Looking Through the Glass: Monsterizing Technology and the Social Media Cyborg

Introduction on the Social Media Fixation:

In the last decade, social media has seen an increase in attention from the academic community. It is studied from multiple perspectives including rhetoric, psychology, user experience design, and digital innovation. Its popularity—or rather, its uncanny ability of hijacking our attention—has crossed boundaries between disciplines. Social media is a weird multi-tool in all our inventories that we draw upon every day. It is a communication tool for messaging and viewing family and friends through Facebook's "Messenger" and receiving the latest news updates through Facebook feeds, Twitter timelines, and Instagram posts. Social media organizes our lives with birthday updates and calendar invites. Influencer and aesthetic culture fueled by big data has siphoned social media control over our buying habits. It is even used as a coping device for people with anxiety in uncomfortable situations. It has changed the way we present ourselves to the outside world. Despite all the ways social media has changed, and arguably has bettered our lives, there continues to be mixed feelings about its consuming presence.

To better understand the relationship we harbour with ourselves and technology— especially in terms of how we present ourselves, and how social meida allows us to experiment with and on oursleves—I chose to do an intertextual analysis of the feminist essay "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" by the American professor Emerita, Donna Haraway. Haraway's essay if feminist in nature, but also dabbles in posthumanism and experimentation with human identities. To understanding the nature of experimentation, and the relationship between creation and creator, I chose to use Mary

Shelley's most famous work, *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus* to extract how Haraway understands human relationships with digital technology and in turn, how we can understand that in terms of social media culture. One of the most conflicted observations of user interaction with social media platforms is its influence over identity formation and fragmentation. What I mean by this is that there is a clear divide in disciplines that analyze social media from a rhetorical, digital, and psychological perspective. For some, social media has created a realm in which users, conflicted in their real lives can ground themselves in the digital and can therefore form a cohesive identity that would otherwise be impossible. For others, the digital demands so much time and devotion that the real eventually ceases to exist, or, becomes fragmented. When discussing this spectrum of social media's influence on its users, the focus usually lies on the platform's inherent presence and capabilities that mold users in specific ways to formulate a transactional relationship. Harway views this transaction as a transformation into the cyborg.

Cyborg meet Frankenstein:

On the surface, "A Cyborg Manifesto" is a revolutionary feminist essay. Originally published in 1985, the essay, as described by Jay Clayton "was immediately recognized in feminist circles as a disturbing challenge to some aspects of liberal, materialist, and French feminist thought" that embraced gender non-conformity (Clayton, 1996, p. 64). Haraway asks that we reject the concepts "human", "animal", and "machine"; and their individual relationships to form something that is both fluid and uniting to people of all religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. Haraway calls this new being a "cyborg". Or as she phrases it, "The [c]yborg does not dream of community on the model of the organic family … The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust" (Haraway, 1991, p. 151). This is where Haraway's feminist essay starts becoming complicated. A "cyborg" is not

a traditional feminist concept and has not been adopted by contemporary feminists. The word "cyborg", short for cybernetic organism, conjures more of science-fiction, futurists, and posthumanist image than that of feminism. Although not mentioned in the title, Haraway's argument inevitably draws on posthumanism due to her heavy referencing of humanity digitizing itself, becoming posthuman, and morphing into cyborg entities; in which posthumanism is the concept that there are persons, and/or entities, that exists beyond our concept of what it means to be human. By referencing the Garden of Eden, Haraway is insinuating that cyborgs have no knowledge, or ties, to their so called "creator" and therefore, "do not [re]member the cosmos" (Haraway, 1991, p. 151). Haraway even says that cyborgs, unlike Frankenstein's monster "[do] not expect [their] father to save it through a restoration of the garden," (Haraway, 1991, p. 151).

