. The films do not simply depict car/human hybrid living as positive and optimistic nor, as expected from a family film, as negative and pessimistic, but rather they frame the characters, their interactions, and their world in terms that can be read as dystopian in their connection to bodily essentialism and the commodification of the body. At the same time, though, these dystopian images are cut through with the films' positive depictions of community and humanity that, while not unexpected for a film marketed toward children, create spaces for more hopeful depictions of the future of American car culture. By drawing upon the history of American car culture, outdoor recreation, and the Great American Road Trip, the first film in the franchise also specifically positions itself within American car culture such that it comments on the relationships between cars, humans, and nature that have lingered in American car culture ever since the popularization of the car in the U.S. This chapter will primarily analyze *Cars*

[4] There are other texts that explore this, as well, with the most notable being the *Herbie the Love Bug* franchise. *Cars* is the most recent of these texts in American popular culture, though, which is one of the reasons why it was chosen for this chapter. *Herbie*'s comparable influence on an older generation, though, can and should be explored through further research.

(2006), the first film in the franchise of the same name, although it will also make references to its two sequels when necessary to develop the idea of the car/human hybrid in the franchise's world.

Set in a world of anthropomorphic car/human hybrids, *Cars* follows a race car named Lightning McQueen (Owen Wilson) as he finishes the championship race for the highly sought after Piston Cup in a three-way tie. Lightning and his two competitors, the arrogant Chick Hicks (Michael Keaton) and the experienced Strip "The King" Weathers (Richard Petty), then travel to California for a tiebreaker race. On the way, though, Lightning is accidentally abandoned in the sleepy town of Radiator Springs along the former Route 66 and must get back on the highway before the race. This setup introduces a number of elements that will be addressed further in this chapter, including the fact that the car/human hybrids have jobs that are associated with their ostensibly natural bodies, the reflections on the history of Route 66 and the Great American Road Trip motif, and the fact that the cars in this world are explicitly given human identity characteristics like age and gender. These three points form the basis for this film's contribution to the anthropomorphic car film, as well as its own diagnosis of the cultural and technological convergence of cars and humans. While this thesis mostly focuses on the hybridity of car and human bodies, this chapter will also address *Cars*' use of animal bodies and humanity's interaction with the natural world[5] to address both the film's references to the history of American car culture and the naturalization, essentialization, and commoditization of the car/human hybrid body. Ultimately, this chapter will argue that through the use of car/human hybrid bodies, *Cars* projects a future for cars and humanity where their convergence is centered

[5] Phrases like "nature" and "the natural world" will stand in here for a consideration of nature as separate from humanity. This is not because this is the most accurate arrangement of the categories of "human" and "nature," but because this is a commonly perceived arrangement in the context of the commodification of nature for human consumption.

on the essentialization of the body, the naturalization of the body as a commodity, and the blurring of the borders between the natural, the human, and the technological. At the same time, though, *Cars* offers some hope for change through the emphasis on community to combat essentialism and commodification to a certain degree.

Born to Work - Jobs and Labor Built into the Body

As mentioned, Lightning McQueen works as a race car, a job that is essentially built into his body. This arrangement, which repeats itself across other characters as well, implies a connection between one's body and one's job, as well as a dual state of being both a laborer and a commodity. Cars are an iconic commodity, surpassing the realities of the labor used to make them in the public eye through images that focus almost entirely on their consumption and their craftsmanship as being more a sign of good taste on the owner's part than the skill or labor of the workers who assemble them. Yet, at the same time, the *Cars* films return labor to the cars themselves by making them laborers. Although some of the jobs in *Cars* tend to be of the more glamorous kind, such as the celebrity status that comes with being a race car, physical work and service jobs are also emphasized. Of course, different cars are built for different purposes in real life, and so it is with the cars in *Cars*, bringing up questions of free will in terms of the division of labor. Perhaps a critique of capitalism lies in this arrangement, as the birthright of inherited wealth can certainly determine or at least influence the array of career options available to humans, as well. At the same time, some characters in the *Cars* universe have more mobility than others, perhaps similarly reflecting the privilege for social mobility shared by some under capitalism.

The bodies of the cars in *Cars* are commodities and laborers, the products of labor (ostensibly, although it is unclear whether and how these hybrids are born or built) and the

bodies pushed into certain lines of work depending on the conditions of their assembly/birth. They are also commodities in a metatextual sense, given that *Cars* has become one of Disney's most successful franchises in no small part thanks to monumental toy sales featuring these characters. By 2011, the franchise had made over $8 billion in toy sales alone, and this only upon the release of the second of three films.[6] As both commodities and laborers, these characters tend to reflect the facelessness of their audience within commodity culture more than their individuality. The audience identifies with the cars as a labor force and as a two-sided coin of consumerism: a consumer of a near-endless string of commodities on the one hand, and a commodity in and of themselves on the other. Kristin Ross writes that "passenger cars, unlike trains, rarely transport goods; they transport workers insofar as they themselves constitute commodities."[7] Therefore, cars are a key image in representing the position of humans at the intersection of laborer, consumer, and commodity. In *Cars*, however, several characters are eventually able to push themselves outside of their bodily limitations. So, while there is an essentialism to the assignment of different jobs to different body types in this world, it is also clear that there is some leeway here in terms of labor.

In the world of *Cars*, work and body type are clearly related on the level of each individual car, as many cars have the equivalent of human jobs in positions that reflect their uses as vehicles. Referring to the transformation of sex into discourse, Michel Foucault notes, "Discourse, therefore, had to trace the meeting line of the body and the soul, following all its

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[6] Georg Szalai, "Disney: 'Cars' Has Crossed $8 Billion in Global Retail Sales," *The Hollywood Reporter*, February 14, 2011, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/disney-cars-has-crossed-8-99438/.

[7] Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995), 39.

meanderings."[8] This is relevant here in that the body is culturally defined, framed by the discourses that trace it, whether it be in terms of sex or other culturally bound topics written on the body (labor and class, in this case). Due to the fact that they are born/assembled into roles that are normally culturally constructed like careers, the lines between what is natural and what is cultural are especially blurred for car/human hybrids. This can be seen through the fact that the semi truck that is supposed to bring Lightning to California, Mack (John Ratzenberger), is built primarily for the purpose of transportation. Since he is a semi truck with a large trailer, he is designed for transportation in a way that seems to be essential to his existence. He may have some ability to make a decision of whom or what he moves, but his work is clearly cemented in place based on his body. Further, as a vehicle associated with manual labor, Mack also does not have the ability to have the glamorous role that Lightning has. By all accounts, Mack and Lightning seem to have a good relationship, but the incident that allows Lightning to get lost in Radiator Springs begins when Lightning says he wants to drive straight through the night. This leads to Mack falling asleep on the road, suggesting that Lightning has some authority or power over Mack by virtue of their work and class positions. In this sense, class is also written onto the body through the job that is assigned to it and the relationships between different jobs. Certain bodies are also not well-adjusted to certain situations, as shown by Lightning's lack of headlights or rearview mirrors. As a racecar, he does not need these parts, but they are limiting once he is off the racetrack and separated from his support staff. So, the constraints of Lightning's job as a racecar impact his body outside of work, such that there is no such thing as a "body outside of work." The labor that Lightning or most any car/human hybrid character does is largely perceived to be their only function.

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[8] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 20.

This demonstrates the relationship between work and the body as demonstrated by the relationship between humans and cars. As discussed, these car/human hybrids reflect the audience's status as both commodities and laborers. Because the audience identifies with the car/human hybrid characters through their shared human elements, the audience is similarly constructed as little else besides their own labor and consumption. Marx's understanding of commodity fetishism shows that the value of commodities is not only separated from the labor that was used to make them, but also so that this value exceeds the use-value of that item. "The specific social character of each producer's labour does not show itself except in the act of exchange,"[9] and "the labourer produces, not for himself, but for capital. It no longer suffices, therefore, that he should simply produce. He must produce surplus-value."[10] For cars, this surplus-value can be connected to notions of coolness, modernity, and personal expression, all of which are often associated with car ownership in the U.S. In the *Cars* movies, however, this sense of individuality is accompanied by an emphasis on function being literally built or born into the body. This reflects Ross' notion of the driver of the car as a commodity, as well, since the cars' autonomy, personalities, and human elements of their anatomy allow them to be distinguishable as individuals, but these elements do not have much impact on their job or class status.

The film also explores the potential to optimize the human body through its conflation with the "ultimate commodity" of the car, as well as the dangers inherent in that optimization when it comes to seeing the body as a laborer and a commodity rather than an individual. While it is not clear in *Cars* where the car/human hybrid characters come from, the fact that there is a

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[9] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Volume 1*, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1887), https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-I.pdf, 48.
[10] Ibid, 357.

specialization of bodies for different jobs, roles, and classes suggests that there is some sort of optimization behind the car's bodies. In the contemporary world, the human body can also be optimized through any number of advancements in technology and knowledge about the body. As Anne Balsamo notes, this involves the human body becoming "a 'techno-body,' a boundary figure belonging simultaneously to at least two previously incompatible systems of meaning—'the organic/natural' and 'the technological/cultural."[11] At the same time, due to the nature of the consumer society where this optimization takes place, the changes to the human body can be argued to tend toward hegemonic arrangements of the body, as opposed to those that push against hegemony. People who change their body through surgery, for instance, are probably more likely to have access to the surgery if they would need it in order to keep their body fit for work. So, there is a connection between the commodification of the body and the body's optimization.

In the film, this is represented by the commodification of the car/human hybrid body and the naturalization of work into the body. Lightning opens the film by giving himself a pep talk, saying, "I am speed."[12] This quality that was built into his body to allow him to do his job is intrinsic to his own perception of himself, but also reflects the fact that his work is framed as his function and, therefore, his primary purpose. In *Cars 3*, a major part of the conflict is the fact that Lightning is no longer able to compete with a class of continually optimizing race cars, reflecting the idea that bodies need to be continually built to be better and more modern in this world.[13] They only need to be better, though, because their bodies are laborers and commodities with clear economic functions. Moving beyond the example of the race car, characters like Mack and

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[11] Anne Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 5.
[12] *Cars*, directed by John Lassester (2006; Buena Vista Pictures Distribution).
[13] *Cars 3*, directed by Brian Fee (2017; Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures).

the Radiator Springs tow truck Mater (Larry the Cable Guy) are built for strength. The differences between the bodies of these characters not only reflect their essential belonging to a certain type of labor, but also how and where they make money. The economy of the *Cars* world is unclear, but it seems to superficially resemble American capitalism for the most part. In this system, bodies are expected not only to work in certain positions, but to work well and serve those in more powerful classes. The optimization of the car/human hybrid body, therefore, warns of the dangers of the "techno-body" when it is no longer under the control of the individual, but rather the dominant class(es) or the mysterious and abstract market.

In addition to representing the body designed for labor, *Cars* addresses the added commodification of the body as an advertisement through the racers' allegiances to certain brands. Lightning is sponsored by an anti-rust product for older cars called Rust-Eze and wears their logo prominently on his body. As these films show, paint jobs are not permanent in the *Cars* universe, and Ramone (Cheech Marin) from Radiator Springs even sells paint jobs from "Ramone's House of Body Art," a name that calls to mind a tattoo shop and the ability to customize the body.[14] So, the commercialization of the body through advertising is not essentialized into the body of the racecar in the same way that their career and class are, but there is a sense of semi-permanence in painting the body that pushes the embodied nature of advertising to the logical extreme of what are essentially tattooed commercials. The conflation of the human body with the commodified body of the car *and* a third-party commodity whose logo takes up space on the car adds to the dynamics of labor found in car/human hybrid bodies. Advertisement is further labor, in a sense, that Lightning and other race cars perform in a way that resembles both real-life race cars plastered with sponsors' logos and celebrity endorsements

[14] *Cars*.

of products. Even the average consumer often participates in this labor, perhaps unwittingly or unwillingly, through the use of branded products like clothes. Cars, of course, are one of the prime examples of this, turning the everyday commute of the driver into an advertisement to other drivers on the road. Humans arguably become not only commodities and laborers, then, but also advertisements themselves. If technologies like the car seem to converge with humans through their cultural association and the economic dependence of many people on cars, then the car's commercialization and brand association extend to the human body, as well.

When Lightning reaches Radiator Springs, he meets several characters who seem like they may have some more ability to decide their careers, but even here the constraints of the commodified body in labor are inescapable. As previously mentioned, Radiator Springs' Mater is a tow truck who, therefore, must own a towing business. Similarly, the fire truck Red (Joe Ranft), the police car Sheriff (Michael Wallis), and the forklift Guido (Guido Quaroni) have a limited array of careers accessible to themselves, as well. Other than these characters, many of the residents of Radiator Springs do not seem as essentialized into their careers, but there are still some limitations. Sally Carrera (Bonnie Hunt), for instance, is a lawyer and hotelier, neither of which are occupations that particularly call to mind a certain type of human body or a certain type of vehicle. As a Porsche, Sally is positioned to the audience less in terms of career than in terms of other cultural associations, like socioeconomic status and femininity, the latter of which will be discussed further in the section below on gender. That said, class is still a major part of Sally's body, as her middle-/upper-class, suburban looks are clearly associated with her make and model. This is especially true in contrast to other characters, like the rust-covered Mater whose rusty appearance, tow-truck body, buck teeth, and twangy voice all suggest working-class, rural living. Sally's jobs as a lawyer and hotelier suggest a higher class lifestyle than Mater's,

and while some elements of this bodily inscription are temporary or accumulated, such as Mater's rust, all car/human hybrid bodies in this film contain class and labor associations. This is significant because these associations do not come solely from the diegesis of the film in a vacuum, but from extra-diegetic cultural associations American audiences can largely be expected to understand about which types of cars belong to which levels of class status, wealth, and career prestige.

Mechanical World - Nature, Humanity, and Technology Overlap

The relationship between the car, the human, and the environment is one that has always dealt with overlapping and confused boundaries in the history of American car culture, as well as one that is intimately connected to labor and cultural perceptions of the environment as a place of leisure. By setting *Cars* in the American Southwest, the filmmakers have drawn upon the imagery of the American West, specifically in reference to Route 66 and the intersection of car-based recreation, commercialism, and large swaths of untouched nature. Relying on these references to Route 66 and the history of that road, the audience can understand that the existence of the American Southwest as depicted here suggests a similar or identical history of buildup of commercial recreation at the expense of ecological balance or preservation. In this sense, the existence of the car/human hybrids in this space suggests that the flow of history has privileged their bodies to a certain extent over the "natural" parts of the world through evolution or some comparable process. On the surface level, this would seem to transfer the simple division between nature and humans into a world where humans are cars. Since nature and humanity are often constructed as categories at odds with each other, this creates a division between nature and cars. *Cars*, however, complicates this distinction by incorporating cars into

the natural world and reflecting upon the overlapping categories of carhood, humanity, and nature.

Reflecting on the actual history of American outdoor recreation in relation to automobile culture like autocamping and the Great American Road Trip will help to illustrate why nature is significant to commodification and the car/human hybrid body. In his book *Driven Wild*, Paul Sutter argues that the core of the preservationist Wilderness Society was a negative reaction to the development of American car culture as it related to outdoor recreation, as opposed to abstract ideals about the sanctity of nature.[15] In making his argument, Sutter outlines the connections between automobile culture and the American view of the environment between the World Wars. Specifically, Sutter sees the shift toward outdoor recreation and nature tourism as tied to the increased availability of cars to get people out into nature. This involves the reconstruction of nature as a consumer product itself: "Tourism requires a nature that is separate, distant, and exotic—a nature that one goes to see. It also requires a natural world that is marked and collapsed into a manageable canon of sites to which tourists can travel."[16] The separation of humanity from nature, despite the fact that humans are natural themselves, allows for this commodification of nature to occur. Nature is marked off as a category that is primarily conceived of in terms of its relationships with humanity, especially now that those relationships include easier access to nature as a place of leisure. Driving is related to this commodification because it allows access to natural spaces as they are framed separately from human spaces, but also because it becomes a business in itself, as Sutter notes: "an entire material culture developed to inform and facilitate the motor touring experience."[17] The experience of recreation in the

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[15] Paul S. Sutter, *Driven Wild: How the Fight against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement*, (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2002), 10.
[16] Ibid, 27.
[17] Ibid, 33.

outdoors becomes the experience of looking at the outdoors ("the roadside became a scenic rather than a recreational space"[18]), which then becomes the experience of collecting the outdoors and its related material goods. Not only is the natural world separated from the human world and commodified, but the technological sphere of the car becomes clearly associated with "going to" and "collecting" nature itself. Nature is not accessible without the car in this cultural arrangement of humanity, technology, and nature. Therefore, through the popularization of the automobile, nature has become a commodity in itself, a place centered on the consumption of commodities, and a place where leisure can be commodified through its relationship with existing commodities like the car and newly commodified places like the natural world. This background is relevant to *Cars*' historical references to Route 66, but also to the film's engagement with the natural world and its relationship to consumerism, humanity, and carhood.

The reflection of cars themselves in the supposedly natural environment of the *Cars* films both reinforces human-centric and commercialized views of nature and questions the distinctions between the natural, the human, and the machine. In the vision of the American Southwest seen in *Cars*, for instance, the enormous rock configurations that dot the sides of historic Route 66 are represented not as organic forms, but as shapes clearly inspired by the cars themselves. In particular, the forms of the upended cars of Cadillac Ranch in Texas are transformed into a seemingly natural skyline. In the skies, too, tire tread marks form the clouds. These whimsical details are minor sight gags, but they do reveal connections between the car/human hybrids and the natural world, or at least their experience of it. According to William Cronon, humans see themselves and their cultural values reflected in nature: "As we gaze into the mirror it holds up for us, we too imagine that what we behold is Nature when in fact we see the reflection of our

[18] Ibid, 38.

unexamined longings and desires."[19] So, this representation of the world of *Cars* may not be a reflection of a nature that has somehow adapted itself to mechanistic and commercial aesthetics, but rather a representation of how these hybrid beings make sense of their world. Just as humans tend to see organic shapes like people and animals in the clouds, car/human hybrids see their own "footprints" in the sky. Just as humans have an uncanny ability to see faces and figures in natural settings, car/human hybrids naturally see their own bodies wherever they can, as well. This may be a matter of putting the audience into the perspective of the cars rather than actually showing the environment from an objective viewpoint. That said, the presence of these details does indicate the blurring lines between the natural, the human, and the commercial that the history of car-based outdoor recreation points toward. Since this can be read in *Cars* as a matter of cultural perspective or a material reality of the fantasy world, it also reflects the impact that cars have both culturally (as a status symbol) and materially (as a commodity, a way to access other commodities, and a way in which the driver becomes a commodity themselves) on humans and nature.

