Hot Wheels, Cool Cars, and an Aesthetics of Simulation

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The word "cool" is both notoriously ubiquitous and, for culture critics, infuriatingly imprecise. In a 2008 article in *The National Post*, Robert Fulford puts responsibility for the general and widespread usage of the word squarely on Marshall McLuhan's shoulders. McLuhan's distinction between hot and cool media, Fulford argues, took a word initially specific to jazz music and created 'a lexical wetland where the swamp creature "cool" could flourish and reproduce'.[1] I am not at all sure that McLuhan can be held singlehandedly responsible for the lexicographical monstrosity that the word "cool" has become—it would take a more detailed study than could be carried out in a quarter of a newspaper page, two columns wide—but I do think Fulford is dead on in locating the word's expansionary aesthetic within the context of technology.

The word "cool" has indeed adhered with remarkable consistency to electronics and technological products over the last several decades, connoting products considered to be useful and/or cutting edge. At the same time, "cool" is also clearly an aesthetic assessment; it connotes the look of things—does it look cutting-edge, futuristic? Does it look new? Or even, perhaps paradoxically, retro? I want to argue that the word "cool" has, in fact, become a kind of cultural shorthand for a conflation of look and function. As such, "cool" revives all the longstanding debates in aesthetics theory about use value and aesthetic objects like art, going back all the way to Plato, Reynolds, Hegel, and Kant.

In this piece, I want to consider Mattel Corporation's product line of children's toy cars, Hot Wheels, as a case study in "cool"; the toy cars perfectly exemplify the metonymic logic upon which "cool", as a relationship between look and function, is based. Further, it is through the agency of simulation that the conflation is made to occur. It is no coincidence that the toys became popular at the beginning of the computer age, given the brand's insistence on developing cars with a futuristic aesthetic, or that they have continued to be amongst the top-selling toys ever since, popular with both children and adult collectors. I focus first on the cars as material objects and Mattel's marketing vocabulary. Next, I look at the graphic art, illustrations which have not only been a mainstay of the cars' marketing as well as of the collector scene, but which have also both participated in and contributed to Mattel's design philosophy. I draw primarily on Randy Leffingwell's invaluable resource—*Hot Wheels: 35 Years of Speed, Power, Performance and*

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[1] Robert Fulford, 'They Don't Get Much Cooler: Why Obama Is the Perfect McLuhan Proxy', in *The National Post*, 18 March 2008, Arts and Life column 2. For a digitised and similar (but not exact) copy of the article, see: <http://www.robertfulford.com/2008-03-18-mcluhan.html> [accessed 1 December 2019].

Attitude—on the collectors' guides, and on the work of Scott Robertson, author of *How To Draw Cars the Hot Wheels Way*. Finally, I offer key scenes from a joint animated production by Mattel and Mainframe Entertainment, *Acceleracers: Ignition* (2005), to suggest how the brand directly models a way of looking at the cars that encourages the collapse of the specular object with its use value. In each of these product categories (miniature car, graphic art, animated film) Mattel's Hot Wheels brand is masterful in its deployment of "cool".

The Cars

The toy car you can pick up today for less than five dollars is a tiny, magical window into the most profound impulses of human evolution. The Hot Wheels brand history, philosophy, and marketing campaigns suggest its calculated impact: to quote the official brand credo, 'speed + power + attitude = cool'.[2] From the beginning, Elliott Handler had a vision for the toys that straddled the look/function divide. Handler, co-founder of the Mattel Corporation, recognised that the major American brand of die-cast miniature cars available in the 1950s and early 1960s, Matchbox, had derived primarily from the adult collector and hobby replica market, and had not moved much beyond that in terms of design. Moreover, the Matchbox cars were drab. Handler hoped to displace Matchbox not only by manufacturing the Mattel cars in a rainbow of bright, modern hues, but by also requiring the cars to have 'play value'.[3] In other words, they should be fun to look at and, at the same time, fun to play with. He was adamant that Mattel's cars would have moving parts that 'kids could really push around', that the wheels should move, and that the cars should fit nicely into a small hand.[4]

In this fusion of look and use value, what Handler had understood was that the toy car was not simply a possession, or a compensatory substitute for possessions one wished to own. Rather, it was a vehicle through which a child could speed into the world of imagination, acting out stories in Technicolor superlatives. Function was thus integral to fantasy at the outset. The cars' appearance guaranteed its fantasy potential, with attention paid to colour, line, and details like chrome and plexiglass. Handler told his design team to bring him prototypes with eye-popping visual excitement, and the team responded with drawings for cars that were typical of the then-contemporary California muscle-car scene.[5] Handler challenged Matchbox not by beating them in the production of realistic model cars, but by taking the game to a whole new level, with dramatic results.

