

# **Data's Generative Transgressions**

How does Rachel Maclean combine transhumanism and posthumanism to  
create new understandings?

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## **Declaration**

This thesis is submitted by the undersigned to the Technological University Dublin in part fulfilment of the examination for the degree of Batchelor of Arts (Hons) Visual Art. It is entirely the author's own work and has not been submitted previously for an award to this or any other institution.

Signed: 

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## **Abstract**

This thesis focuses on the transgressions between transhumanism and the post/human across the work of Rachel Maclean. Through the lens of Elaine L. Graham's "technological sublime," this thesis explores how the inclusion of various viewpoints can be generative to establishing new perspectives. Specifically, this thesis examines Maclean's video work entitled *It's What's Inside That Counts* (2016), with emphasis on the narrative and visual progression and change experienced by the character Data. Through this analysis, this research reveals the possibilities of representing two subject positions: one through a transhuman ideology, and one that slips into the post/human. These possibilities demonstrate the anxieties around changes, and the de-centring of the human subject, to make a case for better understanding multiple perspectives, and applying these perspectives as generative material.

The main research question is: What does Rachel Maclean's character Data reveal about the generative possibilities of transhumanism and the post/human? Through the examination of the characters and the worlds in which they inhabit, this research provides insights into the post/human condition and the ways in which Maclean approaches alternative possibilities for considering change through 'monstrous' representation.

**Key Words:** Rachel Maclean, art, feminism, posthumanism, transhumanism, monstrous, technological sublime.

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## **Abbreviations**

*It's What's Inside That Counts - IWITC*



## Introduction

*It's What's Inside That Counts (IWITC)* (2016) explores a dystopian world where digital and corporeal boundaries are dissolving amongst the expanding landscape of digital growth, consumerism and celebrity culture. The film follows the character Data during a moment of crisis in her 'career' as a celebrity/connectivity centre point. Described by the artist as a "successor to Fritz Lang's Maria"<sup>1</sup>, Data continues the journey of the cyborg past the year 2000. This thesis will approach the narratives of Maclean's work through posthuman and transhuman considerations. This research aims to solidify Maclean's work within dialogues of posthuman critique that accompany the science fiction genre. This genre is already established as an important element within critical posthumanism, and Maclean's work acts as another significant juncture in the larger scope of art, science-fiction and post/human theory. The main research question is: What does Rachel Maclean's character Data reveal about the generative possibilities of transhumanism and the post/human? Through the examination of the characters and the worlds in which they inhabit, this research provides insights into the post/human condition and the ways in which Maclean's work reflects our own world.

The film opens with internet Trolls chewing and eroding the wires that connect the desert/city landscape above them. This is intersected by the thumping chant of the Plague coming from above. We follow the Troll's scavenge up towards the surface of the city, where it emerges behind the crowd of chanters. "We Want Data" echoes through the scene as we are introduced to the protagonist Data displayed on a billboard. The troll is infatuated with the image, but there is a sense that it is not Data that the troll worships, but the desire to erode the wires of connectivity attached to her body. The scene sets up two instances of worship: the plague worships Data, and the troll worships the wires that bind her across digital and corporeal boundaries. It is the concept of worship that resonates with the "technologically sublime" aspects of posthumanism, explored by Elaine L. Graham.<sup>2</sup> Data embodies the 'goddess', or

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Maclean, *Rachel Maclean: Wot u :- ) about?* (London: Hayward Publishing, 2017), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Graham examines posthuman representation through the lens of transhumanism and notions of the sublime. In structuring her analysis in this way, Graham establishes a position of understanding that points to how posthuman representations employ transcendence narratives that contribute to normative understandings of "what it means to be human" in a "politically charged" way. Elaine L. Graham,

‘celebrity’ of techno-scientific growth fuelled by the desires to vanquish “the entropic forces of physical or intellectual finitude, morbidity and mortality”.<sup>3</sup> This thesis explores *IWITC* through the lens of Graham’s “technological sublime”. In particular, this thesis examines how Data’s complicated character journey generates considerations into how transcendence may be approached in alternative ways.<sup>4</sup> Instead of revering a “higher” reach, Maclean’s characters seep deep into the monstrous – and it is this sinking down that allows for transitioning possibilities.

Chapter one will establish Maclean’s work within the transhuman and post/human dialogues. By establishing this position and reviewing the literature that has contributed to this thesis’s position between the transhuman and post/human, the first chapter will outline the roots of each of these theoretical positions and how Maclean’s work establishes characters that are in the liminalities of various viewpoints. Chapter two explores *IWITC* in relation to Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* to trace exclusionary humanist ideals that perpetuated by corporate and capitalist structures. By applying Graham’s “technological sublime” as a lens, the chapter positions the character Data within a losing battle against perceived technological salvation. Chapter three continues to explore the roots of Maclean’s work within the science-fiction genre of film to reveal alliances and or points of departure between *Star Trek*’s character Data and Maclean’s Data. By contrasting these two characters, the chapter examines how “growth” mindsets perpetuated through capitalism render character bodies obsolete within the system. Chapter four will explore *value* and draw out possibilities for how value systems embed the characters within closed circuits. This chapter considers Data’s inability to keep up with the values of the system, and how this leads to an ending or death. The research concludes with reading this death through a material feminist perspective, where instead of it being a complete ending – it is a generative possibility, or transformative space. The research is structured in this way in order to

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*Representations of the Post/Human: Monsters, Aliens and Others in Popular Culture* (Rutgers University Press, 2002), 174.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 154.

<sup>4</sup> Graham expresses how meanings of transcendence are often linked to ideas of “mastery, disembodied spirituality, fear of contingency and finitude” before concluding that representations of the post/human can serve as necessary bridging points in the movement towards *alternative* ways of understanding transcendence. This, she informs is achieved by a material and symbolic unity through the expression of “non-human” autonomy and “monstrous alterity”. Graham, *Representations of the Post/Human: Monsters, Aliens and Others in Popular Culture*, 17.

(1) establish Maclean's work within critical debates of transhumanism and posthumanism, (2) to trace the visual and narratives elements of the cyborg and how these considerations help establish understandings of growth, obsolescence and value, and (3) to reveal the alliances between Maclean's approach to the representation of ending, and a material feminist perspective on death as "vibrant" possibility.

## Chapter 1: Literature Review and Methodology

### INTRODUCTION

Although transhumanism and posthumanism are rooted in different histories, the very fact that they are often, mistakenly, or not, used interchangeably<sup>5</sup> points to the importance of exploring the two theories analogous, so that intersections, slippages and diversions can be used as a generative force in creating new dialogues and forms of representation. This approach recognises the agency of various theories and like Karen Barad's "agential realism", hopes to tease out some of the ways in which the agency of these terms themselves create slippages and transgressions between transhumanism and posthumanism:

...quantum physics has yielded compelling empirical evidence for the surprising claim that things do not have determinate boundaries and properties, and that *words do not have inherently determinate meanings* [emphasis added].<sup>6</sup>

The thesis, whilst relying on transhumanism and posthumanism together, does gesture towards a critique of transhumanism through the lens of Elaine L. Graham's "technological sublime". Maclean uses the cyborg figure as a kind of generative device in which to explore narratives around technology and character identities. These explorations expose the 'inhumanness' of humanisms and Enlightenment discourses, in which transhumanism emanated from.<sup>7</sup> This chapter will first trace the roots of posthumanism and establish the critical position of this thesis. For the second section of this chapter, transhumanism is clarified as a generative force within these discourses, inclusive of Maclean's artworks. For the final section of this chapter, the methodological approach for this thesis will be outlined.

### POSTHUMANITY

Humanism emphasizes the human subject as a rational being with agency and importance. The human subject under humanism acquires a kind of centrality in

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<sup>5</sup> See, Başak Ağın, "Posthumanism versus Transhumanism: James Tiptree, Jr.'s The Girl Who Was Plugged In," *Dil Ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları* 20, no. 22 (2020): 277-98.

<sup>6</sup> Karen Barad, "Living in a Posthumanist Material World: Lessons from Schrödinger's Cat," in *Bits of Life: Feminism at the Intersections of Media, Bioscience, and Technology*, ed. Anneke Smelik and Nina Lykke (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2008), 170.

<sup>7</sup> See, Francesca Ferrando, "The Birth of Transhumanism," in *Philosophical Posthumanism* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 29-31.

relation to his surroundings, he is autonomous.<sup>8</sup> Posthumanism lacks any definitive definitions, though a unifying factor would be a conclusive move away from “man” as a unified, autonomous being.<sup>9</sup> Realisation of this co-existence is realising we “humans” are not in the centre, but existing alongside, with, and merged with all that might be deemed “other”. This realisation, might be horrific to some, especially considering how much attention has been paid into asserting human dominance over nature, technology, and “others”.<sup>10</sup>

Maclean’s characters are often fluid with technology, species and their own splits in identity. For example, (see Fig 1). Data is umbilically bound to her surroundings in this instance. The wires that connect her to the world are embedded into her bulging flesh. This visual, coupled with the sounds of breathing creates a sense that that machine itself is “life supporting”. Far from utopian in its execution, this posthuman condition brings horrific realisations, grotesque imaginaries and confusing consequences. Rosi Braidotti speaks to the importance of realisation of the condition of posthumanism. From a feminist perspective, she constructs an argument for embracing a dissolution of the human subject, because for her, humanism does not allow for an inclusion of certain bodies:

... ‘we’ are all in this planetary condition together whether we are humans or others. It is high time for this heterogeneous and collective ‘we’ to move beyond the Eurocentric as well as humanistic habits that have formatted it, and to dislodge the philosophical anthropocentrism they entail and enforce.<sup>11</sup>

Braidotti calls for a radical rethinking of our relationship to the world around us and our place within it. This urging towards a more inclusive understanding of what it means to be part of this planet underlines her theories. By considering Maclean’s films from a post/human perspective, we can begin to unpick some of the

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<sup>8</sup> Andrew Copson, “What Is Humanism?,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Humanism* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2015), 1-33.