The presence of insect and cattle cars in *Cars* further complicates established notions of humanity and carhood in both the film and in the audience's understanding of car/human/nature relations. As seen throughout the film, the beetles that fly around Radiator Springs are, punningly, tiny Volkswagen Beetles modeled after the car/human hybrid characters. *Cars* also depicts cattle as tractors that have the same kind of windshield eyes and bumper mouths as every car/human hybrid seen in the film. These creatures are not shown to be able to speak or operate mentally on the level of the sapient hybrid characters, although there are relatively few physical indicators that they are car/animal hybrids and not car/human ones. This divide reflects Donna

[19] William Cronon, "The Trouble With Wilderness or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," *Environmental History* 1, no. 1 (1996): 7, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3985059.

Haraway's notion of the cyborg, the name of which suggests a primary interest in the convergence of the machine and the human, but which Haraway also suggests involves a convergence of the human and the non-human animal.[20] If the *Cars* universe reflects a vision of the future of car/human convergence, then the similar convergence of human and animal is occurring alongside it, perhaps inevitably so. While this arrangement can create the opportunity for new ways of thinking about the human body in natural and technological contexts, the commodification of both the human body and nature makes this scenario a reflection of the commodification of all parts of life as promoted by the popularity of the car in the interwar period.

The relationship between this commodification and attitudes toward work also factors into *Cars*' representation of the overlaps between the human and natural spaces. During the interwar years in the U.S., Sutter writes, "American culture was undergoing a dramatic shift away from an ethos that stressed the virtues of work, savings, and delayed gratification, and toward a more therapeutic worldview that sanctioned consumption and self-realization."[21] Sutter's assertion applies to the nostalgic image of Route 66 and Radiator Springs that the residents of that town have, in that their community was built on the culture of consumption (notably, many of Radiator Springs' residents have their own business) and leisure sparked by the popularity of the car. This, perhaps, also offers a slight counter to the essentialization of work into the body of the car. Each car in Radiator Springs has their own role that is often related to what kind of car they are. That said, the town's longing for the days of Route 66 also suggests their communal emphasis on leisure. This means that work need not be an essential part of the

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[20] Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 151-153.
[21] Sutter, *Driven Wild*, 21.

body in Radiator Springs. In their worldview, work is still practically done by certain bodies as needed, but the body is used for more than just work. This is emphasized by the scenes where Mater takes Lighting tractor tipping and Sally takes Lightning for a recreational drive, both of which are foreign ideas to Lightning initially. So, while Radiator Springs exists in a culture of consumption even in its residents' own nostalgic fantasies of its past, it also symbolizes a period of history where recreation and self-realization are possible beyond the seemingly strict boundaries of the commodified body.

This culture of leisure and consumption is reflected explicitly in the film, as the characters have a clear nostalgia for the glory days of Radiator Springs that conflates their town's economic prosperity with a dubious memory of a time where nature was valued more. Waxing poetic about the past, Sally tells Lightning, "Well, the road didn't cut through the land like that interstate. It moved with the land, it rose, it fell, it curved. Cars didn't drive on it to make great time. They drove on it to have a great time."[22] With this line, Sally reaffirms the historical connection between the car and nature, with the latter being represented less by nature in itself but by outdoor recreation and nature as a space for human activity (primarily humans in cars). The car/human hybrid world set up by the *Cars* films recreates this relationship, but in a way where commodified humans are interacting with an environment that is, itself, commodified.

By emphasizing how the road used to "[move] with the land,"[23] Sally also conflates the commodification of nature with a natural process in itself. In the world of *Cars*, the categories of the technological, the human, the natural, and the commodified are conflated by the nature of the hybrid characters and their hybrid world. As this quote shows, however, this is manifested through a reconciliation of these categories that resembles their simplified status quo. Sally's

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[22] *Cars*.
[23] Ibid.

reflection on the road and nature suggests that human/car hybrids are thought of as separate to some extent, and the conflation of technology, humanity, and nature is simplified into the status quo of nature perceived as separate from humanity and technology perceived as within the realm of human activity. In fact, by suggesting that the car itself is already natural, the film goes so far as to create a nature that is already commodified and technologized in its origins. Historically, Americans have seen their relationship with the natural world as one where technology and consumerism (manifested most clearly in the form of the car) tamed nature. In *Cars*, these categories are collapsed into being one and the same, so the tensions between them are removed, yet the dominant narrative of human conquest over nature through the car is maintained. The fact that Sally bemoans the loss of Route 66 for the more impersonal interstate moves the goalposts in order to make this narrative more appealing. It seems like the film wants to return to a more natural, less commodified way of being. However, through its association with the imagery of road trips and the car as a way to access outdoor recreation (Route 66, tourist shops, etc.), Radiator Springs nonetheless represents the historical germ of the inexorable connection between Americans' connection with their cars and their disconnection from non-commodified, untouched nature.

"Holy Porsche" - Essentializing Gender, Sex, and Sexuality

Despite being marketed primarily as a children's film franchise, *Cars* has its fair share of sexual innuendos and references as well, perhaps owing to the fact that cars themselves have become symbols that connote many meanings regarding gender and sexuality. When anatomizing cars in any way, it is difficult to avoid the gendered and sexualized connotations of cars in general, car models, car uses, car ownership, and the romantic and sexual activities done in cars. Given the fact that these car/human hybrid bodies are in the realm of Haraway's cyborg,

crossing the borders of what is natural and what is cultural or technological, there are many possibilities for the film to explore in terms of sex, gender, and sexuality. As Haraway puts it, "there are also great riches for feminists in explicitly embracing the possibilities inherent in the breakdown of clear distinctions between organism and machine and similar distinctions structuring the Western self."[24] In line with Balsamo's concerns, however, the film mostly presents a hegemonic, unchallenging, and boring set of roles for sex, sexuality, and gender in these hybrid bodies. "Indeed," Balsamo writes, "the gendered boundary between male and female is one border that remains heavily guarded despite new technologized ways to rewrite the physical body in the flesh."[25] This maintenance of the gender binary and the hegemonic gender roles that come with it can be logically extended to also include the foreclosing of possibilities in terms of biological sex, gender identity, and ways of expressing human sexuality. This extends to the notion of the commodified body as well, as not only are these qualities essentialized into such a body, but they are also commodified themselves in the process. While *Cars* may not be a film that audiences would expect to explicitly promote sexual transgression, the emphasis on gender and sexuality in the character designs and in the central romance between Lightning and Sally allows the film to push this hegemonic notion of the gendered and sexed body even in a world where human anatomy has been completely rewritten.

The main romance in *Cars* is between Lightning and Sally, and in this relationship, the film sketches out many of its ideas about how sex and gender should be displayed and performed through the car/human hybrid body. When Lightning first sees Sally in the Radiator Springs Courthouse, he is clearly smitten with her and says, "Holy Porsche," connecting a love-at-first-sight romance movie trope with the gendering of certain kinds of car. Sally's light blue color

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[24] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 174.
[25] Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body*, 9.

and, more clearly in this scene, her make represent her femininity, and most American audiences would likely understand the association of Porsche as a feminized car manufacturer. This femininity is also sexualized in Sally's first scene, as the audience sees her from the perspective of Lightning's gaze and is to understand her as an attractive car. Laura Mulvey describes the cinematic gaze this way: "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly."[26] As previously discussed, *Cars* represents Balsamo's idea of an increasingly hybridized world that alters the human body and yet keeps such sexual imbalance intact. So, it is not surprising that Sally is constructed through the audience's and Lightning's shared gaze. This is manifested physically through her shape, which is mostly made up of soft curves with less straight lines or hard edges than cars perceived as masculine, as well as her smaller mouth and dark lines on her windshield "eyelids" that suggest the appearance of eyeliner. This latter point also creates an association between Sally's body and feminine beauty standards. The eyeliner is made to be a part of her body such that she is the sexualized object of the gaze by design. Her perceived femininity and sexuality are also both tied into her status as a commodity object. In a similar way to Lightning's speed and Mack's strength, they serve a purpose, although it is not clear what that purpose is from an economic standpoint. Rather, the purpose seems to be primarily the sexual appeal in itself, serving to appear feminine under the male gaze.

In addition, the cultural associations with the Porsche align with an understanding of cars as not only sites of gender expression, but also sexual and erotic places as well. Tropes of cars

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[26] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Media and Cultural Studies: Keyworks*, 2nd ed., ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 270.

representing sexual prowess (and jokes about those tropes) are common, especially for men. Sally initially is a way for Lightning to display his sexual prowess through flirtation. Further, in this meeting scene, Lightning thinks Sally is his lawyer sent to represent him in his trial for accidentally destroying part of Radiator Springs' main street. He reads her as not fitting into the rural, inland environment, as opposed to an urban, coastal origin, in addition to reading her as attractive. In both cases, he objectifies her as a tool for either his own sexual/romantic desires or for his need for legal counsel. Also in both cases, the audience is meant to understand why he is reading her in that way in seeing her from his perspective and within the context of American car culture. The audience has likely already understood these readings of the body, and Lightning's assessment fills in the gaps and teaches the audience how to read Sally as a character.

Lightning himself also presents as a gendered and sexed character, especially in terms of his relationship with Sally. As the "looker" in the scene where he first sees Sally, Lightning is associated with the masculine-coded attributes of power, agency, and subjectivity. The film shows Lightning pursuing Sally romantically from the moment of seeing her, framing the eventual relationship between the two of them as a heterosexual relationship with at least some attention paid to traditional gender roles. Lightning is also a race car, which, as discussed, reflects the human career of athlete. There is a clear gender divide in how Americans perceive athletics as a career, as male leagues, teams, and athletes are overwhelmingly more popular and prominent than female ones. Indeed, throughout all three films, the vast majority of race cars given names and voices are coded as male through their voices and physical features including larger mouths than the female characters, a lack of eyeliner-like markings, and sometimes mustache-like fixtures on their face. The appearance of the masculine/male cars also defines the appearance of the feminine cars. The audience sees Lightning, Chick, and The King on the

racetrack, as well as several other named, prominent male characters, before the first female characters appear in the film (with the exception of a small handful of minor and background characters with few to no lines). So, by the time that Radiator Springs residents Sally, Flo (Jenifer Lewis), and Lizzie (Katherine Helmond) appear, their femininity is defined in opposition to the masculinity the audience has seen so far. Masculinity is the unmarked norm, and femininity is the marked Other. The appearances of these other male and female characters are significant and will be examined, but first, this framework of gender will help investigate Lightning and Sally's relationship and how it reproduces traditional gender and sexual roles even in new, hybridized bodies that could theoretically leave them behind.

The power of Lightning and Sally's relationship and how it proceeds in the first film is that it draws upon the aforementioned connections between cars and human gender and sexuality that already exist in the minds of many audience members. This allows the film to use the shorthand of human bodies for the audience to understand car/human hybrid characters, create jokes that draw upon subjects of sex and gender, and use the bodies of the car/human hybrids to maintain normative ways of thinking about sex and gender. Throughout the film, Sally and Lightning engage in the common rom-com trope of the odd couple romance, as Sally is the one who initially gets Lightning sentenced to community service after his town-destroying crash. Also, her small-town demeanor is positioned against Lightning's fast-paced lifestyle, although the revelation that Sally moved to the small town from Los Angeles reveals (expectedly, according to the rules of the trope) that the two have more in common than Lightning once thought. This structure helps the audience understand the characters' romance by following an expected narrative route, especially given that this romance is not the film's primary plotline. On the other hand, though, this structure supports a cultural and physical arrangement of gender and

sexuality that positions heterosexual relationships as a bond between two genders/sexes (there is little distinction when both are built into the body so clearly) that are essentialist and seem irreconcilable up until the point that they are not: the romantic union. In the case of Sally and Lightning, this manifests in their increasing connection as Sally reveals her liberated side to Lightning and Lightning reveals his caring side to Sally. Following typical gender roles, Sally is the more sensitive, emotional, community-driven member of the pair, and Lightning is the more resilient, goal-oriented, individualistic one. While the film does not suggest that personality is written onto the body, within a world where gender, labor, class, and career have all been naturalized into the body, there seems to be little room for these characters to break out of these established gender roles.

The film's other two significant female characters are Radiator Springs residents Flo and Lizzie, who further expand upon the construction of femininity in car form that Sally's design and interactions with Lightning suggest. Flo is also voiced by a Black voice actress, and Lizzie is coded as an older character through her voice and the fact that she appears as an older style of car. So, they also have the potential to show how race and age are expressed through humans' relationships with cars and specifically when mediated by femininity.[27] Flo is a teal show car that owns the gas station and diner in town, not straying far from Sally's light blue color scheme. Also similarly to Sally, Flo has marks that appear to be the equivalent of permanent eyeliner. She also shares Sally's small mouth, although Flo's is carved more to look like a plump pair of chrome lips, flanked by beauty mark-like studs on either side. All of this emphasis on Western feminine beauty standards like makeup and exaggerated eyes and lips speaks to Flo's status as a

[27] Age will be discussed further below in this chapter. There is not much space to discuss race here within this thesis, but there is plenty of room for continued research into how anthropomorphic car narratives deal with race and ethnicity.

show car who is intended more to be looked at than to drive well. While cars are typically representative of individual agency, activity, and mobility, Flo represents a case where hegemonic femininity can override this and manifest as a passive, to-be-looked-at product. Flo's presence also seems to suggest that the car is not always representative of agency and mobility for women. Even Flo's activities in her work at the gas station are based around service and food preparation, activities and skills associated with women in most contexts.

Lizzie is less of a gender-marked character in terms of her appearance and role, but she also continues the thread of femininity as represented through a car/human hybrid body begun by Sally and Flo. A black Model T, Lizzie clearly appears significantly older than the other characters in the film due to the fact that her model is older than the other characters'. Age is very clearly written on the body in this world. While there are some male characters who are suggested to be older, none look so old as Lizzie, with her rectangular body and exposed axles among other qualities that immediately suggest her age and even obsolescence in comparison to the other residents of the town. She does not have clear "eyeliner" in the same way that Flo and Sally do, but since her body is entirely black, it is possible that it is just not very visible. She also shares the smaller mouth that Flo and Sally have. Unlike Sally and Flo, Lizzie is not defined by a career, but she is defined by her role as the former wife of the late Radiator Springs founder Stanley. A lot of the comedy around Lizzie also deals with her being forgetful or otherwise unable to process information properly, playing on common tropes and stereotypes of older characters in comedies as senile. She is also defined mostly in terms of her relationship with a male character and in terms of her own lack of agency due to her age. Femininity both marks these female characters as passive and in the service of men, and is marked by these characters as representing visions of cars as primarily expressions of female passivity and service to men.

The general association of cars with masculinity in the U.S. makes it so that being a car/human hybrid in general can be argued to connote masculinity. Further, as discussed with Lightning, masculinity is constructed largely in this film only in how it represents a norm that femininity distinguishes itself from. Masculinity is, therefore, largely marked primarily by its association with other identity characteristics in the world of *Cars*. Besides the lack of "eyeliner" and larger mouths that contrast the male cars to their female counterparts, male cars are frequently marked by identities that are communicated through their make/model and their voice. As previously discussed, Mater's working class nature is communicated, in part, through his appearance and his voice. While the fact that he is a tow truck might associate him with masculinity, his identification as a character is primarily based on these other characteristics. Similarly, characters like Luigi, Guido, and Ramone are bodily and vocally marked by the ethnicities associated with their names (Italian for Luigi and Guido; Latin American for Ramone). Luigi appears as if he is wearing a coiffed, black hairstyle stereotypically associated with Italians, and Ramone's mustache-esque grill is thin in a way that is stereotypically associated with Latin American men. Those three characters also have heavily accented voices. Just as with Mater's class and job, these elements are marked on the body in an essentialized way, requiring each of these characters to perform a certain kind of ethnically marked masculinity. So, while these characters are still limited by intersectional parts of their identity built into their body, the general quality of masculinity is actually allowed much more room to move beyond the boundaries of the body. Since more types of bodies are represented by the male characters of *Cars*, masculinity does not escape commodification or essentialism, but it does not feel their restrictions, either.

Since the film is a family comedy, *Cars* uses its car/human hybrid bodies as the source of humor, especially humor involving the body and its functions. In doing so, the film expands upon its sexual imagery beyond the ways in which it depicts gender and heterosexual romance to include considerations of physical sex characteristics. Further, these jokes recreate the status quo of the human body in the car/human hybrid while simultaneously offering a potential for disruption in the otherwise normative bodies of the car/human hybrids. Many of these jokes involve the use of the undercarriage of the car to suggest nudity or genitals through dialogue as opposed to visuals. At one point, Lightning bursts in on former race car and current doctor Doc Hudson (Paul Newman) medically examining Sheriff, who is suspended on a hydraulic lift. Lightning is clearly embarrassed to see this, and Sheriff quips "Get a good peek, city boy?"[28] Here, Sheriff's undercarriage is clearly marked as a taboo area of the body not to be seen in public, constructing it as the car/human hybrid's version of nudity. Further, in another scene, a pair of lost tourists pass through town and are accosted by the business owners, including Ramone, who lifts himself up in such a way to show off the detail work of his paint job and to show his undercarriage to the clearly horrified tourists.[29] Here, once again, the undercarriage is framed as nudity and played for comedy. Both of these incidents suggest that the car/human hybrid body has not erased the cultural association of nudity with privacy and vulnerability, even in the form of a car that has no genitals.

