

4 *Star Trek: First Contact:* The Hybrid, the Whore and the Machine

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Picard, captain of the *Enterprise*, lies dreaming: embedded in a gigantic matrix that weds flesh and technology in a radical synthesis known as The Borg. It is 'definitely not Swedish'.

'Six years ago they assimilated me. They had their cybernetic devices implanted throughout my body. I was linked to the hive mind. Every trace of my individuality eradicated. I was one of them

I can hear them.'

Flash of alien face: skin glistening wet. A transparent membrane of indescribable delicacy. Veins throb blue under alabaster whiteness. Glossy lips purr sensuously red. 'How could you forget me so quickly?' The whisper slides over him like liquid silk. 'We were so close you and I.'

But I get ahead of myself.

Back in the present, Earth looms into view on the screen of the *Enterprise*. 'Atmosphere: methane, carbon monoxide, fluorine. Population approximately 9 billion. All of them Borg.' Determined to assimilate all species to their collective, the Borg have created a temporal vortex and travelled back in time to absorb humanity before it develops warp drive. The task for the *Enterprise* is to prevent this disaster by following the Borg back to the past.

The main plotline of *First Contact*, the 1997 *Star Trek: The Next Generation* movie, is neither interesting nor original. Humanity must develop faster than light flight because only this is significant enough to attract the attention of aliens and encourage them to make First Contact, paving the way for our entry into the Space Federation. The crucial date is 5 April 2063, when one Zephram Cochrane makes the first such flight. It is he and his ship which must be protected in a story that is half *Terminator*, half *The Right Stuff*, for Cochrane is modelled on Chuck Yeager, not spam in a can, but a 'real' man who flies a real ship, all thrusting phallus with rock 'n' roll blaring over the intercom. There is a lovely scene where the first

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officer Reiker, played by Jonathan Frakes, also director of this epic, and Jordie, the engineer with cybernetic eyes, are cooing over this artefact,

touching it in awe like two little boys wanking a giant collective member. The counsellor, Deana Troy, walks in on them and excuses herself with the question, 'Would you three like to be alone?' This theme of the 'real' man is a constant refrain in a movie that, at least in its main storyline, is utterly predictable. The Borg die. The *Enterprise* wins. History reasserts itself. Flyboy takes his spaceship up. The aliens recognise that we are no longer so uninterestingly 'primitive'. They descend to Earth. They wear druidic costumes. They have pointy ears. They make First Contact. And a new era of peace, love and Space Federation dawns, as all humanity is suddenly united in the realisation that 'they are not alone in the universe'. If the history of humanity is anything to go by, it is more likely we'd unite round our common sense of difference from the aliens and treat them as invading others, not friendly brothers. But this is *Star Trek*, not George Orwell. However, if the basic plot of this saga is as dull as dishwater, two things make it thoroughly satisfying, the Borg enemy, and the subsidiary storyline in which they/it capture Data, the android equivalent of Spock in the *Next Generation*. I shall discuss the Borg first, before examining their/its interest in the android.

THE BORG: THE OTHER AS (THE) UNCATEGORISABLE

The Borg, 'man's deadliest enemy' and the best *Star Trek* bad guys ever, as entertaining as Q and infinitely more deadly, are a synthesis of every cliché about the Other: a complex (con)fusion of insectvirus-commie-machine, with a hive mentality in which each will is absorbed into the collective drive to 'assimilate' the universe. The most frightening aspect of the Borg is that they do not so much kill their enemies as absorb them. 'If you see a crew member who's been assimilated,' asserts Picard at one stage, 'do not hesitate to fire. Believe me, you'll be doing them a favour.' Better dead than red. The means by which the Borg effect this miraculous assimilation is not brainwashing, but implants. Once they've got a body they proceed to invade it, inserting their cybernetic devices into every orifice, possessing it from within. This invasion of the body, this penetration of self by other is what makes the Borg, to a Western mind raised on the credos of individualism and an absolute distinction between self and other(s) so suspect, so alien, so Other.

Are they/it one or many? Singular or collective? They/it blur the boundaries between every category of being, singular/plural, animate/inanimate, insect/animal, disease/host, human/machine. For they/it constitute a heterogeneous dis-unity in which the main characteristics are a radical fluidity and an absolute lack of discretion between identities because, instead of a separation between discrete selves and categories there is what de Sade called 'a universal prostitution of all beings'.¹ Indeed, in many ways the Borg are the inheritor/s of de Sade's transgressive fantasies whose philosophical point is to urge a 'transgression of the limits separating self from other, man from woman, human from animal, organic from inorganic'.² What could be more transgressive of the limits separating self from other than the Borg, when their whole *modus operandi* is to absorb their enemies, not so they may cease to be, but so their uniqueness can be added to the gradually evolving totality that is the Borg?

