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book review

The Dread of Sameness

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Jackie Stacey
The Cinematic Life of the Gene
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We live in an age in which terms like genetic manipulation, artificial intelligence and the genome are becoming part of both popular culture and political discourse. Indeed, some argue that we are entering the age of the 'posthuman', an era in which a gradual rise in corporeal and cognitive artificial enhancement will see us leave the frail 'human' self behind in a quest for increasing bodily perfection. Since the 1990s the spectre of the clone has entered mass media discourse on the 'posthuman' and concomitant ethical debate on whether humans should 'play god' with nature, while at the same time we have seen an increasing proliferation of images of cloned and genetically modified entities on our cinema screens. It is this interplay between cultural anxiety, technoscientific progress and image cultures that Stacey addresses in *The Cinematic Life of the Gene*. Stacey provides a compelling argument that rather than being seen as separate domains of knowledge and meaning, both science and cinema have co-constitutive histories that have together given visual and textual

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form to the epistemological construct and ontological experience of the genetic identity. Together, Stacey argues, the world of science and the world of cinema make visible the fundamental invisibility of the genomic universe while simultaneously making manifest the complex history of identity politics that has surrounded human corporeality itself.

A dense yet theoretically rich text, *The Cinematic Life of the Genome* draws from a history of feminist and psychoanalytic scholarship on bodily identity and the cinematic gaze to interrogate what Stacey refers to as the emerging 'genetic imaginary'. A 'fantasy landscape inhabited by artificial bodies that disturb the conventional teleologies of gender, reproduction, racialization and heterosexual kinship', (8) this imaginary at once exposes long-standing anxieties about the destabilisation of traditional markers of difference, while amplifying these markers in the context of 'new codes of deception in the age of reproduction'. (9) What happens, Stacey asks, when the assuredness of the physical body as a marker of interiority is dismantled by possibilities of genetic manipulation under the surface of the skin? How do genomic technologies and the 'queering of biological processes' (11) challenge the heteronormative and racialised codes that have underscored normalising practices in the context of reproduction? How are these ontological concerns represented in the image-world of the cinema screen?

Stacey interrogates these issues via what she refers to as a 'series of cultural disturbances' (10) expressed through late twentieth-century science fiction cinema: disturbances to the 'biological foundations of embodied difference; to the visual intelligibility of humans; and to the continuity of singularity, individuality and authenticity'. (10) In Part One, 'Sameness Ad Infinitum', Stacey utilises the genre of body horror to examine the ways in which images and narratives of the teratological, or monstrous genetic mutation, challenge traditional reproductive and kinship relationships while at the same time exposing the horrors of abjection that can underscore images of 'unnatural' coupling and copying. Via an in-depth critique of Baudrillard's essay, 'The Final Solution' (2002), in which Baudrillard maintains that the scientific production of cloned life-forms will ultimately produce a hyperreal 'hell of the same', Stacey outlines the core assumptions of sexual difference and heterosexual reproduction that produce the cultural anxiety that surrounds the artificial progeny of genetic science. Building on the work of feminist theorists including Sarah Franklin, Rosi Braidotti and Barbara Creed, Stacey takes the figure of the cloned 'Ripley' in *Alien: Resurrection* (1997) as an imago of the monstrous feminine faced with the horror of her own copied self while at the same time destined to disrupt linear genealogies through her own reproduction of hybrid, monstrous life forms. While Stacey rehearses well-established arguments on the cinematic monstrous-feminine, she adds a significant new layer to this positioning. Pointing out that *Alien: Resurrection* places the 'mutability of the cell at the heart of its spectacular display of monstrous bodies', (39) she argues that as the abject outcome of deliberate genetic manipulation, Ripley and her offspring can be seen as manifestations of the monstrous-feminine in the context of a new genetic imaginary. Also in Part One, Stacey explores the film *Species* (1995) as another example of 'the spectacular monstrosities that genetically engineered hybrid female reproductive systems body forth', (x) arguing that this film can be seen as a manifestation of an emergent dialogic of visibility and invisibility in the context of genetic engineering. The central character of this film, 'Sil', both a physically perfect white female and a monstrous genetic mix of DNA, she maintains, exposes the 'potentialities and limits of visualizing technologies and information technologies to make legible the genetic truths of identity'. (91) If Ripley disrupts kinship lineages, Stacey suggests, Sil disrupts the assuredness of the fixity of the relationship between interior and exterior subjecthood on which historical identity politics have been built.

