Incorporating Technology, Industrializing Subjectivity

Literature, Technology, and Modernity, 1860-2000. Nicholas Daly. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004. vii + 161 pp.

Reviewed by Brandon Jernigan, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

<1> From mid-Victorian sensation drama to David Cronenberg's *Crash* (1996), Nicholas Daly's slim volume covers more than a century of clashes between bodies and machines, culture and technological modernization. While industrial modernity attempts to establish an intellectual distinction between people and machines, Daly argues, the result is also "a modernity that obsessively replays the meeting of the two" (2). In other words, Daly is most interested in works that imagine the erasure of this human/machine boundary. Throughout, Daly skillfully traverses genres, media, traditional periodization, as well as the Atlantic, in order to analyze the "particular ways of imagining machine-transformed subjects" which have been "carried over from the mid-nineteenth century and linger, albeit with variations, well into the second half of the twentieth century" (2). Thus, Daly's innovative study brings together two important areas of research: the growing study of the intersections between culture and technology, and the ongoing interest in historicizing modern subjectivity. Though the publisher's description targets scholars of modernism, the book also proves quite useful to Victorianist scholars—not least because Daly's project challenges the assumption that industrialization falls to the cultural background after the industrial novels of the 1840s and 1850s. Daly offers an eclectic approach that holds together an expansive cultural history even though his study ultimately does not answer the theoretical questions it raises about the embodied subject's capacity to mediate technological modernity.

<2> Daly productively straddles two distinct fin-de-siècle moments. Despite using pliable concepts such as "industrial modernity" and "machine culture," he provides historical depth and specificity for his diverse subject matter. Moreover, Daly's cultural history provides compelling substance to his Jamesonian argument that literature and film facilitated modernization by accommodating embodied subjects to the demands of industrial capitalism. Drawing on Wolfgang Schivelbusch's important work, *The Railway Journey* (1977), Daly focuses on the corporeal and psychic demands placed on the middle classes by the industrialization of everyday life. He argues that the mid-nineteenth century is an important starting point, a watershed moment in which Europe witnessed "the modification of the habitus to fit the contours of modernity, including [. . .] new corporeal regimes (4)."

<3> Beginning with the sensation plays that popularized the "railway rescue" scene in the late 1860s, Daly concentrates on Dion Boucicault's enormously popular production, *After Dark: A Tale of London Life* (1868). For Daly, the elaborate process of staging such industrial spectacle (the rushing train in the underground) retrains the spectators' nerves and (à la Schivelbusch) constructs a shield against the shock and anxiety of the industrial metropolis. At the same time, these productions stage an escape from Victorian modernity; the hero not only triumphs over the train as agent/icon of industrialization, but also escapes "a nightmare vision of the dark and alien forces of modernity" represented by the racialized characters circulating through the London underworld (13-14). At a time when minor railway accidents exposed lingering anxieties, the "railway rescue" drama transformed the industrial experience into thrilling spectacle rather than trauma. Likewise, in the following chapter, Daly argues that sensation fiction adapted subjects to modernity by synchronizing readers with industrial temporality. In mysteries such as Collins's *The Woman in White*, readers are constantly aware of characters' struggles against "the dramatic time limit," and, in this novel form, readers' time-consciousness becomes the precondition of pleasurable suspense.

<4> Daly's third chapter provides the linchpin between the volume's use of drama and fiction and its interest in film. Utilizing Kipling's short story, "Mrs. Bathurst," an elliptical tale revolving around a British soldier in the Boer War who becomes obsessed by the filmic representation of a
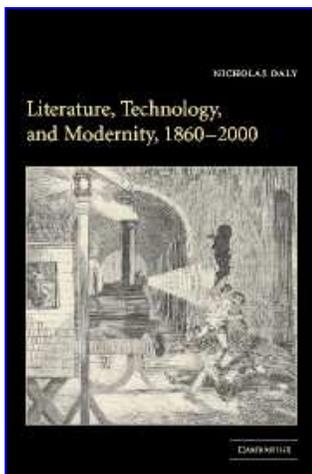
woman he once knew at home, Daly ingeniously offers the Boer War as a primary context for understanding early film. After all, Daly writes, "the first motion pictures that many Britons saw were Boer War actualités" (62); jingoistic advertisements even introduced the cinematograph as the "Boerograph" or "Wargraph." In what is perhaps the most compelling section of the book (one disturbingly relevant to our current global context), Daly traces attempts to dramatize as domestic spectacle warfare radically altered by advancing technology. As Daly writes, at the moment reproductive technology became feasible, Britain faced invisible Boer guerillas (with smokeless long-range rifles), "making a totalizing view impossible for cameraman and general alike" (63). In this context, Daly works through the resulting intricacies of the living/dead, visible/invisible, home/abroad in Kipling's "Mrs Bathurst."