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[2] Scott Robertson, *How To Draw Cars the Hot Wheels Way* (St. Paul's: MBI, 2004), p. 16.
[3] Randy Leffingwell, *Hot Wheels: 35 Years of Speed, Power, Performance and Attitude* (St. Paul's: MBI, 2003), p. 20.
[4] Ibid, p. 21.
[5] Ibid, p. 23.

These new toy cars, launched by Mattel in 1963, were vivid and exaggerated, instantaneously recognisable as something special, even to a small child with no cultural experience of show-cars. They were sleek, shiny, detailed with chrome-like hubcaps, bumpers, and spoilers, and had tinted plexiglass windshields. They were undeniably "cool". The paint was of particular importance. The colour had to be bright, but with a translucent quality and a flawless gloss in order to evoke the fantasy, muscle-car look. Achieving this combination proved to be one of Mattel's biggest manufacturing obstacles. The prototypes had been finished in "candy colours", metallic paints borrowed from the automotive industry. Unfortunately, the paints were toxic. However, the combination of hue vivacity, metal flake, and gloss was so essential to the signature look Handler wanted to achieve that all other production issues were put on hold while the team worked on duplicating the qualities of the prototypes' paint with child-safe materials.[6]

The solution they hit upon is more than a technical tidbit. Instead of the industry-standard, single-layer spray used for the prototypes, the first toys were zinc-plated with a silver undercoat and then finished with a transparent, non-toxic high-gloss colour wash.[7] The result was even better than they had hoped for. The cars had both a depth of colour and a surface shine, giving them an edgy, metallic look (Figure 1, below). It is also worth noting that the Mattel Corporation's initial funding was raised partly from the architectural sculptures that Handler had produced for Boeing. As a young artist some fifteen years earlier, Elliot Handler had become fascinated with the design potential of materials newly popular in architecture and furnishings, particularly Lucite. The first products Mattel sold were Lucite doll furniture.[8] Mattel's toy cars, then, were originally an expression of a transitionary design culture situated part-way between modernist functionalism and utopian postmodernism. As such, they contributed to an aesthetics which championed a machine age in the process of becoming digital and fully mediated, a movement that included the architectural pioneers, Archigram, and the bright, cartoon-like renderings of pop art icons like Andy Warhol.

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[6] Leffingwell, pp. 27-28.
[7] Ibid., p. 32.
[8] *Barbie Nation: An Unauthorized Tour*, dir. by Sue Stern (New Day Films, 1998), 12:05.

Figure 1: "Cool" Rainbow Cars[9]

Michael Benedikt suggests that the beginnings of a style which heralded the computer age had begun to crystallise around a 'vocabulary of lightness'.[10] 1950s and 60s architecture seized upon 'high-tensile steels, glass, walls reduced to reflective skins, openness, and chromium' and, by the late 1960s, included the 'dream of […] buildings like giant posters bedecked in neons' and transparent to the communications signals of radio, television, and telephones.[11] These are exactly the qualities which characterise the Hot Wheels cars: metal, gloss, neon. The cars were also soon sporting, like neon billboards shrunk to size, colorful, cartoon-like tampos—angled geometrics, flames in red, silver and black, skulls and crossbones, flaming eyeballs. The entire aesthetic spoke to two primary and related principles: tactility and movement.

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[9] Permission received from Leffingwell, November 2019.

[10] Michael Benedikt, 'Cyberspace: First Steps', in *The Cybercultures Reader*, ed. by David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 29-44, p. 39.

[11] Ibid.

