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“Erase Me”: Gary Numan’s 1978-80 Recordings

John Bruni

Gary Numan, almost any way you look at him, makes for an unlikely rock star. He simply never fits the archetype: his best album, both in terms of artistic and commercial success, *The Pleasure Principle* (1979), has no guitars on it; his career was brief; and he retired at his peak. Therefore, he has received little critical attention; the only book-length analysis of his work is a slim volume from Paul Sutton (2018), who strains to fit him somehow into the rock canon. With few signposts at hand—and his own open refusal to be a star—writing about Numan is admittedly a challenge. In fact, Numan is a good test case for questioning the traditional belief in the authenticity of individual artistic genius. Not only was he the first to use synthesizers to make best-selling songs, but his use of first-person voice was freighted with irony, given his interest in androids as copies/replicas of humans. And, unlike the canonical genius narrative, his artistic vision was not inherent. Rather, it developed over time, and veered sharply away from the humanist trope of self-expression.

I will begin, then, by suggesting that, although Numan saw the world differently, this premise does not offer proof of individual genius. It is indeed characteristic of autistic people to see the world differently. Systems theorist Cary Wolfe’s exploration of the work of Temple Grandin, who has written at length about her autism, brings out how “her mental life is intensely visual, not verbal,” which questions the humanist privileging of language as a signifier of identity, and opens perception to the heightened influence—traditionally classified as traits of non-human animals—of sight, sound, and touch (Wolfe, 2010, 129–35). Wolfe argues that Grandin’s worldview “crosses the lines not only of species difference but also of the organic and inorganic, the biological and mechanical” (136). Wolfe’s interpretation of Grandin’s work, I propose, can lay the groundwork for the evaluation of art, like Numan’s, that pushes beyond the limits of humanism.

Diagnosed later in life as an autistic, even though he says, around the age of 14, a child psychologist told him he had Asperger’s syndrome (Segalov

2018), Gary Webb (his birth name), started out as a musician of his times, in a post-punk band. His development as both a composer of music and lyrics increasingly challenges the conventional trajectory of the humanist artist. This period of his career embraces a post-humanist aesthetic, and, tracing this process, we can see, I think, how his success unnerved people, who, for whatever reason, were invested in the authenticity of rock music.

Now, the claim that autism puts a distinct stamp on art and the artist is indeed controversial. I am, like Jonathan Lethem, very skeptical about looking at the creative output of an artist only in this “altered light” (Lethem 2012, 98). Instead, I propose that Numan’s seeing the world in a different way—as a collective, not individual trait—compels him to develop his art outside of the humanist tradition of authentic genius, which, one might say, would necessitate a different critical language. In other words, how Numan sees the world signifies his identity as an autistic person rather than making him stand out as an individual artist.

Described in humanist terms, Numan’s music could be said to be cold and clinical. It is not very emotionally open. It does not connect with an audience as any sort of artistic expression of an authentic self. But its challenge to the humanist distinctions between reason and feeling is the same challenge that is a guiding principle of systems theory. I will therefore use systems theory, albeit in measured doses, to fashion the necessary critical language to explore Numan’s groundbreaking work.

In what follows, I trace the development of his art, both musically and lyrically, though his use of technology—that goes beyond traditional arrangements of human voice, guitars, and drums—to critically examine the affective lack that shaped the popular depiction of romantic love in the late 1970s. I focus on his most innovative artistic period (1978–80), when he moves away from his post-punk origins and develops, before his brief retirement, an artistic vision that looks forward to the post-human. His commercial success reflects his ability to describe a messy world, where the organic and inorganic are already inseparable, of complex systems that can both free and constrain us—that is, whoever we think we are, or imagine ourselves to be.