It is this fear of absorption into another, rather than possession by it, that makes the Borg so frightening, for at least in possession, though one is turned into an object, one still has a sense of discreteness, of a self that is separable from others. In the case of absorption one loses even this, as one is incorporated into, and becomes a part of a greater whole. To a creature like 7 of 9, the Borg drone captured and forcibly disconnected from the hive in the *Voyager* series, this is a noble position as one takes part in something greater than oneself. But she wouldn't know any better because she was assimilated as a child. To fully grown adult minds (from a modern Western culture), this proposition is utterly abhorrent in its implication that one is *merely a part*, not (a) whole in oneself, as if being a part of something greater than oneself reduced one's (self-) importance as an individual. But this is the problem for the 'Western' mind, which may now be found in many non-Western geographical locations,³ because in Western-style societies the 'social contract' has been reduced to a competition in which whoever doesn't definitively come out on top must be seen as having 'lost', there being no principle of co-operation by which the whole collective could be seen as gaining simultaneously.

In this sense the Borg represent the opposite of the Thatcher principle. Where the prime minister thought there was no society, only individuals, to our eyes the Borg appear to have only society and no individuals. They/it are the embodiment of the Western fantasy of communism/socialism, as well as virtually all Asian

cultures, especially Muslims in their current incarnation. This fantasy is both a misrepresentation and absurd, for it opposes 'individual' to 'society' as if it were a simple matter of the one or the other. Indeed, one could argue that this fantasy of exclusive disjunction in which there is an absolute choice between individuality and sociality, with no possibility of having both simultaneously, is the ultimate ideological weapon of capitalism, triumphant over democracy as much as it is over socialism.

In reality, in all cultures the individual subject comes into being through a complex set of social relations which ontologically and epistemologically precede it, and the shifts in the constitution of that totality known as society are always at least partially effected by the personal intentions of its subjects. The problem for people raised in a Western-style society, wherever this be located, is that we cannot accept any parameters whereby the relations between individual and society are negotiated in ways other than our own. When we encounter such differences we automatically assume that these others have no concept of the individual at all. As this is our most valorised idea, notwithstanding the fact that only some individuals are really valued in our social structure, not all, our projected perception of their 'lack of individuality' scares us to death. Of course there is to the Western mind a 'real' physiological foundation to this view that the Borg/Asian/communist other has no regard for, or even concept of, the individual. They all look the same, whereas 'we' are each clearly different.

But the Borg offer another take on this matter, for even leaving aside the possibility that all Caucasians look alike to the people of other races, or that, as Andy Warhol famously said, people in capitalist societies often look more alike than their socialist counterparts,⁴ there is the question of what it *means* to look alike, or even to be alike. What is interesting about the Borg in this context, and another point they have in common with de Sade, is that the assimilation of different beings to the collective does not produce a dull homogeneity in which all become the same. It produces a radical heterogeneity in which every being gets to share in the real differences of all the others. From this perspective, the reason 'individuals', in our sense, cannot be identified in the Borg collective is not that they have all been reduced to an order of the same, but that the collective as a whole has absorbed so many different aspects from so many different species that it has become too

complex to categorise, and so too complex to be partitioned in the ways we are used to.

In this sense the Borg are like the great hybrid figures of Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, figures that are such a complex fusion of building, insect, instrument, animal, plant, human, machine and costume, it is as impossible to say what each is or is not, as it is to say where one starts and another begins. And yet, the whole world composed of these strange hybrids is infinitely more diverse, complex and fascinating than the easily categorised and individuated world of our everyday lives. To de Sade, this state of radically shared heterogeneity, of perpetual metamorphosis in which there are no fixed identities only a constant translation of one form or body into another, substitutes for God. It is the primordial reality to which he would love to return, for in his materialist atheism all social order, ethics, morality and institutionalised activity are seen as 'unnatural' constructs imposed upon a natural *disorder*.⁵ From a Freudian perspective, the attraction of this state is that it recapitulates the original polymorphous sexuality we all experienced prior to the limitations imposed by our entry into the social order. It is a state in which the veil of repression is lifted to reveal the original fluidity we lost in being subjected to 'castration', that process which constitutes us as individuated 'subjects' positioned in a social order precisely by separating and distinguishing us from our 'objects'. For de Sade, though neither the 'I' nor any distinguishable 'object' can be said to 'exist' in this state, it is this, not social order, which constitutes true reality.⁶ Nearly 200 years later, the French writer Georges Bataille came to the same conclusion in his concepts of 'base materialism', the *in foame* and 'heterology'.⁷