The mesh of mirror and metal conveys a surface meaning for the word "cool": literally, cool to the touch—like steel, like glass—and anticipated as such by the eye. At the same time, the evocation of fire suggests not so much heat as ignition; the look is cold, but not static or frozen. Movement is an equally anticipated element and the cars are obviously built for speed. One of the brand's longest-selling series of cars makes the connection crystal clear; in the 1980s, Mattel introduced a set of cars that included the creatively-named Aeroflash, Flashsider, and Flashfire. The set was packaged under the denotation "The Gleam Team" and re-released in the 1990s as "The Speed Gleamers". Flickering across the surface of the nomenclature is a metaphor in action: cool flames. Cold fire. Electricity. Where Archigram imagined buildings open to the mediation of electrical and digital signals, cybernetics re-defined the idea of the shell as a physical container, tracing instead flows of information across nodes in a system. Mattel's cars captured that zeitgeist with their clean, fast lines, their neon colours, their names, their tampos. The cars promised to defy gravity, to jump over gaps, like sparks—and when toy track sets were introduced to accompany the cars, they did.

Over the decades, the cars have become even more explicit about that metaphor, as well as their deliberately simulational style. The neon and chrome hot rods of the 70s gave way to 80s models that included 'a number of gimmicks' designed to increase the toys' fantasy value, including interchangeable parts, translucent flip-up chassis covers, exaggeratedly oversized exhausts, spoilers and engines, even jet engines and surreal animal-car hybrids (like 1986's Cargoyle, 1987's Sharkruiser, and 1988's Rodzilla).[12] Significantly, while the rise of handheld computer games in the late 80s and early 90s dealt a severe blow to many North American toymakers, Mattel's Hot Wheels weathered the storm by diversifying its product range. On offer were embellished replicas of real-world, full-sized cars that had high appeal for the adult collector, and more fantastical formulations with higher appeal for the youngsters. Hot Wheels had come of age and, like PCs and video games, were now in most Western homes.

By the late 90s, Mattel's cars were not only exaggerated in design, but also exaggeratedly self-referential in their understanding of their role as simulacra. Top sellers in the late 90s and early 2000s included: the Power Rocket and the Road Rocket, both available with translucent bodies in neon shades, and both sporting a huge jet engine that filled the car's interior; the re-issue of a 1974 favorite, the Rodger Dodger, but this time all in chrome and with cartoon-proportioned exhausts; and the futuristic concept car, the Hyper Mite. Cartoon-like tampos had all but disappeared in favour of even more cartoon-like proportions for the cars' machinery. Mattel's most successful strategy against the video game was not to compete with it for children's attention but to fully incorporate virtual reality as a design aesthetic. Indeed, this is the aesthetic from which the brand

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[12] Leffingwell, p. 135.

had originally taken shape, and in which it continued to evolve. To some extent, it had anticipated the very qualities which would make the computer game so popular as a toy. When the recession of the 1980s passed, few other non-electronic toys were in as enviable a position as Mattel in seamlessly blending the new virtual reality of childhood play with a tactile, 3-D toy.

Today's Hot Wheels cars illustrate how well Mattel has kept pace with a market populated by robotic and virtual pets (from Furby and Zhu-Zhu Pets to Tamagotchi and Neopets), as well as numerous game console systems. At the same time, the persistence of the cars also underscores that the distance involved in making this jump, given the initiatory impulse of the cars, was never very great. Introduced in 2004 and 2005, Mattel's Blings and Tuners series feature a blocky, militaristic design evocative of video game vehicles, along with the return of bold tampos in tandem with the cartoon proportions of Japanese tuner cars, cultural correlatives of manga and anime. 2005's Acceleracers series are driverless drone cars. Mattel's popular track sets are cyber-themed, as well, from the Cyborg Blaster (2008) and Video Racer (2010) to the AI Intelligent Race System, complete with Smart Cars designed to interface with iPhones (2016). Through all of these instantiations, the signature shine, metal, neon, translucence, and exaggerated detailing of Mattel's "cool cars" has remained. Unabashedly simulational, the cars initially helped to fuel a Cold-War era appetite for a technological aesthetic and, evocatively, whisper distinctly posthuman dreams into the ears of children and collectors alike.

