CHAPTER 18
MEDIATED BODIES
Fetal Bodies, Undone

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Ford’s 2007 television commercial for its FlexFuel vehicles begins with a dark, vaguely ominous scene – are those stars? – accompanied by ethereal new-age music and a faint swishing sound. We might be looking at distant galaxies (see Michaels 1999). But the next frame makes it clear that we’re in inner space rather than outer space, perhaps inside a human body. Grainy squiggles – are those worms? – move through something viscous. A globe glows in the distance, surrounded by starry circles of light, and suddenly we are oriented: ah, fertilization. We have been here before. The dreamy soundtrack gives way to the chiming of a music-box lullaby as the image shifts to the interior of a womb. A young embryo pulsates gently to the faint sounds of a heartbeat. The camera slowly pans over indistinguishable body parts, then a recognizable umbilical cord appears. A rippled appendage does not look quite human, however, and as the camera pans out we realize it is an elephant’s trunk. Suddenly we’re seeing an older, fully formed fetal elephant floating freely against the sound of swishing fluids, a music box lullaby, and a distant (maternal?) elephant trumpeting. The screen switches, and we are inside a gravid dolphin uterus. We see shots of a fetal dolphin’s tail and snout, while dolphin vocalizations bubble up under the melody. Gurgling noises mark another shift, this time to an image of twin polar bear fetuses. The commercial closes with a close-up of the fetal elephant’s eye opening slowly, followed by that of the dolphin and the polar bear, each gazing plaintively at the viewer. The screen fades to black. White lettering appears: “For the next generation.” Black screen, then “Ford FlexFuel: Up to 80% more carbon efficient.” The logo for Ford Motor Company appears with the tag line, “Feel the difference.”

This advertisement is entitled Next Generation. It provides a site for examining the topic I was assigned for this chapter, namely, “fetal bodies.” I confess that the idea of writing a chapter on fetal bodies bothered me, because fetuses are by definition contained within the bodies of pregnant women and cannot be said to possess “bodies of their own,” as feminists have long argued. Would this chapter be read as a slight against reproductive female bodies? By writing it, would I be complicit in what Tspir Ivy calls the “trivialization of pregnancy” (Ivy 2010: 185)? After all, throughout the latter half of the 20th century, feminist theorists devoted considerable attention to the philosophical and political problems of pregnant embodiment and the historical emergence of fetuses as social subjects (Bordo 2003; Casper 1998; Franklin 1991; Morgan and Michaels 1999; Oakes 2000; Rapp 2001; Root and Brower 2001; Taylor 2008). Rather than reprising those themes here, however, I argue in this chapter that contemporary understandings of fetal bodies are increasingly generated and dominated by corporate media in the service of consumer capitalism. Fetal bodies, no less than other digitally manipulated bodies that we see every day in the media, are increasingly produced within what Susan Bordo calls “the empire of images” (2003: xvi).

This chapter uses the Next Generation advertisement as a vehicle for investigating the emergence of fetal embodiment as a discursive category. Next Generation was designed by Ford of Europe to air first in Sweden in 2007. It serves up a familiar story line, which in turn relies on the assumption that viewers will hold a biological understanding of embryological development. The animals it depicts are highly anthropomorphized, and in the early seconds of the ad we are cleverly and deliberately misled into thinking that we are watching human development. It builds on “staging parallels between the iconic power of the blue planet and that of the future” (Franklin et al. 2000: 33). The ad aims to create a “small world, one earth” attitude, blurring the boundaries between human and non-human mammals. In the pages that follow, I invite readers to step outside an embryologically determined worldview and to question the praxeic existence of “fetal bodies” as a single, undifferentiated category of self-evident material thing.

Judging by the global spread of reproductive rights movements over the past fifteen years (see Goldberg 2009), it would be hard to argue that “fetal bodies” signal the demise of second wave feminism or imply that we have entered a post-feminist era. Even in the United States, where an intractable and often violent debate over abortion dates back more than 30 years, new legislative proposals concerning abortion are increasingly fetocentric, that is, framed in terms of the subjecthood and rights of fetuses as opposed to those of women (see Hardacrt 1997: 3–6; Parry 2006). In other parts of the world, too, the legalization of abortion is increasingly challenged on the basis of the social meanings ascribed to the biologized materiality of embryos and fetuses. As I write these words, the Spanish constitutional court has agreed to hear a challenge to a 2010 law that permits abortion on demand until 14 weeks gestation; challengers cite an earlier ruling that women’s rights would not take precedence over those of an “unborn child.” In the United States, the Internet program “Abortion.com” asserts confidently that anyone who knew the “physical aspects” of fetal development would surely oppose abortion (Abortion.com 2010). In this context, the purported biological reality of fetal development provides grounding for political projects that recast the abortion debate as a matter of fetal materiality and fetal well being (see Oakes 2001).