Frankenstein is a classic horror novel in which the young Victor Frankenstein decides to play the role of God. Insatiable in his fascination with the natural sciences, Frankenstein decides to experiment with creating his own life form. To complete this task, he painstakingly searches for an amalgamation of limbs—not stopping before grave robbing—which he sews togheter, creating something he remarked as being "beautiful" (Shelley, 2009, p. 81). It is only upon bringing the creation to life, and ultimately succeeding in his goal, that he is horrified with playing god and rejects his now "monstrous"—not beautiful—creation. However, despite Hollywood portraying the creature, that we have come to know as "Frankenstein", the creature remains nameless. So, who is the real monster: Victor Frankenstein? Or his creation? It's interesting that Haraway references Frankenstein's relationship with his creation by showing sympathy to the being that society has mislabelled as monstrous. Ironically, a cyborg is also something that has been labelled by science-fiction as something that is monstrous. The confusion between Frankenstein, as creator or created, can be viewed as a metaphor for how we

experiment on our identities through social media. For instance, when we post a selfie, we are both creator and created. We take the image, we edit the image, and we post the image hoping that our viewership will see is the specific light that we have constructed. In Theresa M. Senft and Nancy K. Baym's article "What Does the Selfie Say? Investigating a Global Phenomenon" they identify that selfies, especially for woman, represent an opportunity to control the representation of their bodies that are otherwise objectified (Senft & Baym, 2015, p. 1594). They are able to enlighten narratives that would otherwise be hidden or create entirely new narratives about themselves through a single photograph. While these narratives are constructed in one way internally, often times they are constructed differently externally. Often what is meant to enlighten oneself, is deemed monstrous to those viewing from the outside—especially when done so with technology.

Technology as Monstrous:

Since the dawn of the digital era in the late twentieth century, humans suffer from a conflicted relationship with technology as we have entered, what experts call the "technological learning curve". Humanity has a phobia of becoming obsolete, just like the machines before it. Movie series like *Terminator*, and the pandemic surrounding Y2K have fueled phobias surrounding technological power. After all, it has become both a saviour in how it's improved our lives, and the devil incarnate for entrapping out attention. It's easy to blame the objects we've created without considering how we've imprinted ourselves in our creations; what we have taught them and the path we've involuntarily carved for them. The discussion of maker presence and responsibility in understanding what it inputs into creating has become increasingly popular in academic spheres surround artificial intelligence, ethics in technology, and social impact of technology. For the purpose of this presentation, the discussion won't oscillate into the

responsibility of social media programmers but will focus on how users interact with social media to experiment and re-create themselves.

As we've briefly touched upon, social media has given an outlet for users to present narratives about themselves through a single photograph or a status update. These posts act like chapters in an overarching narrative about ourselves: who we are and what we represent. But where does monstrosity come into play? Haraway claims that "cyborg unities are monstrous and illegitimate" (Haraway, 1991, p. 154). This loaded statement acts as both a commentary on users and technology itself. Humanity tends to have adverse reactions towards things they don't understand and the velocity of the "technological learning curve" has most definitely cause panic due to the lack of understanding. Haraway notes that "the structural rearrangements related to the social relations of science and technology evoke strong ambivalence," is these relationships is still something we are trying to fully understand (Haraway, 1991, p. 172). Is technology monstrous because we don't fully understand it? Haraway certainly thinks so. Technology *is* monstrous, because we don't understand it. Haraway identifies women, especially women of colour, as equated to monstrous for demanding equal rights. Their historical mistreatment has stripped their humanity away (Haraway, 1991, p. 174). Hence the metaphor of the cyborg— something that is both imbedded within technology and humanity yet neither fully tied to both. The cyborg is meant to be a bridge and a neutral state; an entity that is nationless, genderless, and godless. Most importantly, the cyborg is a monster and according to Haraway, "monsters have always defined the limits of community in Western imagination," (Haraway, 1991, p. 180). To be monstrous, therefore, is to break the status quo and preconceived social norms.

Social media itself, within the digital chaos of the twenty-first century, has broken traditional community limits by making communication faster, global, and more personalized

because we can share images of ourselves. Our bodies have become another tool for social media to use, as opposed to social media being a tool that we use. The boundaries of what this technology can achieve are constantly stretched and boundaries of what it means to be a user are blurred. There are multiple layers of blurring that happen in Frankenstein. From one perspective, whether the creature itself is inherently monstrous is blurred. Indeed, the way the monster came into being was grotesque and disturbing, but it was not the creature who committed these malicious acts, but Victor Frankenstein. After bringing the creature to life, Frankenstein chooses to reject his creation, refusing to show it comfort, care, or humanity. It is up to the creature to learn what it means to not be human, but to exist from a human perspective. Frankenstein is monstrous for playing the role of God and creating a living being outside of the "human" community. This need to create and bend the rules has existed in him since he was a child; it his his inherent nature and although he is apologetic, he is shockingly self aware, stating "I had committed deeds of mischief beyond description horrible" (Shelley, 2009, p. 114). The creature was not naturally monstrous and did not commit horrific acts from the start of its birth. Its cruelty was nurtured by Frankenstein's vehement rejection and refusal to acknowledge its existence. For a long time, the creature did not even understand why it had been rejected or what it had been labelled as. It is only at one point in its journey of self-discovery, that the creature stares at its reflection in a lake and comes to the painful realizes that it is horrific in appearance and perhaps this is why it is treated as monstrous, or can be considered a monster. Nonetheless, it does not understand why it is treated as monstrous when it does not behave that way (Shelley, 2009, p. 163). The creature eventually, in its rage and confusion, murders Frankenstein's younger brother, William—who ironically is described throughout the novel as being extremely similar in appearance to Victor (Shelley, 2009, p. 101).