In *How We Became Posthuman*, Katherine Hayles provides one of the clearest explications of posthumanism, also grounded on Cold-War era development: the science of cybernetics.[13] Because cybernetics follows flows of information through systems, rather than considering physical boundaries (like skin), the information-rich condition that is posthumanism challenges the embodied subject of liberal humanism; skin and bodies—the "old" sites of subjectivity, boundaries and containers for our consciousnesses—no longer define us. Instead, we are defined by and participate in systems of information, interfacing seamlessly with both the machine and its data. Drivers, strapped snugly into their automobiles and in relationship with gearshifts, dashboards, traffic signals, and other drivers, are especially good example of how (to echo Hayles) 'we have always already been posthuman'.[14] The car is an extension of the driver, the link between them not simply mechanical but a construct of flow.

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[13] See Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), especially pp. 2-5.
[14] Ibid., p. 1.

The Art

It is thus entirely fitting that the Hot Wheels brand has insisted on a signature art and photography style that speaks to the intangible. Official Hot Wheels collector guides simultaneously advertise current models available for purchase and foreground the cars' aesthetic. The guides typically feature a single car on each page, framed by a rectangular border and photographed against a white or silver background that maximises the car's reflection (Figure 2, below). The borders lend the images a portrait-like quality and emphasise a full two degrees of separation from an original—the toy itself as a representation of an automobile (one degree) and the image or portrait of the toy (two degrees). We might add a third degree, since each car appears twice in the images—once as the apparently material subject of the photo, and again as an immaterial reflection. The cars are consistently accompanied by these intangible doubles which flow, like electricity, into and across the negative space of the photograph, reinforcing the intimation of the cars' design: Hot Wheels transcends limits and crosses boundaries.

Figure 2: Collectors' Guide: Style[15]

Indeed, this convergence of replica toy, photograph, and reflection insinuates a link between physical and virtual geographies, and the cars' ability to traverse them. The cars not only look fast enough to jump the spectacular loops and turns envisioned by the track designers, but look as if they could jump off the page. The staging used in the collectors' guides promotes an appearance of the cars as crossing the representational divide. Locating technophilia in a preference for images over objects, David Bell explains the representational divide as the line between the images of objects and the physical objects themselves.[16] This means that the images of the cars reside in the world of representation, and the cars reside in the physical world; there is simply no way to smash the latter flat, as it were, and make it into the former. Images are not derived in that way. However,

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[15] Permission received from Leffingwell, November 2019.
[16] David Bell, 'Introduction [To Part One]', in *The Cybercultures Reader*, pp. 25-28, p. 26.

the Hot Wheels photography and art styles deliberately play with this line in order to at least blur it, with the reflections mediating between car and photo. Indeed, the cars have become, borrowing Baudrillard's word, hyperreal.

If, in Baudrillard's proposition of the hyperreal, it is 'the map which now precedes the territory', then the hyperreal assumes greater urgency—greater agency—than the physical original.[17] The hyperreal is meant to seduce with its perfected image, a shining mirage, promising us bigger, better things in the distance, referentially. The hyperreal thus not only asserts the primacy of the image but, like the mirage, it also contains a curious tension between the ideas of arrival and deferral. We can never really reach the destination the mirage pictures for us, it is merely the drink of cool water that will always loom in the distance, larger than life to its thirsty viewers. The "largeness", too, is important. A trick of the image, the map must obviously be smaller than the territory, just as the toy car is smaller than a real one, yet the inferences of scale create a referential expansiveness, and an ability to view the territory as a whole that is only available precisely via the map. Hence, again, the cars' exaggeration. Scott Robertson spells out the formula for "cool" in his advice to would-be Hot Wheels graphic artists:

> What Makes a Hot Wheels car cool? A forward stance, big wheels, bold graphics and lots of chrome give the cars attitude. Hot Wheels cars do things bigger than life. Everything has to be in your face. Anybody can do a replication, but what really sets Hot Wheels cars apart is the combination of detailing and outrageous exaggeration.[18]

Later he adds, 'and above all, you have to make it shine'.[19] Even the names of several popular Hot Wheels models, including the entire 20-car set of Hyper Racers, suggests Baudrillard's hyperreal.

