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‘Beyond Fake’: Real Dolls™ and the Posthuman
Troubling of Femininity and Desire

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Abstract: This paper explores the complexities of posthuman gendered identity and desire as represented in the Real Doll – the eerily life-like sex doll with a fully articulated skeleton and ‘anatomically correct’ silicone body. To begin, I investigate how, by way of Lyotard’s explanation of the pornographic, the Real Doll perpetuates a heteronormative and idealized femininity within popular media. From here however, I examine, through the work of Judith Butler and Kim Toffoletti, how the Real Doll indeed challenges and complicates such fixed notions of gender and arrives at a space of fetish, fantasy, and eventually, the uncanny. The uncanny, and particularly the queer uncanny, embodied in the work of performance and video artist Amber Hawk Swanson and her Amber Doll project, is where I see the most productive possibilities for the Real Doll in the destabilization of gendered identity and desire.

Keywords: Real Doll, uncanny, queer, posthuman, sexuality, pornography, hyperfemininity, fetish, Amber Hawk Swanson

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'Beyond Fake':¹ Real Dolls™ and the Posthuman Troubling of Femininity and Desire
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Since 1996, Abyss Creations of San Marcos, California has been manufacturing the Real Doll. Their website states that: 'If you've ever dreamed of creating your ideal partner',² she (or he) can be yours for just under six thousand dollars. This doll boasts a completely articulated skeleton, is made from a unique blend of flesh-like silicone rubber, and has parts moulded from life casts for anatomically correct positioning. Each doll is completely customizable. The female, which is the focus of this paper, is offered in ten different body types and has sixteen interchangeable faces from which to choose. A customer can select the hair, make-up and nail polish for her or his purchase, and indeed, can even choose specific genitalia. While Abyss Creations has been successfully in business for just over a decade, in the past year, from both Channel Five's documentary *Guys and Dolls* to the fictional film *Lars and the Real Girl*, the Real Doll has been garnering much media attention.

Certainly, sex dolls are nothing new. Those of the vinyl and blow-up variety, with their painted-on eyes, open mouths, and various degrees of individualized (and sometimes vibrating) sex organs, are often the running joke of stag parties and sitcoms alike. Such dolls, though exemplifying a certain identifiably passive femininity, are popularly understood as falling far short of any kind of realism. As a result, they offer instead a parodic reading of such femininity. But, what of the Real Doll, with her more lifelike features? Is she simply an idealized and hyperfeminine extension of this passive blow-up doll? Or, through feminist and queer appropriations, can she potentially disrupt representations and constructions of gender, sexuality and desire? By investigating the Real Doll in popular culture, through the lens of psychoanalytic, postmodern and posthuman theories, I will now put these questions to task.

The documentary *Guys and Dolls*, which features interviews with several men regarding their relationships with one or more Real Dolls, emphasizes companionship through the fixed stability that these dolls bring to the men who purchase them. Although the Real Doll's primary function is sex, Davecat, a subject featured in the documentary, insists that his doll is 'an anchor'. With her he knows 'just what to expect'. But he complains that, 'with [real] women, you don't really get that'.³ In fact,

¹ Hole, 'Doll Parts', *Live Through This* (Geffen Records, 1994).

² Abyss Creations, Real Doll™ <<http://www.realdoll.com/>> [accessed May 2008].

³ *Guys and Dolls*, dir. by Nick Holt (North One Television, 2007).

without fail, all of the men in the documentary express that relationships with humans, and especially with women, are painfully difficult in their temporality.

Similarly, this longing for a staid relationship is also present in *Lars and the Real Girl*. In this fictional account, Lars, a sweetly awkward young man, is seeking lasting love, and attempts to find it in his relationship with the Real Doll, Bianca, whom he orders online. Lars's desire for companionship is exemplified nearly halfway through the film, when he and Bianca have become better acquainted. Not only is Bianca a fixture in Lars's life at this point, however, but also, she is widely accepted within the small rural community (who welcome her in their support of Lars). As such, Lars finds it an appropriate time to profess his love. In an attempt at privacy, he carries Bianca on his back into the woods. Once there, Lars leads Bianca to a quiet place, climbs onto a wooden platform, and bellows out the lyrics to Nat King Cole's L-O-V-E, as his beloved sits perched nearby.

While this scene marks the height of romance in *Lars and the Real Girl*, several characters do suggest that Lars and Bianca have taken things further. Lars's brother is particularly keen to hint at a sexual relationship between the two, but this is never addressed explicitly. In contrast, in *Guys and Dolls*, sex is certainly acknowledged and openly discussed. Thus, as the Real Doll evades her intended use in *Lars*, her sexual design is a key feature of the documentary. While the Real Doll may not be pornography as we generally think of it then—that is, video or still images of explicit sex acts—it is clear that her design can be thought of as pornographic. Each doll is unmistakably sexual in her supposed anatomical correctness and the functionality therein.