At the same time, though, the nudity does not appear to be gendered, at least in any way that is literally built into the characters' bodies. So, while sexual dimorphism can be seen in the differences between male and female car characters, this does not extend to all parts of the human body. That said, references to lugnuts in dialogue are used to punningly suggest jokes

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[28] *Cars*.
[29] Ibid.

about testicles and, in fact, only come from male characters. Mater says, at one point, “I'd give my left two lugnuts for somethin' like that!” and The King tells Lightning “You got more talent in one lugnut than a lot of cars has got on their whole body.”[30] These references may suggest sexual dimorphism, but thinking practically, all car/human hybrids would have lugnuts. So, the jokes may be sexed or gendered in the eyes of the audience, but they refer to a sex-neutral anatomy in practice. This framing of the body erases what is often thought of as the primary sex characteristic that determines the sex assigned at birth of any given individual. Here, the car briefly lives up to the potential of the cyborg, transgressing the traditional boundaries of sexual dimorphism in one small, key way to allow for the hybridity of car and human to form new possibilities for the body beyond traditional notions of binary sex. That said, the taboo nature of the undercarriage as presented in the film also suggests that this transgression is still based in a normative notion of sex that is meant to be hidden from public discourse.

The way in which gender and sexuality are divided among the characters in *Cars* also reveals one of the limitations in the film’s presentation of car/human hybridity: a conservative approach to gender. As has been shown in this section, the characters in this film have a tendency to recreate the male/female gender binary, a romantic structure built on heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality, and even similar ways of seeing physical sex characteristics as taboo and humorous. All of this creates a view of sex, sexuality, and gender that is disappointingly ordinary from Haraway’s viewpoint, which highlights cyborg existence as holding untapped potential for more freeing views of these realms of experience. Balsamo notes that, in the reality of the cyborg as an increasingly prevalent symbol and reality, “The female body continues to function as the sign of a gendered body opposed to a nonmarked (human)

[30] Ibid.

body that is said to be *now* (in late capitalism) subjugated to discursive systems of power and knowledge."[31] The position of the female body is still, observes Balsamo, fairly entrenched in traditional and binary ideas of gender and sex in particular. It can be argued that this extends to sexuality, as well, given the intertwined natures of gender and sexuality. Balsamo also argues that this view of the female body is connected to the historical moment of late capitalism that frames the female body. This perspective provides a perfect way in which to see not only car/human hybrids, but the characters of *Cars* more specifically as intersections of humans and commodities that are held in tension between complex possibilities of individual existence on one hand and the maintenance of hegemonic values and consumerist interests on the other.

Rust in the Wind - Age, Progress, and the Commodified Body

Lighting's relationship with Doc Hudson informs another dimension of the car/human hybrid body by using Doc's position as a former racecar/athlete whose character is marked by his age and the legacy of his career ending in a crash. Unlike Lizzie, whose age is displayed mostly through her physical appearance as a Model T, jokes about her senility, and her memories of her husband Stanley, Doc's age is presented in a more multifaceted way. Doc's body also appears as an older car: a 1951 Hudson Hornet. This suggests Doc's age but does not make him seem incapable, frail, or outdated in the way that Lizzie seems in the film to be more of an antique than a functional automobile. Lightning and Doc's relationship throughout the film is based on the same generational gap that separates Lightning's modernity from the entire town's traditionalism, and it follows the common trope of the gruff mentor and the hotheaded student who eventually see eye to eye. This trope evokes the age difference between Doc and Lightning, so Doc's age is seen less as a quality in himself than a quality of difference between himself and

[31] Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body*, 30.

Lightning. Lizzie is framed as an old character through her stereotypical role as the town's senile old lady, whereas Doc is framed as a characters with more wisdom and experience than Lightning and others in the town. It is worth noting that, while rust-covered bodies do exist in this world (like Mater's and the consumers who use Rust-Eze, the product that sponsors Lightning on the racetrack), neither Lizzie nor Doc appear to be rusted. While rust might have been an easy signifier of age in the *Cars* universe, the filmmakers avoid this and use the make and model of the car to manifest age physically instead. These older bodies are not poorly kept up, but in fact they represent the way that a car collector would maintain cars that are valued because of their age and model. Put another way, they reflect the way that people value older cars because of their bodies.

Although Doc is more physically capable than Lizzie, if his age is viewed in comparison to the much newer/younger Lightning, then his physical capabilities have made him more of a to-be-looked-at object of nostalgia, especially considering he was once a racecar. Doc does race Lightning during the film, but he does so on a dirt road (which Lightning is not used to) as a training exercise, rather than to seriously compete with the young athlete in his element.[32] While car/human hybrids are not "bought" in this film in the same way humans buy cars outside of the diegesis, the transformation of the human into the commoditized body of the car is fully realized here. In this commoditization, the value of cars like Lizzie and Doc lies in their iconic nature and their age, reflecting a similar attitude toward older cars extra-diegetically. On the other hand, as car/human hybrids, these older cars are also valued for their memories and the memories that others have of them, reflecting the sentimental value that people often place on cars due to their personal connection with them. The former mode of putting value into the age of cars appears

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[32] *Cars*.

more cynical in this context, as it is more connected to the commoditization of the human body through the imagery of the car/human hybrid body. The latter point regarding sentimental value cannot, of course, escape the fact that the car is a commodity, but it does represent a more humanist point of connection between humanity and the car by emphasizing lived experience and, often, social connection.

The fact that Doc's body is indirectly "replaced" by Lightning's body suggests that there is a further unnerving quality to this commoditization of the body that emerges in the converging relationship between humans and cars: that of the problem of obsolescent and optimized bodies. In the *Cars* universe, there is an implication that bodies will get "better" over time if younger cars are reflected by newer models of cars. Lightning is not only a part of a new generation, but he was physically made to be better than Doc. Following this trajectory, in *Cars 3*, another new generation of racecars comes along that themselves are more optimized than the cars of Lightning's generation.[33] Lightning trains with Doc in *Cars* and later trains again with other characters in *Cars 3*, but there is still a lingering idea throughout this franchise that bodies will continue to be built better over time. Further, there is an essentialism to how bodies are made in the *Cars* universe. Once a car is built/born, they can train, but they ultimately have physical limitations set forth not by random chance, but by categories created and bounded by consumerism like make and model. As mentioned previously, it is unclear what the origin of these car/human hybrids are, but it is clear that the trappings of consumerism haunt their creation. Not only do the bodies of *Cars* suggest essentialist and binary notions of gender persist in capitalist cyborg bodies, but they also extend this to the maintenance of the unchanging essentialism of the car body. The optimization of bodies for capitalistic gain in the real world is

[33] *Cars 3*.

morphed into an ostensibly natural process in the *Cars* universe, suggesting a pessimistic view of the body in convergence with the car as both incapable of improvement and locked into a forward progression that constantly redefines the car/human hybrid on capitalist terms.

Pit Crew: Building Diverse Communities to Combat Essentialism

When Lightning is finally able to return to California, he finds himself with a new understanding of his former context, having spent some time away from the fast lane and within a tight-knit community of cars. Because of the film's emphasis on bodily essentialism and commodity, however, there is also much that has remained the same for him in terms of the job he has arrived there to do. When Lightning takes to the track, he finds that his new friends from Radiator Springs have arrived at the track to support him from the pit and cheer him on. This resolution to the tensions between Lightning's old life and new experiences is a fairly straightforward message of friendship and togetherness that audiences might expect in a film directed at families. That said, in the context of the commodified and essentialist car/human hybrid bodies that populate this world, the resolution also offers a path forward through what has so far been a fairly bleak view of convergence between cars and humans.

Although the film engages in nostalgic longing for the Route 66 past which is itself a version of the commodification of human experience and of nature itself, its ultimate message of community offers a way to cut through some of the problems of car/human hybridity. In the final race, Lightning uses his experiences training at Radiator Springs with Doc and his time recreationally driving backwards with Mater to win the race. Further, with his friends at the racetrack, Lightning is able to get coaching from Doc and an impressive pitstop from Radiator Springs forklift Guido.[34] Here, Lighting's abilities are enhanced by his experiences with others,

[34] *Cars*.

as well as direct help from others. These connections allow him to evolve past the limitations of his body that was built to race in a certain way because of economic imperatives. Lightning is literally built for his job as a race car, and so his body can only be pushed so far on its own power. Guido's body, meanwhile, can perform pit stops in ways that enhance Lightning's bodily capabilities by making up for the tasks that Lighting is not built to do. Further, by driving backwards briefly during the race, Lightning is pushing against the fact that he was made without rearview mirrors, defying his body through his connection with Mater, a car with rearview mirrors who could teach Lightning to drive backwards.

In the following two chapters, such ruptures in the limitations of the body will be addressed through queer possibilities in *Christine* and *Titane*. In *Cars*, a queer reading does not come so easily, but the idea of community put forth by this film will be especially useful in *Titane*'s own understanding of queer possibilities and how hybrid bodies can evolve through connection. In Donna Haraway's words, the way through such fragmentation of identities that are both cyborg and, in this case, essentialized in the individual, is "through coalition—affinity, not identity."[35]

At the end of the film, The King crashes in a similar fashion to Doc's career-ending crash, ultimately crystallizing the theme of using community support as a way to break through the limitations of the body. This happens when Lightning decides to throw the race in order to help The King to the finish line. Although The King indicates that he is planning to retire after this race, his crash reflects the crash that caused Doc's sponsors and the racing scene in general to abandon him. This seems to be partially what causes Lightning to act, stopping right before the finish line and allowing Chick to pass him before returning to push The King over the finish

[35] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 155.

line. Here, the film emphasizes the limitations of The King's body due to age (represented here by an increasing sense of obsolescence in the wake of newer models) and to the vulnerability to the crash (emphasized by his status as a car/human hybrid). Lightning's younger/newer, more optimized body makes up for The King's age in this case, showing how his helping The King finish makes up for the problems of the unchanging, essentialized body.

When Doc tells Lightning about his own crash, he says that his career ending was outside of his control.[36] So, the film implies that the economic purpose of a race car as a laborer and an advertiser are also ostensibly diminished or lost in such a crash. While The King is planning to retire anyway, Lightning's decision to intervene also represents the difference between an economic and a humanistic interest in the body. Lightning's intervention is not based on The King's economic value as a laborer or commodity, but rather an emotional connection that Lightning makes between The King and Doc. The economic interest in the body pushes it to its limits for profit, while the humanistic interest has the potential to redraw those limitations by forming connections with others whose limitations are different. The convergence of humans and cars threatens to depersonalize the human through commodification. Nevertheless, the maintenance of relationships based on those human elements of the cyborg existence of the car/human hybrid can cut through the commodification of the body, at least to some extent. The end of the film is happy, but it is left unclear how far this value of community can go in progressing the body past its limits.

Conclusion

This examination of the car/human hybrid bodies of cars reflects the ways in which *Cars* positions the convergence of cars and humans as being centered on the commodification of both

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[36] *Cars*.

people and nature. In doing so, *Cars* projects a future for humans and cars that is fairly dystopian, as its car/human hybrid characters are commodified from birth and made obsolete over time through generations of new cars being born/built, emphasizing their use as economic tools (as commodities, laborers, and consumers) over their agency as sentient beings. Further, these bodies are essentialized into identity categories like class and gender in a way that further limits the possibilities for how bodies can maneuver and present themselves. This essentialism also reflects the naturalization of commodification in the human body and, in the same vein, the commodification of nature itself. Historically, the commodification of nature in the U.S. was connected to the popularity of the car, and so the film traces the history of this commodification and follows it through to its logical extreme. Despite the problems with this trajectory for cars and humans, the film ultimately offers some hope through the expected Disney happy ending. Due to the focus on community support and diversity of bodies to make up for the shortcomings of the essential body, the film suggests that such diverse communities are the path toward a better arrangement of cars and humans in the future. At the same time, though, this solution may be a bandage for the deeper issues of commodification and essentialism of identity that create the limitations on these car/human hybrid bodies in the first place. So, while *Cars* is certainly not entirely pessimistic about the convergence of cars and humans, its optimistic elements leave more to be explored in the next two films this thesis will discuss.

CHAPTER 2 - CHOP SHOP: HOPELESSNESS AND TRANSGRESSION IN *CHRISTINE*

Based on the Stephen King novel of the same name, *Christine* (1983, dir. John Carpenter) is one of the most iconic works of anthropomorphic car cinema. It is also the epitome of the anthropomorphic car's crossover with the horror genre, taking on some of the trappings of the slasher film in order to create a monstrous and layered crossover between the car and the human that, much like many other works in the slasher genre, has a penchant to explore both violence and sexuality through the body of the car. *Christine* follows an uncool teen named Arnie (Keith Gordon) who becomes the epitome of cool (in the vein of a nostalgic take on the '50s as seen through the lens of the '70s, when this film is set, and the '80s, when this film was released)[37] after he acquires and fixes up a 1958 Plymouth Fury with a mysterious past and a chain of bodies left in its wake. As it turns out, the car (named Christine by a previous owner, or perhaps by the car herself) is actually sentient and forms a close, possessive relationship with her owner that resembles sexual and romantic relationships between people in many ways. Arnie becomes a hypermasculine teen obsessed with his car and with sex, although he ultimately leaves his girlfriend and best friend behind to spend more time with Christine. Christine herself, meanwhile, becomes fiercely protective of Arnie and kills those whom she perceives as a threat to Arnie or herself. The most obvious readings of *Christine* involve a critique of the angry young men associated with mid-20th century American car culture, as well as the misanthropic and misogynistic dangers inherent in the elevation of automobile technology to the level of importance of human relationships and the related dangers of reducing humans to commodity

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[37] See *Grease*, *American Graffiti*, *Happy Days*, *Footloose*, *The Outsiders*, and *The Heavenly Kid*, among other examples. Due to their relevance to the hot rod, greaser culture that *Christine* references so heavily, *Grease*, *American Graffiti*, and *Happy Days* will be primarily referenced in this chapter. That said, further research into these texts is needed elsewhere to examine how this nostalgia impacted public perception of the 1950s and its cultural and subcultural trends.

objects. The first part of this chapter will address this reading, but it is not the only way to look at the film's anthropomorphization.

There are viewers who see queer possibilities in *Christine*'s unorthodox relationships, as Arnie's close relationship with best friend Dennis (John Stockwell) and strangely erotic encounters with bullies suggest a narrative of homoerotic self-discovery and experimentation in an unforgiving society. Furthermore, Christine herself, given her feminine pronouns and presentation to the characters in the film, has been seen as an analogue for transgender experiences and the inability of others to accept her personhood or her relationship with Arnie. In both cases, reading Christine herself as a cyborg and a monster (using Donna Haraway's and J. Halberstam's theories on each of these terms, respectively) will provide more insight into how *Christine* can function as both an optimistic and pessimistic text regarding car/human convergence.

This chapter will begin by exploring the more dominant reading in the context of '70s and '80s nostalgia around the 1950s and the car culture found there, revealing and decrying the misogyny, misanthropy, and violence inherent in the time period and this subculture in particular. Then, this chapter will address the more subversive, less obvious queer reading possible in *Christine* that reveals the potential for subversive thinking about cars and humans in relation to one another. By holding these viewpoints next to each other, this chapter will view the film as both an apocalyptic diagnosis of the intersection of humanity and car-hood and an expression of potential hope for technological boundary-breaking to create possibilities for marginalized groups, especially the queer community, to imagine, live in, and present to others lifestyles that have been declared alternative or impossible under hegemonic standards. These readings will not necessarily be held in opposition to each other, either, as using them to build

onto each other will reveal the multitude of conflicting attitudes about human relationships with cars, American car culture's place in history, and the possibilities and limitations created by postmodern understandings of human-car fusion as an image that carries many ideological potentialities.

Original Sin: Creation, Capitalism, and Violence

Interestingly, *Christine* is the only film covered in this thesis that shows the creation of the car in question, and the circumstances of Christine's "birth," as it were, are significant to understanding her in the spheres of violence and consumerism, as well as their intersection. The film opens on the assembly line where Christine has been made, and very shortly afterward she commits her first act of violence when she drops her hood onto the hand of the foreman.[38] It is possible that this was an accidental incident that gave the car a sense of bloodlust, following horror tropes of inanimate objects or comparatively gentle beings acquiring a "taste for killing," but it can also be read as an intentional attack that shows Christine's evil occurs from her creation or from "birth." In either case, by tying Christine's history of violence to her creation and to the workers who assemble her, the film explores the violence of capitalism directly by showing violence at the point of production and later obscuring that violence with the imagery of the car in use.

Marx's concept of the commodity as a fetish is significant here: "A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour."[39] Seen through the lens of the alienation of labor in the consumer's use of a product, the film erases the deaths of the laborers in the aesthetics of the car herself and her interactions with the consumer characters as

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[38] *Christine*, directed by John Carpenter (1983; Columbia Pictures).
[39] Karl Marx, *Capital*, 47.

opposed to those who built her. Christine does not just injure the foreman, however, as the more clearly malevolent and intentional attack of the opening sequence involves a worker becoming trapped inside Christine where he is choked to death by fumes. This more visceral, more clearly intentional act of violence sets the stage for a reading of the film that emphasizes the relations of consumers to commodities, while also demonstrating an erasure of the role of the worker and the violence against the worker in the creation of the hot rod commodity culture that Arnie participates in and Christine is a part of.

Within the context of capitalism and the manufacturing scene at the opening of the film, the film's emphasis on the car as a cultural icon points out the connection between the alienated labor of the car as a commodity and the erasure of the violence toward the laborers. This violence at the factory is never mentioned again in the film. Even when Arnie receives information about a previous owner of Christine decades later, he doesn't hear the stories about the workers who were injured or killed by Christine. The arresting central image of the killer hot rod also serves to thematically obscure the role of labor in the creation of Christine and the cost of the laborers who were her first victims by emphasizing the aesthetics and consumer culture of the hot rod over the creation. The first victims, *Christine* seems to suggest, of American car culture are the workers who make the cars, and yet their sacrifices (to use a word that frames the American worker in terms of capitalistic thinking, and not to suggest intentionality or virtue in capitalist violence) are forgotten in the final form of the car itself and the images of the car that circulate throughout American car culture and, in particular, the use of 1950s hot rods (both as vehicles and as stylistic accessories) that *Christine* centers on.