Robertson's advice also makes sense of the specific and insistent Mattel design practice of embedding realistic detail within a gross exaggeration of proportion, colour, and shine. As Baudrillard delineates it, the simulacrum gains agency through displacing and overwriting the original ("the real"), becoming "hyperreal" in the process. The hyperreal simulacrum draws power from its inclusion of realistic details—nostalgic referents of a lost original and guarantors of its own functionally referential status. Or, as Baudrillard writes, the 'whole political problem of the parody'.[20]

Randy Leffingwell's anecdotal inclusion of the invisible car prank in *Hot Wheels: 35 Years of Speed, Power, Performance and Attitude* wonderfully, if ironically, illustrates the point. Mattel designer, Montes de Oca, thought he would pull off an April Fool's day prank by placing a

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[17] Jean Baudrillard, 'The Precession of Simulacra', in *Art After Modernism: Re-Thinking Representation*, ed. by B. Wallis and M. Tucker (Boston: David Godine, 1984), pp. 253-79 (p. 253).
[18] Robertson, pp. 16-17.
[19] Ibid, p. 90
[20] Baudrillard, (p. 253).

supposed new model, Invisible Car, in the company's on-site store. He and a friend in the reprographics department simulated the Hot Wheels blister pack, complete with a collector number and fake UPC code. 'Then I got some wheels and axles,' de Oca recalls, 'and hot-glued them inside the blister so they wouldn't roll around or fall. I put two of them on the rack with the other Hot Wheels so they would be ready when the store opened on Monday'.[21] It seems that the scene quickly degenerated into a combat zone as frenzied collectors looked for more Invisible Cars, tearing the visible ones off the racks and trampling them underfoot as they fell to the floor. The parody had succeeded in becoming more rare and authentic-seeming than the Hot Wheels originals. Invisible Car had become superlatively hyperreal, and De Oca had lost control of the prank to the metonymic agency of the simulucrum. Who can say how the prank would have turned out had there been nothing inside the blister pack? The wheels and axles were critical, realistic details, gesturing towards the immaterial car they were meant to support. In spite of the mayhem, de Oca notes, it was 'a cool idea'.[22]

Addressing the semantics of caricature, Alan Goldman summarises the necessity of combining realistic detail with gross exaggeration. We recognise cartoons and caricatures, he explains, through 'resemblance, [which] seems to be sacrificed to exaggeration, [… but] since caricatures exaggerate exactly those features by which we distinguish the person or object from others, […] recognizability is yet preserved and the connections remain intact once the relevant resemblances are noted'.[23] The De Oca prank is perhaps the most succinct statement of the qualities which make both the cars and their representation in photography and graphic art at once simulacra, parodies, and caricatures: recognisable resemblance. Keeping in mind that parody need not imply a criticism of the original but in its widest sense is a kind of imitation (hence Baudrillard's usage), there is nonetheless a sense of something else, though, something in addition to, something over and above imitation that is captured by the notion of caricature. Like parody, caricature need not be critical, but more so than parody, it must be "larger than life".

The caricaturesque quality of Hot Wheels graphic art is more readily apparent by virtue of the shared medium, but there is more at play here. Consider Benedikt's description of the architecture of lightness. This architecture, as well, might readily be described as caricature because of its gross exaggeration of the properties of space and light, supported by realistic detail.[24] The style has a

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[21] Leffingwell, pp. 153-54.
[22] Ibid., p. 155.
[23] Alan Goldman, 'Representation in Art', in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. by J. Levinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 192-210 (p. 206).
[24] In Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992). Fredric Jameson's criterion for buildings he sees as deliberately parodic is essentially recontextualisation. These buildings refer to other styles and periods in order to suggest how the world-view connoted by those styles, in those periods, is construed and re-viewed. There is direct conversation between the buildings and the styles that are re-framed, and the historical and/or cultural references made to stand out through the recontextualisation in order for the building(s) to be able to comment on them. He contrasts parody, as a deliberate critical comment, to pastiche,

purpose: the architecture of lightness intends to present a vision of transcendence and, importantly, this transcendence involves a reaching for/across the representational divide.

Further, Benedikt points out that the architecture of lightness was defined not only by its openness to communications signals, but also by 'a flattening of space', with buildings trying to squeeze themselves, screen-like, into reflective planes while retaining the translucence of glass, lucite, and plexiglass.[25] The buildings tried to appear, on the one hand, invisible and immaterial, but on the other hand also attempted to draw attention to themselves *as* surface through high-gloss expanses and/or gaudily bedecked in the neon colours and hi-tech accoutrements of advertising and other communications media. In this way, the buildings explicitly state the goal of approximating the two-dimensional. Flattening and transcendence would, then, appear to be co-extensive.