<sup>9</sup> Bernard Stiegler offers a posthuman theory that is not necessarily “post”, as in after humanism, but that it both comes before and after, see: Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and time* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1998). Cited in, Cary Wolfe, “Introduction: What Is Posthumanism?,” in *What Is Posthumanism?*, ed. Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xv. This approach is comparable to Jean-François Lyotard’s theories of postmodernism, see: Jean François Lyotard, *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>10</sup> See: Donna Haraway, “A manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, technology, and socialist feminism in the 1980s,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 2, no. 4 (March 1987): 1-42.

<sup>11</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Feminism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022), 12.

transhumanist associations that entrench the spaces of technological advancement. These dialogues position technology in relation to narratives of immortality, immanence and transcendence. Maclean's use of traditional science fiction tropes enables a reimagining of these narratives with feminist post/human sensibilities. These sensibilities displace the traditional notion of otherness and hierarchical value systems and open a space for new imaginaries and perspectives from those pushed to the margins of difference. Representational iterations of the slippages that occur between transhumanism and critical posthumanism activate a recognition of patterns that entrench, appropriate and limit potentials of "life as bios/zoe".<sup>12</sup>

## TRANSHUMANISM

Maclean's films, whilst generally seeming critical of transhuman ideologies, only allows for diffractive and post/human possibilities through the inclusion of this criticality. Rather than trying to eradicate or ignore the perpetuating discourses around Enlightenment and transcendence through technologies, Maclean includes them as a necessary and generative force that help enable the characters within her worlds to embrace and project themselves into alternative spaces.<sup>13</sup> This generative force begins at the very onset of the film, (see Fig 2). This is the opening visual of the film, and the gnawing focus on the mouth of the troll, symbolically links the work to an upheaval, radical shifting, or apocalypse. Consider this still with the illustration by Master of Catherine Cleves, (see Fig 3). Not only do the trolls share visual elements of hell/the devil<sup>14</sup> but they also share the symbolic resonance with this mouthed scene:

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<sup>12</sup> Rosi Braidotti explains: "The bios/zoe compound refers to what was previously known as "life" by introducing a differentiation internal to that category. This differentiation, by making the notion of life more complex, implies the notion of multiplicity. In turn, multiplicity allows for a nonbinary way of positing the relationship between same and other, between different categories of living beings, and, ultimately, between life and death. The emphasis, and hence the mark of "difference," now falls on the "other" of the living body according to its humanistic definition: Thantos – the death drive, the corpse or spectral other." See: Rosi Braidotti, "The Politics of Life as Bios/Zoe," in *Bits of Life: Feminism at the Intersections of Media, Bioscience, and Technology*, ed. Anneke Smelik and Nina Lykke (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2008), 178-79.

<sup>13</sup> This perspective was developed from Elizabeth Grosz's view of difference as a generative force: "...the ways in which difference stretches, transforms, and opens up any identity to its provisional vicissitudes, its shimmering self-variations that enable it to become other than what it is." See, Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming undone: Darwinian reflections on life, politics, and art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 91.

<sup>14</sup> ... "From the Anglo-Saxon period of art right through the Middle Ages hell is imagined as a gaping mouth, such as a mouth that might belong to a great beast, or a sea creature. It is dark, cavernous, ever hungry. Hellmouth is a detached organ, obeying a reflex action, flesh that blindly pursues its bodily function even though it is separated from an active body. The mouth is engorged chomping away

a scene that signals a gnawing transformation.<sup>15</sup> When considering these two visuals together, the wires that are in the jaws of the troll in the opening visual of *IWITC* already signify a connection with the body – and that connected body (Data), in the instance of this film as a “false prophet”.<sup>16</sup> Characters perpetually cross boundaries, and we are exposed to thinking critically, and compassionately about narratives of the Enlightenment and narratives explored by posthumanisms. Transhumanism, like Data’s ‘twin’, is a retaining, or reinforcement of humanism:

...transhumanism, according to its self-understanding, is a contemporary renewal of humanism. It embraces and eventually amplifies central aspects of secular and Enlightenment humanist thought, such as belief in reason, individualism, science, progress, as well as self-perfection or cultivation.<sup>17</sup>

Feminisms such as the theories of Simone de Beauvoir understood the humanist movement as being the standard of man, and therefore othering women. Women assigned as “other” were oppressed and denied the right to choose their own identities and destinies. This feminism demanded that women be allowed to enjoy the responsibilities of self that came with being human.<sup>18</sup> However, there was a shift in feminist theory that began to shy away from humanism and de Beauvoir’s humanist approach.<sup>19</sup> Kate Soper illustrates how feminists in their claims of “difference” are left incompatible with humanism.<sup>20</sup> Notable voices within the feminist movement towards acknowledging and embracing this difference are Hélène

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locked in its own hell of eternal consumption, unsatiated, insatiable.” Jackson, Melanie, 2017, *Other, Hellmouth* Arts catalyst, London, UK, 1.

<sup>15</sup> ... “The Hellmouth has a specific historical context. Historian Paula Fredriksen said it best, noting “Christianity began with the announcement that time and history were about to end.” The manifestation of this belief took many visual forms in the medieval period, including paintings, sculptures, mosaics, and altar furnishings. In illustrated Bibles and Gospel books of the same period, the vision of Paul’s apocalypse unfolded in the dramatic visualizations of celestial battles between good and evil, the punishment of the wicked, and the reward of the righteous... the jaws of hell, represented by the double-headed monster containing a lake of fire that engulfs the false prophet and those who adopted the mark of the beast.” Tana Villafana, “The Apocalypse, The Hellmouth, and Spectral Imaging,” *Gale Academic OneFile Select States News Service* (2021).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Ranisch and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner, eds., *Post- and Transhumanism: An Introduction* (New York: Peter Lang Edition, 2014), 8.

<sup>18</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (UK: Penguin Books, 1972), 29.

<sup>19</sup> Sandra Harding, *The science question in feminism* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), 15. and Kate Soper, “Feminism, Humanism and Postmodernism,” *Radical Philosophy* 55 (1990): 1117. Both examples reveal the shift that occurred within feminism. For an alternative stance, where feminism positions itself within the humanist discourse, see: Pauline Johnson, “Feminism and humanism,” in *Feminism as radical humanism* (Routledge, 2018), 1-24.

<sup>20</sup> Soper, “Feminism, Humanism and Postmodernism,” 12.

Cixous, Luce Irigay and Julia Kristeva, and with their theoretical approach, a break began to occur, where it was no longer desired to be a ‘human’ in the exclusionary, humanist sense, but that a new way of understanding and decentering ‘man’ was important, not only for feminism, but also, for our way of understanding non-human ‘others’. *Material Feminisms* brings together a collection of essays from theorists such as Karen Barad, Donna Haraway, Vicky Kirby and Claire Colebrook to address material realities. In a tentative revaluation of what might be considered “modernist”, Material Feminists want to redefine human to non-human relations by finding a way to define the “real” in a scientific and philosophical context. They are engaged in the development of theory that sees nature as an “agentic force” that acts, reacts and changes the entanglements in which it is linked. Humans and non-humans engage back and forth, neither passive nor wholly predictable.<sup>21</sup>

This research positions Maclean’s work, not as wholly dystopian, but rather, with an acknowledgement of the importance of facing the glittering monsters of the past in order to come away from the experience with a new sense of knowledge/power of: how we may come to be entrenched in abusively hierarchical systems, how these systems may be collectively contributed to, and finally, how, like the characters, these narratives too “reach their end”.<sup>22</sup> Transhumanism seen not as something that has to be cancelled from the cultural imaginary, but instead utilised as a point of departure and learning potential. Included within the discourse, not just to elevate critical posthumanism through what it is *not*, but rather, as a dialectic within the discourse itself. This is not to say that misogynist, colonialist, specieist are inaugural ways of becoming into something new, always and forever more, but they are, unfortunately (from a posthuman stance) what underlie the structural positionings ‘we’ find ourselves in today, and without *seeing* how they manifest in, often, insidious ways, and how they came to become, ‘we’ may habitually continue down a path of disparaging injustices.

## METHODOLOGY

Maclean is enmeshed within an art historical context, one that she references through the visual spectre frequently through her work. This research will explore some of the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>22</sup> Re-occurring quotation from the film *It’s What’s Inside That Counts*. The trolls direct this dialogue towards Data.



visual structures that Maclean engages with to establish the artworks meaning. More specifically, this research establishes links between Maclean's work, art history and cinema. This thesis positions Maclean's visual signifiers as a baseline for which meaning emerges through the work. A meaning that is preoccupied within the realms of transcendence, appropriation and bodily shifts.

The first section of this thesis will look at how Maclean's Data is inextricably linked to the character's genealogy through the city space and cinematic time. The work will be considered through theories of the technological sublime, developed by Elaine L. Graham to begin to understand the humanistic/transhuman roots of the character and her world. By developing an understanding of what came before, the analysis grounds some of Data's 'realities' in their historical context: Her body as celebrity, as image and as cyborg that perpetuate beauty standards and sets up the body as a site of value. Continuing from this, the next chapter will develop a contrasting analysis between *Star Trek's* character Data and Maclean's character Data. *Star Trek's* Data has been included because of the 'at-a-glance' similarities between Data and Data (they both have a twin, and both cyborg).<sup>23</sup>

On closer inspection, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* perpetuates Enlightenment discourses that are in alignment with transhumanist ideals, and Maclean's work aims at parodying or subversion. By occupying two distinctly gendered positions, both Data's reach towards separate goals. This separation of attention reveals the systematic injustices that *dis-embody* the "monstrous". The monstrous here as analogous to Julia Kristeva's abject figure,<sup>24</sup> and one that also, as Graham notes, essential in the re-establishment of the other.<sup>25</sup> *IWITC* occupies a feminist position through a kind of parody of the appropriation of feminism through corporatism. Data is a pinacol of worship and holds the *power* of self-representation, but this is a position only obtained through the *right* kind of femininity. Data finds herself within the same humanistic pattern that was *supposed* to have been liberated from through

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<sup>23</sup> A point to note is that, it is in my intuitive reading that places these two figures side by side, I am not claiming to know the origins of Maclean's character, but rather find the similarities and differences between *Star Trek's* Data, and Maclean's Data, as a generative point in establishing an understanding as to how gendered positions of intentionality can reveal certain ideologies and the difficulties of the occupancy of certain bodies. It is interesting to me that the male cyborg wishes towards the 'human' in a humanist world, the female, within this same world, is pushing for transcendence.

