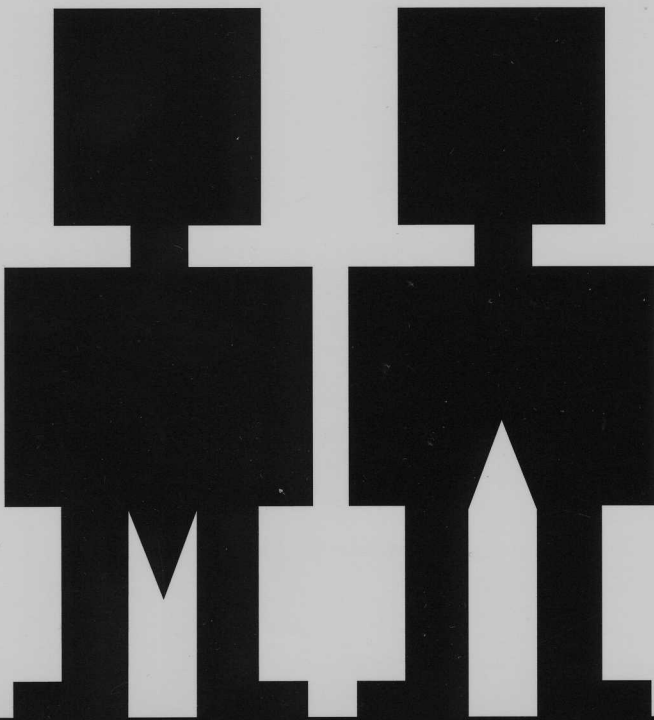


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Do Androids Sleep with Electric Sheep?

Critical Perspectives on Sexuality and Pornography in Science and Social Fiction



monochrom's Arse Elektronika Anthology

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PROSTHETICS AND FUTURE FETISHISM

Sexologist concepts of fetishism

If we think of sexuality in the sense Michel Foucault (Foucault 1988) has taught us to think about it: sexuality as the most culturally regulated, heaviest scientifically studied realm of human behaviour that is 'naturalized' in the service of biopolitics; if we think of sexuality in this framework, it is obvious that technologically enhanced sex is nothing but one variety in the whole range of 'artificial' modes of having sex. But since the beginning of sexology – which is usually associated with the name of Viennese criminal psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing – genital, reproductive sex has been considered not only the 'natural' and 'normal', but the only 'real' mode of sex, whereas all other kinds of sexuality were considered more or less 'perverse'. Consequently, cases of fetishism (with fur, hair, leather, shoes etc.) held a big share in Krafft-Ebing's founding publication *Psychopathologia Sexualis* from 1886. Fetishism figured – besides homosexuality – as a 'model-perversion' for the emerging science of sexuality. Krafft-Ebing's theory of the fetish was strongly influenced by literary works such as the Austrian writer Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* from 1870 and by anthropological concepts of the fetish, which ascribed fetishism to 'primitive' cultures as a kind of surrogate for 'real', meaning monotheistic, belief.

Krafft-Ebing therefore conceptualized fetishism as surrogate-sex for 'real', reproductive sexuality. His fetishists – all of them male – were nervous characters that were not able to make the right use of their genitals but instead got enjoyment out of things 'dead'. His concept was later picked up by Sigmund Freud who conceptualized the fetish as a quite literal surrogate for the mother's missing penis. In his view, women would be 'natural fetishists' and therefore lifetime seekers for a replacement for their missing phallus, whereas fetishist men would be perverse in the sense of a wrong identification with their mother and her missing penis. Female fetishism was therefore associated with women's general desire to decorate and robe, which was interpreted as an attempt to hide their 'defect' by showing off. It is easy to hear Karl Marx' concept of commodity as fetish, as expressed in *The Capital* in 1867, resonate with this concept. Male fetishism on the other hand surfaced as an illegitimate affection for a partial object, as an inadequate surrogate for the 'full' love of a woman with the clear telos of producing children to maintain the national economy.