Christine's Anthropomorphism: Car, Woman, Monster

Christine's brand of anthropomorphism is quite different from the one explored in *Cars* and carries many implications that are important for analyzing Christine the character as a hybrid body and a manifestation of American car culture. First and foremost, Christine appears to the audience and to the characters in the film as an ordinary car. Neither her hybridity as a woman-car nor her anthropomorphism as a sentient car are displayed on her body. Her body instead looks exactly like a 1958 Plymouth Fury without any human qualities or traits written on her. She even moves, for the most part, like an ordinary car, although she is capable of moving herself and manipulating her controls by herself. Even this, however, is not necessarily visible at first glance. The characters in the film do not see Christine as anything more than a car at first either. That said, Arnie instantly marvels at her upon seeing her, while others are disgusted at her dilapidated condition by the time Arnie acquires her. So, the film suggests that there may be some psychic quality to Christine in that she can either directly communicate with or at least influence certain humans, especially her owners.

This psychic ability, combined with her sentience, suggests that, despite the fact that she cannot show emotion or volition with her body, Christine has some sort of inner life, although it may not be as outwardly complex as that of the *Cars* characters. What the audience can know about Christine's inner life is that she has the volition to participate in a pseudo-romantic, possibly pseudo-sexual (or not so pseudo, depending on how the viewer imagines Arnie's relationship with her between scenes) relationship with her owner and, most importantly, identify herself as a woman. It is unclear where the name Christine comes from, but the idea of Christine's gender seems inherent to the car herself, rather than a cultural projection from the people around her. When Arnie refers to Christine by name or with feminine pronouns, it

disturbs the other characters, especially his girlfriend Leigh (Alexandra Paul). It is not obvious to Leigh that Christine is a gendered object/being, and it is not until her sentience becomes undeniable that Christine's gender is accepted by the characters. This is reflective of a tendency in American car culture to refer to cars as women and with feminine names (a practice also reflected with other vehicles, like sea vessels), as well. As will be discussed further in this chapter, Christine represents, among other things, the misogyny of this male-centered culture that equates women with objects, property to be controlled. At the same time, though, Christine's anthropomorphism suggests that her feminine name and her gender are inherent either to her body, her psychology, or some other essence that is translated into the realm of human experience as gender. The implications of Christine's gendered nature in terms of misogyny will be explored in the first part of this chapter, while the implications that can be read to reflect trans*ness will be explored in the second part. Both, however, deal with the tensions between the masculinity of the muscle-car image and the femininity of cars as tradition in American car culture made manifest in the hybrid figure of Christine.

In addition to her nature as a gendered being and as a product of consumerism, Christine is also presented in the film as a monster and a slasher, as she seems drawn to violence and killing for both its own sake and as a way to protect her relationship with her owner. Typically, monsters and slashers in the horror tradition (at least the canonized one) tend to be masculine or male figures, whereas Christine is presented as a female monster. Although, once again, one of her unsettling features especially for the other characters in the film is her place at the intersection of feminine and masculine qualities, as well as at the intersection of human and object qualities. Further, unlike other slashers, who tend to target sexuality, Christine's sexuality in her relationship with Arnie is a major part of her agency and monstrosity in the film. Any

anxieties about her hybrid nature, however, are not directly related to the car as a technological innovation, as Christine is shown to be fully supernatural and does not have any connection to technologies of the human body that make it more car-like or technologies of the car body that make it more human-like (both of which are explored in the previous chapter on *Cars* and the forthcoming chapter on *Titane*). *Christine*'s commentary (although it isn't as didactic as that term suggests) on car-human relations instead approaches the subject mostly within the realms of social relations, cultural relations, and economic relations between humans and cars, or between humans and other humans as mediated by cars. This is why the anthropomorphization of the car is important in *Christine*; the car needs to stand in both for a car and for a human whose relationship with other humans is being mediated by the conditions of production, socialization, and culture surrounding the car. This is also why Christine's status as a monster, a slasher, and a villain is important in the film, as the film clearly has a pessimistic outlook on the car (at least in the dominant reading). Further, Christine's status as a slasher allows for the ultraviolence and heavy sexuality of the slasher genre to be converted here into a productive framing of the forms of violence that build up around the car in American car culture, especially building upon the hot rod, muscle car, and greaser iconography of the 1950s and their legacy into the 1980s when the film was first released.

Greased Lightning: Masculinity and the Nostalgic Fantasy of Cool

After Christine is assembled and makes her first kill in the opening scene, the film shifts perspectives to show the point of view of put-upon teen Arnie, and from here begins to explore the desires and fears associated with the car as a cultural object in America, especially as it has to do with the notion of coolness and the toxic masculinity that goes along with it. Amid criticisms from his parents, a lack of a love life, and problems with bullies at school, Arnie's only solace at

the beginning of the film is his friendship with Dennis. Arnie, however, finds another escape from his struggles in the form of Christine, who is being sold by the brother of her former owner. Although he does not disclose the car's violent past initially, it becomes clear throughout the film that Christine has killed the family of her previous owner, taking control of him, and the brother has some knowledge of this. Arnie is immediately enamored with Christine, but Dennis is skeptical and tries to convince Arnie not to spend so much money on a dated car in poor shape.[40] This immediately places Christine in a time displacement from Dennis and the other characters of the world of the film, with the exception of Arnie, who is drawn to Christine as if she is brand new. He sees Christine's body not as she is, but as she was, even if not physically, then at least in terms of the response she inspires in him. To Arnie, Christine epitomizes nostalgia for a 1950s notion of coolness. Also, Arnie's situation seems to repeat the past more literally, in that the misfortunes that befell Christine's former owner and the people around him are soon to befall Arnie and the people around him. Arnie, then, is projected back into the 1950s aesthetically and doomed to repeat the past of Christine's former owner, linking him closely to the American car culture of the '50s.

During the 1950s in the U.S., cars were a significant cultural symbol in terms of hot rod, greaser culture of the kind that is nostalgically remembered and parodied in films like *Grease* and *American Graffiti*. Gary S. Cross' work on the history of teenagers and American car culture emphasizes three key elements of American car culture in the 1950s: cruising, parking, and the greaser. Cruising and parking were, in particular, both practices that were important in teenage dating, drawing on power dynamics between genders that Cross notes: "The car made the female subject to the male driver, and required her to display skill and finesse in controlling sexual

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[40] *Christine*.

contact."[41] Not only were the inherently sexualized practice of parking (for the purpose of kissing or sex) and the oft-sexualized one of cruising (driving around town often either with or to find a romantic/sexual partner) significant, but they also formed a gendered power dynamic that positioned girls as under boys' control. Cross even notes that getting into a car with a boy could lead to the cultural and legal perception that a girl was "asking for it" in cases of sexual assault into the 1980s.[42] These gender dynamics are flattened into harmless expressions of young love and frequently played for laughs in the nostalgic films of the 1980s, and *Christine* enters into and responds to this cultural milieu that sees such dangerous and sexist dynamics as being lighthearted or sanitized images from a better time.

Similarly, the greaser image itself is flattened by nostalgia in these kinds of texts into an oversimplification and stereotype of the greaser that erases the complex subtext of the subculture as a rich, working-class community. Cross notes that the teen greaser subculture had a bad reputation due to 1950s films that depict "a violent image of youth as alienated thrill seekers without purpose."[43] He finds, however, that the greaser subculture was primarily a way for working-class, mostly white teenage boys to provide themselves with agency by developing skills in car maintenance and engaging in a multigenerational culture that bridged gaps between teens and adults.[44] The nostalgic images of the 1980s tend to be in the mode of the more stereotypical "bad boy" variation of the greaser that does not have this complex relationship with class and age. Depending on the tone, though, they may or may not be violent (see the comedy of *Grease* vs. the pathos of *The Outsiders*, for instance). Alternatively, they also often poke fun at the greaser image, but once again focus on a stereotypical image of the greaser that is based on

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[41] Cross, *Machines of Youth*, 90.
[42] Ibid, 91.
[43] Ibid, 97.
[44] Ibid, 99.

the perception of greasers as girl-chasing, looks-obsessed teens who are too quick to fight, rather than engaging with their socioeconomic situation or the art of car maintenance. *Christine* also engages with this milieu, in which the real-life greaser subculture had already waned from popularity, and the prime examples of greasers are not only sanitized, but also conflated with the gender dynamics of cruising and parking. Audiences at the time watching *Christine* would likely be familiar with at least some of these texts and their displays of 1950s coolness in the form of leather-clad teen boys and romantically successful (and possessive) young men obsessed with their cars. In *Christine*, however, the juxtaposition of the iconography of hot rod culture with horror reveals the worst aspects of this nostalgic view and how it perpetuates a misogynistic and even misanthropic relationship between humans and cars that either covers over or flattens the more complex and uncomfortable parts of the time period it references.

After purchasing Christine against the wishes of his parents and Dennis, Arnie seems to benefit greatly from owning the car, becoming the spitting image of a ‘50s greaser whose coolness still translates to the film’s ‘80s audience through nostalgic recognition. This further positions the film to critique hot rod culture and the way it positions cars and humans, but more importantly, it creates an avenue for the film to study the nostalgia for this culture that was prominent in the 1980s. This point in the film presents the fantasy of hot rod, greaser culture through having Arnie become much cooler by putting on a “bad boy” masculinity and having him begin dating the new girl at school, Leigh. Even at this point, though, the fantasy of the greaser attitude and persona is unsettled somewhat, as although Arnie considers himself to be cool, Dennis and Arnie’s parents are disturbed by his transformation. This is compounded by the fact that they are also upset that so much of his time is focused on two new relationships: with his girlfriend Leigh and with his car Christine. At this point in the film, the greaser aesthetic and

attitude are presented as ways for Arnie to access further confidence through a new way of expressing masculinity, but he is doing so in a way that invites the audience to question the values of this transformation. Arnie turns away from family and friends for romance and sex in the form of his relationship with Leigh, but also for identity expression through consumption in the form of his ownership of Christine. Connections with people become less important to Arnie than sex and commodities. *Christine* further complicates this by explicitly blending and confusing the boundaries between sexual and consumerist relationships between people and objects, revealing the disturbing implications of the greaser persona as imagined and flattened by nostalgic texts.

This conflation of sex and objecthood is first revealed during a date that Arnie and Leigh have at a drive-in movie, a locale that not only continues to displace Arnie in time into 1950s culture, but one that also emphasizes the conflation of romance, sex, consumerism, and cultural imagery that coalesce in the car itself. Images of the car on film arguably influenced American culture just as much as the cars themselves did, and they continue to support each other in this role, even as other media technologies replace the film.[45] Given that this film came out during a time of a resurgence for hot rod culture and a nostalgia for the 1950s in general, it can also be said that the teen characters in the film and many of the viewers who watched it as teenagers when the film first came out also only knew the 1950s through the screen. The movie theater and the car are also locations for romance and sex in much American iconography, and the drive-in doubly so, as is exemplified and parodied in *Grease* when Danny clumsily attempts to have sex with Sandy at the drive-in.[46] Besides being technologically, culturally, and socially convergent,

[45] In America, at least, few transportation technologies have even come remotely close to the car in terms of prominence in everyday life and cultural impact.
[46] *Grease*, directed by Randal Kleiser (1978; Paramount Pictures).

movies and cars are also economically convergent in that they are both prime examples of commodity culture. As Kristin Ross points out, "The 'moving picture' produced by cars and movies reflects a new acceleration in commodity production and circulation, but it does so, perhaps, far more through a more thorough and complete commodification of the driver, the worker, through a recasting of his identity by means of continuous displacement."[47] The workers who died at the beginning of the movie frame Christine in terms of her status as a consumer object. Here, at the drive-in, she is the ultimate symbol of consumption and the commodification of not only the tools (transportation) and images (iconography in the cinema) of everyday life, but also the commodification of people themselves. With all of these considerations in the background and bubbling up to the surface in the forms of capitalistic violence, nostalgia for a misogynistic culture, and layered symbols of sexuality, the drive-in scene erupts into Christine's first act of violence under Arnie's ownership.

On their date, Arnie's inculcation into the misogyny and misanthropy of an extreme version of nostalgic greaser culture and the commodification of the human by combining the car with the human both inform Christine's attack on Leigh at the drive-in. Sitting in Christine, Leigh and Arnie begin to have an argument about Arnie's attachment to Christine. In this discussion, Leigh lashes out in frustration, hitting the passenger seat, and Arnie becomes angry with her. Leigh responds to his anger: "What? You don't like me slapping your girl?"[48] Here, Leigh jokingly questions Arnie's turn toward the aesthetics and ideology of nostalgic American car culture in terms of both his elevation of the car to the level of the human and the denigration of women by reducing them to objects. In both cases, the commodification of the car is important, as well. To Arnie, Christine is unique and develops his own sense of identity, but

[47] Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, 40.
[48] *Christine*.

Leigh recognizes Christine as nothing more than a commodity that allows Arnie to mediate and amplify misanthropic and misogynistic ideas about ownership of women and the valuing of the car above human relationships. For Leigh, Arnie's shift into this other personality does not make him more himself, but rather makes him more of a commodity, too, since he is parroting prepackaged images of 1950s greaser coolness directly from the aforementioned nostalgia films of the 1980s.

When Christine intentionally malfunctions to lock Arnie out and seemingly force Leigh to choke on her burger as the lights and radio in the car blare brightly and loudly, it almost seems like an acknowledgement of Leigh's correctness. The fact that the attack coincides with Leigh's complaints about Christine being seen as a living, feminine/female body suggests that Christine might recognize that Leigh's critique is legitimate and may sway Arnie if Christine does not act. Eventually, Leigh manages to escape Christine, and a passing stranger gives her the Heimlich, which leads to a jealous outburst from Arnie.[49] This reiterates Arnie's possessiveness of women in general, but this time the way in which he expresses it is changed from protecting Christine from Leigh's words to protecting Leigh from other men. At this moment, Arnie is less concerned about Leigh's safety or her concerns about Christine's complicity in hurting her than he is about making sure that his possession of Leigh as a romantic object is maintained. Women, whether human or car, have been transformed into commodities in Arnie's mind, in that they are replaceable and matter to him primarily through his possession of them.

"Show Me": Apocalyptic Visions of the Car

Not long after her first kill, Christine reveals herself fully as a being with agency to Arnie, implicating Arnie in Christine's violence and addressing the appeal of the car/human

[49] Ibid.

hybrid body both in terms of the desire to transgress the flesh/metal binary and the desire to become the hybrid figure as a way of improving upon elements of the human and the car. In this scene, Christine, dented, dirtied, and busted up after a vandalization attack from Arnie's bullies, turns her lights on in the garage, leading to Arnie saying, "Okay, show me." At this, Christine un-crumples herself, reassembles her shattered glass, and realigns her mirrors.[50] This self-healing shows the appeal of the car-human body in two ways: the improvement to the human body and eroticism, both of which also are kept in tension with fears of transgression and losing humanity.

First, the car-human body is presented as indestructible, cutting through the temporary nature of the human body. The fear of the vulnerability of the human body is dispelled by the car body's metal composition, which is in itself something to fear in that it is lacking in humanity. The fusion of flesh and metal is a reality of many people's lives (through medical intervention but also, on a less direct level, through the development of technologies like the car to become an inseparable, expected part of the Western, middle-class human), but it also represents an uncomfortable anxiety for many, due to the vulnerabilities this reveals in the boundaries of the body. Judith Butler notes that "the naturalized notion of 'the' body is itself a consequence of taboos that render that body discrete by virtue of its stable boundaries."[51] The taboos create stability within these boundaries of the body, and when the taboos are broken (say, by combining flesh with metal), so is the stability, and the boundaries of the body are in question. This reflects Julia Kristeva's notion of the horror of the abject, as well, in which the horror comes, in part, from the anxiety about the borders of the body and what crosses them—"refuse and corpses

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[50] Ibid.
[51] Judith Butler, "Subversive Bodily Acts," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, 3rd ed., ed. Simon During (New York: Routledge, 2007), 375.

show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live."[52] By putting metal into the body, these borders are made more vulnerable as the metal brings the functions of the flesh and blood that allow the body to live uncomfortably close to the surface. The invulnerability of metal as presented in *Christine* is also both desirable and undesirable, as it creates an uncanny lack of injury or death (or their significance).

The "show me" moment also signifies an erotic experience between Arnie and Christine to some extent, as it resembles a scene of lovers showing each other their nude bodies for the first time. In the context of Arnie's relationship with Christine viewed as a simulation of a heterosexual relationship, this scene features Christine "flashing" Arnie with her headlights, as well as a desire for Arnie to be able to see what Christine's body is really capable of. Seeing and looking are dynamics that play into the male gaze as theorized by Laura Mulvey, in which men are given power over women through their ability to look at them without the look being returned.[53] As mentioned above, male sexual power over women played heavily into the dynamics of the 1950s car culture that Arnie is emulating through his relationship with Christine. In an erotic moment of revelation, Arnie and Christine have an experience that reflects the male-dominated dynamics of cruising or parking in some ways, but these power dynamics are somewhat shifted by the fact that Christine has some psychic influence over Arnie.

Further, the concept of parking is already fraught with tension, as Gary Cross notes the tension between desire for sex and desire to maintain a virginal reputation in 1950s teen culture: "Neither the boy nor the girl wanted the girl to be 'damaged goods.'"[54] By having Christine undo the damage done to herself, she indirectly participates in the discourse of "damaged goods" and

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[52] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3.
[53] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 271.
[54] Cross, *Machines of Youth*, 92.

further shows the image of the woman as a commodity (and the commodity as a woman) within nostalgic hot rod culture. Christine becomes an idealized woman for Arnie by always returning to her perfected, untouched form, right down to matching her original paint color. His control over her body is easier to maintain than his control over Leigh's that he tries to practice at the drive-in, and therefore his romantic and sexual desire shifts entirely to Christine. This arrangement between Arnie and Christine is, therefore, fearsome even as it is desirable, in that it encourages crossing over of social and physical boundaries between flesh and metal bodies that are not sanctioned by most models of normative human sexuality. By presenting Christine's body as erotic, the film also continues to present her as a commodity object in Arnie's eyes by sexualizing her. This, however, is also complicated by her agency. While it is Arnie who says "show me," it is Christine who turns on her headlights first to encourage this question. If this scene is read as a sexual encounter of sorts, then Christine has given her consent, it seems. If Arnie is under some kind of psychic influence from Christine, which his obsession with greaser masculinity and the culture around cruising and parking might indicate, then he is transformed into the commodity.

