Catastrophic Subjects: Feminism, the Posthuman, and Difference

Kim Toffoletti

Rosi Braidotti argues that late postmodern, postindustrial society has a fascination with borderline figures, situating such formations in the context of an increasingly technologized cultural climate where "classical iconographic representations of monstrous others" cross-over and mutate with contemporary techno-cultural artifacts ("Teratologies" 157). Typical of the popular cultural trend toward the freakish, alien, and mutant is goth-rocker Marilyn Manson. As depicted on the cover of the 1998 album *Mechanical Animals*, Manson embodies the fusion of the organic and the machinic.[1] Here Manson is a digital construct - a distended, artificial, and posthuman body that eschews the natural. The smooth contours of his seamless, plastic flesh betray the familiarity of the organic body. This malleable sheath of rubbery skin stretches firmly, yet comfortably, over a figuration that is neither male nor female, biological nor technological.

This article reconsiders feminism's affinity with the monstrous Other through an analysis of the Manson figuration.[2] I argue that posthuman forms such as Manson create new possibilities for feminist engagements with subjecthood that exceed dialectical thought, residing beyond an identification with the monstrous Other. Neither organism nor machine, Manson destabilizes the status of the image as representing either self or Other, displacing this binary in favour of the ambiguity of a transitional state that defies a natural order. It is through his status as a digital simulacrum that Manson erases difference, eroding the self/Other distinctions that the monster simultaneously refutes and upholds. In what Jean Baudrillard terms a catastrophic process (*Fatal Strategies*), this disavowal of difference operates to occasion a range of differences beyond an economy of dialectics that upholds a politics of identity.

In many respects, posthuman figurations such as Manson may be situated within the genealogy of monstrous and mythical forms - the centaurs of classical myth, Francisco Goya's
ghoulish depiction of Saturn devouring one of his children, and Max Ernst's surrealist man-bird creation. One of the defining features of the *Mechanical Animals* sleeve notes centrefold is Manson's metamorphosis into a hybrid of animal, human, and machine. Most striking is the transformation of Manson's lower limbs into pincer-like hoofs that define him as the "Mechanical Animal" of the CD title. Clumsy and cartoonish in their presentation, these bovine appendages challenge the integrity of the organic body, teasing and taunting the viewer to make something of Manson's morphogenesis into animal. Like many other boundary creatures, Manson signals a breakdown in the system of meaning that programs the distinctions between animal and human, organism and machine.

The posthuman, like the monster, is a boundary figure that occupies potentially contradictory discourses and signifies "potentially contradictory meanings" (Braidotti, "Signs of Wonder and Traces of Doubt" 135). It is this ambiguity that typifies the monster, eliciting anxieties concerning the boundaries and borders of the body. Monsters simultaneously threaten and uphold the integrity of the human, serving as a deviant category or marginal extreme through which the limits of normal, natural, human identity are defined and secured. Various theorists have observed that the monster functions both as Other to the normalized self, and as a third state or hybrid entity that disrupts subject constitution understood in terms of hierarchical binary dualisms (Braidotti, "Signs of Wonder" 141; Cohen 7; Shildrick 78). Part feline, part bovine, part hominid, Manson is one such hybrid form. Resplendent with red glowing eyes, a metallic sheen, and elongated fingers, he invokes the terror and fascination of the alien-vampire-monster. As a boundary figure who resists classification within the natural order of things, Manson may accordingly be located within the field of teratology - the scientific discourse of monsters.

In a reclamation of the association between the monstrous and the feminine Other, feminist revisionist projects have indicated the ways in which monster discourse offers productive and subversive means of challenging humanist subjecthood. In *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, Braidotti associates the organic monster with maternal powers of desire and imagination. Against the perception of the monster as an anomaly or freak of nature to be derided, monstrosity is reinterpreted as a site of wonder and fascination that challenges a masculine symbolic order (85). In this schema, the efficacy of the monster lies in its constitution as a feminist metaphor for difference that threatens to disrupt phallogocentric models of selfhood, reclaiming Otherness as a site of female subject identification.