Read with Foucault, it is more than obvious that so called 'fetishist practices' recorded by Krafft-Ebing and Freud were no expressions of an individual pathology but precise answers to the restrictive construction of heteronormative, genital sex as the only accepted mode in the late 19th century and a response to the increasing amount of commodities that leaked into peoples lives. We can then consider fetishist practices in general to be a rather emancipatory plea for the idea that *all* sex is artificial and partial; as an argument for the generative potential of perverse sex and for an understanding of sexual encounters as a meeting place for humans and non-humans. Fetishism places sexuality on the intersection of human rootedness in a biological 'wetwear' (the desire to be touched, not to be alone) and the cultural: individual and collective histories. Over time fetishism plays with acquired, culturally encoded and embodied imaginaries. But it also releases the potential to project ourselves into the future; it releases our inventiveness and our eminent non-natural side: technologies not only moderate or express our relationship to each other, but they have also profoundly altered our relationships. We can therefore think of fetishes as magical tools that can reshape our experiences. Plus the good news with fetishism is still: *we don't have to reproduce ourselves!* We are free to make use of our body and our sexuality for pure pleasure, we don't even have to use it on other humans, and we can produce things that don't resemble humans at all.

Prosthetic fetishism

How do prosthetic technologies relate to this concept of fetishism? Matthew Barney's *Cremaster 3* from 2002 will serve as a blueprint for my argument. The film is a highly condensed argument on the topics I want to discuss here. The five part

Cremaster-film-sculpture-performance-series (see Barney 2003) receives its name from the *cremaster*-muscle, whose function it is to raise and lower the scrotum in order to regulate the temperature of the testis and promote spermatogenesis. Its development is also considered to be central to the prenatal, anatomical differentiation of the sexes. In his five films Barney's aesthetic universe evolves in quite a 'bionic' way: the biological starting point – the *cremaster* muscle – is being inserted into narrative frameworks from other realms, such as biography, mythology, and geology. The films are full of anatomical allusions to the position of male and female reproductive organs during the embryonic process of sexual differentiation: *Cremaster 1* represents the most undifferentiated state, *Cremaster 5* the most differentiated. *Cremaster 3* – being the pivot of the cycle – presents images of conflicting teleologies of differentiation: images of hyperfemininity and hypermasculinity but also hermaphroditic images. And the film is full of prosthetic devices, of mythological figures and animals, which have been used for centuries to sound out the borders of humanness.

Prostheses are in all of Barney's work and are used extensively on a figurative level, being featured by certain semi-fictional characters Matthew Barney stages. For example the legendary American Football-player Jim Otto who, after numerous surgeries, ended up with two artificial knees and finally a left leg amputation in 2007. But medical-technical materials are also used as working material. Matthew Barney uses prosthetic plastics, as well as Teflon and stainless steel, for prosthetic joints in his sculptural work. Furthermore the aesthetic principles of 'restriction' and 'supplement' are central to his form finding process. His performances that take place under the label 'drawing restraint' for instance feature a restricted semantic vocabulary that is borrowed from the fields of sports (fitness, climbing, rugby), sexual perversion and mythology. Bondage scenes (inspired by free climbing and the 19th century escapologist Harry Houdini) blend with performances of exaggerated masculinity and move on to cross-dressing scenes. Change of gender is only one of the many metamorphoses that take place constantly: characters move from human to animal to mythological figure and back again. But they don't change easily: the changes are forced and often connected to moments of violence, of conflict, of rivalry.