In his influential text *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-François Lyotard insists that pornography has 'not met the challenge of the mass media'.⁴ Catherine Belsey explains this challenge as such:

Because we have no access to the real, visual realism is not truth, Lyotard insists, but a way of 'ordering the visible'...Realism positions objects in accordance with a point of view that makes them readily recognizable, and by this means, affirms the identity and confirms the knowledge of the viewing subject. Photography, film, television show us the world we think we know, generally from our accustomed point of view, and thus, at least in their mode of address, do not challenge us to re-examine our assumptions. The 'degree zero' of realism is pornography, which puts the object of the gaze—as object—just where the viewer wants it.⁵

⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 75.

⁵ Catherine Belsey, *Culture and the Real* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 130-131.

This idea can be applied to the Real Doll, as, through her realistic and pornographic object manifestations, she does indeed centre the heterosexual masculine subject, problematically confirming him within a stabilized space of identity. Further, too, there is a reproduction of the feminine object of desire that relies upon this narrative of the heteronormative. The Real Doll reinforces a certain racialized hyperfemininity—from her straight hair and light skin tones, make-up, and normative to idealized body-type, to her absolute and complete sexual passivity.

These dolls so vividly embody an idealized trope of femininity, as well as add to it, continuing the discourse that suggests what femininity ought to be. Taking this further, and juxtaposing it alongside the above statements from *Guys and Dolls* and themes from *Lars*, the Real Doll seems to provide a haven from a certain femininity that can and does run amuck. As postmodern femininity combines with the posthuman by way of technology, there is the powerful narrative that such femininity is threatening and requires dominance. Thus, these seemingly static, lifeless dolls reappropriate this femininity and provide an outlet for the narrative. Further, through maintaining the hyperfeminine ideal, they also confirm the masculine heteronormative identities of the men who desire them.

Yet, I find Lyotard's above critique of the pornographic problematic at best. While I agree that his interpretation certainly has its place in postmodern analysis, I think that it also discounts the potential that can arise out of pornography. If photography, film, and television 'show us the world we think we know', pornography then shows us the world, or the object we think we desire 'just where [we] want it', within a specific reality. However, what if this realism gets heightened to the extreme, as I think is the case with the Real Doll?

Understanding the Real Doll through the lens of Lyotard's analysis is only one aspect of what she is, and how she can be read. I will not deny that the Real Doll as troublingly hyperfeminine masturbatory prop is probably her most common use, yet I think there is still potential here—within this heterosexual framework, as well as through a queering of these dolls—for productive work in the decentring of the subject.

Kim Toffoletti, in her chapter 'Barbie: A Posthuman Prototype', writes about the potential of Barbie in this way, and I think her analysis is apt for investigating the cultural meanings surrounding the Real Doll as well. In a rather lengthy account, which I think is worth quoting in full, she states that:

Barbie reveals nothing about 'real' women because her longer-than-long legs, masses of blonde hair, and pneumatic breasts exceed the limits of phallogocentric signification by virtue of their hyperfemininity. The way that the markers of the feminine are exaggerated on her form confounds the category of 'woman' because it can no longer be contained to a fixed set of attributes. Barbie comes to occupy what Baudrillard calls the 'fractal', or fourth order of the sign, whereby the proliferation of the unbound signifier incites a viral mode of replication that liberates value from any point of reference...If we agree with Baudrillard...then Barbie does not simply reflect an ideal image of femininity. Instead, the indeterminacy caused by the collapse of absolute value systems refracts meaning from her plastic body. Plastic implies instability and process, and like its definition, the main forms plastic may take are ambiguous and contradictory...It is transformative, contaminating the distinctions between natural and artificial, subject and object.⁶

Like Barbie then, the Real Doll, through her outer appearance and penetrable silicone flesh, also hyperfeminizes and confuses the signifier of 'woman' so it too can no longer contain a 'fixed set of attributes'. She confirms, through such excess, Judith Butler's notion of gender as a reproducible replication:

Insofar as heterosexual gender norms produce inapproximable ideals, heterosexuality can be said to operate through the regulated production of hyperbolic versions of 'man' and 'woman'. These are for the most part compulsory performances, ones which none of us choose, but which each of us is forced to negotiate...Such norms are haunted by their own inefficiency; hence, the anxiously repeated effort to install and augment their jurisdiction.⁷

Further, while Barbie is made of plastic, the Real Doll is made of silicone, a material I find even more appropriate to signify that which is posthuman. Such material, which is more flexible and flesh-like than plastic, suggests, as Toffoletti describes, 'that as the distance between ourselves and our cultural objects fall away, the place of the subject at the centre of the world is destabilized, creating the potential to rethink subjectivity as always in process'.⁸

Toffoletti, citing Hal Foster, goes on to argue that within this hyperreality, the iconic doll can be understood beyond the 'fetishistic and voyeuristic image of woman...whereby the masculine subject confronts the possibility of his own dissolution in an act of identification with, or becoming of,

⁶ Kim Toffoletti, 'Barbie: A Posthuman Prototype', *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2007), pp. 57-79 (p. 67-68).