This is where we encounter the next layer of blurring. If we are to understand William as extremely similar to his brother, then we can treat him as a younger, or rather, more innocent version of Frankenstein. The innocent self is eventually destroyed by the created self—the creature who had been so lovingly and meticulously created only to be cast away. Frankenstein's monstrosity can be now viewed on a spectrum as opposed to an innate part of who we are. Monstrosity is therefore defined as a rejection of the community; bending limits and changing the norm. Technology changed, and continues to change, norms that have been established for centuries. Its rapid evolution makes it difficult to understand, which can be frightening. Ultimately, technology is not by nature monstrous. It is viewed on a spectrum of monstrosity based on where it is placed within our personal and global communities. This spectrum itself remains ambivalent as technology, and by extension social media, or so intimately intertwined with our lives. Where it lies on my spectrum will be different to where it lies in yours.

The Nature of Experimentation:

In building an understanding of what a cyborg means from a quasi-feminist, postmodern, posthumanist perspective, Haraway (1991) tries to reconcile these monstrous community limits and what is, and is not, considered human. She finds the difference between natural and artificial entities ambiguous, especially in terms of self development and external design as "our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert" (Haraway, 1991, p. 152). Within this framework of social media on this monstrous spectrum, we begin to examine what it means to be a user. We are also infected by monstrosity and much like the platform, we are also put on a spectrum. Just like how the true "monster" of *Frankenstein* is ambiguous, so to is our identity. Inevitably, the moment we post something—whether it is an image or text—a part of ourselves is severed and lives its own life. Even Victor, when developing his experiments, realizes that "[he

has] become a poet, and for one year lived in a Paradise of [his] own creation" (Shelley, 2009, p. 46). He genuinely enjoyed the creation process of manipulating a human-esque vision and embedded a part of himself into it. Even when he was grave-robbing, Frankenstein considered how much his creation should reflect him as he mused: "I doubted at first whether I should attempt the creation of a being like myself or one of simpler organization; but my imagination was too much exalted" (Shelley, 2009, p. 77). This reminds me of apps like facetune, that allow users to heavily photoshop and manipulate images of themselves before posting. At times these can be a simple retouch; erasing a double chin or concealing a zit. Other times, much like the creature, we rip ourselves apart and digitally sew ourselves back up together again to post an idealized version of ourselves. We must also consider that fact that we, as the audience, are not the only ones he realizes the blur between Frankenstein and the creature. In the novel, these two entities argue about which one of them is the true monster (Shelley, 2009, p. 171).

Hopefully, this breakdown has given some insight into why academics are so divided in terms of social media's influence on users. Its difficult to generalize influence when it is so intimately tied to our personhood. Social media has the power to form identities and to fragment them. For some, it may even simultaneously fragment specific areas of ourselves in order to stitch specific pieces together. The reality is, we constantly create and recreate ourselves through social media. For instance, status posts depict a specific aspect of ourselves or of our lives that we choose to share. Senft and Baym (2015) explain that an important component of posting is not just the premeditated act of constructing and sharing a part of ourselves, but receiving reaction through likes, retweets, and comments (Senft & Baym, 2015, p. 1595). Based on the reaction we receive, like clay, we continue to mold and alter this image until we create something that we are satisfied with, or will generate satisfaction from our community.

Frankenstein created the creature with the intent of making something amazing to share with his community. However, the reception of this experimental version of self was not only rejected by him, but by the community. The creature than, as a version of Frankenstein's identity, changed its behaviour and self to at first become better liked by the community. It is only at this failed attempt that it becomes enraged and decides it isn't worth it. Much like social media, the pressure to continuously create and generate a specific identity can become extremely taxing. From this we may need to have "social media breaks" or all together quit social media.