It is because they/it evoke this desire to return to a more primordial, un-self-conscious state that makes the Borg so thoroughly fascinating to us the viewers. But it is what makes them repellent to minds like those of the *Enterprise* who come from a culture so perfectly conformist, so thoroughly repressed, it makes every one of them, in their prissy self-righteous individualism, absolutely the same. Just as in Bosch's work we love the hybrids from hell more than the well-categorised creatures of Eden, cute as these are, so in *Star Trek* we love the complex Borg more than the simplistic individuals who make up the *Enterprise* crew. It is an interesting fact of many fantastic artworks that the 'bad' guys are the ones universally loved, while the good guys are loathed, for these, like the *Enterprise* crew, are just too conformist, when the whole purpose of

fantasy is to break down or transgress the cultural frameworks by which we habitually make sense of the world. As Rosemary Jackson says in her excellent introduction to the topic *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, '[p]resenting that which cannot be, but is, fantasy exposes a culture's definitions of that which can be: it traces the limits of its epistemological and ontological frame'.⁸ This is precisely the de Sade-Bataille project, to expose the limits of our social ordering systems by transgressing them, not so much to bring order down, as to open it out to critique. From this perspective the Borg offer viewers an opportunity for the sort of genuinely critical selfreflection that is prohibited by the repressed and narcissistic conformism of the *Enterprise* and the Space Federation. This is the value of all 'Others', that through their very *difference* they enable us to see ourselves more clearly, because in *not* reflecting us they enable us to see ourselves from the outside.

But, if the Borg as a totality are fascinating, their Queen is even more so, for She is *The Borg*. It is also her capture and seduction of Data that constitutes the subsidiary, and by far the more interesting storyline of this saga.

THE OTHER STORY: THE MAKING OF A 'REAL' MAN

'Are you ready?' a silky voice purrs through the ether.

Data lies prone on a table, head encircled by a halo of green light. He has been captured by the Borg, and their Queen is taking an interest in him. I would too if I were Her, he is by far the most interesting member of the *Enterprise*. 'Who are you?' he asks, both curious and polite.

'I am The Borg.'

A beautiful torso floats into view at the top of the screen, face perfectly chiselled, forehead high, skin radiant white, lips ruby red, shoulders bare. It is held by a network of thin tubes that guide it across the space in a gently arcing curve. From its underside a gleaming red tail flexes. Half-spine. Half-phallus. All biotechnological.

'That is a contradiction', Data counters. 'The Borg have a collective consciousness. There are no individuals.'

'I am the beginning, the end, the one who is many', she replies calmly.

The torso is lowered into its casing, a gunmetal grey skin covering a body that is half well-cut muscle, half electronic implants. The head shifts into place, and She utters a sigh of pleasure as the bionic

'buttons' round her décolletage lock top and bottom together in a chain of bio-technology that looks like an elaborate piece of costume jewellery. In fact, the overall effect is of a high-tech Elizabeth I, for with Her dazzlingly white skin, high forehead and off the shoulder costume The Borg is every inch a Queen. (Somehow only capitals will do for this magnificent creature.)

So begins the other storyline of the film, where, instead of a typical bang-'em-up-and-shoot-'em saga, we are given a complex story of interpersonal relations in which the question of what it is to be human is deftly interwoven with an exploration of sexuality and gender. Indeed, what is most impressive is the way this plotline shows how these two issues are inseparable; that to be a human subject is to be a sexed subject. The specific 'subject' around which these questions turn is Data, the man(made)-info-machine, whose problem is that he's never sure if he is 'really' experiencing anything or just processing inputs that can be categorised in a certain way. It is through his capture by the Borg Queen that Data finally experiences the real sensations he has so long craved. And, in representing this encounter, the film raises many questions concerning Data's position as a 'subject', or lack thereof, and what it is to be an Other, both the other of humanity, and the other in a sexual relationship. For, whatever the relation between Data and the Queen, it is definitively sexual. The ultimate irony of this film is that the sexiest encounter the *Star Trek* saga has known comes between an android and a ... well, what exactly is the Borg Queen? But we shall deal with Her shortly. For now, let us examine how their relationship evolves.

The encounter begins well. The Queen is courteous and magisterial, if enigmatic. Data is his usual polite, perky self. (Being an android, Data doesn't have to go into that boring how-dare-youdegrade-my-dignity routine that Picard feels compelled to perform every time he is tied up by a woman.) They banter a while, politely, Data trying to figure out the contradiction represented by this unique Borg Queen, She trying to convince him of the virtues of the Borg way of life, for She wants Data to add his uniqueness to the collective's heterogeneity. Unable to imagine the pleasures such a state could potentially bring, Data resists. However the Queen is wise and has powers beyond his wildest dreams. So instead of trying to reason with him She unclasps the cuff pinning his arm to reveal a few square inches of skin suspended above a bionic net of wires and blinking lights.

'Do you know what this is, Data?' She purrs.

'It appears as if you are trying to graft organic skin on to my endoskeletal structure', he answers correctly.

'What a cold description for such a beautiful gift', She replies.

Then, adopting Her most beatific smile yet, She bends Her beautiful head and, pursing Her lips, blows lightly on t/his skin. It is a haunting image, this combination of shivering skin and bionic circuitry turned on by the touch of a woman's lips. For whatever else The Borg may be, She is all woman, right down to Her treacherous desire which does not balk at preying on men's needs in order to satisfy Her own demands.

'Was that good for you?' She whispers, as Data splutters, smiling, confused, delighted, embarrassed. Never has he felt so human, either to us, or to himself.

