

The Mechanical Bride



Noticed any very spare parts lately?

Have you got what it takes to hook a date? See us for the highest bid on your old model.

"The walk," "the legs," "the body," "the hips," "the look," "the lips."
Did she fall off a wall? Call all the king's horses and men.

ANYBODY who takes time to study the techniques of pictorial reportage in the popular press and magazines will easily find a dominant pattern composed of sex and technology. Hovering around this pair will usually be found images of hectic speed, mayhem, violence, and sudden death. *Look* and *Life* are only the most obvious places in which to study this cluster of interests. Amid what otherwise may appear as a mere hodgepodge of isolated events, this very consistent pattern stands out. I do not pretend to understand all of it, but it is there for everyone to study, and it is certainly linked to the patterns noted in "Love-Goddess Assembly Line." Many a time have the legs in this exhibit stood on their pedestal by the tall column of *Life's* staff, emblemizing the trick that keeps the big team clicking. They are the slick and visible sign of the dynamo purring contentedly in the Time and Life building, but not only there. And they need to be seen in association with those window displays of car engines on a revolving pedestal, with pistons sliding smoothly while a loudspeaker conveys Strauss waltzes to those on the sidewalk.

To the mind of the modern girl, legs, like busts, are power points which she has been taught to tailor, but as parts of the success kit rather than erotically or sensuously. She swings her legs from the hip with masculine drive and confidence. She knows that "a

long-legged gal can go places." As such, her legs are not intimately associated with her taste or with her unique self but are merely display objects like the grill work on a car. They are date-baited power levers for the management of the male audience.

Thus, for example, the legs "on a Pedestal" presented by the Gotham Hosiery company are one facet of our "replaceable parts" cultural dynamics. In a specialist world it is natural that we should select some single part of the body for attention. Al Capp expressed this ironically when he had Li'l Abner fall desperately in love with the pictorial scrap of a woman's knee, saying (January 21, 1950), "Why *not?* Some boys fall in love with the expression on a gal's face. Ah is a knee man!" Four months and many lethal and romantic adventures later, Li'l Abner was closing in on the owner of the knee.

The "Phantom Pencil Seam Nylons" ad presents another set of spare parts against a romantic landscape. Some people have heard of "Ideas with legs," but everybody today has been brought up on pictures like these, which would rather appear to be "legs with ideas." Legs today have been indoctrinated. They are self-conscious. They speak. They have huge audiences. They are taken on dates. And in varying degrees the ad agencies have extended this specialist treatment to every other segment of the feminine anatomy. A car plus a well-filled pair

of nylons is a recognized formula for both feminine and male success and happiness. Ads like these not only express but also encourage that strange dissociation of sex not only from the human person but even from the unity of the body. This visual and not particularly voluptuous character of commercially sponsored glamour is perhaps what gives it so heavy a narcissistic quality. The brittle, self-conscious pose of the mannequin suggests the activities of competitive display rather than spontaneous sensuality. And the smartly turned-out girl walks and behaves like a being who *sees* herself as a slick object rather than is aware of herself as a person. "Ever see a dream walking?" asks a glamour ad. The Hiroshima bomb was named "Gilda" in honor of Rita Hayworth.

Current sociological study of the precocious dating habits of middle-class children reveals that neither sex nor personal interest in other persons is responsible so much as an eagerness to be "in there pitching." This may be reassuring to the parents of the young, but it may create insoluble problems for the same youngsters later on. When sex later becomes a personal actuality, the established feminine pattern of sex as an instrument of power, in an industrial and consumer contest, is a liability. The switch-over from competitive display to personal affection is not easy for the girl. Her mannequin past is in the way. On the male, this display of power to which he is expected to respond with cars and dates has various effects. The display of current feminine sex power seems to many males to demand an impossible virility of assertion.

*Fair tresses man's imperial race ensnare,
And beauty draws us with a single hair.*

Men are readily captured by such gentleness and guile, but, surrounded by legs on pedestals, they feel not won but slugged. To this current exaggeration of date-bait some people reply that the glamour business, like the entertainment world, is crammed with both women-haters and men-haters of dubious sex polarity. Hence the malicious insistence on a sort of abstract sex. But whatever truth there may be in this, there is more obvious truth in the way in which sex has been exaggerated by getting hooked to the mechanisms of the market and the impersonal techniques of industrial production.