Yet the artifice of Manson's posthuman, post-gender formulation corrupts the sanctity of the organic monster celebrated by Braidotti. More akin to Donna Haraway's cyborg ("A Manifesto for Cyborgs"), Manson emerges from a culture of increasingly prolific technology in everyday life, constituted at the site where the material and the mechanical collapse. Haraway has suggested that the monsters of technoscientific worlds may offer the promise of new and productive affiliations between the feminine, the non-human and the technological ("The Promise of Monsters" 327). Despite the kinship Manson shares with the techno-hybrid, I propose that he cannot be seamlessly accommodated within a feminist formulation of the inorganic Other. While the cyborg and the monster operate as identificatory figures through which women may better understand the self in the context of changing technologies, the posthuman is mobilized as a figure that disavows identity. The posthuman body, as Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingstone explain,

is not monstrous simply by virtue of its status as a non-species: posthuman monstrosity and its
bodily forms are recognizable because they occupy the overlap between the now and then, the here and the always: the annunciation of posthumanity is always both premature and old news. (3)

Baudrillard makes the point that in a simulation culture overrun by the speed and proliferation of digital technology, our experience of being a subject is fundamentally altered. Postmodernism's fractured and dispersed subject in crisis no longer suffices as a model through which to articulate subjective experience. Instead, for Baudrillard the subject is understood more appropriately in terms of catastrophe. Catastrophe is the excess, acceleration, and precipitation typified by contemporary society. Its potency resides in the unmaking of the subject and the triumph of the object. By rendering all difference obsolete, this catastrophic subject threatens a politics of identity dependent on self/Other relations, disturbing feminist readings of the ideological construction of the monster and cyborg as strategic Others in the service of a feminist identity politics. Figuring Manson as a catastrophic subject offers a mode of engaging with posthuman figurations beyond the limits of monster theory.

Underpinning an engagement with posthuman, post-gender entities is a shift in relations between the real and representation within an economy of simulation. According to Katherine Hayles, the posthuman can be understood as unfolding along an axis of multiple cultural and technical locations, emerging from complex, highly specialized discourses such as artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and biotechnology, as well as popular culture sites including science fiction literature and popular film (247). This confusion of categories through which the posthuman emerges reflects the postmodern breakdown of the divide between high and low cultural forms, signaling the intermixing of biotechnological narratives with science fiction fantasy. This, of course, is the order of the hyperreal - a Baudrillardian concept understood as the point where fact and fantasy are no longer distinguishable (Simulacra and Simulation 212). As the distinctions between autonomous spheres no longer hold, the production of meaning within particular categories and genres is made impossible. Meaning instead resides in multiple locations, beyond the fixity of signifying practice.

The collapse in the distinction between scientific fact and science fiction fantasy thus forces another mode of engagement with images of the monstrous, for when highly specific fields of knowledge and specialized discursive practices, such as biotechnology, converge and intermix with popular cultural sites, representations demand to be negotiated differently. Approaching the image in terms of simulation ruptures finite distinctions between what is real and what is illusion. By contesting a value system predicated upon binary difference, simulation encourages fluid, contradictory, and partial engagements with images, complicating a model of the self as either entirely resisting or complying with particular aspects of culture. As a product of simulation culture, the posthuman figuration has no Other, no referent from which to constitute the self. Manson's image on the CD is not a representation of Manson in "real life." Rather, Manson here is a simulacrum, unhinging the dichotomy between self and Other, original and representation. There is no "original" Manson to be located outside of the image. While the monstrous inhuman of ancient myth retains the Otherness of alienation, remaining locked in a dialectical relationship with the self, the posthuman figuration cannot be contained in such terms. Otherness disappears in a culture of simulation, Baudrillard argues, "when all becomes transparence and immediate visibility, when everything is exposed to the harsh and inexorable light of information and communication" ("The Ecstasy of Communication" 130).
Where Baudrillard speaks of the transparency of the subject, he refers to the moment when electronic media and communication proliferate and accelerate to the point where the subject is no longer visible in the relay of information. Not only does the subject disappear in a hyperreal cacophony of visual signs and information overload, the social system is said to exceed its limit point, to approach an ecstatic state through the endless proliferation of information and signs. Baudrillard observes that:

Things have found a way of avoiding a dialectics of meaning that was beginning to bore them: by proliferating indefinitely, increasing their potential, outbidding themselves in an ascension to the limit, an obscenity that henceforth becomes their immanent finality and senseless reason. (Fatal Strategies 7)

By exploring what resides beyond the extremities of the social, Baudrillard is attempting to pass from a dialectical system of interpretation into a space where referential values are impossible. It is at this point of saturation by the precession of simulacra that the social is pushed beyond its limits to "the point where it inverts its finalities and reaches its point of inertia and extirmination" (Fatal Strategies 10-11). This form of inertia is, however, not an empty void that is drained of all meaning, but a fatal site of excessive over-multiplication that results in a reversion or implosion of dichotomous value systems.

Baudrillard refers to the accelerated growth of the world pushed beyond saturation point as hypertelic. Like a cancer, hypertely functions as a strategy to refute origins in a process of endless proliferation. Finality is denied by hypertelic process, whereby all value is exterminated in an overdetermination of forms (Fatal Strategies 13). This overdetermination is of the order of the hyperreal, where reality is no longer opposed to falsity, but accumulates to become that which is more real than real. Accordingly, Baudrillard maintains that:

To the truer than true we will oppose the falser than false. We will not oppose the beautiful to the ugly, but will look for the uglier than ugly: the monstrous. We will not oppose the visible to the hidden, but will look for the more hidden than hidden: the secret. (Fatal Strategies 7)

This excess of positivity is radically different to the struggle of dialectics that sees the beautiful oppose the ugly and the true oppose the false. Meaning is no longer a question of opposites, but of excesses that obliterate stable oppositions by collapsing inward. Manson enacts this proliferation and disappearance by exceeding the limits of the natural body.

The centre spread of the Mechanical Animals CD sleeve notes shows Manson languidly outstretched out on a sofa. This furniture upon which Manson reclines is grey and synthetic, a metallic sheen reflecting off its surface. Its tubular shape and long frame appears distorted and artificial, much like Manson's own plastic form. The surface of his skin and the surface of the sofa display the characteristics of artifice and technological construction. These forms appear to merge into one other, demanding that the viewer consider where the inanimate object ends and Manson begins. The plasticity of the two forms implies process, a stretching beyond the boundaries of the subject's body and the sofa object upon which Manson reclines. To borrow a phrase form Baudrillard, Manson appears as "more mobile than mobile: metamorphosis" (Fatal Strategies 7). During metamorphosis fixity and mobility are not opposed. Rather, the play of surfaces disturbs the distinction between subject and object.

Manson's metamorphosis into a mechanical animal is made possible through the fatality of reversion, whereby his skin pushes beyond its limits, imploding in on itself to annihilate the
difference between subject and object, and the structure of signification that differentiates the
two. It is this process of implosion that ensures Manson's plastic body eludes rupture. His
taut, plastic mould indicates containment and flexibility. His elongated limbs and distended
fingers further signal an elasticity that threatens to morph, mutate and shift into something
else, yet never rupture. Absolute fragmentation of the subject is made impossible by fatality,
which ensures the subject disappears at its limit point. The subject does not explode outward,
but disappears; its form reverses inward in an act of metamorphosis that produces something
else.