The graphic artist, of course, has the opposite problem of how to achieve a drawing that looks convincingly three-dimensional. For a Hot Wheels rendering, the problem is even more considerable; how can the artist achieve a drawing in two dimensions that has the look of a three-dimensional object but that also conveys the signature stylistic goal of a three-dimensional object which is itself trying to approximate the two-dimensional? Easily the most technical portion of Robertson's guide is devoted to striking the right surface and light combinations to achieve precisely this effect. To render the signature Hot Wheels look, Robertson explains, the artist must understand the aesthetic paradox of simultaneous reflection and translucence.[26] The first (reflection) is a mirror-like deflection of the gaze; the second (translucence) is a transparency effect predicated on the gaze being able to penetrate the object's surface. Beginning with a time-lapsed study of reflections on model cars set up in a tiny outdoor parking lot, he moves at length through the subtleties of different reflection and absorption rates for different paint colours, along with the level of contrast needed to make each appear shiny. He includes a similarly detailed walk-through for digital rendering to show how the look of metal-flake base paint under a high-gloss finish might be approximated.

Robertson's brief, introductory statement linking 'shine' with 'cool' is a pre-set, a conjunction he does not himself analyse, yet several times in the chapter he repeats the stylistic goal: 'now you know how to draw cars, let's talk about how to make them look shiny'.[27] A paradox of light—'shine' as the combination of both reflection and translucence—is his key criterion, as the

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which is merely a 'blank' form, a borrowing without the intention to comment (pp. 16-20). The architecture of lightness, on the other hand, is not engaged in a project of recontextualisation and a self-conscious reference to previous styles and periods. Rather, the architecture of lightness is interested in developing what its practitioners believe to be an original, forward-thinking style with a purpose all its own—a purpose that is not so much interested in re-interpreting the past, or even "blankly" imitating it, but in pointing us toward the future. While I would suggest that its eschewal of the past in favor of the future is perhaps naïve (the distinction is an impossible one, in any event), this eschewal does set the architecture of lightness apart from the buildings with which Jameson is concerned.

[25] Benedikt, (p. 39).

[26] Robertson, pp. 82-90.

[27] Ibid, p. 90.

technical instructions for achieving this combination underscore. The need to achieve it, however, he treats as so deeply embedded in our aesthetic perception that its desirability is never questioned. I cannot blame him, either. The analysis of where the perception of an object's aesthetic value and qualities comes from has preoccupied aesthetics theory as fully as the look versus function debate, and in fact, intersects it. I do want to offer a cross-section of one small portion of that debate, though, at least insofar as it concerns colour and shine.

Goldman's discussion of caricature punctuates his more comprehensive account of representation in art, in which he re-iterates Plato's question: 'if representation imitates the appearance of things, of what value can this be, as opposed, say, to experience of the real things that are represented?'[28] To be more specific, why would you lavish time, appreciation, and dollars on collecting images of the cars over or in addition to the cars themselves? Goldman's answer is interesting: 'as an exercise of the imagination'.[29] It suggests an understanding of the link between representation and fantasy, on which Handler so successfully built the Hot Wheels brand. Yet Frank Sibley's answer to Plato's question is also interesting, as when he suggests that the value of art, and in particular our aesthetic response to colour, lies in 'an exercise of the senses'.[30]

Interestingly, Sibley introduces his argument with a generalisation about shine. It is worth quoting at length:

> There are, first, those looks and qualities we can admire for themselves—smoothness, polish, high gloss, translucence, transparency, and so on. No further explanation or justification is needed. […]. It is interesting to ask where colours stand in this regard. I believe we do not admire colours for themselves, as we do polish, etc. In admiring colours, we make use of two forms of words: 'the lake is so beautifully blue,' 'the apple is wonderfully red,' 'the field a verdant green.' We admire a colour for the character it lends, for its fitness, its suitability, to its object. We don't admire "blueness" per se, but what the "blueness" tells us about the ideal nature of the lake. Aesthetic admiration has its root in human vital interests—the need for cool, clean water, the warmth of a fire, a light to chase away the dangers of the dark.[31]

Vital interests, note. The phrase is crucial. We like a colour, in Sibley's terms, because it speaks to us of our survival. And, I would add, our evolution.