These themes of genetic monstrosity and identity interiority are continued in Part Two, 'Imitations of Life', in which Stacey examines a conceptual history of mimicry and imitative figures alongside queer notions of impersonation and psychoanalytic theories of subject formation. Chapter Five, 'Genetic Impersonation and the Improvisation of Kinship' takes the film *Gattaca* (1997), a story of two men who share genetic content in an attempt for one (flawed) to masquerade as the (perfect) other, as an example of a problematisation of stable masculinity in the context of queer genetic disguising and copying. Building on Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity, Stacey compellingly argues that this film raises critical questions about 'how the heterosexual–homosexual distinction governs the place of sexuality in the culture of the copy', (131) where technologies of replication both threaten the authority of paternity and challenge notions of agency, originality and individuality. Stacey extends this discussion in the following chapter, examining the convergence of genetic and surveillance technologies in the context of urban spatiality. In her analysis of the film *Code 46* (2003), a film on fetal cloning in an urban megacity, Stacey draws attention to the way in which text film combines 'anxieties about the biological legibility of authentic identity, kinship and relatedness in a world of fetal cloning with contemporary fears concerning geographical security, border control, and the mobility of migrant populations'. (156) Drawing from both Foucault and Deleuze, Stacey highlights the way in which images and discourses of genetic engineering are themselves situated in a complex global flow of surveilled bodies, new technologies and both spatial and social boundary constructions.

Part Three, 'Stairway to Heaven', moves from an analysis of issues of visuality and exteriority to an investigation of how the conjunction of biogenetic and cinematic technologies are impacting modes of human perception. This section begins with a statement that neatly summates one of the core themes of the book:

> Since our cells are now thoroughly codifiable as genetic information—which can be tagged, extracted, transferred, reprogrammed, and recombined—and our reproductive capacities can now be amplified, assisted, manipulated, substituted, externalized, or blended with laboratory techniques, previous notions of the sacredness of life, the distinctiveness of the human, and the singularity of embodied subjectivity can no longer form the foundations of modern subjecthood as they once did. [180]

Drawing from Benjamin's work on the loss of aura in the age of mechanical reproduction, Stacey argues that this shift in the perception of the nature of life itself might be seen as a fundamental loss of 'bio-aura', a sense of 'the transmission of humanness based on geneaological, integrated and unmediated vitality'. (183) Cloning, she maintains, strips humanness from its association with biological, generational reproducibility, and instead places it in the realm of the copy that loses its human authenticity. Stacey utilises the figures of 'digital triplets' in the film *Teknolust (2002)* and practices of cinematic montage and pastiche techniques in *Genetic Admiration* (2005) to explore the complex relationship between the 'bio-aura' of the human, digital cinematic techniques of replication and reproduction, and the science of genetic engineering. Artfully combining discourses on genetic replication and digital reproduction, Stacey again draws attention to the way in which the body is made and remade in both science and cinema, with both the image world and the world of science engaged in the process of visual and narrative (re)constitution of subjectivity itself.

The Cinematic Life of the Gene is indeed a timely exploration of the 'visceral force of the intangible disturbances occasioned by the prospect of techno-scientific interventions into biogenetic processes'. (258) Underexplored topics in feminist theoretical scholarship, cloning and genetic modification are clearly beginning to raise critical questions about issues of kinship, reproduction and subjective interiority that both challenge and newly problematise masculine humanism. Yet in its presumption that the 'new relationalities of geneticized embodiment generate a sense of a loss of bio-aura that is hard to name', (186) this text inadvertently raises a further issue in relation to discussions of the posthuman that is also beginning to surface in theoretical discourse. When does a social group, (or in Stacey's terms, 'the human') make the leap from cultural anxieties over the potentiality of genetic manipulation to a fundamental shift in the nature of the perception of the relationship between biology and personhood? Are we really there yet? In what ways can science fiction cinematic narratives be seen as hyperbolic exposures rather than concrete representations of the nature of a situated cultural imaginary? While the films that Stacey explores in her book might be seen as indicative of a core epistemological and ontological shift, it is perhaps too soon to claim that this fundamental perceptual transformation is underway. At the same time, one must caution against universalising discourses on 'human' perceptual fields of boundaries between self and other, as well as notions of bodily and subjective integrity and autonomy, in a world that contains multiple and heterogeneous cosmologies and conceptions of corporeality. Ultimately, *The Cinematic Life of the Gene* provides strikingly rich harbinger of the shape of genetic things to come and of future theoretical responses to the complexities of biotechnological transformation.

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