Manson's skin can therefore no longer function as a boundary site that differentiates self from
Other, nature from technology, and the organic from the artificial. Instead, skin signals the
point of transformation and liminality where self becomes Other, nature fuses with
technology and the organic cannot be discerned from artifice. Judith Halberstam has written
of skin as "at once the most fragile of boundaries and the most stable of signifiers; it is the site
of entry for the vampire, the signifier of race for the nineteenth-century monster. Skin is
precisely what does not fit" (163). In a discussion of Jonathan Demme's 1991 film The Silence
of the Lambs, Halberstam argues that contemporary images of the monster locate horror at the
level of the skin, thereby disrupting the established gothic model of horror as one of surface
and depth. Referring to several scenes in the film, Halberstam illustrates how skin functions
to confuse boundaries such as interior and exterior, consumption and being consumed, male
and female. What ensues, she argues, is a construction of a posthuman gender founded upon
mis-identity that remakes gender and the humanistic assumptions upon which identity is
forged (176-177).

Similarly, Manson's emphasis upon his plasticity of form suggests that he exists only as
surface, as a simulation without any relation to the real. Manson's grey and pasty form is a
flesh that is made synthetic, digitally altered to produce the effect of a plasticine-moulded
construct. The function of skin as a boundary between biological interiorities and the external
invasions of technology is thus rendered obsolete. No longer is the technological/human
interaction configured in terms of a prosthetic extension or invasion of the unified and organic
self by technology. Instead, posthuman configurations contest the separation of the organic
and machinic, the human and non-human in favour of a symbiotic and contaminated
interaction whereby interiorities and exteriorities, self and Other, no longer exist. As Manson
proliferates, both in terms of digital image reproduction, and the elasticity and endless
possibilities of the body, he surpasses the finalities of binary oppositions to reside beyond the
fixity of signifying practice. Indeed, Manson is that which Halberstam says "does not fit"; that
which goes beyond established categories of gendered identity.

Manson's plastic skin also poses a challenge to binary hierarchies of race. Traditionally, skin
was interpreted as "a reflection of the inside" or "mirror of the soul" (Benthien ix), hence the
site of identity and selfhood. Racial and ethnic identity, too, was located at the site of the skin,
rendering non-white skin an anomaly, an Other to the dominant, white norm (Gilman 1985).
Yet there is nothing authentic or natural about Manson's pliable surface. The plasticity of his
skin emphasises the constructed nature of racial difference in terms of skin colour. His skin is
too plastic and shiny to pass as normal. In parts it is whiter-than-white, with an unnatural
glow that exposes whiteness not as a given but a construct. His contours are grey and
metallic, evoking the artifice of the machine. By suggesting that the body's surface is a
product of technological intervention, Manson makes us aware of race as culturally and
historically constructed, rather than a biological given. What we are being asked to consume
is not necessarily a homogenised difference that erases racial specificity, but a posthuman
imagining that speculates upon the role of information and biotechnologies in the constitution of identity and selfhood.

Manson proves disturbing because he destabilizes a coherent identity that is structured in a binaristic system of meaning determining gender and race and the natural, originary, and human. Unlike the monster, which functions simultaneously to destabilize and legitimate human identity, Manson destroys systems of value by exceeding the limits of the body and signifying practice, and the possibility of forging an identity predicated upon self/Other relations. Manson exhibits a plasticity of form that emphasizes fluidity and malleability. His skin stretches over his frame to cover and contain his interior elements. This artificial skin, like plasticine, begs to be moulded, disrupted, reformed. The processes of repetition and reproduction evoked by plastic as a substance of artifice, imitation, and inauthenticity (Barthes 97-98) are evidenced in the figure of Manson. Constituted by plastic, a substance of transformation and simulation, Manson contests an interpretation of subjectivity as fixed, essential and originary. Instead his transformative state scrambles the binary codes structuring conventional notions of identity.