Sarah S. Jain prompts us to consider how fetal bodies – as constructed rhetorically and semiotically by advertisers – are produced. Following Marx, she terms the body “the ‘thing’ itself... the ‘easily understood’ material object,” and goes on to show...
how "the sign, the thing, and the consumer are not distinct but semiotically and materially co-constitutive" (Jain 1999: 44). In other words, ad, fetus, and consumer are all wrapped up in a project of mutual production and consumption. To the extent that we may find fetal bodies visually and textually seductive, responsibility lies in part with a plethora of new computer-generated imaging technologies and media through which beautiful, sanitized, appealing fetal images are created and promulgated (see Morgan 2009: 189–223).

This chapter builds on the work of the many feminist theorists who have traced the emergence and reification of fetal subjects. Efforts to exclude pregnant women and families from reproductive health and rights have a long history in the United States, where philosophers, political theorists, feminist anthropologists and sociologists, and a host of others have argued exhaustingly about the social, moral, and political significance of pregnancy and fetal embodiment (see Pelcovitz 1987; Tater 1995). I rely especially on observations made by anthropologists Janet S. Taylor and Linda L. Layne, both of whom have written insightfully about how fetal identities are constituted through consumerism. Taylor's ethnography of obstetrical ultrasound shows how fetuses have come to be constructed "at the same time and through the same means, both as a commodity and a 'person'" (Taylor 2008: 117). Layne's study of pregnancy- and defect support groups shows how parents-to-be use consumer goods to symbolize babyhood for miscarried fetuses, suggesting that consumerism is a part of "the actual practices of person-making in our culture" (Layne 1999: 272). My aim is to show that the "fetal bodies" produced within and at the service of a system of consumer capitalism increasingly dominate and determine contemporary understandings of fetal subjects.

My objective is to question the symbolic vehicle, namely the charismatic fetal-fauna, that is deployed to make the point. The notion of "fetal bodies" and the ontological, material, and moral meanings associated with them is constructed by media representations and technologies of production that have very little to do with corporeal embodiment as traditionally understood (see Duden 1993; Michaud 1999). Today's mediated fetal bodies draw their meanings from the collective social concerns with which they are (and are not) associated. Most obviously, they draw on a collective willingness to view fetuses as social beings, at the same time that they produce a willingness to see fetal bodies as attractive and appealing. To be theoretically enchanted by fetal bodies, then, is to be taken in by what Jain calls the "economic-discursive apparatus that does the promising" (Jain 1999: 46). This allows us to forget that categories of embodiment and identity for fetal as well as other categories of embodied beings must be situated in space and time. To ignore this literature and the fact that ethnographers continue to publish theoretically rich studies of pregnancy and embodiment (see Ivry 2010; Plarto 2008; Teeman 2010) is to risk becoming implicated — however unwittingly or unwillingly — in the ascendance and hegemonic scope of corporately produced fetal bodies. Here I focus on the peculiarity of these de-materialized and heavily mediated fetal bodies, even (or especially) when they appear before us as endearingly animated creatures with moist, limpid eyes.

How has it become possible to see a category of thing called "body"? The ethnographic record offers ample illustration of societies in which the development of nascent human bodies and selves is attributed to divine, natural, and social forces not contemplated within Western cosmological systems (Kaufman and Morgan 2005). Anthropologists have examined the production of fetal bodies within Western medical textbooks (Hahn 1995), and compared notions of fetal embodiment and enrolment to illustrate the culture-bound terms of moral debate in different societies (Conklin and Morgan 1996; Coordas 2002). Despite the march of modernity and the dissemination of biomedical and embryological world views (Morgan 2009), alternate explanations of reproduction and fetal embodiment remain persuasive for many peoples. Anthropologists and historians understand that Western embroyological origin stories are not the product (solely) of scientific revelation, but reflect cultural assumptions about kinship and relatedness, as well as the history of reproductive science (Clarke 1998; Franklin 1997; Hopwood 2000). Outside of these circles, however, discussions of fetal embodiment in the Western world have tended to overlook the ethnographic and historical records, and debates have been framed in terms of philosophy, bioethics, biomedicine, embryology, and religion. Certainly within the United States, biomedical science and bioethics have claimed disciplinary authority over fetal matters.