After her vandalization, Christine becomes bolder, killing Arnie's bullies in a bravura and creative sequence that draws upon the exciting spectacle of car violence on film to create a sequence both thrilling and horrifying. The excitement of the car crash on film is conflated with the equally ambivalent excitement of the slasher's creative kills. On one hand, the violence on screen is of the kind that most audience members would find incredibly difficult to process if observed in real life, but on the other hand, these violent acts become exciting displays on the screen. In Christine's case, her killings of Arnie's school bullies are uniquely creative in both realms, as the use of a car elevates the bodily intimacy of slasher kills to a different kind of

bodily interaction between a metal body and a flesh body. In addition, they transform the relatively ordinary car crash from a site of adrenaline-pumping action to one of fear for safety and anxiety about the boundaries of the body. On two separate nights, Christine hunts down and kills the bullies, crushing one after chasing him into an alley, while she kills the others at a gas station in an explosion and finally chasing the final bully while on fire in a visually striking scene. Here, the iconography of the car becomes monstrous, and being a feminine object, Christine represents a feminine monstrosity, as well, unlike many other slasher villains who are frequently men. The thrilling nature of these scenes puts them in the dual realms of sexuality and violence that slasher films occupy. Christine's killings suggest her agency, but within the realm of the commodity as woman and woman as commodity that she represents in this dominant reading, they also signal her action only in a way to protect her own relationship with Arnie. The bullies have vandalized Christine, but they are a more immediate threat to Arnie, since his body is vulnerable while Christine's is not. This reverses masculine and feminine ideals of strength and resilience, but it reinforces the relationship role that restricts women's agency to their relationships with men, as Christine acts out of Arnie's interests just as much as her own. Arnie's attraction to Christine as a fetishistic object (as both a commodity and a site for sexual attraction), however, seems to give Christine power, so her own agency at times seems ambiguous in terms of her relationship to and potential reliance on male partners such as Arnie.

Toward the end of the film, Arnie becomes less of a discernable individual, as the focus shifts to the conflict between Christine on the one hand and Dennis and Leigh on the other. As Arnie disappears into Christine, however, his personality crystallizes into the toxic, misanthropic, misogynistic extreme that the film associates with American car culture and its extreme in the nostalgic image of the greaser. In doing so, the bodily extent of the car and human

dynamic are also further complicated, as car and driver/owner no longer have as much distinction between them. They still appear as two separate entities, but for all intents and purposes, they seem to share agency by the end of the film. Arnie continues to become commoditized through his connection to the object that he made so central to his identity, and the car not only becomes more important than other people for him, but more important than himself, too. The car is elevated to the status of a human and the human is demoted to total objecthood. On Christine's side, this union allows her to become more powerful and gain more agency as she has access to a human vessel to enact her violence.

This works to potentially resolve the issue of the car as a masculine and feminine symbol, given the associations of the car with power and strength on the one hand and with a sense of feminine property to be looked at, owned, and used by men on the other. Christine shares these qualities with other cars but also contains her own tension between a subjecthood often associated with men and an objecthood frequently paired with femininity. Mulvey describes a relevant quality: "In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*."[55] The car is masculine insofar as it is a tool for strength in overcoming long distances or rough terrain, but it is feminine in its iconography, in which it becomes to-be-looked-at, to-be-owned, and to-be-used by male consumers. Christine still acts as a piece of property, but she lashes out against the world drawing on the iconography of a masculine American car culture that covers over its violent misanthropic and misogynistic tendencies with aesthetics and nostalgia.

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[55] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 270.

Moreover, given the erotic nature of the "show me" scene before it and the romantic subtext of Christine and Arnie's relationship, this coming together of Christine and Arnie represents their romantic union, which in this dominant reading is akin to a cis-heterosexual union. This union evokes the concept of male ownership of women in relationships by making cars into feminine figures, but it also paradoxically suggests that feminine agency drives the relationship, as Christine is in control. This, however, is upset by Christine's monstrosity that marks her as a clear villain for taking Arnie's subjectivity from him, as well as the fact that this control represents the more masculine parts of Christine as a hot rod. Dennis and Leigh's relationship and concern for Arnie also push back against this idea of Christine's feminine agency by providing the counterexample of the "good couple," which, in this case, largely features male and female partners on an equal level.

In many ways, Dennis and Leigh's final confrontation with Christine (with a catatonic Arnie in the driver's seat) is straightforward in that it attempts to settle all of the tensions and complications of Arnie's relationship with Christine and ends the film on a final note of a more acceptable romance and the defeat of the monster. This ending also continues the thread of the violence of nostalgic car culture in the film, as it depicts the death of Christine as the end to that violence's incursion into the town where the film takes place. Ultimately, Leigh is able to use herself as a distraction to get Christine into the path of a large bulldozer that Dennis uses to destroy her, but Arnie dies before this point as Christine crashes into a wall attempting to flatten Leigh.[56] The use of an industrial machine to kill Christine brings out the conflict between the forces of labor (as represented by the industrial vehicle itself, but not necessarily by Dennis as the driver) and Christine as the face of commodity fetishism and the effacement of labor in the

[56] *Christine*.

creation of the mass-produced, yet identity-confirming, object that transforms and destroys Arnie. The class discourse here, however, is covered up somewhat by the gender dynamics that are more front and center in the film and the characters, given that there are few working class characters in the film and none in this climactic scene.

By having Leigh become the distraction, the film recreates the damsel in distress motif and allows Dennis to use his strength (or the strength enhanced by the vehicle he is driving—vehicles are still associated with masculine strength here) in order to save her, recreating the strong, masculine hero trope. Since Leigh voluntarily becomes a distraction, however, she is also given some agency and a sense of strength of her own. That said, this moment continues the objectification of women's bodies simultaneously, as Leigh is framed as a prop and agent in the final showdown. So, even as Christine is finally crushed into a form she cannot come back from, even the "correct" coupling that defeats her cannot help but partially fall into the schema of gendered bodies that she represents. In this way, the film ends on the idea that American car culture's violences are projections of existing tendencies toward misogyny, labor effacement, and misanthropy in the face of technological progress in American society. And this makes sense in that American car culture and its specific nostalgic images of the hot rod and the greaser cannot be all-encompassing. They reflect and enhance existing features in culture, and the film's final moments reflect this by suggesting that this violence haunts the characters even after Christine's apparent death.

In the final moments of the film, Leigh and Dennis stand in a bittersweet victory in the junkyard where Christine has been laid to rest, unaware that individual victories may not solve the systemic problems that Christine represented. As Leigh and Dennis stand outside the garage alongside the detective (Harry Dean Stanton) who was looking into Arnie's involvement in

Christine's killings,[57] the three heroes are surprised by a rock 'n roll song playing in the distance and fear that Christine has somehow returned. After it is revealed that the music is just coming from a passing junkyard worker's boombox, Leigh says, "God, I hate rock and roll,"[58] reflecting the film's interest in the violence of nostalgia imagery that overly sanitizes images of the past. On the other hand, perhaps her focusing on the aesthetics associated with Christine represent her lack of understanding of the actual violence involved in the elevation of the car to or above the human and the creation of the car as an object of toxic masculinity and identity formation as opposed to a gender-neutral object of utility. In the last shot of the film, Christine's bumper sticks out of a mass of junk and creaks slightly, perhaps in the wind or perhaps out of Christine's surviving consciousness amid the wreckage. This moment fits within the horror trope of the monster or killer's final return, either to be dealt with in a sequel or simply to allow a final scare and lingering anxiety to hang over the audience. In the context of this reading, however, it takes on a further meaning of the haunting of Christine's violence and the nostalgia that covers up that violence.

This haunting indicates that the violence still lingers, or at least the framework within which this violence in the name of masculinity, consumerism, and technological advancement thrives still exists. Even though the nostalgic realization of 1950s hot rod culture has not largely lingered since its resurgence in the 1980s, this framework was just one way in which the American car culture manifested these violences. The human is arguably still effaced by the technological and the metal is privileged over the flesh (especially the working class or feminine flesh) in more modern understandings of humanity's relationships to cars, even as the overtly

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[57] The duo's alignment with a law enforcement officer is a clear sign that they are on the side of the normative and united against the taboo (as in Arnie's relationship with Christine) and the countercultural (as in Arnie's initiation into the greaser aesthetic).
[58] *Christine*.

toxic greaser imagery has faded. This imagery has been replaced by a normative culture that reflects similarly toxic gender divisions but is able to wave away concerns through a hegemonic adherence to traditional gender roles. Does defeating the nostalgia culture that is produced within toxic masculinity defeat toxic masculinity? The ending of *Christine* seems to suggest no. This reading of the ending is pessimistic and contains an apocalyptic outlook on the convergence of cars and humans in which cars non-literally merge with humans culturally and technologically and begin to erase the human through assimilation and violence.

Alternate Route: Homoeroticism and Trans*ness Breaking Through

At the same time as it predicts an apocalyptic relationship between humanity and technology through the cultural convergence of cars and people, *Christine* also highlights the potential of cars to create spaces for new, queer possibilities and to allow boundaries to be broken within humanity. This, as mentioned before, is not a dominant reading and, as will be discussed further, is somewhat in tension with the violence enacted by Christine. At the same time, though, this reading, which emphasizes queer experiences, also introduces a potential new way to view the trajectory of car-human relationships in these texts as potentially hopeful alongside or instead of the dread of the regressive, misanthropic apocalypse that the more dominant reading of the film suggests. The two major ways in which *Christine* addresses these possibilities are in homoeroticism and trans*ness, although the latter is more significant to the film's anthropomorphism than the former.

So, to briefly address the uses of homoeroticism in the film for context, Arnie's relationship with Dennis involves a clear admiration of his friend, and this reading suggests that their relationship represents, to Arnie if not also to Dennis, something more. The duo's discussions of sex, for one, can be read as filtered or mediated discussions of homoerotic desire.

Toward the beginning of the film, Dennis tells Arnie, "we need to get you laid,"[59] expressing an interest in and intent to involve himself in Arnie's sex life that can be read as an implication of either homoerotic feelings from Dennis toward Arnie or an indication of Arnie's sublimated feelings toward Dennis (in that Arnie's lack of sexual experience is due to his sexual fixation on his friend). None of this is made explicit, although this reading can be bolstered by other elements of the film. In one early scene, a group of bullies corner Arnie, with Dennis arriving to support his friend. The bullying in this scene feels unmistakably homoerotic, especially to an audience attuned to reading relationships between characters homoerotically in order to imagine and create spaces of representation for themselves on screen. This homoerotic tone is created through the fact that one bully grabs Arnie's genitals in a display of power that merges the violent and the sexual, and further in the fact that one of the bullies steals Arnie's lunch bag and pokes through it with a pocketknife, leading to a spilling out of white fluid (yogurt) that stands in as an image of penetration and orgasm between the two male characters, mediated through the normal objects (the knife and the lunch sack) turned violent and sexual in equal measure (foreshadowing Arnie's relationship with Christine). Finally, as Arnie becomes more obsessed with Christine, he disturbs Dennis on a night drive by telling him, "There ain't nothing better than being behind the wheel of your own car, except maybe for pussy."[60] Dennis' concerned reaction to this line suggests that it threatens his understanding of Arnie, perhaps on the surface as it is uncharacteristically misogynistic of him, or maybe more clearly that it refers to sexual acts that are outside the norm for Arnie (acts both heteronormative and taboo, if the quote is considered in the context of sexualizing both women and cars).

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[59] *Christine*.
[60] Ibid.

Christine herself, on the other hand, can be read as an allegory for trans*ness, as she represents a figure whose gender is represented and misrepresented by others without her input and is seen as unnatural by some. While it is common practice in American culture to call vehicles by women's names, the film expands upon this tradition by creating an understanding of the car-as-woman that feels alien and uncomfortable to most of the film's characters. Arnie seems to be the only one who respects Christine's name, pronouns, and gender identity from the beginning. If Christine were a non-sentient being, this would probably not seem like a potential trans* allegory, but rather an extension of the film's examination of misogyny in American car culture: the ultimate expression of woman as an object to be used, consumed, and owned by men (reflected further by Arnie's comparison of "pussy" to "being behind the wheel of your own car" in terms of pleasure and power). Since Christine is understood to be sentient and, in fact, to have some sort of influence over Arnie, however, she cannot be seen entirely as an object to be used, consumed, and owned, but rather as a subjective actor in her own right. Due to the way that she seems to psychically influence and communicate with her owners, it is even possible that she revealed her name to her previous owner before Arnie, as opposed to being named by him.

As Bryan Fuller points out in appearance on *The Kingscast*, Christine's gendered nature reflects the trope in trans-centered erotica on being transformed into an inanimate object.[61] The fantasy to become an inanimate object is, despite the film's emphasis on sexuality, not necessarily represented as erotic in the film (although the aforementioned "show me" sequence seems to connect sex, violence, and flesh/metal dynamics in an erotic way, it is more of an exception than a rule). That said, the fantasy still reflects on the film's gender dynamics in terms

[61] Eric Vespe and Scott Wampler, "Christine with Bryan Fuller," Dec. 30, 2020, in *The Kingcast*, Produced by Fangoria, podcast, MP3 Audio, 01:39:29, https://www.fangoria.com/podcasts/the-kingcast/40-christine-with-bryan-fuller/.

of how Christine's experience of existing both between several categories (feminine identity/masculine symbol, inanimate object/sentient being, instrument of pain/symbol of pleasure) and in a way that is immediately identifiable and unquestioned. In many cases, the fantasy of the inanimate object, according to Fuller, is the unquestioned nature of its existence, in opposition to trans* lives, which are constantly questioned and scrutinized based on others' perceptions of who or what they "really are."[62] Christine, on the other hand, is not as easily understood or known by others, as many characters are initially put off by her being referred to in a feminine way. At the drive-in movie, Leigh pokes fun at the fact that Arnie seems to treat Christine as a romantic rival for his affections. By the end of the movie, the main characters all refer to Christine by name and as a feminine being, understanding her status but still believing her to be an abomination. Christine is, of course, a killer,[63] but she is also a monster of the kind that is disturbing because she should not exist due to her status at the intersection of several categorical boundaries. Understanding Christine requires an explanation to outsiders, reflecting the segments of the public who, through ignorance or bigotry, see gender as something that can be easily read on the body and reject any gender identities or presentations that they cannot easily understand.

In some ways, these queer readings of *Christine* as a film and Christine as a character (and, to a lesser extent, of Arnie and Dennis' relationship) are problematic and clash with the more dominant reading(s) of the film. In other ways, however, Christine's status as a monster

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[62] Ibid.

[63] Christine's status as a killer is problematic to this reading in a couple of ways, but the trend of trans*gender or trans*coded killers in films such as *Dressed to Kill*, *Psycho*, and *Silence of the Lambs*, among others, makes this reading particularly problematic. What may be empowerment for one queer audience may simply inspire an uncomfortable connection to the image of trans*women (or characters who can be read as trans*women) as killers that pervades certain sections of popular film for others.

and a cyborg allows her to cross the lines between apocalyptic and optimistic views of the relationships between humans and cars, catching the light in different ways when beheld at different angles. As a cyborg, Christine embodies the existence between boundaries of flesh and metal, human and machine, masculinity and femininity, mass-produced product and sentient individual, to name a few. According to Haraway, this kind of cyborg living engages with possibility, allowing the spaces between these ostensible dichotomies to be imagined: "a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints."[64] By incorporating the consumer image of the car into this cyborg creation, *Christine* even suggests that the problems of individual boundaries can be mediated through the same consumer objects that so often enforce hegemonic boundaries of what bodies are supposed to look like or how they are supposed to interact with each other in a heteronormative system of gender and sexuality. This also reflects Dick Hebdige's idea that the use of certain objects as stylistic choices for marginalized groups can be a form of resistance, as the consumer object of the car is being used to cleave the very dichotomies that it seems to keep in place.[65] The car is metal, not flesh, machine, not human, and product, not sentient being. Yet, in *Christine*, the images of consumerism are complicated, such as in the possibility of homoeroticism and trans*ness to become more possible in a language adapted from that of cis-heterosexuality and heteronormativity (the nostalgically flattened image of the greaser subculture). In a film focused on high school boys chasing girls, driving around in hot rods, and dealing with aggressive bullies, these images are both critiqued for their misogyny and violent tendencies toward misanthropy on one hand, and reorganized to create possibilities for romances, sexual

[64] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 15.
[65] Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Routledge, 1979), 18.

encounters, identities, and lives that go against hegemonic ideas of how it is acceptable for bodies to look, interact, and name themselves on the other.

The violence is not necessarily incorporated into the latter reading to suggest that such violence is right or necessary, but rather to represent the rupture that such lives create in the norm. Fuller notes that, when Christine is read as a trans* character, she and Arnie appear to want to be left alone by a world that continually encroaches on their space and their lives with the insistence that they are living the "wrong" way or that their taboo relationship is dangerous to others.[66] In this case, the possibility of Christine is not about a utopian existence, but about creating the ability to imagine queer lives in a cultural space that often excludes or obscures them. This, the film suggests when viewed from this angle, involves actively pushing back against heteronormative culture and remaking the images of hegemony in a new form. As Christine remakes herself after each attack, queer audiences may see an image of indestructibility that is desirable and does not carry the baggage of indestructibility as something to be feared that was explored in the dominant reading. Further, it can be argued that Christine's violence is a self-defense mechanism for her existence, which is denigrated by hegemonic standards, and her similarly derided relationship with Arnie. The ability to protect a romantic partner in a taboo relationship is also a desirable quality for those in the queer community who live in non-hegemonic relationships that are often under threat of legal, social, and even physical violence. The persistence of these queer lives is then represented in the final scene of Christine's creaky gasp of potential life from the junkyard, which becomes a sign of triumph rather than one of foreboding.

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[66] Vespe and Wampler. "Christine with Bryan Fuller."