The contrived moulding and casting of Manson's greying form is devoid of the inversions and extensions of the body that rupture the seamlessness of the skin's surface and indicate the threat of abjection. There is no sign of leaking nipples, coarse hair, the vagina dentata or the umbilical remnant of birth - markers most commonly associated with femininity, corporeality, and the threat of otherness (Creed 1993). Moreover, without an umbilicus, Manson explicitly rejects the maternal and denies the process of birth. The most prevalent criticism to emerge from the associations among reproduction, technology and feminine is the suggestion that technology displaces the maternal, an argument sustained by Braidotti in her study of monster discourse (Nomadic Subjects). Zoe Sofia, writing in the context of cybernetic technologies, also upholds this position by suggesting that the erasure of the female body in cyberspace signals a flight from the material and maternal conditions of bodily experience (16). What is problematic about this approach is its enforcement of the long-standing construction of technology as masculine, contra the feminine and the natural. In this schema, technoscience and cybertechnologies are masculinist pursuits that control the natural, maternal, and feminine. Manson disturbs such readings by complicating the distinctions between nature and artifice, blurring the point between where the body ends and technology begins. Rather than re-inscribe the myth of technology as erasing the body in favour of the abstract information of the machine, Manson plays with the notion of origins in an age where the involvements of medical technologies in the birthing and reproductive processes are commonplace. Like the cyborg before him, Manson reminds us that a state of nature contra the artificial is fast collapsing.

Manson eludes such limitations by contesting the idea that bodily markers construct gender. His barely-discernible breasts and ambiguous genital bulge defy the natural order. These amorphous grey lumps suggest that Manson is no androgene, but a more complex figuration than either male or female. Manson's sexually indeterminate status destabilizes identity predicated upon the oppositional dualisms of "man" or "woman." Rather, the transexuality displayed by Manson exemplifies the excessive proliferation of the signs of sex within media culture. According to Baudrillard, transexuality is a mode of play between the signs of sex - a negotiation of sexual indifference that inverts the established play upon sexual difference and its foundation in pleasure (The Transparency of Evil). Sexual indifference focuses "on lack of differentiation between the sexual poles, and on indifference to sex qua pleasure" (Transparency 20). Baudrillard cites Andy Warhol, Michael Jackson, and La Cicciolina as
examples of a sexual ambiguity; a lack of gender specificity "where sexuality is lost in the theatrical excess of its ambiguity" (Transparency 22). Sexual indifference is everywhere. The proliferation of sex has ensured its disappearance.

To interpret Manson as simply negating gender difference, however, is to bypass the key dimension of the technological in reshaping the very status of the human. I argue that Manson's potency for refiguring a feminist politics of the subject lies not in the negation of sexuality, but in the opening up of difference beyond binary dualisms. Sexual status is not denied, but becomes a proliferation of possibilities generated by the posthuman condition. Anatomical being is thus no longer a stable referent as Manson's sexual markers exceed the limits of the natural body. By blurring the corporeal signifiers of gender in a context of digital simulation, Manson not only problematizes gendered difference but the very status of the body and embodied reality as the sites where identity resides. Gender, like skin, is a surface effect, rather than a marker of identity locatable in the body. By confusing his status as man or woman, machine or organism, Manson defies categorization in a regime of binary difference. Difference, as a marker of sexual, racial, and ethnic identity, is under attack.

Manson functions as a fatal site, a place of unstable signification that cannot be contained within an economy of exchange that relies upon the dualistic nature of difference. The move toward a multiplicity of subjectivities and bodily experiences is instigated by the interactions between the organic and the technological. No longer the source of the authentic or natural, the shifting boundaries of the corporeal in turn refigure sexuality, race, and gender as fluid and displaced terms. Manson opts for a skin that is neither male nor female, neither organic nor technological, but something new that refutes essentialist notions of the body and the natural, occasioning a range of possibilities for what might constitute subjectivity beyond the limits of the body and identity. The sexual ambivalence displayed by Manson ruptures semiotic order, so that coherent meaning is not only challenged, but made impossible. For Baudrillard, this fatal strategy is a catastrophic process.

Baudrillard's notion of catastrophe allows us to re-conceive the relations of reality against representation, and subject versus object, upon which a politics of identity depends. Subjectivity eludes definition within a self/Other dichotomy, becoming instead a process of disappearance, catastrophe, and fatality. Moreover, configuring the subject as catastrophic contests a Marxist-inspired model of the resisting subject. Understanding the subject as resistant to popular culture is a strategy that secures identity counter to particular aspects of culture. In this schema, subjects and objects remain firmly opposed. Catastrophe, on the other hand, operates to ensure identity's disappearance within the acceleration and proliferation of popular cultural signs and artefacts.