<5> Just as the Boer War remains crucial for understanding film, so Daly argues in the latter two chapters of his book that film is constitutive of modern sexuality. The sexual magnetism of Kipling's short story—the filmed woman who has "It" rather than conventional beauty—provides a transition to the final chapters. Daly outlines the careers of writer Elinor Glyn and actress Clara Bow, focusing on their collaboration in *It* (1927), and lays J. G. Ballard's novel *Crash* (1973) alongside David Cronenberg's film adaptation (1996). For Daly, Kipling's story anticipates two overlapping aspects of twentieth-century modernity: the concept and vocabulary of sexual attractiveness (independent of beauty) and the power of cinema to create charismatic icons. As a modernized Cinderella story, *It* combines sexual and consumer satisfaction in such a way that conspicuous consumption becomes entangled in the desire for sexual liberation (the film industry's strategy, Daly argues, for targeting female audiences).

<6> In lieu of a conclusion, Daly looks at Ballard's and Cronenberg's *Crash*, in which the fantasy of machine/body collision is finally realized. Though more historically distant from the volume's nineteenth-century epicenter, Daly's erudite interpretation of the novel and film—both of which depict a subculture of sexual car crash fetishism and a main character's fantasy of colliding with a film icon—revisits the crucial themes of the final chapters: the interplay of human bodies and technology, the emergence of machine-mediated sex, and the entanglement of sexuality and consumer culture.

<7> The volume has much history to cover in a short space, but Daly is certainly up to the challenge with his extensive knowledge and research. Though its wide range of cultural references often makes for entertaining reading, *Literature, Technology, and Modernity* is packed to the point that the argument sometimes becomes lost in long parenthetical offshoots that make interesting but tangential connections. Daly describes his cultural history as the "adventures of a trope," and yet his book creates the impression of more serious critical stakes in the argument which are not quite fully developed.

<8> Daly is at his strongest when he is utilizing the body as both a symbolic and material resource—both subject and object of the cultural history he outlines—but one begins to glimpse the accompanying problems as Daly discusses agency. In his introduction, Daly speculates: "What, after all, is the fantastic image of a human being racing against a train to save someone, if not an image of human agency in the face of an increasingly mechanized (for which we might also read bureaucratized, rationalized, administered, commodified) world?" (4).

<9> This suggestion exemplifies the key problems of the volume. Though Daly's focus on embodiment remains promising, the book does not offer any sustained discussion of the contingencies, including gender, contained in the phrase "human being." Daly teases out compelling issues of masculinity in Boucicault's *After Dark* and attempts to establish a nuanced understanding of early twentieth-century constructions of "the modern woman" in *It*, but gender rarely plays a prominent role in the book's argument. At times, the result becomes a discussion of modern subjectivity and embodiment that relies on an undifferentiated modern subject (and thus risks re-inscribing ideologies of race, class and gender).

<10> Furthermore, the book's frequent alignment of technological modernization with "rationalized, administered, commodified" modernity prevents the argument from consistently disentangling and contextualizing these interrelationships (as Daly does more effectively in the chapter on Bow and Glyn). The result is an account of agency, which is not only restrictive (Daly's most frequent description of modernity is Max Weber's "iron cage") but leads to a somewhat anachronistic view of subjecthood. In an increasingly administered world, one would imagine the iron cage closing around the modern subjects Daly studies, but the book tends to ascribe much more agency to its twentieth-century subjects (e.g., the critical spectatorship

presumed by *It* or the self-reflexivity of Cronenberg) than to its nineteenth-century characters and audiences who are seen as merely projecting a fantasy of agency in response to a disempowering industrial anxiety.

<11> In the epigraph of Daly's first chapter, H. G. Wells writes that a steam-engine running on the railway will become the symbol of the nineteenth century. In fact, Wells (who receives little attention in Daly's book) offers a rejoinder to the volume's iron cage premise. In *A Modern Utopia*, Wells's narrator tells us that, in Utopia, the noise and filth of coal-fueled trains has been replaced by clean electric trains, which, among other services, offer safe distance between workers' homes and the "industrial desolation" of mining and smelting; moreover, in contrast to the class segregation that Schivelbusch studies, the utopian visitor explains that "there will be no distinctions of class in such a train, because in a civilized world there would be no offence between one kind of man and another" (37). For Wells, who switches so powerfully between hopeful and stark futures, industrial modernity simultaneously offers glimpses of utopia and dystopia—the potentiality of dehumanizing capitalist logic, environmental catastrophe, imperial brutality and, at the same time, the realizable potential for a collective society reconciled with true individual autonomy. In his treatise, Wells constructs a deeply dialectical Utopia—a flash of hope in the damaged here-and-now—in which technology is both tool for destruction and transformation. In Daly's study, however, such dialectical logic is rare. While Daly offers nuanced contrarian interpretations, one ultimately runs against the iron cage—especially in its nineteenth-century form. Yet, even as the book raises theoretical problems concerning human agency, its potential to spur further discussion and study remains one of its greatest attributes. Its extensive research and innovative methodology demonstrates the necessity of bridging longstanding intellectual divides between technology and culture, Victorian and postmodern.

.