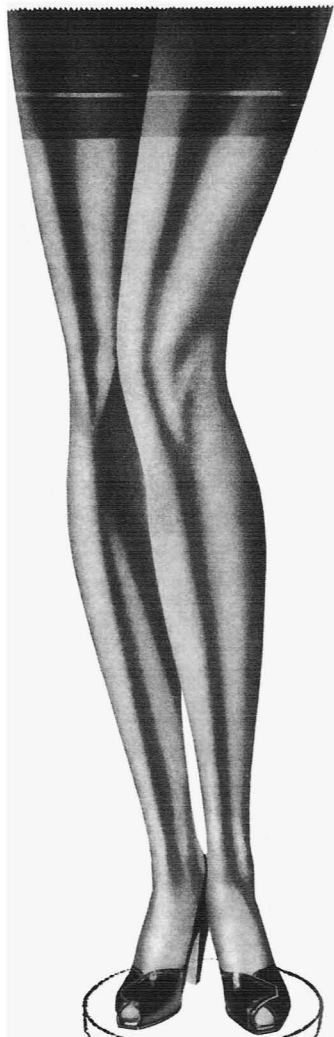
As early as 1872, Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* explored the curious ways in which machines were coming to resemble organisms not only in the way they obtained power by digestion of fuel but in their capacity to evolve ever new types of themselves with the help of the machine tenders. This organic

character of the machines, he saw, was more than matched by the speed with which people who minded them were taking on the rigidity and thoughtless behaviorism of the machine. In a pre-industrial world a great swordsman, horseman, or animal-breeder was expected to take on some of the character of his interests. But how much more is this the case with great crowds of people who spend their waking energies on using and improving machines with powers so very much greater than theirs.

It would be a mistake, therefore, to equate the intensity of the current glamour campaigns and techniques with any corresponding new heights of a man-woman madness. Sex weariness and sex sluggishness are, in measure at least, both the cause and increasingly the outcome of these campaigns. No sensitivity of response could long survive such a barrage. What does survive is the view of the human body as a sort of love-machine capable merely of specific thrills. This extremely behavioristic view of sex, which reduces sex experience to a problem in mechanics and hygiene, is exactly what is implied and expressed on all sides. It makes inevitable both the divorce between physical pleasure and reproduction and also the case for homosexuality. In the era of thinking machines, it would be surprising, indeed, if the love-machine were not thought of as well.

Woman appears as a disagreeable but challenging sex machine in Edmund Wilson's *Memoirs of Hecate County*. But the hero, as an expert sex machine, does a skillful job on a variety of these coldly intricate and maxfactorized products of the assembly line. There may be some relation between the fact that England, the first country to develop know-how and industrial technique, was also the first to develop the *ideal* of the frigid woman.

In Budd Schulberg's *What Makes Sammy Run?*, Kit, the heroine, is fascinated by the ferocious little robot that is Sammy. She hates him but is curious to know what it would be like to have this dynamo of pep and drive roaring inside her. With situations of this sort we move over into territory somehow allied to sex and technology but also very closely related to destruction and death. There are some signs that sex weariness may be a factor in the cult of violence, although Wilhelm Reich, the psychologist, argues that it is a mere substitute for sex in those who have acquired the rigidities of a mechanized environment. This view is ably sponsored in G. Legman's *Love and Death*, a study of violence in comic books and literature. And his book certainly doesn't contradict anything said here. But there is surely much to be said also for the view that sadistic violence, real or fictional, in some situations is



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an attempt to invade persons not only sexually but metaphysically. It is an effort to pass the frontiers of sex, to achieve a more intense thrill than sex affords. There was certainly a good deal of destruction intermixed with the pleasure ideals of the Marquis de Sade.

A news item of March 2, 1950, reported the five-hour flight of a jet Vampire from coast to coast. When the pilot climbed out, he said only that "It was rather boring." For the satiated, both sex and speed are pretty boring until the element of danger and even death is introduced. Sensation and sadism are near twins. And for those for whom the sex act has come to seem mechanical and merely the meeting and manipulation of body parts, there often remains a hunger which can be called metaphysical but which is not recognized as such, and which seeks satisfaction in physical danger, or sometimes in torture, suicide, or murder. Many of the Frankenstein fantasies depend on the horror of a synthetic robot running amok in revenge for its lack of a "soul." Is this not merely a symbolic way of expressing the actual fact that many people have become so mechanized that they feel a dim resentment at being deprived of full human status?

This is a different way of phrasing what is for Wilhelm Reich only a behavioristic fact. Too simply, he thinks of our machine landscape as an environment which makes people incapable of genital satisfaction. Therefore, he says, they break out in fascistic violence. Complete and frequent genital satisfaction from the cradle to the grave is the only way, he suggests, to avoid the recurrence of the age-old vicious circle of patriarchal authority and mechanical servitude. Reflecting on *Moby Dick* in his *Studies in Classic American Literature*, D. H. Lawrence saw deeper:

So you see, the sinking of the *Pequod* was only a metaphysical tragedy, after all. The world goes on just the same. The ship of the soul is sunk. But the machine-manipulating body works just the same: digests, chews gum, admires Boticelli, and aches with amorous love.