<sup>24</sup> See: Julia Kristeva, Alice Jardine, and Harry Blake, "Women's Time," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 7, no. 1 (October 1981): 13-35.

<sup>25</sup> Graham, *Representations of the Post/Human: Monsters, Aliens and Others in Popular Culture*, 17.

technologies.<sup>26</sup> Her drive towards being cyborg, in the transhuman sense, reveals her worlds incompatibility with her *body-as-human*. Data, regardless of her efforts, is still systematically excluded from success, but, as a final and possible retribution, Data dies. At first, the celebratory tone that I am writing of this death may seem peculiar, but I read this death as a necessary ending and the point in which Maclean hands the torch over to her audience. By interrogating Data's death and the space that this leaves for audience engagement, this research concludes with an open response, or space of "vibrant" possibility.<sup>27</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This chapter developed the basis for the following chapters. The first section looked at how humanism became posthumanism, through the incompatibilities with feminism. Following from this, transhumanism was explored and linked with Enlightenment discourses, and how these elements are included within the work of Maclean. Maclean's work, through the representation of transhumanism and its limitations opens a space for the consideration of post/human possibilities. Finally, this chapter explored the methodological approach to this thesis. The next chapter will look at the character Data and her connections to the genre of science fiction and theoretical debate.

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<sup>26</sup> See: Haraway, "A manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, technology, and socialist feminism in the 1980s," 1-42.

<sup>27</sup> "...death as vibrant; death not in opposition to life, but existing in flat continuum intertwined with it; death as an articulation of the vitality and vibrancy characterizing all matter, whether dead or alive, inanimate or animate, non-human or human." See: Nina Lykke, *Vibrant Death: A Posthuman Phenomenology of Mourning*, ed. Rosi Braidotti (London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2022), 7.

## Chapter 2: Machine as Body

### INTRODUCTION

In both iterations of the character Data there is a strong sense that in order to “Be Urself”, you must comply with the exponential speed of growth, be it technological, capital, spiritual or intellectual that is encouraged by narratives disseminated through advertising, media platforms, religion and critical theories. This motion of upward growth is reflected both in the BU corporation’s graphs and during the troll’s dance sequence, (see Fig 4). Not only are the graphs enticingly simplistic in their form, but even the candy-coloured combinations gesture towards something that is simple, child-like, and essentially – gamified.<sup>28</sup> These outlets push Data towards an understanding of a self that can be built, modified and surpassed; one that is in-line with transhuman sensibilities.

Data strives in developing a ‘no-pain-no gain’ mindset to facilitate her position in the world she inhabits. *IWITC* splits Data in two and as a result, we can consider a dichotomy that is present within the culture in regard to technology, and its connections with the body and self. One side of Data fits neatly within a transhuman ideological framework, whilst the other monstrously grows outside of the humanistic ideals in which transhumanism evolved from, (see Fig 5). The top image represents Data in-line with the corporation’s ideals – and therefore more analogous with transhumanism. The image below represents Data during her ‘collapse.’<sup>29</sup> To develop this chapter, the research will first explore how Data is established by considering the character’s genealogy, as successor to Fritz Lang’s Maria and the relationship between this historical body and time. This chapter will consider how

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<sup>28</sup> See: Cathie Marache-Francisco and Eric Brangier, "Gamification and human-machine interaction: a synthesis," *Le travail humain* 78, no. 2 (2015): 165-89

<sup>29</sup> The reference to this version of Data and its link with the monstrous within this thesis, has been established regarding Julia Kristeva’s theories of the abject, Kristeva, "Women's Time." (note) and Margrit Shildrick’s extensive study on the monstrous, and Data’s congruency with her thesis: "...vulnerability, an existential state that may belong to any one of us, but which is characterised nonetheless as a negative attribute, a failure of self-protection, that opens the self to the potential of harm. As such it is, like the notion of the monstrous, largely projected on to the other and held at bay lest it undermine the security of closure and self-sufficiency. The link that I want to make is that we are always and everywhere vulnerable precisely because the monstrous is not only an exteriority. In both cases what is at issue is the *permeability of the boundaries* that guarantee the normatively embodied self." [emphasis added]. Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2002), 1.

Graham's exploration of the "technological sublime" acts and reacts through each of the characters historical strands. This chapter demonstrates how narratives, stuck in Humanist ideals, no longer *fit* certain characters, such as Data.

## WHERE IS DATA?

The "technological sublime" encapsulates the pursuit of information/knowledge through the body, be it symbolic or material. The "technological sublime" through the lens of Elaine L. Graham, reminds us of the genealogy of transhumanism, along with proposed alternatives for the representations of the post/human. Science fiction has the potential to actively reimagine the body's embeddedness with technology, 'object,' and environment. What Maclean offers us, is a body that is not limited just, to a new way of representing the post/human, but falls back onto itself, into old hegemonic patterns, "again, again, again".<sup>30</sup> This kind of masochistic continuum not only questions the medium of film's relationship with cultural patterns, but also brings to question time and how one can move on from it through a representative medium such as film.

Time is perhaps the most enigmatic, the most paradoxical, elusive, and "unreal" of any form of material existence.<sup>31</sup>

Data is built upon a history of associations. She is not limited to past, present, or future, but spreads out through and entangles with these disparate spaces. Through positioning the character as a successor to Fritz Lang's Maria, Maclean makes a direct line between the representations of the cyborg in the 1920's to now. In reflection to this, Maclean's Data could be seen to be embodying the cyborg through the lens of the *corporate- appropriation* of feminism in contemporary culture. This is something that Maclean speaks to in her online artists talk entitled: *Rachel Maclean: Artists Talk at Talbot Rice Gallery*.<sup>32</sup> The next section will explore the body-as-machine, with

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<sup>30</sup> The film ends with the 'Trolls' pleading at Data to do it "again, again, again", before she addresses the camera and says: "when your world falls apart, pick yourself up, and do it again, and again, and again, and again, and again, and again, and...".

<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution and the Untimely* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2004), 4.

<sup>32</sup> See: Chapter Arts Centre, "Rachel Maclean: Artist Talk at Talbot Rice Gallery," YouTube, July 31, 2018, video, 23:51-24:23, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5R-W6MWt5u0>: "...feminist values and radical ideas have got tangled up into this kind of web of corporate interests and consumerism, where being empowered is about knowing your brand and being able to commodify yourself and your ideas. Power is defined by having and making money. I'm uncomfortable with this incorporation of feminism into capitalism, to imagine that equality between men and women can be achieved within a system that necessitates such grotesque inequalities seems to be a little too hopeful."

reflections on how Maclean's Data is used within the corporate system, despite the perceived agency she has through self-representation.

## BORN OF THE CITY

...living matter, corporeality, allows itself cultural location, gives itself up to cultural inscription, provides a "surface" for cultural writing- that is how the biological induces the cultural rather than inhibits it, how biological complexity impels the complications and variability of culture itself...<sup>33</sup>

Through the consideration of the character Maria in *Metropolis*, this section will demonstrate how Data has been born through the city of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and its criticisms. Tom Gunning in *The films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of vision and modernity* positions the film's representations of the machine as an emblem of information that marks a space in historical time:

...the machine is a metonymy, a fragment which stands in for the whole systematic nature of the modern world which Lang sees as a complex determining destiny...<sup>34</sup>

Gunning links the city to the machine in its representation, and within the film 'The Tower of Babel' is used allegorically by Maria to explain the systems of power operating within the city and the worker's embroilments with this city. The Tower of Babel is a solidifying marker of city as body, where the hands build and the brain conceives, (see Fig 6). This division is further marked by the workers inhabiting the space underground, whilst those 'in charge' of the machines and the workers inhabit the spaces above. As demonstrated in the clips presented here; there is not only a split between brain and body, but also through depiction, show that the deciding force is a small number of people, whilst the workers of an idea represent 'the masses.'

There are structures of power enacting through spaces of the film that span across class and gender.<sup>35</sup> In Andreas Huyssen's reading of the film, he elaborates on "The Machine-Woman" and her significance in this instance in the representation of a trope that has been omnipresent through the depiction of technology and its interactions with the body. This history, according to Huyssen is markedly gendered:

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<sup>33</sup> Grosz, *Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution and the Untimely*, 4.

<sup>34</sup> Tom Gunning, *The films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of vision and modernity* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 10.