Critical theorists of the body have recently (re)turned from existential and phenomenological dimensions of embodiment (Coordas 1994) to materiality (Farquhar and Loos 2007: 10–12). As Myra Hird points out, feminist theorists were sometimes reluctant to discuss material dimensions of pregnancy and birth because they wanted to avoid biological determinism (Hird 2007: 2–3). Hird brings materiality back to the study of pregnant embodiment, citing recent discoveries in microbiology and genetics to show how genes and cells are exchanged, like gifts, among and between reproductive bodies. But Hird's argument contains its own kind of biological essentialism, because she accepts that biological "facts" are and should be imbued with social value. She seems to support the assumption that biology provides the strongest foundation on which to build socially (and morally) meaningful relationships. Yet it is precisely this biologically "fact" of fetal development that need to be questioned and analyzed. As Sarah Franklin argues, the so-called biological facts of reproduction constitute a folk model that is informed and sustained by Euro-American social theory (Franklin 1997: 24). Hird, on the other hand, tends to amplify (rather than attenuate) the conflation between the fetal and the body. The prevailing assumption that the social and moral significance of fetal development is (and should be) rooted in embodiment, beginning with fertilization and ending with birth. These are the kinds of assumptions, I would argue, that keep us from seeing the constructiveness of folk models of embryological development.

As with any other worldview, the embryological view of life's beginnings keeps us from imagining questions that contradict or fall outside its purview, such as those contemplated by ethnographers of pre-implantation genetic diagnosis and in-vitro fertilization (see Franklin 1997; Franklin and Roberts 2006; Roberts 2007). The embryological worldview, for example, leaves little room to ask questions like, "When does the soul enter the fetal body?" or "What were you before you were an embryo?" One plausible response to the latter question might be Jean-Paul Sartre's phrase, "Absolute, unthinkable and undecipherable nothingness." Jan Hacking quotes this phrase from Sartre in his essay, well known to anthropologists, called "Making up persons," in which he argues that it is impossible, in one time and place, to conceive of being a category of person that is particular to another time and place. Hacking's argument is easily applied to fetuses. As with almost every way in which it is possible to be a person, it is possible to be a [fetus] only at a certain time, in a certain place, in...
a certain social setting" (Hacking 2007: 159). I write this essay from a time and place in which certain kinds of beautified, naturalized fetuses are not only possible, but imperative (Michaels and Morgan 1999).

FETAL VEHICLES

My primary concern here is with the digitally produced, computer-generated fetal simulators that increasingly inform collective understandings of fetal ontology. Car advertising is just one of the many venues in which such computer-generated fetuses appear, and analyzing the symbolism of the fetuses that appear in car advertising offers a window for understanding how contemporary fetal bodies are produced. Scholars of automobile advertising tell us that ads are effective to the extent that they "invoke symbols" (Paterson and Dalby 2006: 1) or draw from "a stock of collective representations" in ways that link them with (the) desires, emotions, or attributes of viewers (Conley 2009: 37). The choice of symbols used by advertisers provides a clue to the values and lifestyles that are likely to appeal to consumers. Paterson and Dalby argue that the symbols used in recent car advertisements, especially for sport utility vehicles (SUVs), reveal "an emerging imperial geopolitical structure" that is being imposed throughout the world. The symbols used in car advertising, they say, provide clues about "what sort of imperial formation" is underway (Paterson and Dalby 2006: 1).

Similarly, a decision to use fetuses in car advertising reflects willingness on the part of viewers to look at fetuses and to associate them with qualities carmakers want to sell, including safety, protection, and corporate responsibility.

Indeed, anthropologists began to analyze the appearance of fetuses in car advertising two decades ago, when Jaidle S. Taylor wrote a now-classic article about the emergence of what she termed the "public fetus" in a Harper's magazine ad for a Volvo. That advertisement used the then relatively new technology of obstetrical ultrasound to solidify the purported bond between adults and their unborn children. That ad depicted a large, black-and-white ultrasound image of a fetus that appeared to be waving its hand, over the caption, "Is something inside telling you to buy a Volvo?" Taylor began with a rhetorical question, "Not long ago a fetus tried to sell me a car -- or should I say, a car tried to sell me a fetus?" (Taylor 1992: 67; see also Morgan 2009: 27). Her analysis demonstrated how the ad stirred feelings of love for the fetus, an urge to protect it, and anxiety about its safety. She showed how the purchase of a Volvo was offered as a way to resolve this anxiety, and how fetal imagery worked as a powerful tool to manipulate emotions at the same time that it fueled a desire to buy.