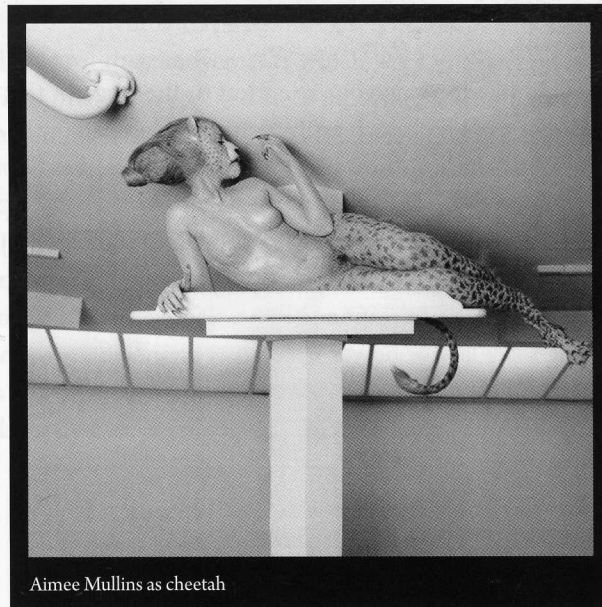
Aimee Mullins as Entered Novitiate

The woman with the plexiglass-prostheses (who appears in *Cremaster 3* in at least five roles) is Aimee Mullins, a double amputee and athlete who has set Paralympic records in the 100 meter dash and in long jumping. She has worked as a model and actress and is very active in promoting rights for the disabled in the USA. In this scene, she plays a prosthetically enhanced Cinderella. The scene is the axis of *Cremaster 3* (and therefore the axis of the whole cycle): the chorus-line-like middle piece of the film is staged on five levels of the Guggenheim Museum and is called 'The Order'. Barney's encounter with Mullins takes place on the third level and is meant to represent the narcissistic stage of aesthetic production: Mullins serves as a kind of distorted mirror of the artist, who also wears glass shoes and is dressed in female vesture.

A minute later Mullins will transform into a hybrid of cheetah and human. This role refers to the name of her running prostheses: they are called *cheetahs* and are of the same kind Oscar Pistorius uses and that caused the International Olympic Committee so much trouble in 2008. They were classified as technological doping, Pistorius did not accept the sentence, and was admitted but by then it was too late to qualify for the regular Olympics.

Another scene within 'The Order' shows women's bodies formatted into a disciplined chorus, dressed up as sheep – no electric sheep though. A scene in which as Siegfried Kracauer once put it, the machine-logic of the military and of the

factory is rearranged as a joyful 'ornament of the masses' (Kracauer 1997). In 'The order' modernity's program of aesthetic and technological alterings of the human body is exhibited in all its ambivalence: the exotic fascination with aberrant bodies, the scientific gaze onto these bodies and the proximity of a normative body image and the desire to overcome the limits of the body are condensed in highly pervasive images. The desire to alter and enhance the body via training and/or technological devices to make his owner 'fit' for ascent and advancement is allegorized in Barney's climbing-exercises within the Guggenheim museum and echoed in his ascent within Chrysler Building's elevator funnel. This fascination with body alterings blends with explicit images out of the archive of sexual perversion: bestiality, anal sadism, the reification of women bodies as pets, object-love, and/or traditional fetishes: shoes, fur, silk.

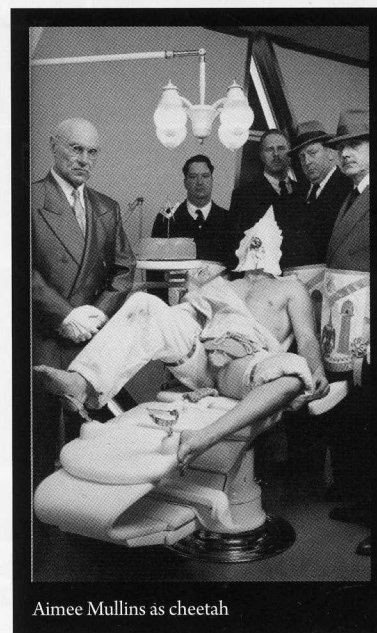


Aimee Mullins as cheetah

In this sequence prosthetic fetishism is quite obviously entangled with a rather male version of objectifying, taking apart and reassembling the human body.

But *Cremaster 3* also discusses the prosthetic altering of a male body in quite an interesting way.

In this scene Barney is punished by the Masonry; he has a strangely shaped, half amputated, half artificial penis and is placed on a dentists/gynecologists chair, where he is tortured with braces made from scrap metal taken from artfully crashed cars. But the braces are not only torture instruments and bodily restraints: they enable him to deliver teeth through the tube that extends from his anus.



Aimee Mullins as cheetah

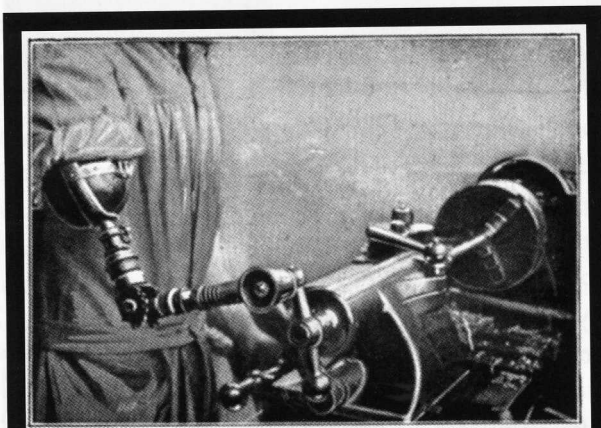
In this sequence the close relationship between virility and violence, between potency and potentiality, between perversion and creativity (making a wrong use of something), between bodily restriction and creative production is articulated quite straight away.