<sup>35</sup> See: D. C. Byrne, "The top, the bottom and the middle: Space, class and gender in *Metropolis*," *Literator* 24, no. 3 (August 1, 2003): 1-14

Precisely the fact that Fritz Lang does not feel the need to explain the female features of Rotwang's robot shows that a pattern, a long standing tradition is being recycled here, a tradition which is not at all hard to detect, and in which the *Maschinenmensch*, more often than not, is presented as woman.<sup>36</sup>

Huyssen develops a hypothesis with a psychoanalytic flare: that of male fears of female sexuality that encapsulates Freud's "castration anxiety". Thus, otherness bounded women, technology, and environment together through the enmeshment and enactment of the anxieties of the time.<sup>37</sup> But *why*? In a further development to Huyssen's claim, he returns to *Metropolis* to explain why woman has been supplanted into a technologized body. Coming from an anthropocentric, humanist perspective, *Man* is who invents, manipulates, and controls nature and technology. *Woman*, who, if assuming to fit into what is/was considered *natural*, extends his grasp.<sup>38</sup> In these circumstances, *her* constitution relies on being "socially invented and constructed by man...". Continuing from this perspective, woman "is considered to be the natural vessel of man's reproductive capacity, a mere bodily extension of the male's procreative powers." Anxiety, in this instance, thus comes from the threat of this prosthetic extension *having* agency and lack of controllability.<sup>39</sup>

This understanding positions Man at the centre of the universe, and everything *other*, as passive and controllable. *Metropolis* couples the uncontrollability of technological growth with the anxieties around female/other agencies. Maclean demonstrates how these anxieties are not just present in past 'futures,' but that they seep through the corporate worlds of contemporary culture. Data is narratively positioned as somebody who is worshipped, who can 'self-represent', but still, by following her journey we see that she does not have the same agency as some of the other characters. This is enacted in a very literal sense when she is physically tied-up with the wires of connectivity, (see Fig 7). In this instance, Data's wires of connectivity leave her vulnerable to the control and manipulation of others. She is a mediator between BU corporation and the Plague, and as shown here; her "safety" within the confines of the red carpet are easily breached by the Trolls. This breaching of space or crossing of a boundary positions the Trolls as the activators of change within the

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<sup>36</sup> Andreas Huyssen, "The Vamp and the Machine: Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*," in *After the Great Divide* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 69.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>38</sup> Barbara Brook, *Feminist Perspectives on the Body* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 8.

<sup>39</sup> Huyssen, "The Vamp and the Machine: Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*," 72.

film – or in a sense, they could be seen to represent the unavoidable movement of time itself. Data’s capacity to move through her world is intricately linked to her body ‘image’ and its reception in the digital space she occupies. Faltering under the pressures of her world, Data’s body convulsively slips between beauty and monstrosity.<sup>40</sup> The slippage we encounter is one where monstrosity attempts, with the *guidance* of the Guru to transcend itself back into a *stable* image. Data linked to the city, acts as a useful cog in the “Destiny Machine”<sup>41</sup>, but only through her contribution as an image that is *fit* for consumption, and *fit* for worship.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter looked at how transcendent ideologies and transhumanism are linked to exclusionary humanisms that position ‘Man’ at the centre and displace ‘others’ as passive. By analysing Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* and reflecting on Maclean’s iteration of the cyborg, this chapter demonstrates how hegemonic structures believed to have been abolished, still have their traces within corporate/capitalist structures. The worship of Data, and the worship of technology and the corporation mirror Enlightenment discourses and transhumanism. Maclean’s inclusion of the power imbalance that these structures reinforce, enable a reflection onto how, even feminisms have been appropriated into the system, but do not always liberate the individual from the structures of power. The transhuman figure, engrossed in technological salvation, in this instance, does not find retribution. The next chapter will look at character intentions to reveal how obsolescence and value within their worlds.

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<sup>40</sup> Bernadette Wegenstein develops a thesis of ‘convulsive beauty’, where the feminine body holds symbolics of both desire and monstrosity. The acts that the body endures to achieve beauty are often acts of “deformation” and “mutilation” in and of themselves, materialised through cosmetic surgeries. See: Bernadette Wegenstein, “The Dark Side of Beauty: From Convulsive Beauty to Makeover Disfiguration,” in *The Cosmetic Gaze* (The MIT Press, 2012), 88.

<sup>41</sup> Reference to Tom Gunning’s elaboration of metaphorical link between the “city” and the “machine” in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*. See: Gunning, *The films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of vision and modernity*.

### Chapter 3: Becoming a ‘Somebody’

#### INTRODUCTION

“Fabulation” as a strategy, according to Marleen Barr, challenges bodily and worldly norms through tropes such as the monster, and the alien. This practice, according to Barr helps to facilitate a re-worlding, or becoming into something new.<sup>42</sup> Science fiction as a genre allows for explorations into other worlds and circumstances between species, but it can also help in developing an understanding of perpetuated norms and structures that the genre itself hopes to challenge. This chapter considers character similarities and differences between Maclean’s character Data, and *Star Trek*’s character Data. For this analysis character *intentions* will be explored, to reveal the body’s growing obsolescence within capitalist discourses. This obsolescence is perpetuated through narratives of augmentation and self-improvement. *Star Trek*’s Data and Maclean’s Data, although stretching towards different notions of being human or cyborg, have in common, the worldly pressures of improvement and need for augmentation. By looking at Bernadette Wegenstein’s theories developed in *The Cosmetic Gaze*, this chapter looks at how characters augment themselves to *fit* into their worlds. These enhancements reveal the structures of a world and set up the subject/character as a site of value within narrow parameters – parameters that do not necessarily benefit anything but the ‘corporation’.<sup>43</sup>

#### INTENTIONS

Lisa Meinecke in her chapter *Veins and Muscles of the Universe* explores connectivity and posthumanism in the *Star Trek* franchise through Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “fungal roots”<sup>44</sup> and Donna Haraway’s “cybernetic organism.”<sup>45</sup> Meinecke looks for the traces of anthropocentrism within the new iterations of the series, and through

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<sup>42</sup> Marleen S. Barr, "Canonizing the Monstrous," in *Feminist Fabulation: Space/Postmodern Fiction* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1992), 21-48.

<sup>43</sup> *It’s What’s Inside That Counts* is run by the “B U” corporation. This isn’t the only instance where corporations seem to run a world through Maclean’s work. In *Feed Me* (2015), a similar surveillance corporation runs the city.

<sup>44</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 7-21.

<sup>45</sup> Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, ed. Donna J. Haraway (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 145.



this, contributes to discourse that helps to understand “cyborg” representation.<sup>46</sup> Through this analysis, Data, from *Star Trek (TNG)* is positioned as a character, who’s intentions are directed towards the pursuit of becoming ‘human’.<sup>47</sup> Data’s preoccupation with becoming human, at its core, is a preoccupation with a self-improvement that is somewhat demanded by the world the character inhabits. The following is an excerpt from commander of the *Starship USS Enterprise -D*:

Picard: A lot has changed in the past three hundred years. People are no longer obsessed with the accumulation of things. We’ve eliminated hunger, want, the need for possessions. We’ve grown out of our infancy... the challenge is to improve yourself: to enrich yourself...<sup>48</sup>

Data circumscribes himself to various *rites de passage* to reach towards a fuller experience of what it is to be human, Data moves through various hobbies and activities throughout the series, such as getting a dog, painting, etc. Data’s pursuit to fit into the parameters of ‘human’ are established through outward projections and pursuits, (see Fig 8). This is exemplified by the painting that Data is creating: an outer environment, one of sprawling landscapes and flying birds. In contrast, and through the examination of Maclean’s work, Data’s *visual appearance* signifies key moments of change throughout the film, (see Fig 9). The contrasting images show Data through her digital appearance as Maclean makes visual links between beauty and success, monstrosity, and failure through a scoring system. These scores signal to how well Data is doing under the confinements of BU corporation. Data, in order to fit into the corporate landscape in which she is utilised in, seeks augmentation that is preoccupied with bodily amendments and perfection. Rather than establishing change through outward exploration, Maclean’s Data is thrust into extreme changes through biological/physical means. This is solidified by the advertisement sequence visually, (see Fig 10) and through dialogue:

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<sup>46</sup> See: Olivia Stowell, "Ascendance to Trans-Corporeality or Assimilation to Whiteness," in *Feminist Posthumanism in Contemporary Science Fiction Film and Media* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), for an explicit analysis into posthuman representation, theory and their subsequent limitations. In reference to the films *Annihilation* and *Midsommer*: “...they nonetheless gesture toward the limitations of posthumanist thought that imagines trans-corporeal intersubjectivity as always inherently liberatory.”

<sup>47</sup> Lisa Meinecke, "Veins and Muscles of the Universe" in *Fighting for the Future: Essays on Star Trek: Discovery*, ed. Sabrina Mittermeier and Mareike Spsychala (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), 384-385.

<sup>48</sup> ‘The Neural Zone’, episode 26, season 1 (1988) cited in: Graham, *Representations of the Post/Human: Monsters, Aliens and Others in Popular Culture*, 140

...making cuts in the right places, so that we can turn sustainable resources into Data, Data that can be recycled again, and again, and again... we've combated issues of health and wellness through a high-end policy of facial modification and after treatment, allowing that extra one percent enjoy a safe and happy future...<sup>49</sup>

This sequence graphs out a simplistic path to “inner” happiness, but not without reminding the viewers that this happiness is obtainable by a limited number of people, and that even they are replaceable. This idealising of augmentation, implemented by technological means (a scissors in this instance) further embroils ideas of fulfilment with the iterations of the body. Data is just another cog in the ‘destiny machine’, where her life only receives a sense of value through her ability to *appear* as an icon. The images here show various clips from an advertisement from the film: the setting up of the “nose-less” population as the one percent, and subsequently representing these figures as cogs, solidifies Data within a category of privilege, but also gestures to the ultimate power of the corporation and the powerlessness of the entire population within this system – Data included. Maclean’s film inhabits a space between Data’s empowerment and the anxious tendencies to conform to “homogenised ideas of beauty”.<sup>50</sup>

Maclean’s Data subverts the intentions apparent through *Star Trek’s* Data. Rather than wishing towards the fleshy realities of human life, Maclean’s Data aspires towards a “technologically sublime” rendering of the body and self. Maclean’s Data is completely preoccupied with hopeful transcendence beyond the biological body in order to escape from obsolescence. This *intention* reflects an idealisation of the infinite body, the body that is malleable, updatable and free from its own time-based changes. The next section will explore Bernadette Wegenstein’s approach in understanding *why* body augmentation is so prevalent and wished for. Wegenstein’s thesis demonstrates how the gaze perpetuates a beauty standard that is seen through the lens of technological manipulation.

