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# Outing Hybridity: Polymorphism, Identity, and Desire in Monika Treut's *Virgin Machine*

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*Now we are faced with a much more original situation: not that of the pure and simple inversion and promotion of remainders, but that of an instability in every structure and every opposition that makes it so that there is no longer even a remainder, due to the fact that the remainder is everywhere, and by playing with the slash, it annuls itself as such.*

*It is not when one has taken everything away that nothing is left, rather, nothing is left when things are unceasingly shifted and addition itself no longer has any meaning.*

Jean Baudrillard<sup>1</sup>

Monika Treut's 1988 film, *Virgin Machine*, offers a playful, self-ironizing look at the construction of sexual identities, utilizing the techniques specific to the filmic medium to create cuts and bridges between concepts, characters, and locations. In its portrayal of the passage and passages of the story's central character, Dorothe Müller, the film takes the viewer on a voyage of self-exploration and self-

discovery that moves from one harbor city, Hamburg, and ends in another, San Francisco. The move between harbor cities carries associations of commerce and exchange, arrivals and departures, as well as the potential for import and export of goods and values. A harbor is a place in constant motion and symbolizes a condition where movement and mutability serve as the ground for existence. Connected to the harbor as a metaphor for dynamic movement and change, the trope of crossing implied in Dorothe's voyage is linked to another kind of crossing that the film's title suggests, the crossing of virgin and machine. This hybrid term in itself introduces the play of mixing and separating that runs through the entire film.

By juxtaposing a term of sexual innocence with a term of mechanical production, Treut undermines the biological basis for female reproduction while simultaneously offering a technological explanation for the Christian postulate of virgin birth. The title becomes a metaphor for the work of the film itself, the convergence of female innocence with technologies of gender. On one level, the film can be read as a coming-out narrative, a parodic twist on the coming-of-age story, in which the central character discovers her lesbian sexuality in the over-determined streets of San Francisco. Yet on another level, Dorothe's voyage out is also an embrace of a more expansive conception of femaleness and femininity, effectively hybridizing a more essentialist construct of "woman". At issue here is a reading of the film's destabilization of fixed gender roles and the dictates of an intrinsically binary heterosexuality that culminates in an "outing" of the hybridity of sexual pleasure and identity free of the boundaries set by reproduction. In this reading, I argue that the film effectively weds a critique of compulsory heterosexuality, i.e. the precept that human sexuality serves primarily if not solely the purpose of reproduction, with an equivocal revaluation of sexuality as a continuum of choices.

The idea of the continuum is both offered and interrupted by Treut's use of editing, an interweaving or grafting of narrative and non-narrative sequences that insinuates gaps and undecidable spaces into Dorothe's story. The confusion and meaning-seeking that these spaces provoke in the viewer mirror the process of exploration and discovery followed by the protagonist, who over the course of the film comes to experiment with ever more audacious self-presentations in her pursuit of answers to the riddle of 'love'. The opening credits roll over a scene depicting a woman in a dress and heels as she picks up

some items from a cluttered desk, descends an outside staircase, fetches her bicycle and walks off. The viewer's directed gaze then blends with that of a man who has been closely watching the woman's movements. This voyeur shifts from his position of silence to speech when he taunts the woman's retreating figure with the words: "Liebe ist für viele Schafe, schwerer als die schwerste Strafe." [For many sheep, love is harder than the harshest punishment].<sup>2</sup> This diegetic reference to love sounds a central theme in the film and is immediately echoed in the non-diegetic song of romance that seeps into the scene and serves as a bridge to the next sequence in which the same woman is now seated in a boat being rowed by a muscular oarsman. Wearing a diaphanous dress and broad-brimmed hat, she peers at a thick tome open in her lap and, as if reading her own story, introduces herself in the past tense: "Dorothe Müller, das war ich." [Dorothe Müller, that was I]. Who Dorothe Müller was, who she is, and who she might become is the focus of the filmic narrative that then unfolds.