Like Robertson, Sibley posits shine as desirable and admired with '[n]o further explanation […] needed'. However, the paradox of light effects that produces shine is both a form of exaggeration

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[28] Goldman, (p. 206).
[29] Ibid., (p. 207).
[30] Frank Sibley, 'Aesthetics and the Look of Things', *Journal of Philosophy*, 56 (1959), 905-915 (p. 907).
[31] Ibid., (p. 908).

(including exaggerated contrast) and also answers Plato's original question. Shine is admired through the same agency of metonymy as the simulacrum and not simply in and of itself. Further, shine is a kind of metonymy that gestures towards a flattening, a process of becoming representational (or virtual), and a process that propels us towards transcendence. "Cool" is the perfect package. It bundles these qualities together and tells us how they are all intimately bound up with vital human interests.

The Film

The animated feature, *Acceleracers: Ignition*, provides a stark thesis about what exactly these vital human interests are and what stakes are involved in achieving them. The film showcases the Highway 35 model series, a set of cars introduced to commemorate the brand's 35th anniversary. The story, in a nutshell: a young driver, Vert Wheeler, must help two elite racing teams put aside their rivalry and engage in a group effort to retrieve an alien artifact, the Wheel of Power, from the racing realms beyond Highway 35. Once retrieved, the Wheel will be delivered to scientist/engineer, Dr Peter Tesla, who wants to harness its clean, renewable energy for humankind. As the trailer promises, the film combines 'heart-stopping tricks and phat beats in the Ultimate Race'. The film's narrative is actually quite clever, as it delivers substantial continuity between the toys and the story, a continuity which principally derives from (a) the central activity of driving, and (b) the look of the cars.

Joyce Oates and Sherry Turkle consider the educational value of children's books and toys, respectively, as deriving from a skeletonised but dense distillation of cultural norms. Oates, approaching the issue from the perspective of story, suggests that children's literature tends towards a portrayal of universal humanism through the use of absolute polarizations, such as "us" against "them", and "human" versus "non-human".[32] Turkle, approaching the issue from the perspective of toys, argues something like the opposite about cyber-pets, which 'including Tamagotchi, are only the first in a series [of toys] designed to teach children that computational objects need to be related to as another life form'.[33] Where Oates sees antagonism and the old thought-space of humanism, Turkle sees connection and proto-posthumanism, but, fundamentally, they are both driving on the same track, so to speak. At bottom, they are both talking about the expression of vital human interests. What differs is their definition of what those interests are.

Unsurprisingly, given the cyber-styling of the parent product and its target audience, *Acceleracers* is a dense distillation of classic cyberpunk fiction, including a rebellious, young protagonist (Vert)

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[32] See Joyce Carol Oates, 'Transformations of Play', in *Where I've Been and Where I'm Going: Essays, Reviews, Prose* (New York: Plume, 1999), pp. 53-61.

[33] Sherry Turkle, 'Cyborg Babies and Cy-Dough-plasm', in *KurzweilAI.net*, 23 May 2001, para. 33. <https://www.kurzweilai.net/cyborg-babies-and-cy-dough-plasm> [accessed 1 December 2019].

and fast-paced, serial transitions between physical and virtual geographies. Emulating the interface of video games, the film's disc menu renders its choices through a graphic display that resembles both a car dashboard and a game HUD, while the Handler Training Facility, introduced in the early minutes of the film, recalls the brand's design origins. New drivers meet Tesla in a the building that they cannot at first understand as a building; it is a perfect square clad in reflective metal, like sheets of mirrors, with no visible doors, windows, or other discernible features, and resembling at the same time an architecture of lightness and a computational object. Its function within the narrative (as a central processing unit) is an embedded version of the dashboard/HUD's function for the film's viewer.