On returning to this scene some time later we find Data still prisoner, as a Borg drone carefully sews the new organic skin in place and locks his arm back up. He is chattering away, in his best nonchalant, rationalistic, I'm-not-emotionally-affected manner, quizzing the Borg about what they are doing to him, reverting to the certainties of science in a desperate attempt to stave off another encounter with the 'real', even though that is his most cherished desire. This completely exasperates The Borg and She finally loses her royal cool. They argue about perfection, She, Nietzschean to the core, trying to convince him that the synthetic mixture of biological organism and technological invention is superior to the merely human, or, for that matter, the purely machinic, as he is. Data refuses to be swayed, despite the fact that his whole aim is to become more human, more organic. Given the pleasure he so clearly derived from the previous scene, we can only assume that his program to protect the *Enterprise* overrides his more personal desire for real physical sensation. But The Borg knows that actions are more convincing than words. So instead of arguing, She unlocks the clasp on his arm, again offering him sensation, bodily sensation, human sensation, not the shallow electronic simulations of sense he has had to make do with until now. However, Data has had time to prepare for this encounter and springs into action before Her 'stimulations' can subvert his programmed goals. Consequently, instead of pleasure he receives pain, as a defending drone slashes through his newly grown skin. This brings him to a halt, his personal feelings and sensations at last overriding his programs, as he clutches his arm in pain and confusion.

An interesting philosophical point is made here: that the essence of being human is not certainty, but confusion, for it is only when Data is forced into a state of confusion, when the certainties of his programs are overridden, that he at last experiences something 'real', something human. And precisely because She knows this, it is just here, when Data is at his weakest and most vulnerable, that The Borg steps in for the kill. Drawing closer, eyebrows arched, She asks him, nonchalantly, almost innocently, 'Are you familiar with the ... physical forms of pleasure?'

Data backs away, breath coming quickly. 'If you are referring to sexuality, I am fully functional, programmed in multiple techniques.' (The mind boggles.)

'How long is it since you used them?' She purrs.

'Eight years, seven months, sixteen days, four minutes, twentytwo ...'

'Far too long!' She reaches forward and kisses him, then draws back slightly. This time Her stimulations completely override his software, and he pounces, instantly drawing Her to him in a tight embrace as the camera dissolves to another scene. We can only hope that future generations of *Star Trek* producers will not be so shy, and that the question of Data's multiple sexual techniques will be more fully explored in later episodes.

Much could be made of this little scene from a psychoanalytic perspective, specifically that it is a classic, even literal, example of the psychoanalytic thesis that femininity and masculinity are isomorphic with hysteria and obsessionality, the two principal forms of neurosis. For where the hysteric is overly alive and needs calming down, the obsessional is mortified and needs enlivening. What could be more mortified than an android, or more alive than this beautiful Borg? As we shall see, this theme of mortification is not unconnected with the notion of Otherness. But before we discuss that, we must first examine the final scene in this storyline, for Data is not the only (obsessional) man to be seduced by our Queen.

Flash to Picard. The battle is over. The Borg have fled. The *Enterprise* recaptured. Flyboy's erupting into the sky in his phallicshaped rocket, rock 'n' roll blaring. But Data is still in the grip of the Queen, and Picard 'can hear them'.

'I must save my friend', he tells his companion, the black female engineer who built the first faster-than-light craft, even if she didn't design it. She is a sort of all-purpose PC Other, a black female technician who nevertheless remains permanently a sidekick,

supporter to the two white male heroes, Picard and Flyboy. We must wait for the later *Deep Space Nine* series to get a black man as hero and star, and for the *Voyager* series before we have a woman as the central character.

Picard enters the zone the Borg have assimilated on the *Enterprise*, all murky atmosphere, suffused with 'alien' green light and hollow electronic growlings. The walls look like a combination of the inside of a stomach and a Visigoth tavern decked out in gunmetal grey, the current fashion of the future in sci-fi movies. (Do all aliens really hire the same interior designers?) For those not in the know, Picard was once assimilated into the Borg collective, and he has harboured a personal hatred for them/Her ever since. Spying Data standing quietly in a Borg niche, face now half covered in 'real' organic skin, he shouts at the Queen.

'Let him go. He's not the one you want!' Says who? Why do men always think they know what a woman wants, even a Borg woman?

'Are you offering yourself to us?' She is quizzical, bemused.

'Offering myself? ... That's it!' The bubble has burst. The light switched on. 'I remember now', he continues in a self-righteous rage. 'It wasn't enough that you assimilated me. I had to give myself freely to The Borg. To you.'

'You can't imagine the life you denied yourself', She counters sarcastically.

A fight ensues and, inevitably, predictably, disappointingly, The Borg is killed, Picard gloatingly breaking Her neck/spine/phallus/ source-of-power, which is now exposed as pure machine, its organic component having been burned off by poisonous fumes. All the drones are instantly deactivated, and the *Enterprise* is restored to its normal state of peace and order. We can only hope the producers of the film were thinking 'three dimensionally' and that The Borg will return in all Her glory in future episodes. But what has all this got to do with Otherness? Indeed, what kind of Otherness are we talking about here, for we have already examined the uncategorisable Otherness of the Borg as a collective? There are two issues at stake, the Other as feminine, and the Other as machine. Both revolve around the issue of sexuality. Both involve the Borg Queen. The latter also involves Data. I shall deal with the former first.