Following the boat sequence in which the highly feminized female protagonist directs the movements of a highly masculinized male, the voice-over reveals Dorothe's fascination with the nature and etiology of romantic love. Her reflections on this subject have cost her job as a journalist in Hamburg, and she sublimates her desire for knowledge of desire into a research project investigating the origins of love, focussing initially on the sex lives of chimps and the role of hormones. This project is inspired by her personal experiences of disappointed expectations: she has split with Heinz, her overweight and clinging ex-lover, and fallen for her step-brother, Bruno. The introduction of Bruno's character serves as a visual and narrative signal that the boundaries of convention as well as the real are about to be tested and have already been violated. Bruno appears to Dorothe while she is sleeping and brings her a message from their mother. Speaking in a mixture of languages Bruno's dream-like persona at first drifts in an unlocalizable realm of language and space that is only apparently resolved when he continues to be present in the sequences that follow after Dorothe awakes. Dorothe is clearly drawn to her lithe and sensuous step-brother, whose androgynous appearance links his position of "in-between" dream and reality with an "in-between" of gender and sexuality. Their growing intimacy is characterized by a playful sensuality that hovers on the edge of sexual pleasure. After Heinz's brutish and corpulent carnality, Bruno's sensual fraternity at first seems to offer Dorothe an alternative to the conventional hetero-

sexual relationship she has left behind her. Her interaction and fascination with Bruno symbolize a turning point in her development, and after Bruno leaves her to join his male lover, she is confronted with the threshold of her own sexual identity and prepares, if unconsciously, to cross it.

Her dreams of romance with Bruno shattered but not overcome, Dorothe packs up and decides to continue her quest elsewhere. Her search is ostensibly provoked by the wish to find her mother, but this combines with her interest in furthering her researches into the nature and mystery of love. The location presented as the potential solution to both of these desires is San Francisco, where her mother supposedly worked as a stripper. The journey to California, which her mother has described in fantastical terms as an exotic island inhabited solely by Amazonian black women and where everything is made of gold, inspires Dorothe's imagination as well as her longing to experience an 'other' shore of her self and sexuality.<sup>3</sup> Her search for her mother serves as the point of entry into an unfamiliar world, taking her from the tenements to the sex clubs of San Francisco. It is here that she first encounters performative alternatives to the modes of pleasure and sexual expression familiar to her.

This relocation does not, however, lead immediately to a radical departure or transformation. Although her initial interactions with women in the tenements of San Francisco are marred by antagonism and aggression focussed on Dorothe's foreignness, the bridge to a sense of community and solidarity with women appears in the figure of Dominique, an amiable immigrant whom Dorothe meets on the beach. This encounter with Dominique develops into a strong friendship, not only the first instance female friendship shown in the film, but also the first interpersonal connection devoid of the sexual tensions and romantic expectations that had determined Dorothe's relationships in Hamburg. Dorothe's friendship with Dominique serves as a segue into a women's community that had hitherto been unknown to her and which ultimately leads to her entrance into San Francisco's diverse female sexual culture.

It is here that it becomes apparent, however, that Dorothe's sensual desires are still guided by romantic expectations. While watching a strip show at a ladies only sex club, Dorothe becomes infatuated with Ramona, a male impersonator, stripper, and freelance love therapist. After a night of performed passion with Ramona, the realization that she is expected to pay for Ramona's services liberates her from the

restrictive expectations of romantic love, while her revelation that love is one thing and 'fun' another leaves the status of pleasure in this distinction unresolved. Her hearty laughter after Ramona leaves signifies her recognition that what she had presumed to be a unique experience of mutual gratification was nothing more than an expensive masquerade. Desire, pleasure, and sexuality are revealed to be as subject to performance and marketing as gender, and her realization of this cures her, at least momentarily, of her own projective fantasies and signals her subsequent performance on the stage of a ladies only strip show. Her romantic dream is displaced by the emancipatory consciousness of her own power to fantasize and create herself in and as desire.

The apparent progression in the direction of liberated, polymorphous sensuality and sexuality, and a sense of living in the moment (indicated by the shift from Dorothe's self-introduction in the past tense: "Dorothe Müller, that was I" to her symbolic 'rebirth' at the end of the film in the present: "Dorothe Müller, that is I") seems to demonstrate that the protagonist has become the free agent of her own sexual quests. If this is the case, then how does it relate to the film's title?<sup>4</sup> The reference to virginity in the title has a direct tie to the film's content in a sequence where Dorothe, still in her Hamburg apartment, watches a TV talk show on the topic of virgin birth. Discussing the validity of the Christian assertion of Maria's virginity, Dr. Ursula Ranke-Heinemann argues that the idea of virgin birth came out of Aristotelian biology where the woman served merely as a vessel or plant pot for the man's seed. By conjoining virgin and machine in the film's title, Treut revokes this reproductive dependency on men and alludes instead to a crossing or hybridization that evokes associations to cyborgs as well as to the production of purity as a technological process. In the German original, the title *Die Jungfrauenmaschine* places the machine in relation to a plurality of virgins, a multiplicity that is obscured in the English translation. As a machine with the capacity to produce numerous virgins, Treut's virgin machine undermines the singularity of the valorized virgin in Christian theology while simultaneously ironizing the concept of virgin birth. A machine carries no association with sex or sexuality and could thus be viewed as a kind of ideal virgin, here symbolically giving birth not to a Messiah but to another kind of salvation.