What Barney does here twists the sexologist's verdict of the fetishist being 'unproductive' for the societal body (because he is not engaged in proper reproduction) into a form-finding program of *artistic* production: by assembling heterogenous and highly idiosyncratic objects – mythological, technological, biological and biographical – the artwork is being deliberately developed without ever gaining a definitive form. Prostheses play a central role: they exhibit the artificiality of all form-finding-labour conducted by the different characters. But still, it's only men that create art here: Richard Serra as the maitre/architect with his building of phallus-like towers and the entered apprentice Matthew Barney who challenges his hubris by experimenting with more 'feminine' form finding principles.

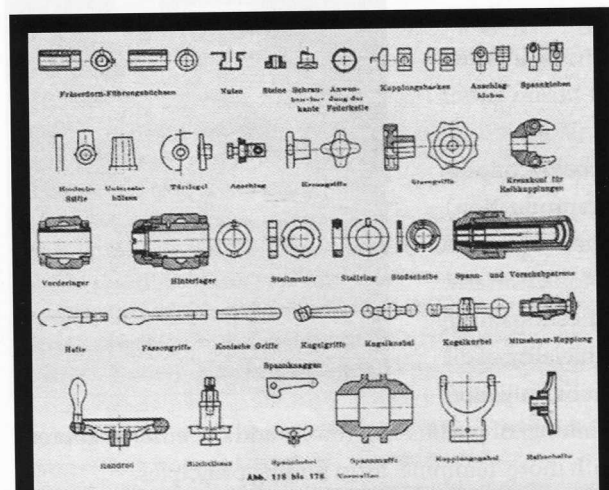
The dentist – the universal cripple

I would like to draw your attention to the stage of this scene, the dentist's office, to shed light on the context in which prosthetics as high-tech artifacts were developed in the first place. And I would like to hark back a bit into the history of prosthetics to show how precise this stage is used in *Cremaster 3*.

Industrial production of prosthetics started in the USA just after the civil war. Before that time prosthetics were individually crafted by blacksmiths, carpenters or manufacturers of instruments. In the 1870s new methods of mass production were developed to respond to the massive need for prosthetics as caused by the war. This 'need' was fueled by fears of losing male labour power which was connected with the fear of destabilization of gender-roles. The prosthetic industry clearly followed a patriotic goal to reassemble the social, a gesture that was literally performed by reassembling the soldier's body with prosthetics to put the maimed soldiers back into the labor market and into their families as breadwinners (Herschbach 1997).



New interfaces for workers and machines, Prüfstelle für Ersatzglieder Berlin 1919



'Normalien' developed by Georg Schlesinger

The next technological advancement in the prosthetic industry took place during WWI, as the production on prosthetics were enhanced by principles of Taylorism, the European 'Science of Work' (Arbeitswissenschaft) and advanced engineering as well as by the findings of psychophysics and of so called 'psychotechnics', an early form of applied psychology (see Perry 2002, Price 1996). One of the leading engineers of that time, the German Georg Schlesinger, who was at the same time factory manager of a gun plant near Berlin, developed a new principle of interconnection with all parts of the prosthesis and the human body. By modularizing and standardizing the interfaces, he wanted to achieve the perfect 'fit' of the prosthesis with the worker and of the worker with his machine.

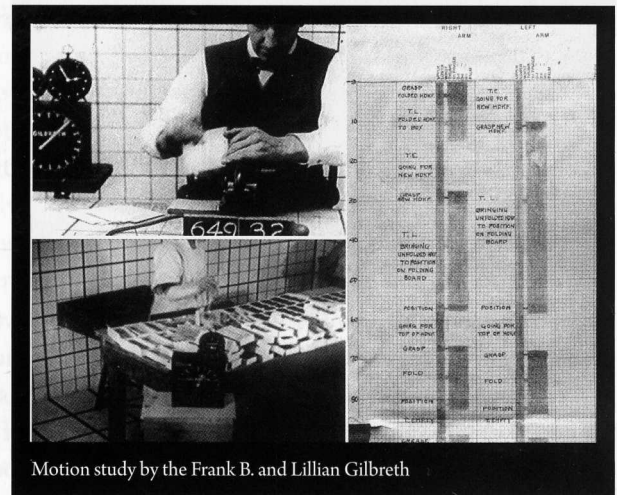
Schlesinger's ideas of friction-free connections to maimed soldiers with machines were not really successful though and prosthetic technology took a different way. But what was very successful was Schlesinger's powerful manufacturing principle: the standardization of connections with so called 'Normalien' (normalcy).