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<sup>49</sup> Rachel Maclean, "It's What's Inside That Counts," HD video, colour and sound, Rachel Maclean, 2016, video, 03:53-04:18, <https://www.rachelmacleane.com/whats-inside-counts/>.

<sup>50</sup> HENI talks, "Rachel Maclean: Cutting Up the Canon of Art History," HENI talks, March 29, 2019, video, 6:50-7:09, <https://heni.com/talks/rachel-macleane-cutting-up-the-canon>.

## BEING SEEN AS A SOMEBODY

Am I man or am I machine? There is no more answer nowadays to this question: in reality and subjectively I am a man, but virtually and in fact I am a machine.<sup>51</sup> – Jean Baudrillard

In Maclean's film *IWITC*, the artist explores online validation and connectivity through the protagonist Data. Data has almost fully merged with her technology, which she uses to post photos and analyse her wellbeing (see Fig 11). Data sits and gazes into her phone. The phone is costumed; displayed as a kind of hand mirror, but unlike an actual mirror which reflects only the exterior surface – this mirror holds within it “what’s inside”, or rather, the external/internal interconnectedness of Data. The threats that Data receives through her “social media” account, represent the character shifts and the following movement into a resisted bodily change. Nina Powers, in response to Maclean's films, explores our fascination with the machine world as a kind of distraction to our own mortality. She points to the promise that consumer capitalism and social media award us:

...if we just follow the instructions on the beauty products, watch enough videos of cats pushing things off shelves, immerse ourselves in the world of self-help, of caramel lattes, and online spirituality, and eventually enter into a total immersion in the machine, that we will live forever in a kind of immortal and ageless bubble.<sup>52</sup>

This “total immersion” is something that Jean Baudrillard discusses in his essay *Video World and Fractal Subject*. Baudrillard emphasises “man's” desire to become entangled with the machine as a desire to bypass his own creative self.<sup>53</sup> Baudrillard in *Plastic Surgery for the Other* points to how virtually, we are “continuously referred back to oneself”.<sup>54</sup> This is something that Bernadette Wegenstein refers to in *The Cosmetic Gaze* and adds that with the gaze operating “in a close circuit... the body becomes the sole locus of identification.”<sup>55</sup> Wegenstein develops a theory of the

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<sup>51</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "Video World and Fractal Subject," 1988, Ars Electronica Archive, [https://webarchive.ars.electronica.art/en/archives/festival\\_archive/festival\\_catalogs/festival\\_artikel.asp?iProjectID=9073.html](https://webarchive.ars.electronica.art/en/archives/festival_archive/festival_catalogs/festival_artikel.asp?iProjectID=9073.html).

<sup>52</sup> Nina Powers, "essay Data Drive, Death Drive: Inhabiting the Warped World of Rachel Maclean's Consumerist Carnage," in *Rachel Maclean*, ed. Anette Hüscher (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag GmbH, 2020), 35.

<sup>53</sup> Baudrillard, "Video World and Fractal Subject," 1988.

<sup>54</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "Plastic Surgery for the Other," November 22, 1995, CTHEORY, British Columbia, <https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ctheory/article/view/14654/5521>

<sup>55</sup> Bernadette Wegenstein, *Cosmetic Gaze: Body Modification and the Construction of Beauty* (MIT Press, 2012), 149.

cosmetic gaze which is grounded it in a “Deleuze-inspired metaphor” of “organ instead of body”.<sup>56</sup> This then finds its realisation in a media form:

*The Cosmetic Gaze*, is a bettered self that has been reborn from its own flesh and is now, like a digitally remastered character from a classic Hollywood movie, immortal.<sup>57</sup>

The gaze via social media is no longer linear and straightforward. It circulates back to itself where the body is seen as a site for improvement and change.<sup>58</sup> In Data’s case, the world in which she hopes to fit, is one that capitalises off her image, but only when the image represents her “beautiful” self. The monstrous realities of change are not accepted in the “upper realms”. Even the environments in which Data occupies changes with her physical appearance, the “upper,” bright world is for beauty, and the “lower,” for monstrosity, (see Fig 12). This reference to “upper” and “lower” realms is reflected in various films of Macleans, (see Fig 13). This use of space symbolically references and situates the work within an art historical context that is embedded in narratives of heaven and hell, good and evil – essentially – dichotomous. By using these traditional visual narrative elements, Maclean subverts and disrupts the solidity of these opposing spaces. The turning “Upside Down” of space, remind the viewer of the precariousness and blending of seemingly opposing points.

## CONCLUSION

Augmentation through this chapter has been established through two separate strands; augmentation of outward expression, and “inner” augmentation, which takes the form of physical change within the world of Maclean’s Data. ”.<sup>59</sup> Rather than Data being able to embody a full sense of being human, this is bypassed, and projected straight into a transhuman response. The body, unconcerned with being ‘human,’ instead, is pushed into having concern only for physical improvement and agelessness. Whilst

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<sup>56</sup> From Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s concepts of “body without organs”, see: Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Bloomsbury Revelations, 2013).

<sup>57</sup> Wegenstein, *Cosmetic Gaze: Body Modification and the Construction of Beauty*, x.

<sup>58</sup> Francesca Gavin explores themes associated with Macleans work in her book *Watch This Space*. Gavin comments on social media’s appearance as a space for free and creative expression but adds that this seemingly free exchange is not as simple as it seems. Platforms such as Facebook and Instagram have rights to its user’s content once posted. The author goes on to say that: “our desire to be noticed makes us into things that are increasingly owned by other people”. See, Francesca Gavin, *Watch This Space*, 2<sup>nd</sup>ed. (United Kingdom: Pentagram Design Ltd, 2019), 67-78. Data, in a very literal and exaggerated way is controlled and owned by the “B U corporation.” Any and all of the control that Data seemed to have at the beginning of the film, slips into the hands of others as the film progresses.

<sup>59</sup> Graham, *Representations of the Post/Human: Monsters, Aliens and Others in Popular Culture*, 141.

*Star Trek's* Data sees himself fitting neatly into the worlds humanisms, much of Maclean's female characters would much "rather be a cyborg."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> From Donna Haraway's original quote: "I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess" in: Donna Haraway, *Simians, cyborgs, and women: The reinvention of nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 181.

## Chapter 4: “Vibrant Death”

### INTRODUCTION

We can see through the final section of Maclean’s film that Data is pained by her inability to fully transcend back into her image as an ‘icon’. In Simone de Beauvoir’s seminal work, *The Second Sex*, she discusses the representation of women through literature and mythology as inhabiting bodies that are either “devilish” or “angelic”. These two strands of female subjectivity, according to Beauvoir stems from ideas around female sexuality and motherhood, where the body taking pleasure is seen as “perfidious”, and that the sexual act should only be for pregnancy.<sup>61</sup> Data is not wholly confined to the “angelic” or the “devilish”, her body flips between the two states. Although she is between the two, the film highlights that her *value* as figure of worship is only obtainable through the projection of her “angelic” qualities. The worship of the angelic is not only sought after by Data herself but is seemingly *needed* by the wider community.<sup>62</sup> She is what enables the world to be connected, she is a pinacol of faith and worship, but also, in her world, she is replaceable. This chapter will interrogate Data’s position through the film *IWITC* and her relationship to time-based changes, her access to transformations and finally her diffractive possibilities through death.

### DATA’S SUSCEPTIBILITY TO TIME

Maclean’s Data falters under the pressures of her world, and regardless of her ‘positive’ attitude, her material body still fails under the systems in which she inhabits. Occupying a feminised cyborg figure, Data’s body becomes recognizably susceptible to time. Her growth into ‘monstrosity’, not unlike the growing of the maternal body, becomes a site for intervention.<sup>63</sup> Under the bodily changes Data experiences, she no longer functions as a ‘celebrity’ or ‘icon’. Her image as use factor begins to deteriorate whilst the boundaries of her body are forcefully corroded

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<sup>61</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (London: Jonathon Cape, 1953), 206-207.

<sup>62</sup> The Plague act out Luara Mulvey’s ‘Possessive spectator’, where Data becomes owned by the community and thus used to fulfil its needs for spiritual connection: “The human figure becomes an extension of the machine, conjuring up the pre-cinematic ghosts of automata.” See: Laura Mulvey, “The Possessive Spectator,” in *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*, ed. Laura Mulvey (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2006), 170.

<sup>63</sup> See: Susan Sherwin, *The Politics of Women's Health: Exploring Agency and Autonomy* (Temple University Press, 1998), 83-121.

through the interactions with the Trolls and the Guru (see Fig 14). The collection of images here is a compilation of moments in which Data's body over the time of the film, is captured and breached. Each of these moments reflect Data's life as something that can be *used* for the sakes of either change or maintaining of the status quo.<sup>64</sup>

Sherryl Vint makes an argument that succinctly outlines the historical underbelly of current political and social structures in society. While maintaining a focus on the political changes around women's reproductive rights, Vint demonstrates how our understandings of "life" are being reinvented, and also, paradoxically, maintained. Through the use of biotechnologies, "life" is caught in past colonial imaginaries, where the body is seen as a site of "resource" or "capacity" that can be extracted from for the sakes of "economic productivity."<sup>65</sup>

...we must recognize in slavery's commodification of people via their biological reproduction as property the template from which contemporary biocapitalist commodification was extrapolated.<sup>66</sup>

Vint's argument points towards the historical understandings of *value* in relation to life, especially when considering colonial histories, she pairs this with the current political changes around women's reproductive rights in the US as a contrasting attitude towards life. This value, she argues has to do with how this life might be productively viable for the state, and not for the sakes of *life* itself. She outlines how the movement of 'Black Lives Matter' in contrast to 'Rode V Wade' helps demonstrate how the state deems *some* lives more valuable than others. Maclean's Data, although not occupying the maternal in any obvious way, does evoke the abject through Data's more monstrous depictions. This growth into the abject renders the characters body as obsolete within the system, and she ultimately fails to transcend back into the upper realm of the film. Her value as an object of *use* deteriorates with her own fleshy deterioration.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> The Trolls here are representative of change activators – but use Data to tap into, to gnaw on and to dissolve the "connected" system established by the BU corporation. Likewise, the Guru, representative of the corporation, also uses Data to fulfil the aims of the corporation – enchanting the Plague.