THE BORG: THE OTHER AS WOMAN AS WHORE

As one of the collective The Borg Queen is other because She is part of the confusion of insect-virus-commie-machine that constitutes

the collective. But as *The One* of the collective, She is, as Data says, an outright contradiction, and a wholly different kind of other. She is the collective that is also an individual, the one who is many, the 'I' which is the All of the-m-others. But if an 'I' is of the-m-others, then it is of an order other than the 'I' that we normally associate with individual subjectivity. It is an 'other-I' which is multiplicitous and relational, whereas, since the Enlightenment, the 'normal' subject has been seen as definitively singular, autonomous and self-contained. It is here that sexuality becomes an issue, and the issue of sexuality becomes entangled with the notion of Otherness, for this 'other' subject is clearly the feminine one. The problem is that femininity is definitively excluded from the notion of subjectivity if it is equated with the relationality of the-m-other's function. In this case, we need another way of defining femininity. But even if we dissociate it from child-bearing, the main characteristics of the feminine mode of being still seem to be relationality, equivocality, splitting and a porousness of boundaries (precisely the qualities of The Borg), all of which go against the entrenched definitions of subjectivity as founded on a fixity of meaning, a unity of identity, and an absolute separation of self from (the-m-)others.

The problem of the feminine subject is even further complicated by the fact that she is constantly confused with that other quite different entity called 'The Woman'. According to the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, 'The Woman doesn't exist'. Lacan did not mean by this that anatomically female bodies don't exist, or even that there are no feminine subjects. He meant that the concept of 'The Woman' is a fantasy existing exclusively in people's minds, a fantasy that both men and women think feminine subjects should conform to. In the psychic structure of the masculine mind 'The Woman' is the fantasy that occupies the position of (his) object, the cause of his desire, and that around which his psycho-sexual life revolves. In the psychic structure of the feminine mind there is a problem, for she cannot take herself as object. Or can she? And if she did, what would it mean? In other words, if the masculine subject revolves around 'The Woman' as object, at least his subjectivity is clearly separable from that object. But in what sense can we talk about the feminine subject being separable from 'The Woman' as object? This is one reason why subjectivity is seen, in patriarchal society, as masculine *by definition*, for the patriarchal subject is defined in relation to an object named 'Woman'. This is also why 'The Woman' is other. She is the other-of-the-subject.⁹

But what about the feminine subject? Clearly she is a problem only if we do not have another definition of subjectivity. But this is the problem of patriarchy, that it does not provide the conceptual apparatus for defining subjectivity in other terms. Indeed, one could define patriarchy as the social state in which a 'feminine subject is excluded because subjectivity *per se* is defined in relation to an object conceptualised through the trope of "The Woman"'. The challenge for both feminism and psychoanalysis is to develop a more complex view of subjectivity which, through reconceptualising the relations between the subject's I and its object(ive) Other, is able to embrace other forms including the feminine.

However, we do not live in the future. We live here and now, and in the future-now of *Star Trek*, a woman, even a Queen, cannot take a man as her object, for a man is, by definition, not an object, but a subject. This is what makes Picard so angry in relation to The Borg: that She treated him as an object, demanding that he 'give' himself to Her. (And he can't imagine the pleasure he denied himself.) The problem here is not so much that The Borg is/are collective, and that in giving himself he will lose his individuality, for as he himself says, in his (unique) case, She did not want just another 'drone'. She wanted a human being with a mind of his own, 'a counterpart'. The problem is that She takes for herself the active part and puts *him* in the position of passive object, the position of non-subjective Otherness. The name for women who do this is 'Whore'.

A whore is a woman who has her own desire and pursues it. She is a woman who does not wait for men to come and proposition her, but actively goes out seeking them, stalking them, pursuing them. And when she finds them she seduces them, insinuating herself into their affections, their minds, wearing them down. In short, a whore is a real other, a woman who upsets the 'natural' order by turning herself into a subject and putting men in the position of objects. This is why all whores must die, including The Borg, for they are unnatural and excessive in the assertion of their own desires, which should naturally be subordinated to the desires of men. This 'unnaturalness' is symbolically marked in a most acute manner in our first view of The Borg. Remember Her torso sailing majestically overhead, spinal cord dangling below. This member is not so much unnatural because it is clearly half machine as because it looks like a phallus. The woman, whether in fantasy or fact, does not have a phallus. Indeed, in psychoanalytic theory, if 'The Woman' is merely a fantasy object, at least she is a 'natural' fantasy, for 'The Woman' is precisely

the one who is in want of the phallus. But the woman who believes she actually has a phallus is not fantastical, she is an object of derision, for she is the most deluded of all creatures. As Data says in his argument with the Queen, 'Believing yourself to be perfect is often the sign of a delusional mind.' In being the ultimate in perfection, the fantasy of a woman with a phallus is also the ultimate delusion. This is why The Borg must be crushed, because She behaves as if She really has a phallus. It is the man who has the phallus, not the woman. And it is (the bearer of) the phallus which desires. The other is (merely) the cause of (t)his desire, its object but never its subject. As the subject's other, its object, the woman's 'natural' desire is simply to arouse the man's, not to have any ideas of her own. This is the reason a woman's desire should be subordinated to a man's. So at last we come to the desire of a man, the only proper subject for an enquiry into Otherness.