At the start, Numan’s music is nothing out of the ordinary. His band, Tubeway Army, released its first single in 1978, “That’s Too Bad.” The single followed

the template of Wire's *Pink Flag*, the groundbreaking 1977 post-punk album that featured choppy guitar riffs underlining oblique lyrics and an overall sarcastic tone. In the chorus of "That's Too Bad," the irony of the repeated line, "Oh well, that's too bad," caps off the verses about a man who fears he is under techno-surveillance. A lyrical reference to "1920 flashbacks ... Of crazy actors hiding/Machines scream in anger" keys the narrator's psychotic fantasies to the 1927 German Expressionist film, *Metropolis*, where class struggle in a dystopian society veers into paranoia evoked by a sinister robot that is a sexually ramped-up double of the female leader of the workers. But we should not read too much into this reference, especially as a definitive artistic statement of purpose. At no point in the song does an android identity appear; the *Metropolis* flashbacks function as cultural bricolage, a standard feature of lyrics by post-punk bands such as Wire. In addition, a more general appreciation for German Expressionist art informed David Bowie's "Heroes" (1977).

Yet to argue that Numan, from the start, had an original vision that he was searching for a way to express, Sutton must insist "That's Too Bad" is flawed because "the song is performed in a style that clashes with the content and the mood of the lyrics" (Sutton, 2018, 80). To the contrary, the driving rhythm and ascending chord progressions that connect the verses and choruses, I would suggest, build a tension that dramatizes the narrator's abject mental state. Although there is nothing particularly innovative about the arrangement or lyrics, "That's Too Bad," it should be pointed out, is a rather skilled performance of a post-punk minimalist aesthetic, especially the syncopation of the vocals which, meshing with a propulsive bass line, gives the song an immediate forcefulness.

Bowie was, of course, the other major influence on Numan at the time. Bowie's collaborator on "Heroes," Brian Eno, helped craft the record's soundscape by appropriating the relentless techno-beat of "I Feel Love," the disco hit sung by Donna Summer and produced by Giorgio Moroder and Pete Bellotte, that upended the music world in early July 1977 (Reynolds, 2017). Recorded entirely in Berlin, "Heroes" played the ghosts of the city's war and post-war past off against a future guided by a willful departure from the sonic textures that were standard in rock music and recharged by post-punk (Dombal, 2016). The second Tubeway Army single, "Bombers," (1978), channels Bowie and Eno's layering of synthesizers over a foundation of metallic guitars

to create a collage-like depiction of wartime chaos that has a similar feel to “Blackout” on *Heroes*.” And you would have to look rather hard to find any significant variants between Bowie’s fame-drink-and-drug-damaged persona in “Blackout” and Numan’s murderous soldier in “Bombers.”

A major difference, however, is the drumming on “Blackout” and “Bombers.” While both songs have a frantic up-tempo, “Blackout,” has a powerful backbeat by Dennis Davis, an ace drummer, that practically swings. In “Bombers,” the drums are played more stiffly and are mixed behind the distorted guitars locked in a staccato quasi-reggae pattern. Put telegraphically, the groove that emerged from the drums and guitars in “Bombers” pointed to the future, and the song, as DJ Afrika Bambaataa says, “was one of the early records we used to play when rappers was [sic] rapping” (Sutton, 2018, 83). Here was the earliest signpost of Numan’s artistic destination, even if the groove on “Bombers” is sonically far away from what Simon Reynolds calls the “blank-eyed fixated feel of post-human propulsion” in “I Feel Love” (Reynolds, 2017).

In the same year that the robotic precision of disco had infatuated Eno, Numan’s musical peers Ultravox released “My Sex,” from their 1977 self-titled debut album, which came close to capturing the affective lack of “I Feel Love.” As Sutton observes, the monotone vocals on “My Sex” were counterpointed by synthesizers that echoed the warmer textures of human choral voices (Sutton, 2018, 30). The futuristic pleasures of “electroflesh” and “synchronesh” in “My Sex” forecast what was to come a year later. The Normal’s “Warm Leatherette” (1978) took its deadpan lyrics from the descriptions of the erotic human-machine interfaces in J.G. Ballard’s novel, *Crash* (1973) and set them to an icy electronic pulse. Both songs, however, by showing humans in machinic sexual poses, maintained a relatively safe distance between human and machine identities.