⁷ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 237.

⁸ Toffoletti, p. 72.

the fragmented female form'.⁹ Yet, Toffoletti's argument offers a reductive account. If, as she asserts, the masculine begins to identify with this fragmented female form, where does this leave desire? While I would argue that identification and desire cannot and do not remain separate, but rather inform each other constantly, Toffoletti does not emphasize this conflation, and as a result problematically removes desire as an active source that can indeed destabilize the subject.

Instead of going beyond the fetish to reach a destabilized subjectivity, I think its effect can be achieved through the fetish and the fantasy it invokes. For Freud, the fetish appears when a 'normal' sexual object is replaced by another that 'bears an assignable relation to the person whom it replaces and preferably to that person's sexuality'.¹⁰ Fetishism, which Freud (problematically) believes is only present in men, takes place when there is a disavowal of the mother's castration. That is, instead of accepting that the mother is without the phallus, the fetishist places the phallus elsewhere, and that object, instead of the female genitalia, and the woman to which it belongs, becomes the object of desire.¹¹

The Real Doll then, bearing an 'assignable relation' to woman, becomes a site of fetishistic overflow. Her hyperfemininity replaces the masculine heterosexual desire of woman with an excessive reproduction of it, while simultaneously disavowing the castration of the mother. In so doing, The Real Doll's silicone body enacts a fetishistic fantasy of gender and (homoerotic) desire. As such, this fantasy confuses the heteronormative. Butler recognizes fantasy as a place of fluid transformation and possibility:

To posit possibilities beyond the norm or, indeed, a different future for the norm itself, is part of the work of fantasy when we understand fantasy as taking the body as a point of departure for an articulation that is not always constrained by the body as it is...Moreover fantasy is part of the articulation of the possible; it moves us beyond what is merely actual and present into a realm of possibility...The critical promise of fantasy, when and where it exists, is to challenge the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality. Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home.¹²

⁹ Ibid., p. 66.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, 15 vols (London: Penguin, 1977, repr. 1991), 7, p. 66.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 353.

¹² Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 28-29.

If fantasy is a way to bring the 'elsewhere home', this sits nicely with Freud's insistence that the fetish, along with, and because of its immediate location to a scene of trauma (recognizing and disavowing the mother as castrated) is also linked to the uncanny. Freud's uncanny, or *unheimliche*, collapses into definitions of the *heimliche*, through the metaphor of home. Freud explains that, 'the subject's interest comes to a halt half-way, as it were; it is as though the last impression before the uncanny and traumatic one is retained as the fetish'.¹³

The Real Doll as a fetishized object is, thus, already situated on the cusp of the uncanny. That she is an excessively life-like representation of the feminine form makes her position all the more fascinating and appropriate. Freud explains that the 'uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known and long familiar'.¹⁴ While he speculates about what this 'long familiar' might be throughout his essay, what I find most provocative is how this certain homely something is particularly feminine.

Freud's analysis depends upon the E.T.A. Hoffmann narrative, 'The Sand-Man', an ill-fated love story about a young man and his infatuation with a doll. Freud however, does not envision the doll, Olympia, to be the height of that which is uncanny in this account, but rather, he focuses upon Hoffman's other literary motif, the eyes and the fear of becoming blind, as a connection to the fear of castration. Later in Freud's essay, he also draws much attention to the fear of being buried alive — something which he wagers is to some, 'the most uncanny thing of all'.¹⁵ This fear, he argues, is actually a fear of returning to the womb. Thus, while Freud attempts to avoid the feminine uncanny by reducing the significance of Olympia, it cannot remain repressed, and returns in several ways throughout his analysis.

In 'Fiction and Its Phantoms', Hélène Cixous takes Freud to task on his ambivalence towards the feminine, acknowledging these above slippages, and insisting that his attention to the eyes is an opportunity for Freud to distance himself from that which is truly uncanny: in this case the doll as a marker of femininity. While in his essay, Freud recognizes that dolls and automata bring about anxieties surrounding the ruptured space of human and non-human, Cixous must tease out and elaborate on these discrete elements in order to apply them to the feminine uncanny. Here, she

¹³ Freud, *On Sexuality*, p. 354.