His system for the replacement of organs with industrially produced, interchangeable spare-parts revolutionized prosthetics: it made the mass production of modular prostheses possible, which has since then been applied worldwide.

Staying within the early days of prosthetics of WWI, I want to return to the US-context and draw your attention to a different model of cripple-care. The famous research-couple Frank Bunker and Lillian Gilbreth were well known

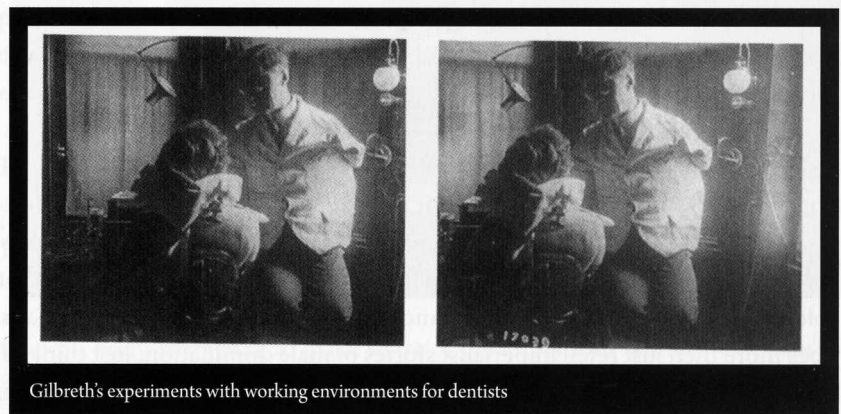
for promoting the Frederick Winslow Taylor system of scientific management with their film-based motion studies. The Gilbreths filmed test persons within rasterized spaces to precisely record their movements which were in a second step dissected into work steps they called 'therbligs' (an anagram of Gilbreth). These codified basic movements would then be transmitted onto charts, to identify the most efficient way to do something – for example folding handkerchiefs or packing soap.

Gilbreth, a bricklayer, contractor and scientific autodidact, had spent the first years of WWI in Germany to help the German army optimize procedures of war surgery. He then returned to the US in 1916/17 and together with his wife Lillian became one of the leading voices in cripple care. They developed a rather avant-garde view on what it meant to be a cripple: 'When we come to consider the subject closely we see that every one of us is in some way a cripple. (...) We can, then, think of every member of the community as having been a cripple, as being a cripple, or as a potential cripple (cit. after Brown 2002).' The consequence of their concept of the universal cripple was that they did not so much put effort into the *prosthetic repair* of the maimed bodies but to set up adaptable *working environments* that allowed all the potential cripples to perform their jobs efficiently. One of the privileged professions, one in which a technified environment would be especially suitable for adaptations in favor of the cripples was in the Gilbreth's view the dental hygienist. On this image you can therefore see a simulated cripple (see his hand stowed away under the white coat) engaged in cleaning the teeth of a patient for demonstrational reasons.



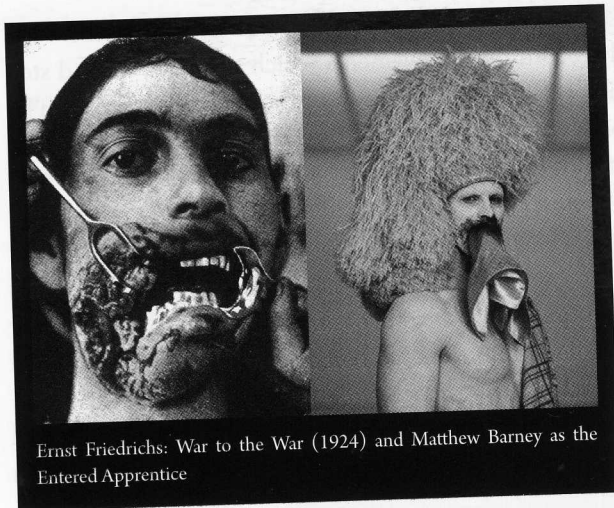
Motion study by the Frank B. and Lillian Gilbreth