Similarly, the racing realms beyond highway 35 may be alien, virtual, or future possibilities, or all three—we are never quite told. Conceptually, reaching these realms conveys a transit across the representational divide, including the combined elements of the realistic and the fantastical. As the new drivers discover, these realms are accessed through a portal Tesla has constructed. We watch as the racers gather speed on highway 35 until they are driving fast enough to jump into the portal, at which point they disappear and then, in the next frame, re-emerge in one of the caricature-like racing realms. The mesh of car and driver, look and function, and physical and virtual (or virtual-like, to be pedantic, since the racing realms are referred to simply as 'beyond') form an equation that returns a single answer: to ensure vital human interests. And in *Acceleracers*, those interests are preserved by the protagonist's technical ability. The film's tag line punningly spells out the interests and introduces young viewers to posthumanist theory's equivalence of survival and evolution, all of which in turn depend on the cyberpunk protagonist. The tagline: DRIVE TO SURVIVE.

The drivers' overseer, Peter Tesla, instructs them on the price of failure. In the first scene of the film, a dark, half-ruined cityscape is raked by the searching headlights of an Acceleron, an alien AI/drone-car, while Tesla reaches to place a desperate finger on a button, embedded in his dashboard, that will activate a portal allowing him to escape back to his own realm. Just as the looming Acceleron reaches Tesla's car and rips it open with a claw-like, mechanical appendage, the scientist hits the button and drops out of the sky above a wide desert through which winds a stretch of highway 35. The scene expands, revealing a cactus, a rattlesnake, and an unconscious Tesla, sprawling from his broken car as his helmet rolls across a waste of sand.[34] *Acceleracers* thus introduces its viewers to the apocalyptic desert of the real, and the critical importance of becoming a master of the hyperreal. It will be up to Vert, the most proficient 'console cowboy' of his group—which is also to say, the best driver—to defeat the Accelerons, and he will need not just

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[34] *Acceleracers: Ignition*, dir. by Andrew Duncan and Gino Nichele (Mainframe Entertainment and Mattel, 2005), 0:17-2:50.

the guiding expertise of Tesla but also the improved performance of his car, emblazoned with stylised flames if he is to jump the gap into the portal and the unexplored realms of 'beyond'.

The vital, human need for light and warmth, for the primordial techne of fire as it is conveyed in the older, muscle-car flame tampos, has united with a vital, human need for electricity and metal, sleek and cool to the touch. Vert's car sports orange and blue rectilinear flames, twin reminders of these fundamental drives. Vert's desire for a car that reminds him of a surfboard, since his background is in pro surfing, may further intimate a primordial need for clear, running water that has now become the need for information flows across digital oceans, across the human and the machine as cybernetic systems. Several times, characters remark on Vert's surfing ability as fuelling his prowess for driving. *Acceleracers* perfectly re-makes the Hot Wheels aesthetic as a cinematic narrative, moving through the visual iconography of the architecture of lightness through caricature and into a dramatisation of the border skirmishes between the real and the hyperreal.

The End of the Road

Mattel produced toy cars that looked markedly different from anything else on the market at the time of Hot Wheels' introduction. As I have been suggesting, Hot Wheels cars evince an aesthetic which not only spans the shift from humanism to posthumanism as cultural contexts; they also self-consciously mark that shift in their very design. Mattel has continued the Hot Wheels story with a seamless integration of the cars for animated film and video games. As a result, Mattel has, I think, succeeded in epitomising the allure of the automobile in general. That it should be the automobile, of all our machines, that is so centrally situated at the intersection of imagination and evolution is hardly surprising. In spite of its ubiquity and utility, the PC is just not the same. For one thing, it is (relatively) stationary. For another, in spite of the variety of colorful skins in which users can now wrap their laptops, computers still are not much to look at. We know what they are for and that is the first thing we see when we look at them. The cars, though… the cars do not just do something; they mean something—they *look* like something. Hot Wheels is only the most emphatic demonstration of how the automobile as an aesthetic ideal becomes, in and of itself, an evolutionary expression, a promise to the individual, to the community, to the species, that you/we are *getting somewhere*.

By the same token, the automobile and all its historical correlates, from horse to space shuttle, are the very conveyances of pure potential—vehicles which move an ideal faster, further. They point to a destination in the distance, as yet unrealised, as yet unsullied, as yet untarnished by the realities of arrival. The particular genius of Hot Wheels is the creation of a signature aesthetic that tells children and adult collectors alike all of that, in a single glance. Or in a single word: cool.

antae

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