From Numan’s perspective, this distance begins to radically narrow on *Tubeway Army* (1978). “Listen to the Sirens” uses three vocal tracks, sung by Numan, to compel the listener to question whether the rebellious “Mr. Webb” (Numan’s real-life last name) is a captured human in a techno-authoritarian state or a police robot on the run. Although “Steel and You” dramatizes a somewhat friendlier relationship between a young boy and a robot, its setting, like the whole of the album, is a dystopic mashup, first essayed

by Bowie's *Diamond Dogs* (1974), of George Orwell's 1984 and William S. Burroughs's cybernetic/junkie narratives. Regardless of Sutton's claim that Numan's version is "authentic," whereas Bowie's is not (Sutton, 2018, 32-33), Numan is still retrofitting his influences and updating his overall sound with the times. Synthesizers are more out in front, but the foundations for the songs tend to be guitar based, a hybrid mode of arranging used on the Eno-produced debut album by Devo, *Are We Not Men? We Are Devo!* (1978).

Numan experiments with modifying this hybrid sound on the follow-up album from Tubeway Army, *Replicas* (1979). The first single, "Down in the Park," subtracts the guitars and adds layers of synthesizers to create a coldly sinister narrative about humans being hunted by machines. During the middle verse, the perspective changes from a human on the run to another human, watching from a space-age restaurant while a "rape machine" patrols outside, and flatly states, "You wouldn't believe the things they do." Right after Numan sings this line, one of the synthesizers swoops down out of the mix and cuts off; the decay of the last note echoes into the void, as if the human observer's consciousness has blanked out, like the machines being observed.

This psychically intense moment resists—which Wolfe says Grandin's thinking also does—the idea of vision "as stereotypically expressive of the humanist *ability* to survey, organize, and master space" (Wolfe, 2010, 130, original emphasis). In the last verse of "Down in the Park," the imagery of sexual exploitation, the humans "serving" the machines, is similar to the ultra-violence of car-crash sex in "Warm Leatherette." Continuing to push emotion beyond traditional human boundaries, Numan uses heavily effects-laden guitars over a steady rhythmic groove to accentuate the ambiguity of "Me! I Disconnect From You," as he could be singing, "Please don't turn me off," from the perspective of a sexually-frustrated human and/or an anxious machine.

Staging an even more arresting provocation along these lines, Numan further complexifies the music and lyrics of the next album single, "Are 'Friends' Electric?" Harmonically the verses and wordless choruses move upwards, anchored by a catchy synth hook. What starts as android noir ends with the breakdown of the "electric 'friend,'" which leaves the human narrator

heartbroken. In the middle of the song, Numan delivers the first of two spoken-word monologues. The first monologue begins:

So now I'm alone
Now I can think for myself
About little deals and S.U's
And things that I just don't understand

“S.U’s” refers to Su Walthan, his girlfriend at the time, suggesting, on a confessional note, that he does not “understand” their complicated relationship, involving “little deals” with another woman, her name encoded in the album’s lyric sheet (Sutton, 2018, 52). After the breakdown scene, the opening of the second monologue, serving as an epilogue to the song, cuts to the quick:

So I found out your reasons
For the phone calls and smiles
And it hurts and I'm lonely

The hummable synth lines (accompanied in the chorus by what sounds like a human voice buried in the mix) support the claim of John Foxx, the leader of Ultravox, that Numan “found the human in the machine;” here, “the machine” conveys the “human” vulnerability of a failed affair (Sutton, 2018, 38, 52-53). Numan’s playing around with the idea of the thinking/feeling machine hearkens back via the song title to Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968). Interestingly, Dick was the first to use the descriptor “autistic” in science fiction (*Martian Time Slip*, 1964). In many ways, Dick’s work can be seen as a prototype for the cyborg narrative that Numan develops.