How, then, might the question of difference be negotiated in an order of simulation where difference is erased? Vivian Sobchack's work on digital morphing provides a contemporary point of engagement to pursue the question of difference in relation to figurations of the transformative. Manson's status as a digital image, and his plastic skin, suggest a reversibility and fluidity of form akin to the virtual morph generated in digital space. While it is impossible to witness Manson change over time on a CD cover, the potential for Manson to morph resides in his status as a digital image. Sobchack considers "implied reversibility" a key feature of the morph, stating that "(w)hether or not one actually sees the reversal is irrelevant to the 'lived' knowledge of its possibility" ("Meta-Morphing" 44). By situating the morph within a broader genealogy of mythology, magic, "trick" films, and attractions, Sobchack invites the reader to consider the digital morph's "continuities and discontinuities
with earlier forms and figures of 'marvelous' transformation" (Meta-Morphing xv). Indeed, the strength of the essays in her edited collection on digital morphing, Meta-Morphing: Visual Transformation and the Culture of Quick Change, lies in their awareness of the historical formation of the transformative figuration before the advent of digital technologies.

In her own contribution to Meta-Morphing, Sobchack turns her attention to the erasure of difference as a crucial marker of identity in contemporary instances of digital morphing. Her essay "'At the Still Point of the Turning World': Meta-Morphing and Meta-Stasis" suggests that the digital morph circulates in popular culture as a figure that is banal and familiar, but also as a site of fascination and impossibility (131-132). Sobchack in part celebrates the uncanny and paradoxical qualities of the morph, arguing that:

'It calls to the part of us that escapes our perceived sense of our 'selves' and partakes in the flux and ceaseless becoming of Being - that is, our bodies at the cellular level ceaselessly forming and reforming and not 'ourselves' at all. ("'At the Still Point'"136)

Morphing taps into our own sense of being a subject in flux. Sobchack claims, however, that the material experience of space and time is rendered problematic by the digital morph's "quick-change" qualities and powers of reversibility. Sobchack is particularly critical of the manner by which the morph functions to assimilate difference and Otherness into a figure of the same. Taking Michael Jackson's "Black or White" videoclip as one of her examples, Sobchack maintains that while Otherness is purportedly celebrated in the parade of multi-ethnic and racial faces, it is concurrently denied by the morphing of one face into another ("'At the Still Point'"139). And while difference is conventionally understood in terms of binary hierarchies, whereby man is privileged over woman, black over white and self over Other, Sobchack suggests that the reversibility of the morph denies the power relations upon which difference relies, presenting the myth of equality and the democratisation of difference. Moreover, according to Sobchack, reversibility denies the spatiality and temporality of lived existence in which difference operates ("'At the Still Point'"141-142).

Such a homogenisation of the heterogeneity of difference in the space of popular cultural consumption is also found in the advertising of Italian fashion company Benetton. As explained by Henry Giroux, mass advertising adopts a legitimising function in order to "disguise the political nature of everyday life and appropriate the vulnerable new terrain of insurgent differences in the interests of a crass consumerism" (6). The threat of difference risks destabilizing the unity of white, Western masculinity, thus difference is diffused into sameness, and denied political efficacy. According to Giroux, Benetton negotiates difference via a "strategy of containment," whereby the potential antagonisms of difference are marketed in such a way that differences are dissolved into a depoliticised pluralism that invokes a myth of global harmony.