DATA: THE OTHER AS MACHINE

The problem is that the 'man' in question is Data, not a flesh-and-blood, born-of-woman man, but a man(made)-info-machine and, it has to be said, he handles his relations with The Borg infinitely more graciously than Picard. But this is probably because Data's problem is not so much with women, as is Picard's, but with humans. As a man(made)-info-machine it is almost irrelevant that Data is designed to look, and programmed to behave, like a male, complete, apparently, with multiple sexual techniques although, it has to be said, we are not told which role/s he is programmed to play in these.¹⁰ But if Data's problem is not women, neither is it the problem of a subject in relation to an object. Data does not want to possess a human; he wants to become one. His problem is thus not whether he is or is not a subject, or is properly recognised as one by a womanobject-other. His problem is simply that, whatever he is, his sensations are limited in relation to humans. Where they are clearly aroused in all sorts of pleasant and unpleasant manners, all he experiences are inputs he can categorise as pleasure or pain. What he never actually does is *feel* pleasure or pain, that is, until The Borg gives him the gift of humanity, by properly stimulating him. But it is not Her stimulations, Her actions, that are the gift here; it is the sensory apparatus to respond to them.

This is what makes the relation between Data and The Borg so much more interesting than that between Her and Picard. Where Picard turns everything into the typical, 'I-must-be-on-top, I-subject, You-object' struggle, Data is quite happy to play the object-role, for in this position he gets what he has always wanted, to feel like a 'real' man. Which just goes to show that these two positions are not mutually exclusive, as Picard so desperately insists on asserting. In this sense, there is something genuinely radical in the relation between Data and

The Borg, for in his acceptance of this role reversal play in which he becomes the passive object and She the active subject, he engages in a kind of sexual experimentation that, for Hollywood, is really quite subversive. Perhaps he really has been programmed with multiple techniques.

But if Data can liberate himself from the constricting sexual codes of his culture it is because he understands that there is something much more precious than the assertion of one's subjective position, something other men take for granted, namely, *life* itself. For it is clear that Data treasures his flesh, all few square inches of it, as much as his life, because this is the only thing he has ever known as *real* life, not just a simulation of it. Thus, not only does one feel very sad in the final scene where he and Picard are fighting and killing The Borg, one also does not quite believe it. In fact, one feels betrayed, in the same way we were betrayed in *Fatal Attraction* when, in a desperate attempt to relieve us of the sympathy we felt for the Glenn Close character, the makers of the film had her boil the family bunny. In other words, this is one of those cases where the movie makers illegitimately manipulate the plot by having a character act in an unbelievable manner. (Cynics would say the whole thing beggars belief, but I mean believable on its own terms, not those of 'objective' reality.)

What is not credible here is that Data would willingly give up his precious life-giving skin, for at the end of this scene he is shown with circuitry exposed on his face and arm where he has ripped off the organic skin grafted by The Borg. We are not shown the act itself, precisely because it is not believable. We are only shown its effects. As Picard helps him to his feet, Data says in the hushed tone of true appreciation, 'She was unique. She brought me closer to humanity than I've ever been. And for a time I was tempted by her offer.'

'How long a time?' Picard demands, callously sizing up Data's loyalty rather than showing the slightest concern for his loss, a loss Picard cannot even imagine, though clearly The Borg did.

'0.68 seconds,' Data replies efficiently, before adding quietly, 'and for an android that is nearly an eternity.'

The question is: why did he do it?

The answer, according to the logic of the plot, can only be that having real-life sensations would make him value himself above the others he is designed to protect, those human subjects to whom all his own desires must be constantly subordinated. There is a very telling scene in this respect early on in the movie when, along with others, Data and Picard are heading towards their first encounter with the Borg. Data opens the conversation with a delightfully childish outburst of enthusiasm over some newfound feelings.

'I believe I am feeling anxiety. It's a fascinating sensation', he bumbles.

Picard is annoyed at this and responds tetchily, 'I'm sure it's a fascinating experience. But perhaps you should deactivate your emotion chip.'

Ever obliging, Data complies, only to have Picard mutter grudgingly, 'Data, there are times I envy you.'

What is there to envy? Every one of his own pleasures must be nipped in the bud, virtually before they've begun, if they even vaguely look like interfering with the demand that he place others' needs before his own.