In “Are ‘Friends’ Electric?,” the idea of breakdown, moreover, crosses the line separating human and machine and, by dissolving the boundaries between emotional pain and mechanical failure, acts out a crushing social pressure that is, Numan would be the first to say, not merely human. We could point out, through systems theory, that the humanist division of reason and feeling is replaced by the “functional distinction” between system and environment (Wolfe, 2010, 220). That is, Numan is guiding our attention to anything but a traditional humanist viewpoint.

Numan's next gambit, on *The Pleasure Principle* (1979), is to eliminate guitars altogether and place the rhythmic pulse of Cedric Sharpley, who hits the drums with a mechanistic precision, forward in the mix. The instrumental opener, "Airlane," could be regarded, Chris O'Leary contends, as building "an altar to *Low*," Bowie's influential 1977 album (O'Leary, 2019, 153), in particular, the lead-off instrumental, "Speed of Life." Yet the differences between the two songs are there from the start. While "Speed of Life" features a repetitive guitar hook, "Airlane" introduces Numan's discovery of what would be the signature sound of *The Pleasure Principle*, a synthesizer setting, "Vox Humana": Human Voice (Sutton, 2018, 38), that dramatized, like Sharpley's drumming, a human/machine interface. "Airlane" opens with a shimmering chorale-like voicing on the synthesizer, while Sharpley plays a cymbal roll, a traditional way of building tension, before launching into a beat, somewhat similar to what is heard on "Speed of Life," but considerably faster paced.

Not to put too fine of a point on it, Numan's critical appraisal at the time was derailed by Bowie's not-subtly-veiled accusation that Numan was copying him. His dislike of Numan was anything but moderated when Numan stated that "image is to be copied. That's the essential reason I created mine" (O'Leary, 2019, 153). Yet Numan here was not simply refuting charges of plagiarism; he was challenging some of the more traditional humanist signifiers of both artistry and personhood. Written from the perspective of an android trying to act human, "Metal" overlays Sharpley's slamming drumbeat over a synthesized one, giving the illusion that the tempo is speeding up, a sonic imaging of the narrator's identity crisis. Halfway through, the Vox Humana sound enters, but pitched down sinisterly as Numan intones, "I'm still confusing love with need." Even when the narrator is figured as human in "Conversation," there remains an inability to make a convincing claim for the authenticity of personhood: "Am I a photo? I can't remember."

Numan would also question the universality of assumptions about how humans experience the world. As Grandin would later document, autistics tend to react to "a light unexpected touch" with a "flight" reflex (Wolfe, 2010, 134). In "Complex," an affecting ballad, Numan expresses a form of sensory vulnerability akin to such an experience: "Don't let them touch me." This vulnerability, moreover, crucially informs Numan's most popular song, "Cars." Jump-started by an ear-grabbing, augmented fourth/diminished fifth chord,

known as the Diabolic interval, a staple of horror-film soundtracks (Sutton, 2018, 67), “Cars” describes feeling protected in a tightly-enclosed space:

Here in my car
I feel safest of all
I can lock all my doors
It’s the only way to live
In cars

Such a desire, as Grandin explains, has been observed in autistic children who find comfort in similar enclosures (Wolfe, 2010, 134). That is to say, then, that Numan takes us on a rather different road trip—especially if our expectations align with the traditional romance of wide-open spaces.