As a "digital morph" or techno-mediated mutation, Manson could be interpreted within such a framework. Barthes' understanding of myth as "depoliticised speech" lends itself to a reading of Manson as an image that reinforces or naturalizes meaning in a repetitive process of endless signification (143). His form appears decontextualized; space and time fall away as Manson hovers against a nondescript grey backdrop that gives no indication of his spatial and temporal co-ordinates. His body denies any definitive markers of sexual and racial difference. He shuns adornment or decoration. The body is not natural, not harmonious. Rather, like the preying mantis of Surrealist iconography, Manson's stick-like form is repellant, posing the threat of envelopment by his spindly limbs. The very same figuration simultaneously emits a
seductive synthetic sheen from his rubbery form, eliciting an evocative and playful response to the body. Fact and fiction fuse when attempting to make sense of the image. And it is this ambivalence that complicates an analysis of difference in the posthuman figuration. Beyond signification, difference is dispersed, annihilated, and opened up, so that identity is not enforced but destroyed.

Traditionally, the potential threat of difference is contained in a mode of signification based upon a dualism of self/Other, whereby radical alterity is denied and negated. Braidotti's analysis of monster discourse, Sobchack's study of the digital morph, and Giroux's critique of Benetton, all expose difference as functioning in a binary dialectic. Even though difference in these instances is negated, it still operates via a model of dualistic structures of value. Each example highlights the inability of difference to be conceptualised outside the dominant regime of dialectical thinking, stressing how it is absorbed and contained in a model of the self/same. Accordingly, difference in a system predicated upon binary dualisms allays the threat of the Other, because this type of difference may be controlled and knowable. How might difference be otherwise negotiated at the site of representation, so as to configure the posthuman not as the denial of difference, but as a catastrophe and illusion that moves beyond signifying practice?

Challenging the signifying codes that construct subjectivity, language, and culture offers the possibility to think about difference in another way. The articulation of difference as an oppositional posturing between self and Other, reality and representation, is rethought in the Manson figuration. Beyond dialectics, difference functions as an ongoing process of mutation that acknowledges the experiences of individual bodies to various technologies, re-writing how bodies are conceived, experienced, and represented. Manson embodies a difference that exceeds binary dualisms, threatening how we know the world and make meaning. For a difference that resides beyond signification or systems of value is no longer positioned as Other to a primary term. Rather, difference is annihilated so that it cannot be understood as different to something. It is same.

As I have indicated in my analysis of Manson's skin and sexuality, difference escapes containment and homogenisation by exceeding signification. The illuminating red glow of Manson's stare provides another illustration of the play of difference that disturbs dialectics. Manson is certainly no innocent, no random anomaly produced by the freak mutation of genetic material occurring naturally in the gene pool. Eyes like infra-red lasers are reminiscent of the penetrating gaze of the disembodied lens of science, mimicking the all-seeing gaze of the visual technologies employed by science and the military. Science and medicine have been understood by Michel Foucault in terms of biopower, in which an analytical, neutral, and objective gaze fixes and regulates knowledges. For Foucault, visual control is a form of power deployed in the service of knowledge making practices.

In the tradition of the monster, Manson challenges the scientific rationale of order, classification and naming. His burning stare "sees through" an overarching biotechnological narrative of a new world order, refusing to comply with a seamless and controlled vision of a technological future. Donna Haraway has theorized the "New World Order, Inc." as an imaginary configuration, a way of understanding the global arrangement of culture and capital precipitated by information technologies and technoscience (Modest Witness 6-7). Haraway's critique of the term functions along the lines of ideology-effects, whereby representations both construct and reflect a contemporary cultural landscape. In the instance of posthuman figurations, it is in a world of biological, informational, and digital technologies that these
representations are operative. I contest an interpretation of posthuman figurations that rely upon semiotic meaning production and ideology effects. Posthuman figurations do not wholly operate as a reflection of who we are, or function to define what we are not. Rather, they circulate beyond the fixity of signifying codes, in a space of simulation that calls into question conventional understandings of subjectivity, the body, and reality.

Manson poses as an ominous and potentially dangerous mutant monster that threatens to transform the coding of technology as either threat to, or saviour of, humanity. Manson illustrates the fear and mistrust evoked by the controlling gaze of science "tampering" with humanity, while turning the gaze back upon the institutional structures that strive to fix meaning: to name, know, and order the world. He is both watcher and watched, confusing the boundaries that traditionally serve as a limit point between self and Other. The interconnections and interfaces of the techno-human interaction belie simplistic distinctions, making it impossible to judge the effects of biotechnology as either good or bad.