<sup>65</sup> Sherryl Vint, *Biopolitical Futures in Twenty-First-Century Speculative Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 72.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 74.

<sup>67</sup> Leisha Jones directly positions the body in relation to the abject in a response to Julia Kristeva's work: "The abject is a realm outside culture and threatening to reduce culture to chaos: it is shapeless,

## CLASS DIVIDE AND ACCESS TO THE TRANSITIONING HUMAN

Transformations through social media are as much to do with physical augmentations as digital ones, and both rely on having access to the technologies that participate in alteration. It becomes clear through Maclean's film that Data is only worshipped if she represents herself in a certain way, and this way is only obtainable by *some*. In an interview for *The White Review* Maclean comments on the costuming function of the characters presented:

Not all the characters in the film are noseless, and there's an implication of class – a form of genetic modification or plastic surgery, say, which allows you to remove your nose or become a cyborg, if you can afford it.<sup>68</sup>

Data's image is worshiped because of her ability to access the technologies and supports that help consolidate her appearance. The attention or focus of worship supplants itself onto the image, or representation itself. This image, in Data's case, is supported by stylists, technology and the system itself. The ability to project a story of success has the Plague enchanted and asleep to the actual "inner" realities of both Data and the corporation, (see Fig 15). Even the costuming of the Plague signal towards a sleepiness and a clouded or disrupted vision.

"If you're fast on the inside, you can do anything"<sup>69</sup>, mirrors generally the idea that 'if you work hard, you will be rewarded'.<sup>70</sup> Data embedded into this system of belief reaffirms this reading when stating: "I earned this", as if hard work *should* carve out a space for her within the realm of success.<sup>71</sup> As we see though, Data is inescapably within a system that wasn't built for her wellbeing, or, to withstand time's implications on her body. Maclean's work reveals here that, regardless of the "work" Data engages with, she is still made obsolete within the systematic conditions she inhabits. All the striving and sacrifice leaves her just as "dried up"<sup>72</sup> as she would

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monstrous, damp and slimy, boundless and beyond the outer limits. It is a realm associated primarily with the adult female body in its perceived fluidity and capacity to change, to bleed, to reproduce." In: Leisha Jones, "Women and abjection: margins of difference, bodies of art," *Visual Culture and Gender* 2 (2007): 63.

<sup>68</sup> Izabella Scott, "Interview with Rachel Maclean," *White Review*, February 1, 2017, 145.

<sup>69</sup> A reoccurring quote throughout the film *It's What's Inside That Counts*. This quote acts as a kind of slogan for the "BU Corporation".

<sup>70</sup> See: Mark A. Martinez, *The Myth of the Free Market: The Role of the State in Capitalist Economy* (Sterling: Kumarian Press, 2009).

<sup>71</sup> Maclean, "It's What's Inside That Counts," 24:50-52.

<sup>72</sup> Guru: "My Data's been all kinds of dried up, I haven't had a lick of connectivity in days". Ibid, 19:58- 20:00



have been had she not sacrificed her material self to that very system. Data's self-talk continues on the trajectory of unlimited potential. Still enthralled by the hegemonic ideals of her world, Data speaks directly: "When your world falls apart, pick yourself up and do it again...".<sup>73</sup> Regardless of the many pep-talks and signals of positivity, ultimately, the film ends with her corporeal collapse.

#### "LOADING"

Narcissus is not in love with a reflection of himself but loves the image itself, the fatal attraction of digital narcissism: 'psychobiological technology – all the computer prosthesis and self-adjusting electronic networks we possess – provides us with a kind of strange bioelectronic mirror, in which each person, like some digital Narcissus, is going to slide along the trajectory of a death drive and sink in his or her own image. Narcissus= narcosis'<sup>74</sup>

*IWITC* is not the only film of Maclean's that represents certain deaths. There seems to be a discerning continuity of time within the work of Maclean, that follows, frequently, the ageing body, specifically from adolescence to adulthood.<sup>75</sup> This is often anxiously depicted, as the body becomes a site for abusive practices and 'becoming-into-the-world' realities. The work, though, often unsettling and charged with abuse and power hierarchies, does hold within it a glimmer of possibility outside of the repetitive cycling of stories. Maclean often uses fairy tales, myths and art-historical/cinematic references, to create a stark critique on the representational qualities of these mediums. Within these works, there is often an uncanny glimmer of possibility captured through death. Death, within Maclean's larger body of work, seems to generate an opening, or a moment of complete change, upheaval or ending. The artist sets up worlds as spaces of consumerism, perpetual growth, and technological transcendence. These ideological frameworks play out through the films, but ultimately, something dies, breaks or becomes disrupted in some way.

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<sup>73</sup> Maclean, "It's What's Inside That Counts," 29:07-14.

<sup>74</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 160, quoted in: Fred Botting, *Sex, Machines and Navels: fiction, fantasy and history in the future present* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 196.

<sup>75</sup> See: Rachel Maclean, "Feed Me," HD video, colour and sound, 2015, video, <https://www.rachelmacleane.com/feed-me/> and Rachel Maclean, "upside mimi мими и моп," HD animation, colour, sound, architecture and sculpture, 2021, video, <https://www.rachelmacleane.com/mimi/>.

These disruptions switch the structures of power, blur the characters autonomous or fixed identities and essentially, end either the sequence or the film itself.<sup>76</sup> Considering the final visual element in *IWITC*, (see Fig 16) this research positions itself alongside this liminal space. This sign, a literal “loading” not only signals towards the space of Data as she passes through from life into death – but also captures the space between the work itself ending and the subsequent seeing or experiencing that the audience viewing the work takes in. The space where an audience can be active agents in the reception of the film, and therefore contributing to understanding, meaning, and activation of the work itself. From this position of “loading” into something different, acts of decentring, of ‘seeing’ anew are positioned within the realm of possibility. In a final return to Graham’s “technological sublime,” this “loading” sign, and Data’s death within the monstrous, serves as a necessary engagement with transcendence that is embedded within material realities. This juncture, or transcendence that seeps down into the flesh, opens space for possibility and of change within the field of representation.

## CONCLUSION

Reading Maclean’s work, specifically in relation to death, as an opening up, or transitory space of becoming posthuman. This does not essentialise death, or frame death as an extinction or destruction that is an inevitable source for recuperation. This research aims to tentatively approach the subject as a metaphorical ending or disruption. Death here is not the sacrificial eradication, but rather a blurred reality within the whole ‘picture.’ Coming from a feminist new materialist point of view, death here is approached as something that is intertwined with life. One that refuses dualisms or *immanent* transcendences, but rather as matter or material with agency.<sup>77</sup> This chapter traced Data’s experience of life through the film *IWITC* and positioned it within the context of contemporary political discourses. Through outlining Data’s

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<sup>76</sup> It is important to note here that many of her films are repetitious, in that they follow along a circular trajectory. This, in some ways could imply a closed circuit of information and character performances, that never truly die. A power structure that circulates round and around, recycling bodies for the sakes of the larger mechanistic structure. Yes, the circularity could be read in this way, but, regardless of the narrative’s circulation, death within the sequences of the films creates a pause. This pause, or moment, I argue, is a space, and enough space for the spectator to metaphorically conclude a kind of ending, or blank space, and this ending or blank space, even if only for a moment, allows for even a glimmer of diffractive possibility that moves beyond and outside of the looping narrative.

<sup>77</sup> Lykke, *Vibrant Death: A Posthuman Phenomenology of Mourning*.

access to the “upper” realms, and the subsequent “lowering” through time-based changes – this chapter considered an alternative reading of death as possibility rather than complete end.

## Conclusion

Rachel Maclean presents a jumble of maximalist material spanning from capitalism, art history and critical theory, which enable a point of reference from where ‘we’ came from, where ‘we’ are now, and through death, or ending, empowers a creative delivery of where the viewer will go with this ‘material of insight and knowledge’. Maclean’s work explores primarily, the drastic implications of transhumanist worlds, but building and diffracting from this, the artist offers us possibilities for generative experience with transhumanism itself - as the stuff of insight and radical speculations. The generative material of the worlds is what, in this instance, allows for the characters to undergo cataclysmic change, growth and ultimately, a death.

This thesis explored the generative possibilities of *IWITC* considered through transhumanism and posthumanism. These insights revealed Maclean’s work as being embedded within the critical debates around entanglement and the de-centering of ‘Man’. *IWITC* offers a complicated positionality of the human/cyborg in relation to the system of power in which Data is embedded. The recognition of this complication and through the consideration of the difficulties of change and ‘blurred realities’, this work projects the viewer into spaces of compassionate possibility. By maintaining an underlying attention on Elaine L. Graham’s “technological sublime”, and through exploring *how* acts of transcendence may be generatively enacted through Maclean’s work, this research concluded with a material feminist perspective of death or ending. This final representation of a liminal space, a “loading”, revealed a transcendence that was beyond the notions of reaching a “higher” self, and instead, was the sinking deep into the representational “monster”.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to consider Maclean’s work through other generative lenses regarding the post/human. This thesis offers considerations into the possibilities of including both posthumanism and transhumanism through the work of Maclean. This engagement positions Maclean’s work within the realm of critical debate and offers a consideration of transcendence embedded in the material. I think that this research would benefit from furthering the scope of the ‘monstrous’ through the lens of critical disability studies. Data’s body is recognizably ‘monstrous,’ when

considering common tropes that are entangled with this term,<sup>78</sup> but further insight into how 'transcendence' may be reflected on through the lens of disability studies, would offer insights into how Data's 'life-support,' through the machine, contributes to her desire to be 'disconnected' and within the 'higher' realms of the film.