“Cars” joins minimalist science fiction to a dissonant, relentless harmonic motion; this formula animates another stand-out song off of a seminal 1979 album: “Life During Wartime,” from Talking Heads, *Fear of Music*. Like “Cars,” “Life During Wartime” has a mutated dance-floor groove, but heightens the contradiction: “This ain’t no party, this ain’t no disco, this ain’t no fooling around.” “Life During Wartime” narrates a ruined future outwardly bleaker than “Cars,” where a group of rebels, traveling in a weaponized van, is always on the run. Accordingly they assume disguises, the narrator exclaiming, “I changed my hairstyle, so many times now, I don’t know what I look like!” This line, however, keys, for Lethem, a change from interpreting the song as “paranoid” to “paranoid art,” as if the band members “were only sampling paranoia as a temporary mood or style,” which thus suggests that “paranoid art, unlike paranoid persons, also distrusts itself” (Lethem, 2012, 109). And distrust certainly emerges in the last verse of “Cars,”

Here in my car
I know I’ve started to think
About leaving tonight
Although nothing seems right
In cars

The fantasy of protection falls away, leaving the narrator to face his own fears, disclosed by a compulsion to leave.

The Pleasure Principle was a massive success, darkly prophesized by the abrasive funk riff of “Films” that articulated Numan’s anxiety about the music business: “We’re so exposed/Anything can happen.” The guitar-propelled 1980 singles, “We Are Glass” and “I Die You Die,” both making the UK Top Ten pop chart in the wake of Numan’s stratospheric popularity, capture his reaction in real time. “We Are Glass” has a chugging rhythm and an incandescent melody–like “Cars,” based on an augmented fourth/diminished fifth chord (Sutton, 2018, 67)—that evoke the brashness of youth, but life in the spotlight triggers a dissociative episode that can be interpreted as a cynical take on a post-humanist transformation: “You are replaced, you are you.” In other words, one cyborg could be “replaced” by another, without a noticeable disruption in identity. “I Die You Die” is even less optimistic. Numan spits out the opening couplet, “This is not love/This is not even worth a point of view,” then ends the second verse with a terse summation of paranoid art: “Does everything stop when the old TAPE fails?”

“I Die You Die” previews the central theme of *Telekon* (1980): a farewell dissection of personal and business relationships expressed through the language of music recording. As Numan would declare his retirement after this record, the opening song, “This Wreckage,” holds little back. It is the last song written for and added to *Telekon* (Sutton, 2018, 118, 120), with a deliberate pacing that suggests a premeditated exit strategy:

Erase me
Replay ‘The End’
It’s all just show
Erase you.

Although *Telekon* is a statement of finality, Numan remains unpredictable. Leaving the Top Ten singles, “We Are Glass” and “I Die You Die,” off of the UK release of the record is a memorable signifier of erasure, forcing listeners to reckon with Numan’s disengagement from the hit-making machine, and this feeling of alienation emerges in the opening line of the title track: “Where is my outline? I start to fade.” Here, Numan challenges pairing alienation with traditional humanism (as, perhaps, the *sine qua non* of the modern artistic condition); the search for an “outline” would accord with what Wolfe, in his reading of Grandin, says: “In extreme cases, autistics actually have severe problems locating the boundaries of their own bodies” (Wolfe, 2010, 135). A

further sense of dissociation creeps into the chorus, “You end on reel one, you end on reel one,” through dissonant piano note clusters, recalling Bowie’s “Aladdin Sane” (1973). The narrator of “Telekon” becomes a replica of Bowie’s “lad insane,” addressing “you” both as a subject that ends on the recording (“on reel one”) and continues during playback: the narrator repeatedly chants, “You are.” Indeed, where, exactly, is the outline?

The song on *Telekon* that most implicitly addresses such a question, “I Dream of Wires,” proposes to redraw the boundaries. Thrillingly boosting the energy level, the drums kick in as Numan sings, “We opened doors by thinking.” Sutton explains that this song was written when Numan had contemplated making a concept album about a protagonist with telekinesis (Sutton, 2018, 118). Like “Cars,” “I Dream of Wires” initially constructs a fantasy about physical disengagement. And like “Cars,” this fantasy then becomes questioned. The narrator, “the last electrician alive,” reminisces about a narrative past, where he lived with his android wife. That this past, set in a future world is, of course, yet to happen suspends the fantasy. And, that *Telekon* starts with “This Wreckage” epitomizes the decision—and its finality—that Numan made about how the album would unfold.