By revisioning virgin birth to be the birth of virgins in control of their own destiny rather than the Holy Virgin giving birth to a male

savior, Treut puts into practice what is articulated as a kind of feminist wishful thinking in Marilyn Frye's collection of essays on feminism provocatively titled *Willful Virgin*. Here Frye argues for a definition of virgin that is not grounded in heterosexuality and the commerce of heterosexual reproduction, but rather in woman's autonomy and freedom. In her definition, the virgin was not originally a term denoting a female innocent of sexual experience, but rather a free woman: "one not betrothed, not married, not bound to, not possessed by any man. It meant a female who is sexually and hence socially her own person."<sup>5</sup> While Frye unfortunately does not provide the source from which she derives her definition of virgin, her use of the term undermines conventional usage and provides a conceptual link to Treut's machinations and manipulations of the word. Treut's 'virgin machine' itself takes on a mutable form as at once the camera and the screen where conception and conceptions are represented, directed, and revisioned. By turning her lens onto the structure and process of conception itself, Treut reveals the incongruities between the fluid nature of sexuality and fecundity and their discursive treatment in patriarchal narratives of origin. Dorothe serves as both the object and the illustration for this revelation. As the scales fall from her (and by didactic example ideally also the viewer's) eyes, Dorothe is finally liberated from a definition of sexuality contingent upon the heterosexual relation and becomes a virgin in Frye's sense, i.e. unconfined by patriarchal conventions and free to find her pleasure where she pleases.

In Treut's film, the critique of the religiously justified machinations regulating sexuality and desire evoked by the title merges with an exploration of the margins of regulation and convention where alternatives to the codification and control of women's (virginal) bodies are played out. On the streets of San Francisco's 'red district', Dorothe encounters Susie Sexpert hawking invitations to a strip show. The figure of Susie Sexpert offers one example of a woman asserting and acting upon an unbounded, unregulated sexuality. Standing in front of an array of posters advertising various strip-show celebrities, Sexpert cheerfully outlines their relative merits to her curious listener. Pointing to a poster of Candy Samples whose enormous breasts are the secret to her enduring popularity Sexpert concludes: "It's not a pretty face that necessarily lasts the longest, but big tits will last forever." The clichéd fetishization of women's breasts is presented here without varnish as a lucrative marketing asset while, in the apparently guileless

earnestness of Susie Sexpert's commentary, its commodification is simultaneously rendered ludicrous.

Fascinated by Sexpert's unselfconscious exuberance towards women's bodies and her embrace of sexuality as a series of possibilities, Dorothe willingly agrees to accompany her on her appointments around town. On one of their stops en route, Sexpert shows off her dildo collection, proudly pointing out her favorite which she had made according to her own specifications and which she playfully refers to as "the Susie". In claiming this phallus designed for her pleasure, Sexpert demonstrates the liberating capacity to become the agent of one's own gratification, gaily manipulating the phallic-centric fetishism of compulsory heterosexuality to suit her own purposes: "Nowadays there are a million other ways to make love – and dildoes are one of the best ways." Susie Sexpert's pleasure in her dildo collection can be read critically as an assertion of sexual agency through the appropriation of the masculine 'member', but it also indicates that desire can be gratified by accouterments, i.e. the phallus as the arbiter or measure of masculine identity is revealed to function in isolation – disembodied, it is reduced to a sex toy. While Susie Sexpert's Do-It-Yourself guide to sexual pleasure can thus be read on one level as emancipatory, the focus on the phallus as sex object in a story that ostensibly celebrates female sexuality renders the implied critique of heterosexuality ambiguous.

The unselfconscious focus on the commodified phallus escalates into raucously self-conscious parody during Ramona's performance at a ladies only strip show. Sporting a mustache and dressed in a man's suit, Ramona strips down to her boxer shorts and then manipulates a beer bottle between her legs in an amusingly convincing imitation of male masturbation. This sequence in itself disrupts the presumed stability of appearance and identity as Ramona moves nimbly through an array of personæ from male impersonator to (wo)man wanking. This scene both echoes and exceeds the message of Sexpert's dildo collection in that it unmask the phallus as a movable, manipulable signifier that is the stuff not only of appropriation and transformation, but also of parody. Poking fun at Freudian-style 'penis envy', the focus shifts to women's sexual 'agency' and the emancipation from phallic dominance as necessarily male dominance ironically by laying claim to the phallus. Yet this appropriation of the phallus is merely one in a series of possibilities for erotic gratification where the phallus

'reigns' merely as a pleasurable and parodic accessory rather than as a supreme signifier.