Was it not the mistake of D. H. Lawrence to overlook the comedy in a situation of this type? The human person who thinks, works, or dreams himself into the role of a machine is as funny an object as the world provides. And, in fact, he can only be freed from this trap by the detaching power of wild laughter. The famous portrait of a "Nude Descending a Staircase," with its resemblance to an artichoke doing a strip tease, is a cleansing bit of fun intended to free the human

robot from his dreamlike fetters. And so with Wyndham Lewis's *The Apes of God*, Picasso's *Doll Women*, and *Finnegans Wake* by James Joyce—the latter especially being a great intellectual effort aimed at rinsing the Augean stables of speech and society with geysers of laughter. It is not a laughter or comedy to be compared with the whimsy-whamsy article of James Thurber or Ogden Nash. For the latter kind is merely a narcotic which confirms the victim in a condition he has neither the energy nor appetite to change.

In a story called "The Girl with the Hungry Eyes," by Fritz Leiber, an ad photographer gives a job to a not too promising model. Soon, however, she is "plastered all over the country" because she has the hungriest eyes in the world. "Nothing vulgar, but just the same they're looking at you with a hunger that's all sex and something more than sex." Something similar may be said of the legs on a pedestal. Abstracted from the body that gives them their ordinary meaning, they become "something more than sex," a metaphysical enticement, a cerebral itch, an abstract torment. Mr. Leiber's girl hypnotizes the country with her hungry eyes and finally accepts the attentions of the photographer who barely escapes with his life. In this vampire, not of the blood but of spirit, he finds "the horror behind the bright billboard. . . . She's the eyes that lead you on and on and then show you death." She says to him: "I want you. I want your high spots. I want everything that's made you happy and everything that's hurt you bad. I want your first girl. . . . I want that licking. . . . I want Betty's legs. . . . I want your mother's death. . . . I want your wanting me. I want your life. Feed me, baby, feed me."

As an instance of how the curious fusion of sex, technology and death persists amid the most unlikely circumstances, the reader may be interested in a display of "Ten Years of *Look*" (October 29, 1946), in which the central picture was a wounded man coming home "to face it all another day down another death-swept road." Flanking him was a sprawling pin-up: "Half a million servicemen wrote in for this one." And underneath him in exactly the same posture of surrender as the pin-up girl was a nude female corpse with a rope around the neck: "Enraged Nazis hanged this Russian guerilla." If only "for increased reading pleasure" readers should study these editorial ghoul techniques—conscious or not as they may be—and their poetic associations of linked and contrasting imagery.

Perhaps that is what the public wants when it reaches out for the *inside* story smoking hot from the entrails of vice or innocence. That may well be

what draws people to the death shows of the speedways and fills the press and magazines with close-ups of executions, suicides, and smashed bodies. A metaphysical hunger to experience everything sexually, to pluck out the heart of the mystery for a super-thrill.

Life, on January 5, 1948, ran a big picture captioned "Ten Seconds Before Death." A Chicago woman called the press and told them she was going to commit suicide. A photographer rushed to her apartment and snapped her. "Just as he took this anguished portrait, she brushed by him, leaped out the third-story window to her death."

This is merely an extreme instance of what is literally ghoulishness. The ghoul tears and devours human flesh in search of he knows not what. His hunger is not earthly. And a very large section of the "human interest" and "true story" activity of our time wears the face of the ghoul and the vampire. That is probably the meaning of the popular phrases "the inside dirt," the "real inside dope." There is very little stress on understanding as compared with the immediate bang of "history in the making." Get the *feel* of it. Put that sidewalk microphone right up against the heart of that school kid who is looking at the Empire State Building for the first time. "Shirley Temple gets her first screen kiss in a picture you'll never forget," and so on.

In all such situations the role of modern technology in providing ever intenser thrills is evident. Mr. Leiber has thus written a very witty parable which shows an intuitive grasp of the mysterious links between sex, technology, and death. Many people were disagreeably surprised by the similar parable of Charlie Chaplin's *Monsieur Verdoux*. The wistful, self-pitying, chivalrous little figure had gone. Here instead was a lady killer in every sense. As Parker Tyler pointed out in his book *Chaplin: Last of the Clowns*, the early Charlie was a man-child seeking the security of the womb in a harsh world. In *Monsieur Verdoux* he in a sense exchanges womb for tomb. In order to have material comfort and security, he is ready to kill. But womb, tomb, and comfort have always been interchangeable symbols in his world. He was the giant killer in his first pictures, the lady killer in his last. The same mechanism of sentimentality dominates both. In other words, his is a popular dream art which works trance-like inside a situation that is never grasped or seen. And this trance seems to be what perpetuates the widely occurring cluster image of sex, technology, and death which constitutes the mystery of the mechanical bride.