As a monster, meanwhile, Christine becomes an eminently to-be-looked-at object where several meanings intersect and interact, including both the misanthropic apocalypse and the possibilities of queer lives. In his work on monstrosity in fiction, J. Halberstam notes, "Monsters are meaning machines. They can represent gender, race, nationality, class, and sexuality in one body. And even within these divisions of identity, the monster can still be broken down."[67] Under this idea, Christine certainly fits the identity of the Halberstam-ian monster, as this chapter has already discussed her several times as existing at the boundaries between various categories, displaying elements of both those categories simultaneously. In the "show me" scene, Arnie asks Christine to make her monstrosity visible, and she does so by showing her sentience while also still maintaining her objecthood. As she fixes the dents and cracks in herself, she also shows Arnie her existence at the border of the ordinary and the supernatural, as she is able to undo the violence done against her. The monstrosity here comes from Christine's transgression of the boundaries of life and death, but there is also something attractive in her final fate.

In the queer reading of the film, the final shot that suggests Christine still lives stands for the perseverance of the queer lives that are destroyed by a society that does not understand or condone them. Even when resistance seems to fail in an individual instance, *Christine* suggests, these lives can live on because of their perceived monstrosity. If monsters are meaning machines that are eminently visible, then marginalized groups like the queer community tend to identify with them because of their monstrosity. The queer community can identify with Christine's monstrosity as identified by the other characters in the film, but they can also identify with the fact that queer lives are forced to be visible for better or for worse in the same way. Queer lives

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[67] J. Halberstam, "'Parasites and Perverts: An Introduction to Gothic Monstrosity,' from *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*," in *Classic Readings on Monster Theory: Demonstrare, Volume One*, ed. Asa Simon Mittman and Marcus Hensel (Yorkshire: Arc Humanities Press, 2018), 87, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvfxvc3p.

also involve the appropriation of existing cis-heterosexual-oriented texts and symbols for new purposes, as Christine herself is a reversal of symbols of masculinity and cis-heterosexual male fantasies in this reading of the film.

The car is also significant as a symbol in this queer reading for the fact that it is not usually an object associated with queerness, and so this reading allows for the subversive transformation of an everyday object into a space of queer imagination. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, the car is not only an object within American car culture, but also a piece of identity and a place where everything from important milestones to everyday activities happen. These instances are usually thought of as very normative moments, especially when represented on film and, as such, have been historically heteronormative. Even today, there are few queer-specific associations with American car culture and the romantic, sexual, and other lived experiences often represented therein.[68] By using the image of the car specifically as a site of romance and sexuality, *Christine* represents not a general reversal of a cis-heterosexual masculine symbol, but rather a specific reappropriation of the symbol of the car as a place where queer lives can happen and where queerness can be expressed. The reading of *Christine* that emphasizes homoeroticism and trans*ness may not be the dominant reading of the film, but it is one that considers the film's specificity not just as a boundary-crossing slasher with a cyborg-monster killer at its core, but one that utilizes the image of the car and its associations to explore dynamics and possibilities of marginalized queer lives through a more positive reading of

[68] That said, the space of the car as a place that can symbolize change or forward movement, as well as the common association across American media of the car with emotionally heightened moments (ranging from sex and violence to revealed secrets and emotional breakdowns) have allowed queer moments like coming out to be associated with cars in some cases. These moments are likely not codified enough to become tropes in their own right, yet, or at least need further research.

flesh/metal dynamics, the symbology of American car culture, and the tensions of consumerism and individuality in the anthropomorphized car.

Conclusion

Ultimately, these two readings of *Christine* reveal two possibilities of how the convergence of humans and cars might end up. One of these visions is apocalyptic, a future where cars and humans become linked to one another in a way that elevates the value of the car above that of human life and reduces the human to a mere commodity that can only express themselves through the body of the car. The other vision is significantly more hopeful, a future where the car may still threaten to overtake the human, but the human twists the image of the car to imagine new, queer possibilities for the body and social arrangements between bodies. Both of these imagined futures are not necessarily literal, but rather reflective of the ways in which culture constructs the relationships between humans and cars. Because the latter future comes from a subversive view of the car as a space to imagine queer possibilities that disrupts the more dominant view of the car as a place of commodified toxic masculinity, the two viewpoints can also live together, so to speak. They are different ways of viewing and dealing with the same trajectory, and while *Christine* the film does not necessarily function as an activist film, it does create the space for the queer narrative to take hold if the audience knows where to look. This allows the viewer to read in the film both the problems with the elevation of the commodity of the car to a mythic, superior status and the potential for this symbol of the car to be retooled and used to expand rather than contract possibilities for humanity. Neither of these readings, however, is able to fully rescue the laborer or the working-class greaser from the effacement of nostalgia and American car culture, and so the future for these figures is still in question at the end of *Christine*.

CHAPTER 3 - NEWLY REFURBISHED: QUEER POSSIBILITY AND COMMUNITY IN *TITANE*

The previous two chapters outlined close readings of two classic films in anthropomorphic car cinema. With *Cars*, the convergence of humans and cars is imagined as being both an inescapable commodification of the human body into rigidly categorized car/human bodies and an opportunity to create change in those hybrid bodies through community and connection. Similarly, *Christine* can be read as an indictment of the misogyny and misanthropy inherent in the commodification of the human and the humanization of the car, while it can also be looked at from the perspective of the possibilities created through car-human convergence to expand hegemonic understandings of the human body and interactions between bodies. Both of these films find some sort of tension between positive and negative outlooks on the convergence of humans and cars, and further research into the world of anthropomorphic car movies would likely offer further perspectives and tensions across other films and readings of those films. In the French body horror film *Titane* (2021), though, these tensions formed between flesh and metal are pushed even further through the bodies of its main characters Alexia (Agathe Rousselle) and Vincent (Vincent Lindon), as well as the body of an unnamed anthropomorphic car. Ultimately, many of these tensions are resolved by the film's surprisingly hopeful ending that refutes the commodification and misanthropy of car culture while embracing both *Cars*' sense of community and *Christine*'s embracing of queer potential by pushing bodily limits. In doing so, *Titane* provides a hopeful, though complex, perspective on the future of car-human convergence by acknowledging the problems with that convergence and showing how an embrace of queer and community-driven possibilities directly addresses the problems of commodification, misogyny, and misanthropy.

Although this film takes place in France, the lens of American car culture as discussed in the past two chapters will still be useful here. Works from authors like Kristin Ross and David Inglis will provide context at a few key points in the chapter to discuss French car culture and how historical thinking about cars in France may impact this film's perspective. That said, Ross asserts that while American cars were not necessarily popular in France, the image of American cars as disseminated through American film captivated French audiences and represented a fantasy of modernity during France's modernization process.[69] This connection of the image of American car culture to the modernization of France between the World Wars means that much of the cultural imagery that has historically impacted American car culture has also filtered into French car culture. Of course, many years have passed since the time period that Ross is writing about, and so attitudes and cultural imagery surrounding car culture have changed over time in both the U.S. and France. Further, the film presents itself in some ways as a cosmopolitan film that takes references from numerous cultures and in other ways as a film that addresses American car culture in particular from a French perspective. The film uses a soundtrack that draws songs from many sources, including the U.S., Italy, and the U.K.,[70] which perhaps loosens it from its association with French culture somewhat.That said, the shared historical image base early in the popularization process for cars in both countries has undeniably lingered in the public consciousnesses of both countries. Since this thesis focuses on cinematic representations of cars, specifically, it will continue forward with this context.

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[69] Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, 37-38.
[70] "*Titane* Soundtracks," *IMDb*, accessed March 30, 2023, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt10944760/soundtrack.

Body Horror, Anthropomorphization, and Automobilization

While *Cars* deals with an anatomically specific car/human hybridity and *Christine* deals with the horror of a sentient car, neither of these films deal with the anthropomorphic car as a site for body horror. This is one of the reasons why *Titane* is able to promote a more transgressive and hopeful view of car/human convergence, though. The subgenre of body horror has the potential to offer liberation in transformation that can be queer, postmodern, or both in its reframing of the body and what being human can mean. In some cases, body horror narratives can counter the pain and disgust of body horror with ideas of accessing something new through extreme bodily change. In *Titane*, filmmaker Julia Ducournau draws from this play with bodies and boundaries through both grotesque imagery and a nightmarish body horror narrative. Early in *Titane*, serial killer and car accident survivor Alexia has sex with an apparently sentient car, and she becomes pregnant by this encounter. This image sets the stage for the blurring, bending, and breaking of bodily boundaries. This process is often difficult and painful to watch, but ultimately offers a unique perspective on queer liberation that confounds the lines drawn between man and woman, car and human, family and outsider, and organic and inorganic, among other binary oppositions.

Compared to the other films discussed here, *Titane* deals the least with car-human relations in terms of pure time on screen, but the union between Alexia and the sentient car she has sex with underscores much of the narrative. More importantly, though, Alexia herself is transformed into a hybridized car-human figure throughout the film, who, much like Christine, is also a killer at the border of several categories of gender in terms of body, experience, identity, and presentation. In this way, *Titane* represents a new understanding of the anthropomorphized car in relation to its lesser-seen cousin: the automobilized human. As such, this chapter will

address car/human hybridity as a general state of being in which the lines between humans and cars have blurred so much that there is little difference between the automobilized human and the anthropomorphized car. As discussed in the previous two chapters, anthropomorphic cars are already positioned in narratives in such a way as to point to the commodification of the human body. The automobilized human is another step in this direction, extending the cultural and economic convergence of cars and humans to a physical convergence between metal and flesh within a body that is recognizably human. This is opposed to anthropomorphized cars, which are recognizable as cars and yet have human elements. Automobilized humans are more uncomfortable images in many cases since they are based on clear changes to the human body that make it seem less human. Thus, this chapter will deal with both anthropomorphic cars and automobilized humans in *Titane*, as well as their relationships to each other and to the other humans and vehicles depicted in the film.

The film's unexpectedly optimistic ending also stands opposed to the more conflicted implications of the other films discussed in this project. This outlook is unusual due to the fact that the film is a horror film and deals with disturbing content and characters, perhaps even more so than *Christine*'s own engagement with darkness. Unlike other optimistic horror films, the resolution here is hopeful because of its breaking of boundaries, rather than returning them to their normal, hegemonic state. Ultimately, though, the film utilizes the relationships between cars and people to reject a misanthropic attitude and to embrace queer possibilities explicitly through the bodies and actions of the anthropomorphized car and the automobilized human, and especially in their union and a complex perspective toward both of their cyborg natures.

The Metallic Turn: Trauma and Automobilization as Misanthropy

Titane begins by introducing a split between cars and humanity, showing an instance of human/car convergence that is really more about the movement of humanity toward carhood as opposed to the movement of cars and humans to a central meeting point. As the film opens, a young Alexia (Adèle Guigue) is involved in a car accident that requires a metal plate to be installed in her head, a shift that the film suggests is the moment of her automobilization, her entry into a new realm of experience and relation to cars and to metal more generally. In the opening scene, Alexia distracts her father (Bertrand Bonello) while driving by removing her seatbelt, leading him to lose control of the car and swerve hard into a guardrail.[71] Following the accident, Alexia receives the plate in her head and subsequently falls into a deep misanthropy similar to that projected by *Christine* through Arnie and Christine's rejection of other humans to the point of violently lashing out against them. Once released from the hospital, the young Alexia runs ahead, rejecting the comforts of her parents, and embraces and kisses their car instead, giving the first indications of her disconnect from humanity and her general attraction toward cars.[72] This is a clear rejection of humanity and flesh in favor of cars and metal. With the newly installed metal plate in her head, Alexia herself exists at the hybrid intersection of flesh and metal at this moment, but she also seems to move past even this hybridity into a desire to be more car than human. This represents both a misanthropic rejection of humanity and the value of human life that will be represented by Alexia's eventual turn to becoming a serial killer as an adult, as well as an embracing of an ostensibly enhanced humanity that develops through its connections with technology (in that the technology is said to improve humanity). This latter

[71] *Titane*, directed by Julia Ducournau (2021; Diaphana Distribution).
[72] Ibid.

humanity is also manifested as a taboo affection for, and, later, sexual attraction to cars, which, much like *Christine*, comes to suggest a queer way of life.

Alexia embracing the car as a child also represents the significant split between herself and her parents. As opposed to the more general split between humans/flesh and cars/metal, this division speaks specifically to Alexia's own strained relationship with her parents, especially her father, which motivates her own decisions as the film goes on. Thematically, this split speaks to the subject of queerness in the story, as Alexia's rejection of her parents creates a cleavage in the family unit that resembles the cleavage found in the lives of many queer youths who are forced to leave home upon coming out or a forced outing. In the film, this is not a traditional outing, but the sudden introduction of transgressions of the body (metal entering the body, replacing and enhancing parts of the flesh) and of transgressions of the social contract (the taboo attraction toward cars and preference of cars over humans) that signals queerness. Specifically, the transgression of the body seems analogous to the transgressions of the trans* body (rejection of the birth body for a body that feels more comfortable and correct to the person) and the transgression of the social contract seems analogous to the transgression of homoerotic desire (rejection of the traditional family unit for a taboo form of affection and attraction). This analogy to queerness could be complicated by the use of the metal plate to bring about this apparent change in Alexia, but the opening scene of the film shows Alexia playing with a toy car while in the car with her father and making engine noises with her lips.[73] This suggests that the connection to cars and metal may not have been introduced but rather enhanced or at least rearranged by the insertion of the plate. The film, however, does not proceed with this queer metaphor in a straightforward fashion, instead questioning whether Alexia's full turn towards the

[73] Ibid.

car is helpful to her. In the coming sections, this chapter will discuss how the film ultimately suggests that hybridity and in-betweenness are preferable to existing in or even moving between clear-cut categories. For now, though, the film continues into Alexia's adulthood to consider her turn towards metal from the perspective of gender and labor.

As an adult, Alexia dances seductively at car shows and moonlights as a serial killer, seducing victims before killing them with a sharp metal hair pin. Here, the film already begins to play with the boundaries of identity outlined by Haraway, who writes, "my cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities,"[74] all of which are certainly represented in Alexia's initial introduction to the audience. From a young age, Alexia's disconnection from humanity manifests in the breaking of boundaries between the inanimate and the animate, of the inorganic and the organic, and, of course, of human and machine, which Haraway cites as one of the main binaries being interrupted by cyborg identities.[75] Alexia is drawn to cars sexually, but her sexual interactions with humans are only pathways for her violent outbursts. In her job as a dancer, she reverses the expectations of the audience. While the men watch a woman dancing on a car and identify themselves with the car's body, she gains her own pleasure from the experience by disidentifying the car's body with humanity entirely. Since Alexia rejects and is even repulsed by humanity, she finds her pleasure in the car because it is divorced from humanity. This way of seeking pleasure also allows her to reject the sexual pleasure of the audience, in that she knows that what is pleasurable to them about her dance (human, feminine sexuality) is not related to her own pleasure (sexuality aroused via cars and metal). In her own view, Alexia and the car become active subjects, while the audience at the car show sees her and the car as being connected in their objecthood, their to-be-looked-at-ness. As

[74] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 154.
[75] Ibid, 151.

discussed in the previous chapter, women and cars are often framed in similar ways both feminizing the car and objectifying the woman.

In *Titane*, Alexia begins to push back against this objectification and commodification through this small moment of agency and connection between car and woman that seems to exclude the male observer. As Alexia dances sensually on the car, grinding and writhing on top of it, the camera moves around her and the car slowly, seemingly objectifying them both in an expected way through the male gaze.[76] When the film cuts away from close-ups of Alexia and the car's bodies colliding sensually, though, the audience learns that there are few audience members watching. A handful of men watching the performance mill about and leave, and the male gaze cannot be identified with any one character. Mulvey notes that the male gaze comes about through the connection of the audience's gaze with the gaze of a male protagonist: "As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look."[77] There is no such male character to identify with in this scene, however. Even if the film's audience identifies themselves with the dance's male audience members, they cannot do so until after the dance is already over. Further, since Alexia is the protagonist and perspective character of the film, she is the audience's clearest point of view for most any given scene.

Since this identification does not happen and the film itself shows that the intensity and passion in Alexia's performance are likely not solely for a male audience, this scene rewrites the

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[76] This kind of gaze can be seen in a more straightforward way in the American *The Fast and the Furious* films, as the first several films in that franchise take place in the world of car shows and street races. *Titane* reflects and may even be directly referencing that franchise through this early scene.

[77] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 271.

gaze and allows Alexia and the car to take a subjectivity over their own sexualities that the gaze does not typically allow them. The car in this scene is also the car that later is revealed to be sentient and has sex with Alexia, impregnating her. In hindsight, then, it is important to consider that this scene features two beings who are commonly seen as objects that are to-be-looked-at or to-be-owned by a largely male audience as they engage in their own sexual pleasure with some sense of agency.[78] The car and Alexia both take control of their own pleasure and do so for themselves more than for the audience in this dance. In doing so, both the car and Alexia become less commodified, as well, as they are able to operate for their own pleasure outside of the limitations of needing to perform for male pleasure. It is significant that this is Alexia's job, as well. Since she sells her body and her sexuality, she is also taking back agency over it in the same space and time as she is selling it. This is done through an arrangement between her and the car that is non-heteronormative and outside what is deemed permissible to a heteronormative gaze.

Death and Life: Pregnancy, Murder, and Carhood

Shortly afterwards, Alexia has two encounters: one with a fan of hers whom she kills and the other with an anthropomorphic car (the same one she danced on) whom she has sex with. Through these encounters, Alexia's misanthropic perspective on the world is elaborated, aligning her somewhat with the misanthropic worldview shown by *Christine* in the previous chapter. Further, her relationship with the car seems to be a straightforward adaptation of heterosexual norms onto the car/human hybrid, similar to that explored in *Cars*, as discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. After she performs her dance, Alexia is followed back to her own car by a

[78] The car may not have the agency to move or act in this particular scene, but it is clear that the car's return to have sex with Alexia later signals its desire to seek out pleasure with her specifically.

fan who harasses her, saying he is in love with her and kissing her without consent. Using the sharp, metallic hair pin that she wears throughout the first third or so of the film, Alexia stabs and kills the fan as he is leaning into her car during the kiss.[79] Given the fact that her performances as a showgirl allow her subjectivity and control over her own body, this self-defensive killing reinforces her own agency by demonstrating Alexia's defense of her body. She once again takes back her subjectivity against the power of the male gaze to take what it wants. The stabbing also represents Alexia's misanthropic separation from humanity. The fan's harassing behavior and assaultive kiss demonstrate the parts of humanity that reaffirm Alexia's turn toward cars and metal and away from humanity and flesh. In fact, it is not until the fan breaches the space of the car to kiss her that Alexia kills him, perhaps demonstrating the power of the car as a safe space for Alexia, despite the previous trauma she experienced there as a child.