I want to interrupt my little historical digression here and return to the prosthetic fetish as presented in Matthew Barney's art work: it is almost uncanny how precise Barney's arrangement is in this case: Taylor's and Gilbreth's systems were in the beginning of the 20th century subject to harsh criticism by trade unions. Labour leaders feared – with good cause – the devaluation of skilled labour by the Taylor system and therefore strongly disapproved of the new scientific methods. They realized that the Taylor system would privilege the managers and planners over the workers. *Cremaster 3* is not only set in the 1920s, the time of the labour-fights, it is also about the Irish trade unions; and this is why the white-collar-workers torture the craftsman Matthew Barney.



Gilbreth's experiments with working environments for dentists

Another influential post WWI image resonates all too strangely with *Cremaster 3*: it is an image the anarchist Ernst Friedrich used in his popular anti-war pamphlet *War to the War* from 1924. On the right you can (again) see Matthew Barney's character of the Entered Apprentice. The shocking photographs of maimed soldiers were in the 1920s used as visual



Ernst Friedrichs: *War to the War* (1924) and Matthew Barney as the Entered Apprentice

arguments against the devastations of the technified war. Facial prostheses were later produced to hide the wounds the war had caused to individuals and to the Prussian state. For Barney there doesn't seem to be a cure for injury, only a provisional silk drapery hides and shows at the same time the open wound.

By recounting the historical roots of prosthetics we can now identify the ingredients of Barney's poetic film-machine more precisely: it is a military-industrial-research-complex that is echoed in these sexually loaded, fetishistic images; but this complex stripped bare from its promises of a technologically and managerially rationalized bright future. Barney's prosthetic fetishes are either phallic torture instruments used

by men on men or they are carefully crafted, magical devices that allow transgressions between the animal and the human, man and woman, past and future. Instead of following the functional trail of prosthetics as tools for reassembling the social and to secure production and reproduction, Barney installs a polymorphous perverse (the term was used by Sigmund Freud for the unguided pleasures of babies) universe of *artistic* production, that twists the normative notion of fetish as an artificial surrogate for 'the real sex' into a highly elaborate program of artificial restraint as a precondition for creative production.

Technofetishism

Now, what does all that have to do with technofetishism, which you might have expected to take place on spaceships and alien planets rather than in the Guggenheim museum? But I would like to argue that the Guggenheim museum is itself – like contemporary art as such – a kind of spaceship. A space set aside from the normality of everyday life, a space where imagination and experiment find a rescue. And just remember how well the Guggenheim fitted as a futuristic backdrop to *Men in Black* (Barry Sonnenfeld 1997). Science fiction's fascination with technology is thoroughly linked to military research which was as shown above the birthplace of modern prosthetics. The first notion of a Cyborg for example did not come up in a science fiction text or in Donna Haraway's famous manifesto (from 1991) but in government sponsored research on perceptual and physiological effects of outer space on humans in the 1960s (Clynes and Kline 1960). The whole idea of the necessity to enhance human features technologically seems to be deeply rooted in the figure of the armed soldier and his technological dominance over the enemy. Still, I think that science fiction – as does contemporary art – does more than just retell imperialist stories of male domination. Just think of the ambivalent image of body-enhancement that is drawn in the *X-Men* comics and films. The *X-Men* (which also comprise of women) are a bunch of mutants whose genetical and morphological otherness is subject to anxiousness in the rest of society. It is not clear whether their mutations are a gift, an enhancement or a disability that has to be protected. This leads to two groups of mutants: those who want to blend into society and use violence only for defense reasons and those (Magnetos people) who consider themselves superior to unaltered unions and therefore want to take over power. For the subject of prosthetics the character of *Wolverine* is especially interesting: he is a mutant – he heals especially fast – but has also been subject to involuntary experimental surgery that has left him with prosthetic devices, such as his infamous iron-claws. This is why he embodies the conflict over technified bodily difference and its complicated relation to the spontaneity of desires especially well.