Despite the allusion to the "million other ways," however, 'other' forms of sexual expression shown in the film are not conveyed with the same carefree humor that characterizes the Sexpert and strip show sequences. For example, the sexual antics of Dorothe's neighbors in the Tenderloin hotel are portrayed as both illicit and alienating through Dorothe's (and implicitly also the viewer's) voyeuristic gaze. While the portrayal of these sexual practices is ambiguous, the fact that the couple in the hotel is the product of a heterosexual pairing hints at another level of critique in the film's otherwise negative representation of heterosexuality. The couple's sadomasochistic rituals are represented with an intensity and seriousness that seems devoid of pleasure and in this context Dorothe's voyeurism comes across as detached curiosity. This stands in contrast to her obvious interest and involvement in the women's sex club scene, where her acknowledgment and participation are clearly portrayed as both open and affirmative. The sex club scene represents the threshold to the 'other' space she has been seeking and she seems delighted to have crossed it.

The crossing and crossing out of borders separating sexualities and their expression, although realized most fully after Dorothe's voyage to the New World (San Francisco), are anticipated in several of Dorothe's encounters back in the Old Country (Hamburg). The blurring of clear-cut sex and gender distinctions first occurs with the appearance of her step-brother Bruno, whose polymorphism I have already referred to above. In a pivotal sequence in a Hamburg nightclub Dorothe visits shortly before her departure for California, she circles the stage where a singer of androgynous appearance and ambiguous gender seductively intones a song of desire, love, and betrayal. Both Bruno and the nightclub singer serve as heraldic figures for Dorothe's embrace of mutable sexual identity. Their composite characters are underscored by the linguistic mixing in their utterances. Bruno makes his first appearance in Dorothe's Hamburg apartment speaking a mixture of Spanish, Italian, and German, while the nightclub singer's song combines lyrics in German and English that serve as a segue both to Dorothe's upcoming voyage and to the experiences of 'love' she will have. The song itself offers an ironic commentary not only on 'love' and the voyeurism implied by desire, but also on the voyeuristic position of the spectator – both diegetically referring to Dorothe, and outside of the screen to the film viewer:

“Fremde wende deinen Blick von mir, Fremde die Liebe ist teuer [Stranger turn your glance from me, stranger love is dear...] ... I wanna be loved by you.”<sup>6</sup>

The appearance of Ramona’s character after Dorothe has made the transition to San Francisco signals a shift from linguistic mixing to performative parody. Ramona is a body constantly in quotation marks, the ‘woman’ playing the ‘man’ playing with ‘himself’, the ‘woman’ playing the ‘woman’ desiring the ‘woman’. In all instances, Ramona is playing, her role is a put-on, a masquerade that shows all while revealing nothing. Ramona’s performance of gender and sexuality calls not only these into question, but the nature and ‘truth’ of desire as well. Ramona’s appearances and performances and her chameleon-like capacity to transform herself into a convincing imitation of sexual desire hinge not only on her skill as a mimic, but also on costuming. Costuming as a process of putting on and taking off is central to the theme of crossings as an assertion and confusion of identity shifts and relations. Dorothe too subsequently transforms her look – from her highly feminized appearance in Hamburg to a more androgynous mode in San Francisco. What remains consistent throughout, however, is her attention to her eyes, a detail that links the look with the gaze and places these in a self-reflexive and self-reflective dialogue with each other. The attention to appearance as well as the pleasure in eye make-up reveal an awareness of the commerce and exchange of looks that the production and the consumption of film and stage performance both share.

Shortly after her arrival in San Francisco, Dorothe makes her way about town still arrayed in her German ‘get-up’: a patterned dress, high heels, and sheer black stockings. Dorothe quickly progresses from get-up to put-on, falling for Ramona’s act before she becomes a performer herself. In her later appearance at the ladies only strip show, Dorothe shares the stage with another woman dressed in an absurdly minimalist version of bridal attire. In this company, Dorothe brazenly engages her audience with an assertive gaze, clearly enjoying her own position as performer watching her audience watch her. In this crossing of spectacle and spectator, she crosses the artificial line that separates the viewer from the performer, a boundary violation that demonstrates the arbitrary nature of the divide. In this experimental play with crosses and crossings, Treut uses Dorothe’s character to both reveal and affirm a variety of modes of desire and sexuality that are either not recognized or not condoned by the ‘dominant’ culture.

While there is something of the carnivalesque in Dorothe's staged metamorphosis,<sup>7</sup> her performance has an emancipatory impact that extends beyond the confines of the nightclub. On stage she acts out a kind of ritual, stripping away the raiment of voyeuristic objectification by simultaneously enacting and reversing it to become her own woman.