While the self-defensive killing itself may not signal misanthropy, its combination with the previous image of young Alexia embracing the car and the scene of her dancing on the car as an adult frame Alexia's worldview. For her, cars are loving sources of pleasure that are wrongfully objectified and denigrated by a disgusting humanity that treats cars like women and women like cars. When the fan dies splayed across her, he begins vomiting foam, as Alexia has stabbed his brain through his ear. Alexia is clearly disgusted by this, as she returns to the showgirls' locker room to shower and vigorously scrubs the foam from her skin.[80] This moment makes Alexia's misanthropic attitude unmistakable, since she is less concerned with the fact that she just killed a man and more concerned with the organic, human material that has dirtied her

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[79] *Titane*.
[80] Ibid.

pristine body.[81] This incident also shows the misogyny of a car culture that equates cars and women as to-be-looked-at and the misanthropy of that car culture as a reaction against, rather than parallel to, that misogyny. *Christine* places the misanthropy and misogyny on the same side, whereas *Titane* frames car culture as more complicated. Men are empowered against cars and women, but Alexia is empowered by her taking back subjectivity for both herself and the car. The film goes on to expand upon this latter point in the second of Alexia's revealing encounters: the sexual tryst with the car.

The film's main moment of anthropomorphization involves Alexia having sex with, and, as is later revealed, being impregnated by a sentient car. This scene is transformative not just for its rupture into the relatively believable world of the film, but also in that it both reinforces Alexia's misanthropic turn from humanity and creates a situation in which her humanity is unavoidably centered through her pregnancy. After showering at the racetrack, a booming noise calls Alexia outside, where she finds the car she was dancing on at the show. She gets inside and the car bounces up and down, apparently of its own accord, and it is suggested that the two are having sex.[82] Interestingly, the anatomical logistics are left unclear. Given that jokes about anatomy in *Cars* serve largely to reinforce taboos about sexuality, though, it can be argued that such a lack of attention to anatomy attempts to legitimate Alexia's desire for the car and its apparent desire for her. At the same time, such a decision avoids making the car and Alexia's bodies into objects of the audience's gaze, continuing the thread of taking subjectivity back from the gaze that equalizes women with commodity objects. The audience sees the bouncing car and even briefly sees Alexia ecstatically writhing against the car in the back seat, but the lack of

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[81] This is not to suggest that Alexia's morality is tied to how she feels about killing a man who harassed and assaulted her, but rather that her reaction to the situation in general is less based on morality and more based on her attraction to cars/metal and rejection of humans/flesh.
[82] *Titane*.

anatomical details of how pleasure and pregnancy occur from this encounter keeps the audience at a distance. Once again, this is framed as a moment for Alexia and the car to take control of their own pleasures.

At the moment, this encounter signals Alexia's complete disconnection from humanity, but it is soon revealed that Alexia is pregnant from this encounter with the car, bringing her uncomfortably close to her humanity and her embodiment of a cis-female body. From the beginning, it's clear this is no normal pregnancy: oil stains on Alexia's legs leave little doubt that something new is forming, something that cannot be easily defined in terms of human and machine, of flesh and metal. Guy Austin points out that fears of depopulation have led to "fears and desires concerning motherhood feeding into French horror alongside anxieties generated by other biological issues."[83] While abnormal pregnancy is a trope of French horror, *Titane* pushes the convention into the realm of the mechanical and wedges it into the thematic space of car/human hybridity. At first, Alexia's aversion to the organic concerns her, as this new life-form will not simply be someone who has crossed the boundaries between human and car, but someone who exists between those boundaries. Further, Alexia is no longer taking lives but creating life, forcing her to address her own humanity and relationships with other humans.

Given her own strained relationship with her parents, especially her distant, disinterested father, Alexia may also have anxieties about parenthood as it relates to this new child's life. The car also becomes a father in this scenario. Although the car does not figure directly into the rest of the film, it haunts the plot through Alexia's pregnancy and through Alexia's experiences with her own father. What does it mean for a car to be a father? Since Alexia's only example of a father figure is one that is cold and distant from her despite still living under the same roof, it is

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[83] Guy Austin, "Biological Dystopias: The Body in Contemporary French Horror Cinema," *L'Esprit Créateur* 52, no. 2 (2012): 106, https://doi.org/10.1353/esp.2012.0023.

not much different from her actual experience of having a father. The absent car comes to stand not for masculine activity and aggression, nor feminine passivity and to-be-looked-at-ness, but masculine unavailability. This represents a shift in the use of the imagery of the car as a gendered object, pushing against hegemonic narratives of masculinity and femininity. At the same time, though, it pushes towards the value of in-betweenness and hybridity over the car itself. If both the human father and the car father are disappointing for Alexia, then the solution is either no father or a hybrid father that can draw on the strengths of humanity and carhood. Later in this chapter, Vincent's role as that hybrid example will be discussed. For now, though, what was once a source of subjectivity and pleasure for Alexia becomes lost, and the situation is further complicated by her inexplicable pregnancy.

The tensions between life and death, inanimate and animate, and controlling subject and controlled object are further explored as Alexia continues her serial killing into the early days of her pregnancy. In fact, Alexia discovers she is pregnant during a sexual encounter with another one of the showgirls at the track, Justine (Garance Marillier), whom Alexia seems attracted to primarily because of her nipple piercing.[84] While the pleasure of this encounter, the film implies, is not the same as that of sex with the car, Alexia still finds herself drawn toward the inanimate and the metal and away from the human. When Alexia starts leaking oil from her vagina, though, she becomes concerned, which leads her to taking the pregnancy test and attempting an abortion at Justine's house. The presence of the oil reflects Austin's discussion of the fear of motherhood, but it also reflects a fear of boundary spaces, such as those in between life and death, or those between humans and cars. Julia Kristeva writes, "filth is not a quality in itself, but it applies only to what relates to a boundary and, more particularly, represents the object jettisoned out of that

[84] *Titane*.

boundary, its other side, a margin."[85] The oil signals Alexia's transgression across the boundary that separates the car and the human and emerges, from the view of the audience and Alexia, as something unnatural and even filthy. While Alexia is attracted to metal and is, in many ways, presented as an automobilized woman, she actually is less interested in hybridity than in a complete removal of humanity and the flesh in exchange for carhood and metal. So, the oil and the pregnancy are both disturbing to her because of the hybridity represented by a human body leaking oil and by the car/human hybrid fetus inside of her. She becomes a life-giver not instead of, but in addition to being a serial killer, and she is forced to reconcile her subjective agency as a dancer and a killer with the objectification that comes with the pregnancy that she cannot terminate. All of this comes about in the turn toward hybridity and car/human convergence that, at first, seemed to embrace simple pleasure, as in the sex scene with the car, but now is filled with contradictions and tensions that Alexia must uncomfortably live out.

In attempting an abortion, Alexia first encounters the discomfort and limitation that her body experiences in the intermingling of the car and the human. She attempts to give herself an abortion with her hair pin, but it does not work, probably due to the mingling of flesh and metal in the fetus' body. In a way, this extends the idea of the conflation of woman with car expressed earlier in this chapter and in the previous chapter. Alexia cannot physically give herself an abortion because of the fact that the car's genetic material has created a hybrid fetus. In other words, the commodification and objectification of Alexia's own body represented by the car as a symbol of male dominance have controlled Alexia's agency over her pregnancy. She becomes an object, a vessel for the creation of new life from a now-absent father figure, and it is likely that her body will be destroyed in the process. Throughout the film from this point on, Alexia's body

[85] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 69.

will continue to leak oil, and a hole that forms in her stomach will grow and reveal a metal plate womb underneath. The initial discomfort for Alexia comes from the idea that she may be more human than she wants, but the true source of her pain is the transformation of parts of her into car-like objects. Much as women are made into objects in debates about abortion, Alexia is made into an object through her sexual union with another object. Her ability to abort her fetus has been taken away from her through the very same commodity that she once identified with due to their shared to-be-looked-at-ness.

Becoming Adrien: Transformation and Control

The film continues to push these bodily transformations and tensions further in Alexia's body as she is forced to change her identity and alter her body while on the run from the law. After killing Justine, Alexia finds herself needing to also kill a chain of witnesses at Justine's house. When one gets away, Alexia must go on the run, deciding to disguise herself as Adrien, the long-missing son of fire chief Vincent, after burning her house down with her parents inside. In disguising herself, she must alter her appearance to appear more masculine, doing so by cutting her hair, binding her breasts and pregnant belly, and breaking her nose.[86] The violent nature of this transformation brings to the fore the ways in which hybridity can be at different times anxiety-inducing, painful, and freeing.

Alexia desperately tries to control her body and the growing car/human hybrid fetus inside of it through binding with bandages, a common symbol of trans*masculine identity. This is not shown to be a freeing process in itself, but it is shown to be a painful altering of the body necessary for Alexia's transformation to be complete. In fact, from the moment Alexia discovers she is pregnant, she seems fixated on controlling her belly and pushing it inward. Vincent's own

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[86] *Titane*.

body's tightness concerns him, too, as he takes steroids to stave off the weakness and loss of control that comes with old age, also utilizing a technology that symbolizes trans*masculinity through its masculine-coded enhancements of the body's muscles. In her discussion of body image and advertising, Susan Bordo notes, "The ideal here is of a body that is absolutely tight, contained, 'bolted down,' firm: in other words, a body that is protected against eruption from within."[87] This ideal of the body in advertising can be further expanded to include a general tendency toward tightness that is demonstrated both by Alexia and Vincent here. So, even as these characters are breaking boundaries of gender and age, they are only doing so through a movement toward hegemonic masculinity. Vincent is even obsessed with keeping Alexia in the house once she moves in, further signaling a tendency toward tightness and inward-facing postures.

This inward-facing nature of bodily control also extends to individualism and solitude, as both characters do not seem to be receptive to new people outside of their social circles (especially in Alexia's case). Cars also represent individuality, given their opposition to communal, public transportation, as well as the closed-in space of the car emphasizing the solitude of the driver and passengers inside, sealed off as they are from the world. In his examination of various common lines of thought in postwar France regarding car culture, David Inglis writes, utilizing Roland Barthes' concept of the two "sides" of the car:

> The ["sporty"] side of the car, which obviously comes to the fore more in some models than others, connotes unfettered individualism, the driver being representable as a free spirit breaking away from the rest of the pack … The more "homely" aspect of the car,

[87] Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Los Angeles: University of California, 1993), 190.

> which is foregrounded most typically in the family saloon or estate, by contrast, allows a different, more gentle sort of individualism. It suggests a cosy cocoon of one's own.[88]

Here, individualism is not only shown to be commonly associated with the car in France, but it also has multiple manifestations in the car. Both of these are presented in a positive light, but they also suggest the separation from others that forecloses connection. In the case of the automobilized human characters in this film, solitude may feel somewhat freeing, but it is not cozy. Even that freedom is complicated by the fact that Alexia's lifestyles, first as a murderer and second as Adrien, are perceived as aberrant and disruptive to the social order. So, it is not that she is freed by solitude, but she is driven to solitude by her individualist desires.

Further, the use of steroids certainly breaks down the binary between the artificial and the natural, arguably making Vincent an automobilized human himself. While Vincent is not explicitly crossed with a car, his concern with masculinity and bodily tightness reveal much in common with the anthropomorphic car itself. As mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis, car bodies are often obsessively optimized over generations in order to produce better vehicles. "Better" can have many meanings, but many cars are built to be sleeker, faster, and stronger than the previous generation. Similarly, Vincent strives to make his own body sleeker, faster, and stronger through artificial enhancement, moving beyond what the flesh can do on its own and moving toward a hybrid state.

Alexia and Vincent form their own masculinities through their methods of bodily control in the vein of Haraway's description of the cyborg as an individual, reflecting the individuality inherent in the image of the car, as well. Haraway notes that "The cyborg is a creature in a postgender world … the cyborg is also the awful apocalyptic *telos* of the 'West's' escalating

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[88] David Inglis, "Auto Couture: Thinking the Car in Post-war France," *Theory, Culture & Society* 21, no. 4-5 (2004): 211, https://doi-org.ezproxy.bgsu.edu/10.1177/0263276404046067.

dominations of abstract individuation, an ultimate self untied at last from all dependency, a man in space."[89] Both Alexia and Vincent's attempts to capture a youthful masculinity via body alteration embody the postgender nature of Haraway's cyborg, in that both of them are trying to break through their own gender identities and the stubborn bodies attached to them. Notably, they also find themselves doing so individually, apart from each other and keeping themselves apart from the world. The car, in many ways, also represents individuality, as it defines itself separately from public transportation due to its own private use and ownership.

Also, as discussed in the previous two chapters, personal expression is a major appeal of the car as a commodity object. Kristin Ross notes:

> During the 1950s and 1960s in France mobility was the categorical imperative of the economy [sic] order, the mark of a rupture with the past; every individual must be free to be displaced, and displaceable in function of the exigencies of the economic order. The car performed (and continues to perform) the activity most embedded in ideologies of the free market: displacement.[90]

Historically, then, the car in French culture is explicitly connected to Haraway's concern about the "ultimate self" adrift from other connections, especially in terms of progress, as the car signals modernity, as well. Ross goes on to write:

> During this period the car, as the commodity unlike any other, took center stage in cultural debate; it became the vehicle, so to speak, for dramatizing the lack of real social consensus around the French stateled modernization process, the favorite target of the numerous adversaries of the model of development France had followed since the war.[91]

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[89] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 150-151.
[90] Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, 22.
[91] Ibid, 23.

The tensions of modernization and how to progress as a society are, then, historically contained in the car for France. Similarly, Alexia and Vincent's attempts to optimize their bodies engage with the tension of how to progress the body beyond its human limits. Both of them, however, find it impossible to keep up the "progress" forever as they have been. Vincent collapses when attempting to increase his dosage, and Alexia's ruse becomes harder and harder to uphold as she becomes more and more pregnant. The tensions between tradition and modernity, flesh and metal, human and machine are all captured in the car for both the individual and the country as a whole.

Vincent and Alexia are both concerned with control of bodies, and both attempt to mold and shape their own flesh to match what they need or want at the moment, also moving toward a more car-like body in terms of its tightness, optimization, and association with masculinity. This is depicted as a painful process, practiced in solitude (and, therefore, in concert with the car's dominant cultural value of individuality), but also one with queer resonances that become more clear as the film moves into the disturbing implications of Vincent's past and its echoes with Alexia's own crimes. Bordo writes, "In advertisements, the construction of the body as an alien attacker, threatening to erupt in an unsightly display of bulging flesh."[92] This suggests that the tight, slender body tends to be privileged and viewed as more safe and normative. Alexia and Vincent's own concerns with containment and tight bodies reveal a reversal to the film's body horror. It is not the change that is horrifying to these characters, but rather the unchanged body that refuses to cooperate and fit within the standard. This may be problematic in the context of Bordo's discussion of body image and the queer liberation experienced by the bodies on film, since the change here is toward what Bordo is presenting as a hegemonically controlled body.

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[92] Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 189.

That said, the linking of the two together also potentially refers to the fact that these discomforts do not necessarily originate from the individuals themselves, but from the cultural context that prescribes certain expectations onto their bodies and identities. These expectations include limitations imposed by hegemonic models of capitalism (where the body is transformed into a commodity and laborer), patriarchy (where the feminine body is perceived as weak and alien), and cis-heteronormativity (where bodies that do not conform to normative models of gender presentation and attraction are hidden or denigrated). When the characters try to break from these expectations, it manifests in violent, painful ways that the audience can see in their bodily transformations.

Vincent's general masculine demeanor and insistence on his own body being "tight" suggest that he clashed in the past with Adrien over his own masculinity. In one scene, Alexia puts on a dress that she finds in Adrien's room. When Vincent catches her, he shows her a photo album of Adrien as a child in the same dress, telling her, "they can't tell me you're not my son."[93] The fact that Vincent is suggested to have originally rejected Adrien due to his effeminacy also centers the story in queer narratives of parental rejection and acceptance. Further, the presentation of radically accepting fatherhood here pushes against Alexia's previous notions of fatherhood, as manifested in her own father's cold distance, as well as the disappearance of the car that fathered her fetus. Vincent is attempting not only to rebuild his body, but also rebuild his own self as a father in his relationship with the new "Adrien." It is implied through Vincent's hallucination of a burning corpse at the scene of a fire that Adrien is actually dead, and the missing campaign is part of Vincent's delusional desire to rebuild himself as a father and fix the mistakes of the past. It is unclear exactly what those mistakes are, but it is

[93] *Titane*.

clear that Vincent may blame himself for Adrien's death, directly or indirectly. Here, the optimization of automobiles comes to mind again, as Vincent is attempting to optimize his fatherhood to progress into the future, but he is not allowing himself to mourn his past mistakes by allowing himself to believe Adrien is dead.

Adrien's mother (Myriem Akheddiou) comes over for dinner one night and discovers Alexia's pregnant body, upon which she warns Alexia, "Whatever your twisted reasons for exploiting his fucking folly, I don't care, just take care of him. Look at me. You take care of him. He needs someone, you or another."[94] This further implies that Vincent's belief that Adrien is still alive is only a delusion, but it also reflects upon Alexia's free-floating identity at this moment. She is no longer bound to the categories of gender, humanity, familial status, or even identity, as she can move freely between them. "You or another" implies that her identity is not her own. She is now Adrien, regardless of whether she actually is. This is not a traditional trans* identity, but it does involve some undeniably queer play with the boundaries of the body and the social expectations for it. This also reflects Haraway's notion of the "man in space" discussed above, but it is somewhat complicated by the new responsibility that Adrien's mother places on her. Alexia cannot really be fully free-floating due to her responsibility to Vincent, but this responsibility does not limit her body. Instead, it allows her to transcend those aforementioned categories that are usually thought of as rigid and unchanging while also anchoring herself to her humanity through her connection to Vincent.