Maclean's work, though unsettling at times, does not necessarily project forward into dystopias, but rather, imaginatively displaces the viewer in order to 'see' the now, which could be likened to a Brechtian form of alienation.<sup>79</sup> By seeing the now, in all its multiplicity and 'ugly' transgressions, 'we' may begin to deliberately step out of its cycling projections and begin to carve out alternative narratives such as posthumanism.

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<sup>78</sup> Data has blood oozing from her face, her body is spilling out in excess and her boundaries are unclear. See: Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, 9-28.

<sup>79</sup> See: W.A.J Steer, "Brecht's Epic Theatre: Theory and Practice," *Modern Language Review* 63, no. 3 (1968): 636-49.

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## Illustrations



*Figure 1:* Close-up still of Rachel Maclean, “It’s What’s Inside That Counts”, HD video, colour and sound, 2016, Commissioned by HOME, University of Salford Art Collection, Tate, Zabłudowicz Collection, Frieze Film and Channel 4, Courtesy of the artist. 23:33. <http://www.rachelmacleane.com/whats-inside-counts/>.



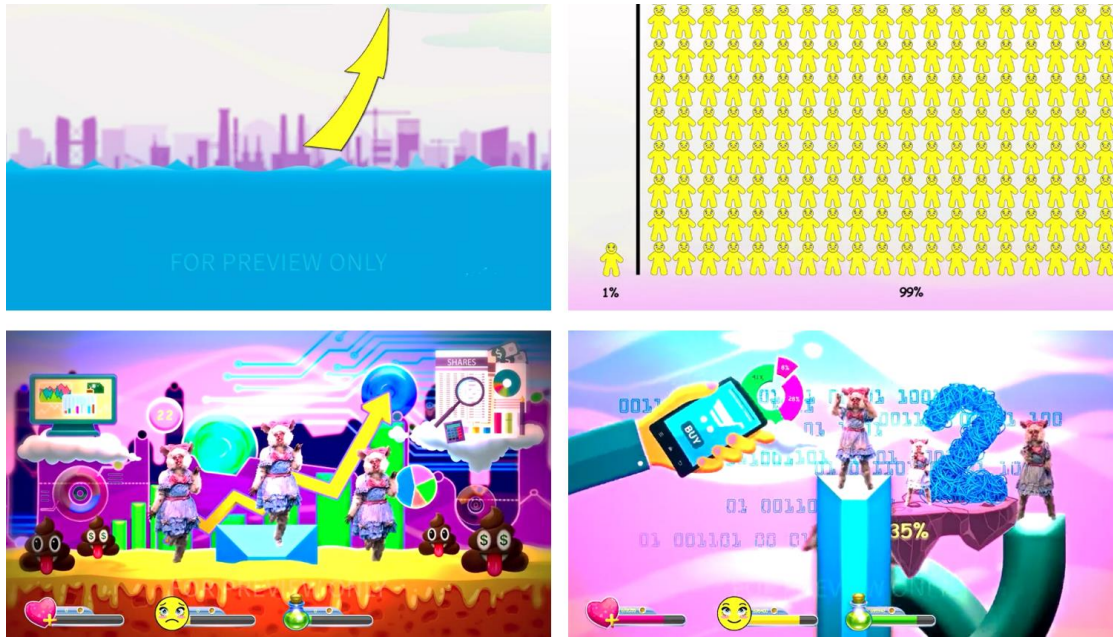
*Figure 2:* Rachel Maclean, “It’s What’s Inside That Counts”, HD video, colour and sound, 2016, Commissioned by HOME, University of Salford Art Collection, Tate, Zabludowicz Collection, Frieze Film and Channel 4, Courtesy of the artist. 0:09. <http://www.rachelmacleane.com/whats-inside-counts/>.





*Figure 3: Master of Catherine of Cleves, "Hellmouth\_- miniature from Hours of Catherine Cleves", Illustrated manuscript, c.1440.*





*Figure 4:* Rachel Maclean, “It’s What’s Inside That Counts”, HD video, colour and sound, 2016, Commissioned by HOME, University of Salford Art Collection, Tate, Zabłudowicz Collection, Frieze Film and Channel 4, Courtesy of the artist. 04:01, 04:16, 14:16 and 15:27. <http://www.rachelmaclea.com/whats-inside-counts/>.



*Figure 5:* Rachel Maclean, “It’s What’s Inside That Counts”, HD video, colour and sound, 2016, Commissioned by HOME, University of Salford Art Collection, Tate, Zabludowicz Collection, Frieze Film and Channel 4, Courtesy of the artist. 12:24 and 12:29. <http://www.rachelmaclean.com/whats-inside-counts/>.



*Figure 6:* Fritz Lang, “Metropolis”, video, black and white, 1927, produced in the Babelsberg Studios for Universum Film A.G (UFA). 53:42, 53:58 and 54:06. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yFzHH9EL9x0>.

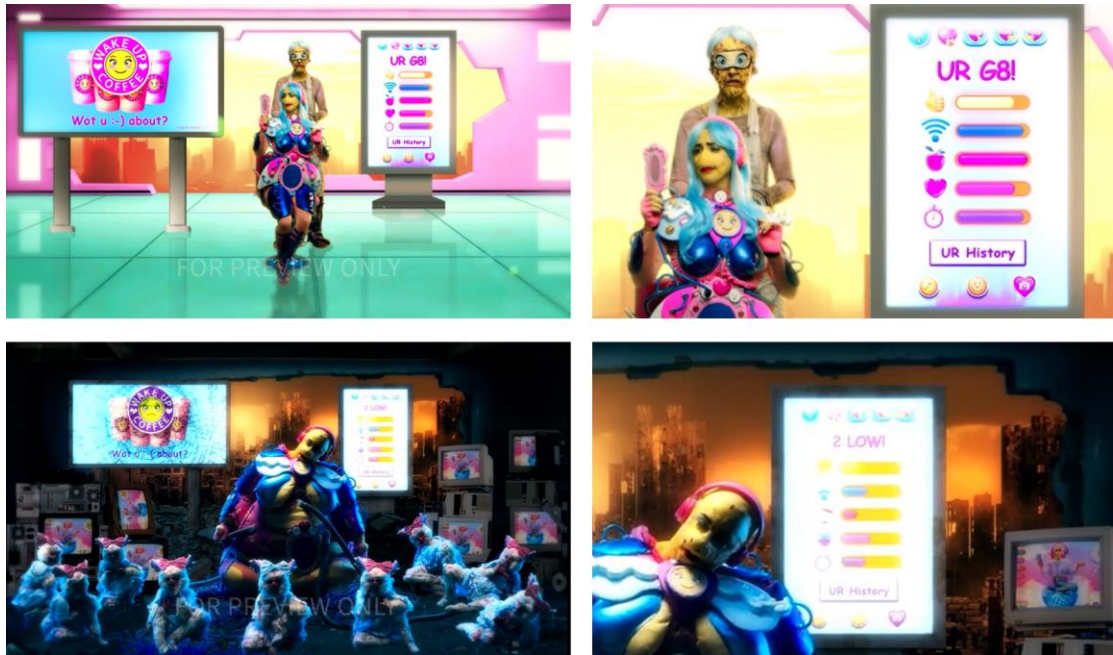


*Figure 7:* Rachel Maclean, “It’s What’s Inside That Counts”, HD video, colour and sound, 2016, Commissioned by HOME, University of Salford Art Collection, Tate, Zabludowicz Collection, Frieze Film and Channel 4, Courtesy of the artist. 03:37. <http://www.rachelmacleane.com/whats-inside-counts/>.

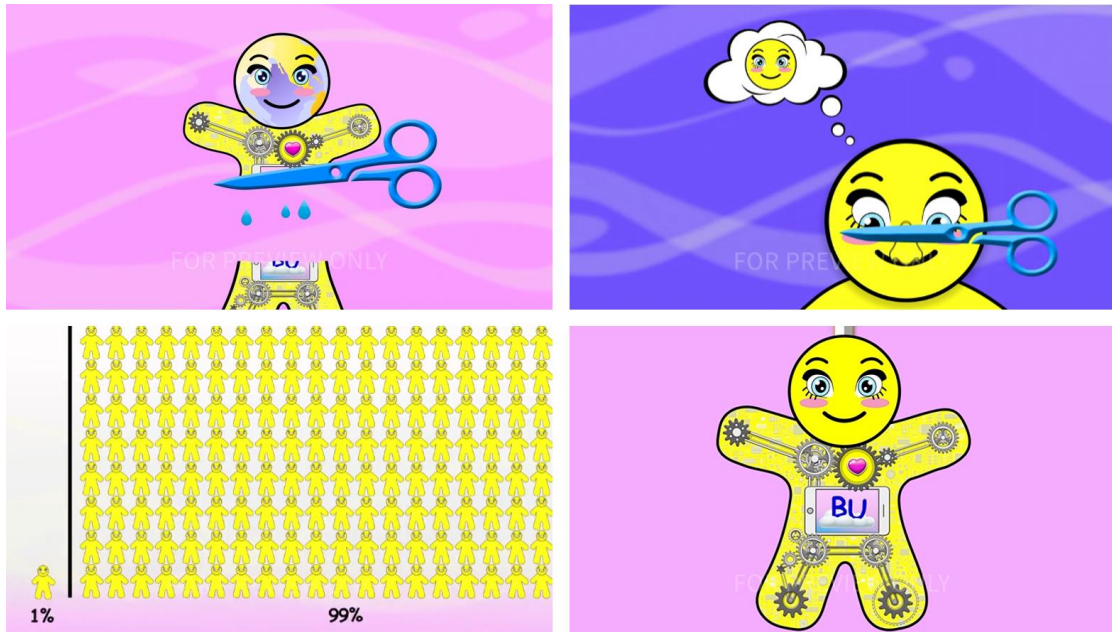


*Figure 8:* Winrich Kolbe, Star Trek: The Next Generation, “Birthright Part I”, video, colour and sound, episode 16 season 6, 1993, 30:15. [https://www.paramountplus.com/shows/star\\_trek\\_the\\_next\\_generation/video/3QW0DzoztzSBInfDfzbZHDLsJb9Bh\\_aA/star-trek-the-next-generation-birthright-part-1/](https://www.paramountplus.com/shows/star_trek_the_next_generation/video/3QW0DzoztzSBInfDfzbZHDLsJb9Bh_aA/star-trek-the-next-generation-birthright-part-1/)