Yet the validity of this performance as performance is undermined by the song lyrics that accompany Dorothe's staged transition. The refrain "you don't fool me" from Pearl Harbor's song "Don't Fool Me" insinuates a self-ironizing quality to Dorothe's performance that serves as a multi-directional commentary on her 'coming out' as an 'acting out' and remarks the playful, puckish recognition of the masquerade as both libidinous projection and performative desire. In what could be interpreted as a liberation sequence, the strip scene leads into her transformation in the film's concluding segment. Allegedly now free of the fettering dream of romantic love, Dorothe has reached a decision to break with her past and live in the present. Back in her room at the Tenderloin and now dyked out in an almost stereotypical lesbian uniform of loose, military style pants, leather cap, and zippered shirt, Dorothe puts the finishing touches on her eye make-up before she packs up the photographs of her previous objects of desire (mother, Heinz, Bruno) and then cycles energetically to the Bay to unburden herself of her past.

In its narrative structure *Virgin Machine* combines, as Chris Straayer has argued, three genres: the romance, the coming-out story, and the coming of age story.<sup>8</sup> The hybrid nature of the film's narrative form is both echoed and reinforced by the filmic techniques Treut employs. Because of its interlacing and suturing of crossings, its mobile treatment of the gaze, its shifts in space and place, and its parodic play with the expectations engendered by the traditions of mainstream cinema (character coherence, narrative development and resolution, identification with the protagonist's story and/or character, climax, closure), I propose that Treut's film can be viewed as an intelligent and good-humored critique of contemporary identity politics. This critique can be particularly applied to the discursive hype surrounding the theoretical concept of 'hybridity' as popularized by Homi Bhaba and others. In my taking up of the term hybridity in application to *Virgin Machine*, I am consciously extrapolating from its *en vogue* theoretical sense as the uneasy interplay between majority and minority chords in culture to an examination of hybridity as a

phenomenon always already embodied and implicit in gender and sexuality.

The concept of hybridity as propagated most prominently by Homi Bhabha is not only applied to culture but also to spatiality, i.e. it is used to characterize a kind of simultaneous politics of culture and location. In my use of the term in reading Treut's film, I am suggesting that it can be equally well employed to describe the relationship between corporeality and identity. The self that emerges out of this relationship is not rooted in place but embodied. In this view of the self, its borders become not boundaries but permeable membranes in a constant state of mingling with whatever stimuli they encounter. Hybridity as a term used both in genetics and multicultural theory implies a mixing, in fact a coupling of different traits or characteristics which combine to form a third that is other to both. Underlying this concept of mixing is a binary logic and a dualism that presupposes the integrity and distinctiveness of the individual components before they are crossed with each other. Multicultural theory concerns itself both with the situation of the hybrid, as the 'other' to an artificially constructed, ideologically imposed homogeneity of 'the dominant culture', and with the condition of the 'join', the seam where the grafting occurs, the point of crossing, or the threshold of change.

For Homi Bhabha, hybridity offers an opportunity, a kind of utopian potential, to generate something new out of a combination of what 'is'. This is a hopeful position that posits change as an effective and creative application of resources that are already available but which have the capacity to be transformed from their original substance in order to become "*neither the one nor the other*".<sup>9</sup> Such phrasing, however, again seems to rely on the same dominance of the dialectic and the dualism that underlies the 'Western' thinking that Bhabha is trying to circumvent. By arguing that his theory is grounded in a neither/nor that subverts rather than replicates the dialectic, Bhabha avers that what comes out of the equation is not merely a third term, but something in excess of a third term, what he calls '*besides*': "which is not only the cut or gap of the subject but also the intercut across social sites and disciplines."<sup>10</sup> But is this 'besides' or 'intercut' resulting from a 'neither/nor' a signpost for liberation from political taxonomies and exclusionary ideologies, or merely a sophisticated reformulation of the necessity and vitality of the 'Other'?