So we come to the real problem with Data: why is he the true Other in this piece? Data is not a subject, not a 'person' at all, either masculine or feminine. He is a slave, reduced to the condition of a living death, because he has to give up his feelings, his sensations, his *life*, in direct opposition to his own personal desires. And this is not because his loyalty or sense of duty, which after all are pleasures, override his other desires, but because he is *programmed* to. Inside his being Data has the equivalent of the device implanted in Alex from *A Clockwork Orange*, a device that makes him physically sick if he even so much as thinks about sex. Data isn't made sick by his programming, it just asserts itself over his desires, overriding them so that he has no opportunity to pursue his own goals. In this case Data is as one possessed, for he has no control over his own actions. He cannot make choices of his own free will, for good or bad, but is completely enslaved to the will of others, to the point of not even being able to have feelings and sensations of his own. It may be argued that this is what the Borg do to those they/it conquer. But while each new recruit has their will absorbed into the collective, there is no suggestion that they stop feeling, stop having sensations. Data by, contrast, is the walking dead, and after his brush with life, courtesy of The Borg, he must know this in an even more painfully acute manner than ever before.

What is most horrific about this state is that, as one possessed, he still has his own consciousness intact. He is not in control, but he is conscious of himself as a discrete individual. The point is that although the state of Borgdom may appear frightening to those on the outside looking in, to the ones actually experiencing it it would not be nearly as horrific as the kind of possession Data has to endure. Though as a Borg one may lose the sense of separateness as one becomes mingled with the All of the m-others, being a part of that vast collective consciousness is potentially, as the Queen asserts, an unimaginably great experience. On the other hand, though it may appear less unappealing to (Western-minded, and masculine) outsiders, to those undergoing it, as so many women and colonised 'subjects' have attested, absolute possession by an other is living hell, for it places one in the position of being an absolute object, the complete opposite of a subject. The paradox here is that those placed in this position are precisely *not* pure objects. If they were they would have no desires of their own and hence no objections. It is only because those put in this position, whether women, androids or 'primitives', are *in themselves* subjects that they can feel their objectification-in-relation-to-others as a confinement.

The problem with Data, or with his position in the symbolic order of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, is that the producers of this saga want to maintain the same duplicitous fantasy that haunts psychoanalysis, namely that someone can be a fully (self-)conscious 'subject' in-relation to itself, and yet completely objectified in relation to other, more 'real' subjects. In the case of women the objectification occurs in relation to men. In Data's case it is played out in relation to humans. In this sense, Data represents the other side of the Sadean contradiction, for though de Sade's libertines get to experience the pleasures of a life dissolved and dispersed into other beings, the heterogeneous mixing together of all things, including subjects and objects, in order to achieve this experience they must first turn these others into pure objects by robbing them of their own subjectivity. Remember all those children captured and held in chains to do the libertines' bidding?

If there is a liberatory way of viewing this fantasy, there is also a paradoxical price to be paid for it. It's all very well for those who want it, those who are its subjects, however much they might be trying to become Other. But what about those who don't, those who are *forced*, precisely because they don't want it, to conform to these

desires? It is this negative side of the Sadean fantasy that so troubles us in the Borg, even if, like Sade, we love the fantasy at one level. On the one hand we want to see them, like 7 of 9, as proud and happy in their extraordinarily heterogeneous collective consciousness. On the other, at the level at which we continue to view them as individuals, we can't help feeling they are being held against their wills. One could argue that this is a flaw in the design concept, for if we take the logic of the Borg literally then, like Bosch's hybrids we should not be able to delineate them into discrete individuals at all. In the case of the Borg then the contradiction is only an effect of the lack of imagination on the part of the show's designers and writers, not of their actual being. But in the case of Data, as with women and those forcibly colonised, the paradox is real, and as such, like men and colonialists, the makers of the series must make up their minds. Either he is a real subject, in which case he must be allowed to develop his emotions and sensations as *he* wishes, not having to switch them off whenever others require it, or he is not, in which case it should be honestly admitted that he is in a state of possessed servitude, the slave to others' wills, however conscious and intelligent he may be. If the latter is the case, it will be a miracle if he doesn't end up like Marvin the paranoid android from *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. As Marge Piercy shows in her novel *He, She, It*, if we ever do develop robots that are fully self-conscious, we do not have the right to put them in this position, especially not one so charming, so playful, so multi-techniqued as Data.

CONCLUSION: THE TRANS-HUMAN

There is, of course, another reason why Data must give up his cherished flesh. If he did not, there is nothing, in principle, to distinguish between him and The Borg. If he kept his skin, he would be the same hybrid fusion of organics and technology. And we couldn't have that, now could we? But, then again, Jordie has technological implants. So what does that make him?