The queer elements of *Titane* are fairly explicit, even if their connection to the anthropomorphic car and automobilized humans of the film are not immediately clear. The most obvious signs of trans*masculinity in the film are the binding bandages and steroid injections

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[94] Ibid.

used by Alexia and Vincent to maintain their masculinity and surpass the physical boundaries of their bodies. Although neither of the characters are explicitly trans*,[95] both of them utilize these symbols of trans*ness in pursuing their own bodily transformations. The language of queerness and parent-child interactions also enters into the film, especially in the scene where Vincent reveals that he realizes he has lost Adiren. Vincent tells Alexia, "I don't care who you are, you're my son," before a towel Alexia is wearing falls and reveals her cis-female body, followed by Vincent silently and gently returning the towel to her.[96] This is a powerful moment of parent-child identity affirmation, as it reflects the reaction of a parent to a child coming out as trans*. Vincent's insistence here could have been used as a way to reject the trans*ness of a child, but instead it is used as an affirmation, transforming the language of violence against trans* youths into one that affirms their identity and relationship with their parent. Alexia's gender and body do not matter to him, but taking the scene a step further, her actual identity and genealogy do not matter either. Alexia transcends her own identity and biological family to discover a new life and found family with Vincent, a sort of queer utopia, although not one without its own trials and pain. The value of community espoused in *Cars* and that of queer possibility exemplified in the queer reading of *Christine* are once again pushed here as Vincent practices radical acceptance of a boundary-breaking body.

Another important moment in the film in which this utopia of transcending boundaries is suggested comes in the scene in which Vincent introduces Alexia to his crew at the fire station. Here, Vincent tells his men, "I'm God to you. So [Adrien's] not only your brother, he's Jesus.

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[95] Arguably, Alexia/Adrien could be read as trans*. However, she is mostly wearing masculinity as a disguise rather than an identity. Notably, she tells Vincent her name is Alexia at the end of the film, suggesting that she maintains her original identity despite living as Adrien for some time.

[96] *Titane*.

Jesus will speak when has something to say. He will speak, and we'll listen," followed by one of the firefighters joking to one of the others, "Turns out Jesus is white and gay."[97] While this is just an aside demonstrating the lack of respect the firefighters have for the visibly feminine Alexia, it also frames the scene in terms of queer, boundary-pushing identities and their utopian potential to free the body from its perceived limitations. Within the context of car/human hybridity, it also clearly marks such hybridity as potentially divine. In the sketch of divinity that Vincent lays out, God is an aging being using chemical means to maintain his youth, masculinity, and strength. Similarly, Jesus is cast as a woman desperately attempting to be masculine, pregnant with a child conceived of highly unusual circumstances. She is blood and oil, flesh and steel, man and woman, son and non-son, giver and taker of life, and "when [(s)he] has something to say,… we will listen," suggesting that there is something salvational and revelatory in Alexia's own crossing of boundaries, with an emphasis on her liminal status. The fact that she is pregnant with a child that does not have a human father also suggests another divine arrangement in which she is akin to the Virgin Mary and the car that she dances on and has sex with is compared to God. Here, further complications are added: God is a car, Jesus and Mary are one, and there is nothing virginal about the conception of the Jesus figure. The first point, in particular, is useful, in that it reflects the worship of the car as a part of everyday life. That said, it also uses that ubiquity of the car to push against the hegemony of the everyday and allow space for queer possibilities by reframing Christian imagery, which itself is often associated with hegemony in many European and American settings. Haraway's construction of the cyborg is similarly utopian and similarly couched in the imagery of monstrosity: "the possibilities for our reconstitution include the utopian dream of the hope for a monstrous world

[97] Ibid.

without gender."[98] More significantly for this thesis, though, the utopian and monstrous world without gender is brought about in this case by a divinity that recycles and reframes the imagery of car/human convergence.

Hard Bodies: Vulnerability and Community

The allure of transgression and the strength it provides is also made practical in the film, as are its negative consequences. With the car-baby in her and existing in her androgynous state, Alexia is made vulnerable, but she feels she is more vulnerable in her old life. Earlier in the film, when tensions between her muteness and Vincent's desire to spend time with her escalate, Alexia tries to leave Vincent's home, sensing that she is unable to maintain her new life as Adrien. In doing so, she gets on a bus where she witnesses a woman being catcalled and accosted by a group of men, who ignore her since she is living as Adrien.[99] This encounter makes Alexia want to return to Vincent's side immediately, due to the implications of her going back to living publicly as a woman. At the same time, the reason she was leaving in the first place is her inability to keep up acting as Adrien in Vincent's presence. Existing as she does between genders, among the many other categories she exists in between, Alexia does not belong within the restrictions of either masculinity or femininity. She does not fit in with the firemen due to her inability to perform masculinity, and she is unable to bring herself to return to femininity and the misogyny that she must face there. She also does not appear to belong in human spaces due to her misanthropic serial killer past and her affiliation with metal, and yet she also does not belong to metal spaces entirely, as she is still attached to her human body. This is why the sex with the car at the beginning of the film is a fantasy for her, as well as why the pregnancy is a nightmare. The sex allows her to transgress the constrictive behaviors expected of her as a woman and as a

[98] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 181.
[99] *Titane*.

human, but the resulting pregnancy only serves to emphasize her belonging to these two groups, as well as the objectification coded into being in a woman's body in this world.

Alexia's second sexual encounter with a car serves in many ways as a reversal of the pleasure and satisfaction of the first encounter. This encounter takes place after a party where Alexia attempts to mingle with the other firemen at the station by dancing with them at their encouragement. This leads to Alexia performing her showgirl routine on the roof of the fire truck, an act that confuses and disappoints the audience of firemen. Even though Vincent has already accepted Alexia's body and the fact that she's not his son at this point, he also storms out of the room in disappointment.[100] In transgressing the gender norms of the gaze—who is to-be-looked-at (women) and who is supposed to look (men)—Alexia has once again disrupted her role in the dynamic of subject and object. When dancing on the car at the beginning of the film, she transforms herself as an objectified woman into a subject with agency over her own pleasure This time, though, the switch happens in the other direction, as she sacrifices her masculine privilege of the gaze and subjectivity for the objectification of womanhood. Whereas she rejected womanhood when she saw the woman being catcalled on the bus, here she once again seems to make peace with her femininity.

Alexia is met with confusion and disappointment, however, since this is not seen as the proper way to transgress. The fire truck represents masculine strength where the show car represents masculine sexual fantasy. Similarly, the gender transgressions that allowed Alexia to become Adrien was celebrated (even if only by Vincent), whereas the transgression that makes her more feminine is frowned upon, due to the perceived subordinate position of femininity in the context of the firefighters' world. When the firefighters have all left, Alexia has sex with the

[100] Ibid.

apparently non-sentient fire truck, although it does not seem to bring her the same satisfaction or pleasure as the previous affair with the show car. It seems that the transgression alone may not be enough, especially now that Alexia has made a human connection and does not need the car. It may be expected that the firemen would not understand Alexia's male/female, metal/flesh, Alexia/Adrien existence, but Vincent's rejection feels particularly painful, since he has already accepted her as Adrien even after seeing her pregnant, cis-female body. The understanding that flowed between them is momentarily lost, as Alexia does not continue with the agreed-upon arrangement with Vincent: that being an arrangement of embracing hybridity. So, the car/human convergence is revealed to not be effective in offering cyborg possibility alone, since Alexia still cannot fit in with the firefighters due to her hybrid existence. This suggests an incompatibility between hybridity and mainstream society that extends beyond the bond that Alexia has made with Vincent over their acceptance of each other's hybrid bodies. When Alexia gives birth, however, the film returns to this bond as a model for interpersonal connection and queer possibility in the face of a society that cannot accept hybridity.

In the end, Alexia gives birth to her miracle child, and the final scene of the film leaves the audience on a note that is hopeful and ambiguous, reflecting the potential of the radical transcendence of binaries that embracing car/human hybridity can unlock. Alexia gives birth to a baby that appears to be infused with titanium in several places, reflecting both Alexia's titanium plates from the car accident and the fact that the baby is a car/human hybrid. Here, the echoes of pleasure and pain from earlier in Alexia's life morph into a symbol of a new future, one defined by hope and compassion. The latter value is reinforced by the fact that, as the film fades to white, Vincent holds the child and repeats, "I'm here," suggesting that the transcendent future represented by the child will be nurtured and will be defined by connection rather than

separation.[101] On the other hand, Alexia dies in childbirth, which could be read as a pessimistic ending in which hybridity is punished by a culture that cannot make sense of it. However, the film does not seem to discard Alexia as some sort of moral punishment or final reaffirmation of women as objects in the schema of car/human relations.

Instead, her death suggests that the transcendence of labels and binaries into a cyborg future is not an easy practice in the present that is so resistant to change and insistent on labeling. Michel Foucault refers to how bodies can be controlled by authority through self-labeling or "the nearly infinite task of telling - telling oneself and another, as often as possible."[102] So, the transcendence of labels by moving into hybrid, postmodern, and queer spaces of identity can be read as a freeing move for these characters. The pain that Alexia and Vincent go through can be read as the pain of transitioning from a normative car/human dynamic to the cyborg dynamic of car/human convergence (represented here literally as car/human hybridity) as well as the pain of being queer in a world that does not recognize queerness and is not made for it. In this case, the ending might represent a hope for the future in that Alexia's child is already hybrid from the very beginning, existing wholly and only in a liminal space. Although Alexia and Vincent had to suffer for the baby to exist, this child may be able to live a life freed from the same burdens, at least to some extent. Vincent and Alexia both embrace queer potential, and Vincent provides human connection and the beginnings of a community to the hybrid child, providing hope for his future.

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[101] Ibid.
[102] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 20.

Conclusion

In an interview with the Lincoln Center, Julia Ducournau expressed her belief that "you have to be many before you can be one."[103] Although postmodernism can be challenging in that it can promote the idea that labels and categorization are completely useless, *Titane* seems to offer a radical connection in the place of these labels. As Vincent's striking quote, "I don't care who you are, you're my son," expresses, the labels might have some uses, but what ultimately matters on a human level is the connections we forge that can transcend those labels. By embracing hybridity and becoming less concerned with such labels, we can understand each other in a multitude of ways beyond the language that we currently have to describe ourselves and each other. In the context of car/human convergence, this involves allowing such a convergence to open people's minds to further arrangements of the body and technology, opening the way for embracing hybridity. This is not the normative way of viewing car/human convergence, as the relationship between humans and cars has historically foreclosed the possibilities for the human body and resulted in the commodification of the body. The objectification of women has also been amplified through car culture, as cars have become ways of expressing identities that often fit into hegemonic roles. Therefore, as *Titane* demonstrates, connection to other people and a queer transcendance of labels are needed to achieve a more optimistic, even utopian, hybridity. If car/human convergence is an inevitability, then the solution is not to embrace the car, but to embrace the space in between.

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[103] Eugene Hernandez, "Julia Ducournau, Vincent Lindon, and Agathe Rousselle on *Titane*," Sep. 29, 2021, in *Film at Lincoln Center*, podcast, MP3 Audio, 26:09, https://www.filmlinc.org/nyff2021/daily/julia-ducournau-vincent-lindon-and-agathe-rousselle-on-titane/.

CONCLUSION

As an analysis of these films demonstrates, the use of anthropomorphic cars in cinema does not suggest a single trajectory for car/human convergence. The representation of human and car bodies in proximity to, interaction with, and combination with each other has the possibility to generate numerous complex prognoses on the relationships between cars and humans and their implications. In this thesis, this has been explored in terms of cars as a cultural image that reflects the commodification of the human body, the objectification of women's bodies specifically and human bodies more generally, and the turn away from nature and humanity represented by many forms of American car culture. On the other hand, anthropomorphic cars have also represented possibilities for the expansion of the human body through technology, the breaking down of boundaries that limit the human body, and the opportunity to expand the limits of the human body through community. These more positive aspects of the anthropomorphic car image are not necessarily a part of hegemonic understandings of car/human convergence. Therefore, audiences need to actively work towards these optimistic spaces of community and queer possibility. What this thesis has not necessarily explored, though, is the significance of these readings to an audience. Even if the audience for these films does not take these exact readings from them, the films still clearly have an impact on how audiences view the cultural relationship between humans and cars, if not also the economic and technological relationship.

This thesis reflects on the ways in which American car culture has been reflected and refracted in many ways by films. While these chapters have not reflected on how these movies may have impacted American car culture (or any number of international car cultures) themselves, they still rely on the idea that films are both a product of and an influence in the worlds of their audiences. Films like *Grease* and *American Graffiti* sell nostalgia for 1950s hot

rod culture to a 1980s audience who are then primed to see their dark side in *Christine*. The *Cars* films instill younger audiences with a knowledge and love of American car culture from an early age. Alexia's dancing at the car show in *Titane* reflects an understanding of the sexualized imagery of the car show that many moviegoing audiences would understand through the *Fast & Furious* franchise. *Back to the Future* launched the failed DeLorean car into the status of a cultural icon such that many audiences do not even recognize the DeLorean as a real, oft-mocked car, but rather an invention to represent the epitome of futurism, progress, and coolness.

While audiences may not always understand the entire context of every cinematic image of a car they are taking in (nor could they be expected to, even if they were all vigilant film theorists), the trajectories of possibility for the relationships between humanity and cars persist throughout these texts. Their intertextuality is clear, and many audiences likely feel those connections, even if they do not always make them concretely at the moment of viewing. Audiences understand the anatomy of the cars in *Cars* intuitively once they see the eyes in the windshield, because they can make the connections between cars and humans as bodies as much from the movies as in real life. The specifics of the anatomy may differ, but nobody is surprised when Lightning McQueen lifts a tire the way one would lift a foot, because those two parts are analogous in purpose and positioning. Audiences learn their own associations with cars through films and they learn how to read these films through their real-life encounters with car culture.

As discussed in the introduction to this project, these films were chosen due to their perceived resonance with the themes discussed in this project and do not constitute an exhaustive or even necessarily representative survey of anthropomorphic car cinema. By taking this approach, this thesis did not intend to create a holistic theory of anthropomorphic car cinema or make a broad statement about what these films have to say about American car culture or any

other car-human relation. Instead, what this thesis reveals is the breadth of explorations into car-human relations that these films have the potential to represent, while also honing in on key patterns that are significant explicitly and implicitly across these films despite their differences, such as the commodification of the human body through the anthropomorphic car image. These films represent a multitude of expressions of car-human relations (both in terms of expressing existing relations and creating new imagery that then enters into the cultural lexicon) and also a significant set of concerns with those relations surrounding the body and its place in technological, economic, and cultural spheres (and perhaps others, as well).

This thesis is necessarily limited by space, time, and resources to focus on this set of films and a particular set of concerns as they are addressed by those films. For instance, this thesis addresses issues of gender, sexuality, class, and age far more than those of race, ethnicity, religion, ability, colonial status, and geography. This selection of identity categories and embodied experiences was not intended to exclude any experiences or to suggest that cinematic images of car bodies only deal with issues of gender, sexuality, class, and age. Further work is needed in this area to explore how relationships between cars and humans up to and including hybridity and anthropomorphization cut across many entangled embodied experiences. Since these experiences are so entangled, even the discussions of them in this thesis are not totally removed from their experiences. In this thesis, it was more a matter of attempting to look at these embodied experiences within the frameworks that came to the forefront the most, but there are, for instance, no images of a gendered body that are not also images of a racialized body. There are brief mentions of race throughout this thesis, demonstrating that the seed of such expanded work does exist and should be developed further.

Examinations of other films that focus on or utilize the image of the anthropomorphic car could further fill in this area of research, but other ways to utilize and extend the research here could include applying these concepts to other items besides the car. The prominence of the anthropomorphized car makes it an outlier among a number of other objects that have become embodied characters of their own on screen. That said, the idea of humans relating to objects by imagining them as human bodies extends beyond the car and even beyond anthropomorphization. Some of the interesting elements of the car as a body include: the flesh/metal dynamics, the consumer/commodity dynamics, and the possibility of blurring the human body's boundaries. All of these can be applied to representations of other iconic objects on film. In order to create an equivalent analysis, an observer would need to ensure that the object has a similar place in culture to the car, in that it is both a consumer object and an important piece of culture in itself with its own historical associations (something akin to the collection of images, values, and connections that form American car culture). Some important developments and images in American popular culture that might benefit from a similar examination include the smartphone, the gun, the train, the toy/doll, and the camera. Due to the fact that they are a common target for anthropomorphization and the fact that many species carry significant, widespread, and polysemic meanings, animals are also a prime target for this type of analysis.

Thus, it is important that scholars continue to study these images and the kinds of impacts they may have on audiences. Audience studies may be needed to see exactly what kinds of information about car/human convergence and hybridity audiences are receiving and processing. At the same time, additional close readings can reveal new threads of intertextuality and new ways of thinking about car/human convergence that have not been found in other texts or other

readings of the same texts. Quantitative studies about the number of films released in a given time period in a given place that feature car/human relations and how those films explore that subject will also be helpful. All in all, this thesis sheds light on a topic that has only been studied in small pieces here and there. Given the close association of cars and movies since the beginning of the medium, this topic could be deeper than initially imagined.

As for this thesis' explorations into the world of car/human hybridity in the movies, there is also a takeaway for how audiences could react to these films and the issues they breach. *Cars*, *Christine*, and especially *Titane* demonstrate a need for radical thinking about car/human convergence that goes beyond simply how people use cars. The emphasis on community and boundary-breaking queer possibility that the readings explored in this thesis discuss could be used to advocate for radical reforms in transportation infrastructure, such as a shift toward more intermodal forms of transportation.[104] At the same time, though, a more immediate and personal takeaway from these films and this thesis is the need to embrace hybridity and find connection with others in everyday life. As pointed out in the above chapters, the restrictions of car/human convergence are not invented by the movies, but rather used by films in order to express actual forms of hegemonic control and limitation. These forms of control impact all human bodies to some extent, but they are especially damaging to those in marginalized communities and limiting toward their bodies. So, while it may be overly simplistic to suggest that these films have a singular message, it is clear that their glimpse of change and a glimmer of hope through interconnectedness and queer possibility is worth engaging with. It may even be the beginning of a path toward more impactful change in and outside of the realm of car culture.

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[104] In this way, communities could embrace public forms of transportation without losing the cultural importance of the car, living in a hybrid state between public and private transportation frameworks. Both the values of community/interconnectedness and queer/hybrid possibility are suggested here.

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