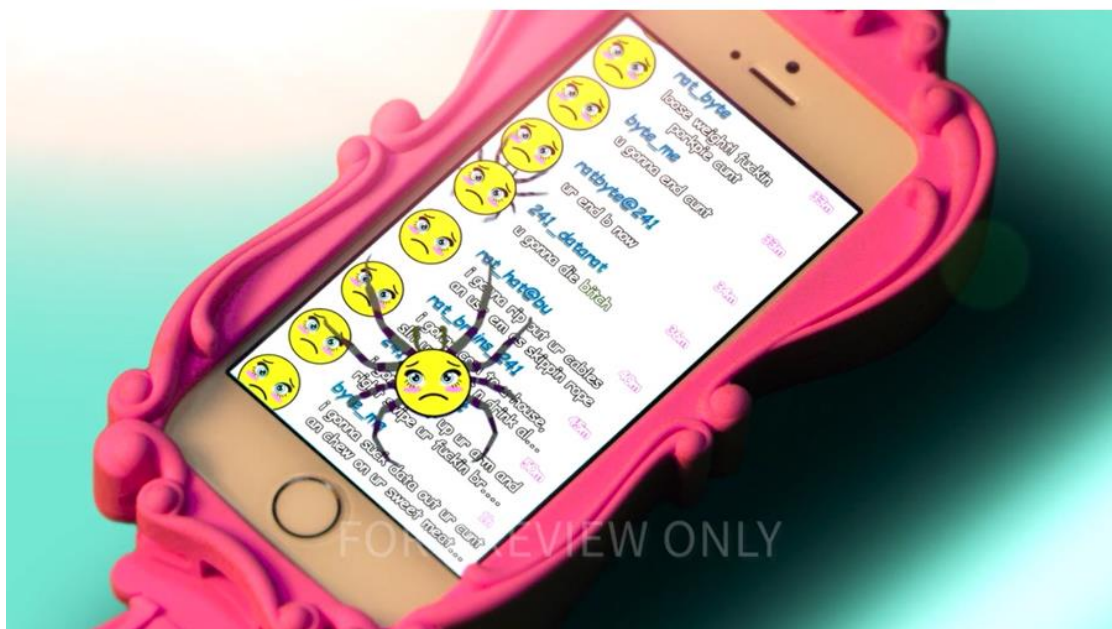




*Figure 9:* Rachel Maclean, “It’s What’s Inside That Counts”, HD video, colour and sound, 2016, Commissioned by HOME, University of Salford Art Collection, Tate, Zabludowicz Collection, Frieze Film and Channel 4, Courtesy of the artist. 9:48 and 29:28 <http://www.rachelmacleane.com/whats-inside-counts/>.



*Figure 10:* Rachel Maclean, “It’s What’s Inside That Counts”, HD video, colour and sound, 2016, Commissioned by HOME, University of Salford Art Collection, Tate, Zabludowicz Collection, Frieze Film and Channel 4, Courtesy of the artist. 03:53, 04:11, 04:15 and 04:33 <http://www.rachelmaclea.com/whats-inside-counts/>.



*Figure 11:* Rachel Maclean, “It’s What’s Inside That Counts”, HD video, colour and sound, 2016, Commissioned by HOME, University of Salford Art Collection, Tate, Zabludowicz Collection, Frieze Film and Channel 4, Courtesy of the artist. 09:48 and 11:31. <http://www.rachelmacleane.com/whats-inside-counts/>.



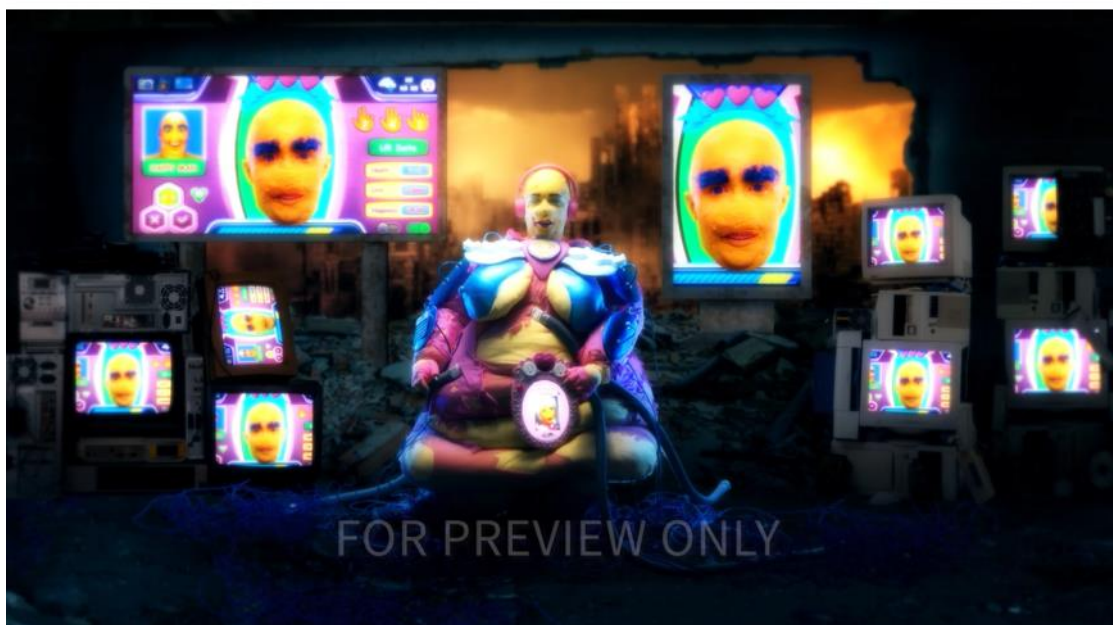
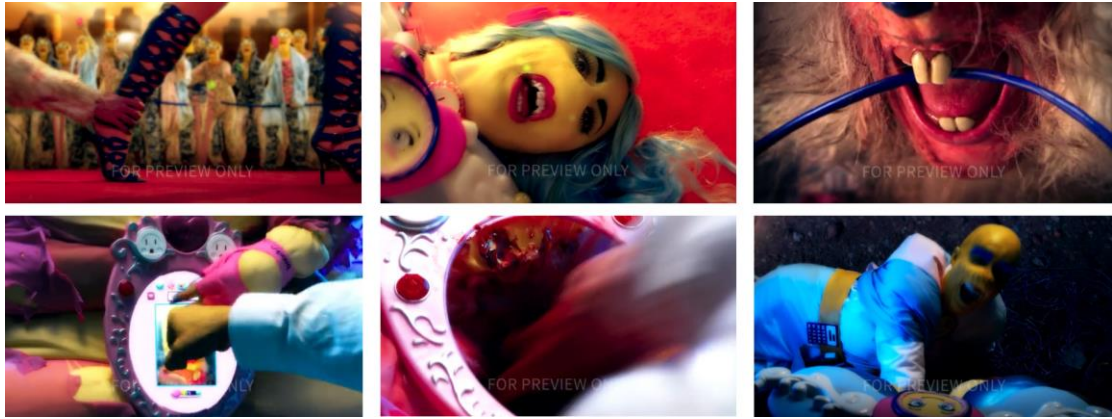


Figure 12: Rachel Maclean, “It’s What’s Inside That Counts”, HD video, colour and sound, 2016, Commissioned by HOME, University of Salford Art Collection, Tate, Zabludowicz Collection, Frieze Film and Channel 4, Courtesy of the artist. 23:33 and 02:05. <http://www.rachelmaclea.com/whats-inside-counts/>.



*Figure 13:* From top to bottom, Rachel Maclean, “Spite Your Face,” HD Video and sound, 2017, commissioned by Alchemy Film & Arts for Scotland + Venice at the 57th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia 2017, courtesy of the artist, 08:10 and 08:13. <http://www.rachelmaclean.com/spite-your-face/> and Rachel Maclean, “upside mimi mimi mimi”, HD video animation, architecture and sculpture, 2021, Commissioned by Jupiter Artland, Courtesy of the artist, 06:47 and 06:52. <https://www.rachelmaclean.com/mimi/>



*Figure 14:* Rachel Maclean, “It’s What’s Inside That Counts”, HD video, colour and sound, 2016, Commissioned by HOME, University of Salford Art Collection, Tate, Zabludowicz Collection, Frieze Film and Channel 4, Courtesy of the artist. 02:52, 03:01, 11:25, 24:20, 24:44 and 24:45. <http://www.rachelmacleane.com/whats-inside-counts/>.



*Figure 15:* Rachel Maclean, “It’s What’s Inside That Counts”, HD video, colour and sound, 2016, Commissioned by HOME, University of Salford Art Collection, Tate, Zabludowicz Collection, Frieze Film and Channel 4, Courtesy of the artist. 18:54.  
<http://www.rachelmacleane.com/whats-inside-counts/>.



*Figure 16:* Rachel Maclean, “It’s What’s Inside That Counts”, HD video, colour and sound, 2016, Commissioned by HOME, University of Salford Art Collection, Tate, Zabludowicz Collection, Frieze Film and Channel 4, Courtesy of the artist. 29:04.  
<http://www.rachelmaclean.com/whats-inside-counts/>.