Manson's infra-red eyes are no window to the soul. The viewer is not welcome to gaze into them. Confronting the viewer is a laser-like stare that mimics the scanning devices of military technology, or the spaces of consumption - the beep of the supermarket scanner. As perception is made technological, Manson evokes the machine as an aspect of the self (Turkle 1980). He confuses the distinction between bodily interiorities and machinic exteriorities so that the machine becomes an integral dimension of embodiment. Manson resists signification as an inert and "safe" product of biotechnology by simultaneously occupying the position of the body threatened by the scientific gaze, and a body that exceeds the empiricism of the scientific paradigm. Manson signals more than the threat of the Other, or the postmodern subject in crisis.

Posthuman bodies demand another kind of engagement with difference, a negotiation that eludes binary opposition. The ambivalence of Manson's skin, his sexuality, and his stare, play with difference in a way that goes beyond dialectics. Manson is, at once, appealing and repulsive, seductive and threatening. It is this ambivalence that underpins figurations of the posthuman, a point of slippage that corrupts an understanding of representation as a mirror of reality. Manson shows us that in an order of simulation, the image can be neither. The image functions instead as a catastrophic site that challenges hierarchical and dualistic value systems through the excess of the simulacra.

A focus upon difference and its function within a political economy of signification is fundamental to understanding what is at stake for women in a post-material, post-gender, and posthuman landscape. As a sexually indeterminate, technologically mediated entity, Manson destabilizes the Cartesian dualisms that underpin the liberal-humanist subject, as well as a notion of female identity predicated upon positive difference. Against the centrality of the subject, Manson's catastrophic posthuman form encourages a decentralized mode of figuring subjectivity. In this sense, posthuman figurations do not pose as objects or subjects unto themselves, but act as fatal sites that displace the value system upon which subjects and objects are constructed in relation to one another. In the process of reversion, the possibility of coherent meaning is denied. The potential of this mode of theorizing for feminism may be located at the point where the logic of dualistic thinking is exceeded, where disappearance enables formulations of embodied existence beyond male/female, self/Other, and technology/nature. Following this schema, subjectivity forged upon identification with the posthuman is made impossible. Manson's is not a productive difference, as found in the monstrous hybrids reclaimed by feminism to disrupt the rational order. Rather, subjectivity is
understood as a series of displacements where identity cannot be secured in relation to popular images in terms of identification or resistance. Identity is abolished by posthuman figurations in favour of a model of the subject that is unstable, transformative, and catastrophic.

Notes

1 See image online here (from http://www.ilbaluardo.com/). back

2 The argument I present here is specific to the images accompanying the Mechanical Animals CD and does not necessarily extend to the other images of and by Manson circulating in the popular media. This album follows in the tradition of what Mark Dery has identified as "metal machine music" - a mainstreaming of the once alternative genres of hardcore and electro-industrial rock that serves as a prism to refract some of cyberculture's recurrent themes: the convergence of human and machine; the supersession of sensory experience by digital simulation; the subcultural 'misuse' of high technology in the service of perverse sensibilities or subversive ideologies; and a profound ambivalence, handed down from the sixties, toward computers as engines of liberation and tools of social control, reweavers of the social fabric shredded by industrial modernism and instruments of an ever greater atomization. (75)

Some of these ideas will be developed in this paper in relation to gender, technology, and the erasure of difference. It is also important to approach this image with the knowledge that Manson's shocking and provocative music, personas, and imagery are a deliberate intervention into debates regarding media and censorship. Documentary film-maker Mike Moore's interview with Manson in Bowling For Columbine is a recent and accessible example of Mason's position on free speech and censorship debates. back


Works Cited


--. "Signs of Wonder and Traces of Doubt: On Teratology and Embodied Differences."