Such a feeling of finality is reinforced by the album closer, “The Joy Circuit,” an elegy wrapped up in layers of violins. Having an ironic trajectory implied by the title, the song returns to a grimmer reality, where Numan is presently stuck in a musical career he no longer finds worthwhile. Sung in mid-register, which gives the lyrics additional weight, “The Joy Circuit” looks for a way out, but the repeated line, “Well, it’s somewhere to go,” appears to lack the courage of the narrator’s convictions, much like his earlier thinking, in “Cars,” “about leaving tonight/Although nothing seems right.” The last lines of “The Joy Circuit” only give assurance of a rather inevitable destination: “But all I find is a reason to die/A reason to die.” Perhaps this answer concludes the trajectory of “Cars;” Sigmund Freud, after all, found the death drive through “the pleasure principle” (Freud, 1961). Thus “Cars,” Numan’s most famous song, would ultimately become a death trip.

But Numan has dismissed previously (for instance, in “Conversation” from *The Pleasure Principle*) the idea of a humanist self that ends or could be erased. What he figuratively desires to transform is his corporate image, which as he earlier claims, “is to be copied.” His imagined outcome

deconstructs the humanist boundary between presence and absence. In other words, as an invented image, Numan (not his real last name) is becoming virtual (Derrida, 1994, 169), always dynamic, and only to a humanist listener would this departure be tragic. The challenge, then, constituted through his artistic vision, from 1979–80, is to trouble the apparent difference, in the resolutely humanist terms of a music–business career, between departure and arrival—set up by the ironic placement of his farewell statement, “This Wreckage,” first on *Telekon*.

Numan’s retirement, however, was short-lived. He released *Dance* (1981) and *I, Assassin* (1982), which moderated his dissonant electronic exploration with a commercially-slicker sound. This post-retirement trajectory signals a change from anxiety about being “exposed” in “Films” (1979) to seeking recognition in a 1980s music world, where record executives had not only caught up with the provocative attitude of his 1979–80 albums, but softened their edginess to appeal to more mainstream tastes.

In a rather uncanny way, how a corporate-branded humanism reenters our discussion about Numan replicates Wolfe’s observation about Grandin’s work being positioned to offer a humanist recognition to the disabled. As Wolfe puts it, “[T]he disabled would be seen as simply the latest traditionally marginalized groups to have ethical and legal enfranchisement” (Wolfe, 2010, 136). Wolfe’s critique of this recognition process then emerges:

But a fundamental problem with the liberal humanist model is not so much what it wants as the price it pays for what it wants: that in its attempt to recognize the uniqueness of the other, it reinstates the normative model of subjectivity that it insists is the problem in the first place. (136)

It is not, Wolfe wants to point out, that the disabled should not have legal recognition; he is instead concerned that the humanist model of subjectivity on which such recognition would be based is limiting in ways that have already been discussed with concerns to Numan’s case. Here Wolfe specifies that the crucial challenge is to “think the ethical force of disability and nonhuman subjectivity as something other than merely an expansion of the liberal humanist ethnos to ever newer populations” (137). While Numan resisted and reformulated a humanist subjectivity in his 1979–80 work, his

post-humanist aesthetic was circumscribed not only within a corporate music-business mode of production, but a constraint that is centered in the collective, rather than the individual, experience of autism, what Wolfe calls the “price” of humanist normativity.

From 1979–80, Numan’s work resisted the traditional definition of being human. But the relatively minimal duration of his resistance dramatizes how disability discourse at large has likewise sought to contain autistics within the same traditional idea of humanness instead of redefining this understanding as Numan did in his earlier work. What he started with *Replicas*, *The Pleasure Principle*, and *Telekon* compels, for the furtherance of such a project, a collective sense of musical artistry that can recognize a post-humanist aesthetic on its own terms. Only, then, for artists such as Numan, will recognition not come with the painfully high price of being (over) exposed to a humanist system of artistic regulation.

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