What do we have if we combine without a reliance on a dualistic compositional principle: continual process rather than stability, muta-

bility rather than coherence, fluidity rather than containment? Judith Butler, in her interrogation of gender, identity, and agency, asks this question in a form that renders liberation from rigid categories contingent upon the subversion of the binary:

What is left when the body rendered coherent through the category of sex is *disaggregated*, rendered chaotic? (...) Are there possibilities of agency that do not require the coherent reassembling of this construct? (...) ... the source of personal and political agency comes not from within the individual, but in and through the complex cultural exchanges among bodies in which identity itself is ever-shifting, ... (...) because this process is in no sense fixed, it is possible to become a being whom neither *man* nor *woman* truly describes. (...) an internal subversion in which the binary is both presupposed and proliferated to the point where it no longer makes sense.<sup>11</sup>

What connects this alleged subversion of the binary with the examination of hybridity is yet another question. Is hybridization itself a presupposition and proliferation of the binary as basis, diluting its 'origins' to the point where the original, the essential 'nature' of the opposing terms is impossible to reproduce or reconstruct? Whether one looks back to Aristotle or the Book of Genesis, both of these patriarchal narratives of origin portray man as the norm or point of origin and woman as merely a derivative, variation or 'hybrid'.<sup>12</sup> The premise behind this designation is similar to that which governs the zoning of bodies and sexualities. It establishes a hierarchy of otherness whereby the dominant becomes 'pure' and the pretenders to membership in the dominant group are allowed 'in' only in accordance with their overt or assimilated resemblance to its prescribed attributes.<sup>13</sup> Yet the alleged 'purity' of the dominant is an artificial, ideologically coercive construct, its artificiality all too apparent given the criss-crossed history of conquest and colonization that marks the development of human civilization. Mobility, whether of the nomadic or imperialistic variety, would seem to breed hybridity.

Throughout the film, 'hybrid' figures (Bruno, the nightclub singer, Ramona) serve as stepping-stones on Dorothe's journey toward a realization of mutability as a condition of agency. But the real 'other'

woman in the film is the unassuming figure of Dominique. In contrast to both Ramona and Dorothe, Dominique is presented neither as an object nor as a subject of desire. When she first encounters Dominique on the beach, Dorothe has been alternately gazing out at the expanse of water and waves before her and looking down at the miniature figures of two skeletons she holds in hands, one dressed as a groom, the other as a bride. She has clearly been brooding further on the subject of love, but the skeletal figures suggest a death knell for the heterosexual conventions she has struggled with up to this point. The shoreline setting and Dorothe's view of an enormous ocean steamer preceding Dominique's appearance underscore the themes of transit and crossing that began with Dorothe's departure from Hamburg and further suggest a point of transition in Dorothe's own development. Dominique approaches her with an openness and amiability that combines naiveté with insight, quickly recognizing that Dorothe comes from other shores and offering her own tale of otherness in exchange. The friendship that develops between them is portrayed as one of mutual and generous affection, a bond free of the complications linked with eros and desire, but one that anticipates Dorothe's entrance into another world of women.

In contrast to the other female characters in the film, Dominique is portrayed as plain, almost frumpy, with an unobtrusive 'femininity' signaled only by the loose skirts and blouses she wears without any obvious interest in hairstyle, jewelry or cosmetics. In her conscious or ingenuous refusal to 'perform' gender, Dominique stands out as the only uninscribed because unadorned character in the film. Is she then by virtue of this absence of inscription (even with the minimal marks of culturally conventional 'femininity') the true 'virgin in the machine'? Or does her character rather reveal the potential for a 'crossing out' of sexuality while retaining the mask of gender attributes? In this context, it is relevant to note that Dominique appears on the scene before Dorothe embarks on her joy ride of experimentation with pleasure and performance. As the "uninscribed", Dominique represents the potential for self-invention or re-invention, while her experiences of serial displacement, the multiple migrations she refers to when she tells Dorothe of her wandering journey from Uruguay to Germany to New York to California, position her as the consummate hybrid. She has been all over and in the process of continual adaptation to changing surroundings, she has become a kind

of 'woman without qualities', taking on a neutrality of exterior that belies her chronic 'foreignness'.

For Dorothe, whose own foreignness has led her to self-discovery, the openness she has apparently achieved at the end of the film does not signal her liberation from restrictive terminology. She is still bound by discursive limits, evidenced by her retention of the concept of 'love', albeit without offering a new definition to replace the old that she has symbolically consigned to the waves of the San Francisco Bay. The tearing up of the photos in the closing sequence is a ritual of casting off, dumping the contents of a technologically fixed identity (as in the photographic process itself) that 'was' in the past to leave an openness, an undecidability, as the condition of the present tense.

By retaining the 'I' ("Dorothe Müller, das bin ich" [Dorothe Müller, that am I]) without fixing its content or core, Treut is able to fashion a subject that in the recognition of its own mutability crosses over into a realm that is no longer regulated by binary logic. Fully embodied but no longer inscribed, experienced but not owned, Treut's Dorothe is ready to make a fresh start. The crossings she has undergone have left her with an anticipation of multiple possibilities and an air of almost childlike expectation, as if the experiences she has had up to that point have left her strangely untouched, with her innocence intact, naive if not virginal: "Dorothe Müller, das bin ich. Ein deutsches Mädchen in Amerika. Wenn ich mich das nächste Mal verliebe, was wird dann wohl passieren?" [Dorothe Müller, that am I. A German girl in America. When I fall in love the next time, I wonder what will happen then?]