¹⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'The "Uncanny"' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey and others, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), vol. 17, pp. 217-56, (p. 220).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

argues that Freud 'minimizes the uncertainty revolving around Olympia',¹⁶ and in so doing, 'reverts to the universal, or nearly so; he calls out to the "majority of men", to a nearly impossible consensus as if the *Unheimliche* were recognized in the same way by everyone. A rather paradoxical hope, [she ventures] since it is the nature of the *Unheimliche* to remain strange'.¹⁷

As that which is disturbingly familiar then, the uncanny proves to be an excellent place to consider the possibilities for the destabilization of the subject. Nicholas Royle, in his book *The Uncanny*, echoes Cixous's above contention by explaining that: 'The uncanny involves feelings of uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of who one is and what is being experienced. Suddenly one's sense of oneself (of one's so called "personality" or "sexuality", for example) seems strangely questionable.'¹⁸ But, like Lars and the men featured in *Guys and Dolls*, Freud, too, attempts to contain a certain feminine overflow of the uncanny. Thus, there seems to be a constant dialogue between a fetishistic instability and a longing for a safely masculine heteronormative narrative. What if, however, such an attempt were reconfigured through the *queerly* feminine uncanny?

Amber Hawk Swanson is a performance artist who has created her double in a Real Doll. With Amber Doll, she enacts sometimes violent, pornographic sexual fantasies that call attention to the heteronormative narrative that the hyperfeminine Real Doll can perpetuate. Because of the queerly uncanny nature of her work, however, she also problematizes and destabilizes such queer feminine subjectivity. She explains:

As a performance/video artist also working in photography, I explore the interplay between repulsion, desire, and surrender. I rely on spatial and temporal relationships inherent in ritualized settings such as weddings, rollerskating rinks, and American-football tailgating parties. Each of my selected scenarios evokes nostalgia and camaraderie in spaces where the human impulses of curiosity, longing, hostility, and self-assessment are magnified. By inserting a sexually available silicone replica of myself into these already charged environments, the possibility of peril often interrupts allegiance to the social codes of each space.¹⁹

¹⁶ Hélène Cixous, 'Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche* (The "Uncanny")', *New Literary History*, 7:3 (1976), 525-48 (p. 533).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 533.

¹⁸ Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 1.

¹⁹ Amber Hawk Swanson, <<http://amberhawksanson.com/>> [accessed May 2008].

In 'The Queer Uncanny', Olu Jenzen argues that the connection between the (feminine) queer and the uncanny is a link not to be taken for granted. She draws particular attention to the etymological similarities between the two, stating:

Firstly, the cultural and epistemological placing of the queer 'on the edge of', 'at the back of', 'in opposition to', and even 'underneath' heterosexuality resembles the relation of the *unheimlich* to the *heimlich*. Secondly, the uncanny effect of making strange the world as we know it is an element identifiable both in queer theory and what we may want to call a queer aesthetic, drawing on both repletion and the carnivalesque. Lastly, by paying attention to the uncanny in the meaning of that which 'ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light' (Freud 1990 [1919], p. 345), and which relates to the second semantic connotation of *Heimlich*, meaning concealed, kept from sight and secret, we can see how the uncanny structures the cultural space of 'the closet' and the 'open secret'.²⁰

It is in this final section, drawing upon the language of the closet, that the feminine becomes more pronounced. Aside from being a metaphor for the queer, the closet here returns us to Freud's emphasis upon the uncanny fear of the claustrophobic space, being buried alive, and what can be argued as the most familiar space of all, the womb.

Coupling the queer with the uncanny doubles the effect of destabilizing the feminine within the Amber Hawk Swanson's Amber Doll project. The queering and uncanniness of this hyperfemininity further denaturalizes the heteronormative discursive of such as an idealized sexual passivity. Amber Doll, and her queering, elucidates the exaggerated production of femininity in a way that does not lead directly back to a narrative of heteronormativity, and through hyperfeminine replica, situates Amber Hawk Swanson, as original, into her own heteronormative gendered crisis. In so doing, this highlights the nature of gender as a copy of a copy. Amber Doll calls attention to the very artifice of Amber Hawk Swanson's feminine gendered identity, challenging the notion of naturalized gender and, thus, desire.

Thus, as the Real Doll's impact on identity fluctuates, she provides a complex critique of heteronormativity, as well as the narratives that struggle with overflow into the postmodern and the posthuman. Her hyperfemininity fictionalizes Lyotard's realism, providing fetish, fantasy, and a wavering glimpse into the uncanny, which challenges and destabilizes identity through the pornographic. As her form is appropriated for such projects as Amber Doll, she can provide queer feminist readings that renegotiate feminine gendered identity and desire.

²⁰ Olu Jenzen, 'The Queer Uncanny', *eSharp*, 9 (2007) <<http://www.sharp.arts.gla.ac.uk/>> (p. 4) [accessed May, 2008].

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