We are Cyborgs:

As we continue to experiment on ourselves, the nature of our personhood becomes blurred. How much of our identity is lived in reality and how much of it is floating in the virtual interwebs of technology is ambiguous. The cyborg, although treated as monstrous in science-fiction and postmodernist genres, is Haraway's (1991) solution to the ambivalence of personhood. The creature in Frankenstein is linked to Haraway's vision of cyborg because of how it blurs boundaries by discovering its personhood as separate from the limited community— in which the community is Frankenstein. Rejected by its creator, or rejecting a part of itself, the creature shows interest in learning behaviour by watching others and micking what they do (Shelley, 2009, p. 134). At one point, it begins to call the small family living in the cottage "my friends" (Shelley, 2009, p. 140). Social media gives us the power to experiment on how we portray ourselves to the world, but it also gives us the ability to observe how others are experimenting on themselves. We may choose to mimic styles of experimentation, for instance, the dawn of the selfie and the infamous popularity of "duck-face" poses. The people we follow, or our Facebook "friend" group can feel closer to us than our relationships in real life. Often, we follow celebrities or "Insta-famous" users to feel closer to them. We may feel drawn to their

presented identities, or to the style of their experimentation that they've made public. However, experimentation is not always healthy. As mentioned earlier, many can feel the need to quit and distance themselves from social media. Consumed by the identity he had created, Frankenstein admits "I was the slave of my creature" (Shelley, 2009, p. 178). He realizes his own wretchedness and monstrosity for conceiving a creature that began to live a life of its own. We too may feel consumed by the identities we have created that are both a piece of us and separated from us.

If we are slowly self-developing in spaces between artificial and natural sources, than our identities are split in two; the ones we present in real-life and the ones we present-online. This is the exact definition of a cyborg: an entity that dissolves the binary between technological and human; artificial and natural as the "cyborg myth is about transgressing boundaries" (Haraway, 1991, p. 154). If a piece of our identity is developed and nurtured online, does that make it any less real? Or human? Likewise, the creature in *Frankenstein* is considered monstrous for not being "naturally" human—but is it any less of a person? In her feminist-orientated context, Haraway says: "we are excruciatingly conscious of what it means to have a historically constituted body. But with the loss of innocence in our origin, there is no expulsion from the Garden either" (Haraway, 1991, p. 157). Social media has made us more aware of our bodies and the control we have over them—whether that is presenting them in specific lights, angles, pieces, or to alter them altogether to make something new—it allows the user to distinguish themselves from their own and societally constructed histories. We have now internalized technology and escaped the limits of the community by realizing that we can actually change ourselves and our origins without consequence. A cyborg lives in both realities to make a cohesive whole. It is

"disassembled and reassembled, [a] postmodern collective and personal self" (Haraway, 1991, p. 163).

Concluding Thoughts on What it Means to be a Cyborg:

The cyborg is a creature that moves beyond binaries and boundaries. It reconciles the digital and the natural into one entity that is meant to navigate its personhood through both. Cyborgs are not constrained to traditional ideologies and are Haraway's solution to showcasing the multiplicity of this personhood. Haraway's cyborg metaphor is an excellent way for us to understand how different parts of our identity fit together in a cohesive whole. By taking a close look at Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, we can better understand how these different identities are formed, how they interact with one another, and what this means as a user of social media. Social media allows us to both blend and separate aspects of who we are to interact with them separately. Initially, Frankenstein was fascinated and embraced experimentation. He readily accepted the more innocent quirks of his personhood (manifested by his younger brother, William) and chose to explore a new part of himself. However, the amount of time and effort lead to a fragmentation of his identity that he sought to destroy. For our purposes, we can understand this as being overwhelmed by social media or dissatisfied with the content we've published. This could lead to deleting status updates, photos, and in extreme cases, erasing our profiles entirely. It consumed his life, which revealed another part of Frankenstein that is more cynical and vengeful; ironically embodied by both Victor, and the creature. And just like it consumed his life, social media has consumed ours. Frankenstein and the creature are two sides of the same coin. Although they have separate bodies in the book, they are the same identity reformed. They have become a cyborg: both artificial and natural fused in one, living through two different channels. We too are cyborgs. But whether we are monstrous, or will become

monstrous, is dictated not by the social media platforms we use, but by our own will and the

choices we make when we experiment on ourselves.

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