But as the concept of virginity calls the components that precede it into question, i.e. sex and sexuality, Dorothe's crossings and her unmasking of the mutability of desire and identity simultaneously undermine and validate 'hybridity.' As the latest fashion on the identity market, hybridity can be dismissed as yet another attempt to contain difference; but, as a condition of subversive play with roles and expectations, hybridity is also 'outed' as a mode of emancipatory being. Despite the affirmative potential inherent in the term, its critical inconsistencies hamper its utility as a tool of analysis in identity politics. If the elements that constitute any identity are in themselves mutable and shifting, is there ever a point where we can isolate the 'pure' strain of any characteristic in order to claim that it was from there that the genesis of successive hybrid forms occurred? Is there in fact any identity that could not be said to be hybrid, since identity

formation itself is the result of a process of mixing, appropriation, and borrowings that are precisely what make identity such a mutable construct. If its generalizability precludes its utility as a theoretical term, it is ironically perhaps this very quality that lends hybridity its political potential. As a term designating the process of transformation and change through encounter with difference, hybridity can be viewed, as Robert Young suggests, as “a radical heterogeneity, discontinuity, the permanent revolution of forms.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, the changes that constantly and inevitably confront us could be harnessed to encourage the energy and dynamism that flows from diversification rather than resisted by adhering to artificial constructs that return repeatedly to the confines of binary systems and classification.

For her part, Treut achieves a level of openness and possibility that leaves questions of coherence and multiplicity unresolved. Instead of offering us an ending that unequivocally affirms the protagonist’s sexual liberation and an unambiguous embrace of a lesbian lifestyle, Treut opts to conclude her film with a question that sets the process of exploration in motion all over again: “The next time I fall in love, I wonder what will happen then?” That there can be no simple, single or definitive answer to this question has been shown not only by the sequences that precede it, but also echoes in the words of the song, “Voodoo Voodoo,” in the final scene: “I thought I was snake, I started crawling on the ground; I thought I was a dog, I started barking like a hound...” These references to multiple instances of mistaken, imitative identity collide mischievously with the final freeze-frame of Dorothe’s leather-capped reincarnation. The resolution to the question of identity posed and promised by the coming of age story as well as the coming-out story is exposed as a projective fantasy, as substantial as the photographic fragments that Dorothe has scattered to the waves.

Treut’s *Virgin Machine* is successful in deconstructing the binary norms that have come to dictate bodies, identities, and sexualities, in part because of the properties of the filmic medium itself, which allows for a manipulation of juxtapositions, cuts, crossings, and meldings that exceeds the discursive limits of a written text. The theme of mixing and crossing is constantly reinforced by Treut’s humorous employment of sound bridges, passages of music or narrative that carry over from one sequence to the next and serve to graft together what would otherwise have appeared to be arbitrary cuts. Treut’s predilection for non-narrative editing, evidenced in her use of dada-esque clips, together with the interpolation of sound and

image (contextual parallels between sound effects and dialogue, music and mise-en-scene) form a parodic metacommentary on the central narrative. For example, in one dadaesque sequence, the buttocks and legs of mannequins are shown flying through the air and joining together in motions that evoke copulation while a soft hypnotic voice-over chants “Die Liebe, die Liebe, die Liebe.” [Love, love, love]. This editing technique inspires associative connections between cuts that weave the film into a matrix of threads that lend it form without fixing its meaning. Through a skillful and ironizing interplay of camera movements, sound, and non-narrative editing, Treut destabilizes the viewer’s gaze, confounding voyeuristic desire, conscious or not, for identificatory gratification dictated by mainstream film conventions.

Monikca Treut’s *Virgin Machine* ultimately thwarts the spectator’s wish for closure by leaving questions of identity unresolved. Dorothe’s voyage has been an experiment with desire, sexuality, pleasure, and ‘difference’, but cannot in the end be viewed as a rite of passage. There seem to be no consequences, no revelations, but rather a suspension of fixed identities in favor of fluidity. Dorothe’s geographical displacement gives rise to an exploration of corporeal geographies bereft of conventions. It is here in the realm of unregulated sensations and representations where Dorothe finds the open and unmapped territories that liberate her erotic fantasy and beckon with possibilities for boundless experimentation.

#### Notes

1. “The Remainder,” *Simulacra and simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994) 146.