This brings us to what I believe is the truly radical point of the movie, for there is perhaps a more complex reason why we are so fascinated by these hybrid creatures, one that bears on the very definition of what it is to be human. As Keith Ansell Pearson argues in *Viroid Life*, his marvellous defence of Nietzsche's theory of the trans-human, humans cannot, as Western philosophy has so long assumed, be defined as self-contained subjects using tools that may be conceived as objects external to their being." Rather, following

Nietzsche, we must recognise 'that from its "origins" the human has been constituted by technical evolution'.¹² Whether these techniques be sticks and bones, printing presses or the VCR, whether evolved in thatched huts on desert plains or in the high-rise towers of concrete jungles, as Pearson persuasively argues, the human is something absolutely distinct from the natural because it is essentially *artificial*, even if this artificiality plays itself out around and through a biological core. Furthermore, not only is the human always involved in a series of contingent technical 'natures', its modes of artificiality are never fixed but always in a process of becoming. From this perspective, the fantastical, category-breaking Borg are not other at all. They are actually a reflection of our own hybrid, freakish 'nature', our *Doppelgänger*. Their hybridity is our hybridity, their polymorphous heterogeneous becoming our polymorphous heterogeneous becoming. As Pearson so succinctly sums us up, '[t]he human being is the greatest freak of nature and the only features we can be certain of are monstrous ones characterised by perpetual mutation and morphing'.

However, arguing that humanity is a monstrous technical becoming is not the same as opting for an uncritical acceptance of the technological commodification foisted on us by unbridled capitalism. Rather, it is to argue for a 'critical in-humanity' which goes beyond the ethics of possessive individualism by recognising that the thoughts and other creations generated at the interface between the human and the technological - beginning with the originary mnemotechnics constitutive of human thinking - are not purely human, but *trans-human*, for they include the contributions of the technics/techniques themselves, and the pluralities of becoming these bring into (our) being. Viewed from this perspective the Borg are indeed 'other', but they represent the *otherness in ourselves*, that radical otherness which lies at the heart of our own artificially becoming, technical and multiplicitous 'nature-s'. It is precisely because this instability, this plurality, this extended, nonbody-bounded becoming threatens capitalism that it is defined as other, and repressed. For only through the repression of this relational and equivocal otherness can we be maintained as passive, discrete and possessive individuals; that is, as subjects of enlightened consumption. Fortunately, as Freud said, that which is repressed

always returns in the real. With any luck the Borg might just turn up one day and assimilate us for real.¹³

In any case, as all the hybrids presented in this movie - Data, the Borg and The Borg - suggest it may never be possible to make an absolute distinction between subject and object, (hu)man and machine, the I of the self and the All of the-m-others. Perhaps the truth is that each and every one of us is penetrated by an Otherness from which it is impossible to properly distinguish ourselves, ever.

NOTES

1. De Sade, quoted in Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, London and New York, Routledge, 1988, p. 73. 2. Ibid.
3. See Ziauddin Sardar, *Postmodernism and the Other: The New Imperialism of Western Culture*, London and Chicago, Pluto Press, 1998.
4. See 'What is Pop Art? Interviews with Eight Painters (Part 1)', *Art News*, New York, November 1963, and John Russell and Suzi Gablik (eds), *Pop Art Redefined*, London, 1969.
5. Jackson, *Fantasy*, p. 74.
6. However, if there is a positive, unrepressed side to this fantasy or even to its actual realisation, there is also a very negative side for, as de Sade himself shows, an absolute un-self-consciousness reigns here. The problem is that, though in fantasy this may be desirable, in actuality it would not only make society untenable, it would make survival itself impossible, for those in such a state would require others, who are themselves self-conscious subjects, to take care of them. An excellent account of such a state is given in *Watt*, Samuel Beckett's finest novel. The other aspect of this state only touched on here is the fact that, though to some people it appears as liberatory, to others it simply induces stark terror. For an excellent, if thoroughly nasty account of the terrible side of this fantasy, see *The Event Horizon* (1997, directed by Paul Anderson (III), Golar Production/Impact Pictures/Paramount Pictures, 95 minutes, USA).
7. See Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1985. See especially 'Base Materialism and Gnosticism', pp. 45-52.
8. Jackson, *Fantasy*, p. 23.
9. For an excellent account of this problematic, see Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (eds), Jacqueline Rose (trans.) *Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudienne*, London, Macmillan, 1982.
10. There really are too many questions raised by this issue of Data's sexual programming for the producers of the saga not to enable us to explore it more fully in future episodes.
11. See Keith Ansell Pearson, *Viroid Life*, London, Routledge, 1997, p. 4. 12. Ibid., p. 5.

13. Either that, or we end up in some boring 'post'-not trans-human fantasy where the elite look like Ethan Hawke and Uma Thurman and everyone else is a troll. For an excellent critique of this possible future, see Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, New York, Knopf, 1976. Piercy's point, along with Pearson and so many others, is that the media, medical and pharmaceutical industries notwithstanding, we make the future, not some impersonal evolutionary drive that will only realise itself in some 'post'-human purely machinic future. This myth of a post-human goal for evolution is merely a device employed by these industries to repress a far more radical and active engagement between humans and technology that might upset the passive consumerist logic of Late Capitalism.

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