2. English translation and all subsequent translations from the film text are mine, kb.

3. Dorothe reports her mother’s description in a dream-like voice: “Rechts von Indien gibt es eine Insel, die Kalifornien heißt. Sie ist die unzugänglichste Insel der Welt. Auf dieser Insel gibt es keine Männer.” [To the right of India there is an island called California. It is the most inaccessible island in the world. On this island there are no men.] This vision of California as a kind of lesbian paradise supports Gerd Gemünden’s argument that Monika Treut portrays the U.S. (most often California) as a “queer utopia” in her films. See Gerd Gemünden, “How American Is It? The United States as Queer Utopia in the Cinema of Monika Treut,” *A User’s Guide to German Cultural Studies*, eds. Scott Denham, Irene Kacandes, and Jonathan Petropoulos (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997) 333-353.

4. In her article, “The Body in the (*Virgin*) *Machine*,” Caryl Flinn claims that Monika Treut has taken the film’s title from a 1973 art exhibition billed as *Les machines célibataires*, which in turn is a borrowing from Marcel Duchamp’s

reference to modernity. Flinn is extremely reticent on the details of this association and provides neither a clue as to why Treut might have made this choice in direct connection with the exhibition, nor any explication of how the phrase was intended in its earlier uses and applications. Flinn's argument that the machine for Treut is the camera, a position that I share, is much more relevant to the film and thus more convincing. See "The Body in the (*Virgin*) Machine," *arachne: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Language and Literature* 3.2 (1996): 52; 58-59. While Flinn's treatment of the title is disappointing in its lack of supporting evidence and explication, it is the only direct assessment of Treut's titular choice in the secondary literature that I have seen on the film. In addition to the analyses already mentioned, see: Colin Richardson, "Monika Treut: An Outlaw at Home," *A Queer Romance: Lesbians, Gay Men and Popular Culture*, eds. Paul Burston and Colin Richardson (London: Routledge, 1995) 167-185; Chris Straayer, "Coming Out in a New World: Monika Treut's VIRGIN MACHINE," *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies: Sexual Re-Orientations in Film and Video* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) 23-41; Marcia Klotz, "The Queer and Unqueer Spaces of Monika Treut's Films," *Triangulated Visions: Women in Recent German Cinema*, eds. Ingeborg Majer O'Sickey and Ingeborg von Zadow (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998) 65-77; Anneke Smelik, "The Navel of the Film: On the Abject and the Masquerade (*The Virgin Machine*)," *And the Mirror Cracked* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998) 152-184.

5. Marilyn Frye, "Willful Virgin or Do You Have To Be A Lesbian To Be A Feminist?," *Willful Virgin: Essays on Feminism* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1992) 133. Frye's challenge to women in her essay is in a sense also Treut's pursuit in *Virgin Machine*: "The question at hand may be conceived this way: *Will* and *can* any women, many women, creatively defy patriarchal definitions of the real and the meaningful to invent and embody modes of living positive Virginité which include women's maintaining erotic, economic, home-making, partnering connections with men?"

6. Mona Mur, "That Night at the Ritz."

7. Cf. Robert Stam's discussion of carnival as "participatory spectacle, a 'pageant without footlights' which erases the boundaries between spectator and performer" in *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film* (Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989) 94.

8. Chris Straayer, in her discussion of *Virgin Machine*, argues that Treut creates a kind of 'hybrid genre' by melding the narrative genres of "the romance, coming-out, and coming of age stories." Straayer 23-24.

9. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London/New York: Routledge, 1994) 25.

10. Bhabha 64.

11. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York/London: Routledge, 1990) 126.

12. In her book, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), Rose Braidotti argues for a connection between 'woman' and 'other' on the basis of the perceived primacy of 'man' (83): "as sign of the in between areas, of the indefinite, the ambiguous, the mixed, woman/mother is subjected to a constant process of metaphorization as 'other-than.'"

13. See Patricia Williams's pointed critique of the proposal to include an interracial category on official forms, "Big Words, Small Divisions," *The Nation* (August 25/September 1, 1997): 9. Williams argues that the discussion surrounding

the interracial category leaves the purity of 'whiteness' intact and unquestioned while implying that 'other' groups are 'mixed'. If this differentiation were to be codified, Williams warns that the "two-story system of racism ('white' on top and anyone with 'one drop' or more of black on the bottom)" would be replaced "with a multilevelled caste system. We will end up with something like what plagues parts of Latin America: whole skyscrapers of racial differentiation, with 'white' still living in the penthouse, the 'one drops' just below and those with buckets of black blood in the basement or out on the street."

14. Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London/ New York: Routledge, 1995) 25.