Public fetuses have grown up a great deal since then. To give just one example, the American public is now so familiar with ultrasound imagery that advertisers and filmmakers can dispense with the ultrasound frame, purporting to take viewers directly inside the public space of the womb. One thing that has not changed, though, is the importance of consumption as a facet of reproduction. As Taylor states, "consumption...to a significant degree constitutes the experience of pregnancy" (Taylor 2008: 126; emphasis in original). She points to pregnant women who regulate what they eat and drink on behalf of the fetus, and who risk prison sentences if they consume morally or legally illicit substances (Taylor 2008: 126-131). Taylor goes on to argue that consumption increasingly constitutes collective ways of "knowing" fetuses, when for example ultrasound imaging services permit people to ascribe social identities and personality characteristics to fetuses. Truth claims about fetal bodies -- as well as fetal bodies themselves -- are "increasingly firmly embedded within U.S. consumer-capitalist society and culture, as commodities available for consumption like any others" (Taylor 2008: 143).

Since the Volvo ad appeared in Harper's, fetal bodies have become increasingly mass-marketed, mediated, and commodified. Fetal imagery now includes a dizzying mix of "real" (2D, 3D, and 4D real-time obstetrical ultrasound) fetal images as well as facsimiles generated by toy-makers, visual effects artists, and modellers working in silicon. Fetuses are more apt to be mass-marketed, and the markets are huge: parents-to-be with disposable income, educational videos, entertainment. Some fetal products even come with their own automotive accessories: Mattel's pregnant Barbie doll, Midge, comes with a removable belly panel, extractable fetus baby, and an optional Volvo accessory sold under the name, "Happy Family." There is a veritable media industry devoted to the production of fetuses, which in turn seem to generate their own reproduction in the form of sequels and copy-cat books and DVDs. Unlike the Volvo ad, these new fetal bodies look real enough to pass. A YouTube commenter queried of the Next Generation ad, "Are these really ultrasounds?" No, those are not real ultrasounds, nor were any real animals used in making the commercial (Ilancio 2007). According to the producers, the twin polar bears are completely computer-generated, while "the elephant and dolphin were scanned and then tracked over the shot footage to make the body parts and give each fortus life" (Glasswoon London 2010). But does that reality even matter? Baudrillard could have appreciated such hyperreal public fetuses, created by advertisers with little or no pretense of materiality and nonetheless constituting what we understand to be real.

Next Generation Tropes

The car business has changed, too, since Taylor wrote about the Volvo ad (since 1999, paradoxically, Volvo has been owned by Ford). Safety, rugged individualism, and sex appeal continue to be important components of auto advertising, but a more recent angle is to assert that buying a car can save the planet. This is a classic example of greenwashing, the term used when corporations tout their purported environmental sensitivity or the sustainability of their products in order to increase sales (Kellner and Hetherington 2002). Capitalizing on faddish concerns about global warming and environmental destruction, Next Generation implies that buying a flexible-fuel car is an act of global altruistic activism and a potential solution to the environmental crisis. This advertisement builds on sentimental connections between baby animals, humans, and the fate of the planet. It expands beyond the anthropocentrism that used to characterize the appearance of fetuses in advertising (see Taylor 2008: 107), by indicating that we (human and non-human animals) are bound together in one world; it encourages viewers to "challenge notions of the accepted dichotomy between human and non-human" (Lapthorpe 1999: 58). The Next Generation spot positions Ford as a modern-day Noah's Ark, dedicated to preserving the creatures of the planet. The car buyer in this analogy becomes a modern-day Noah: compassionate, capable, forward-thinking, and obsessed with saving those charismatic "pre-born" megafauna, one Ford at a time (Whitmore and Thorpe 2000: 188).
Critics point out that greenwashing claims are at best selective and at worst deceptive and misleading. Timothy Luke, for example, argues that corporations use ecology to sell products "only if it reaffirms most of big transnational capitalism's existing forms of technology use, managerial centralization, and profit-generation" (Luke 2001: 320).

His analysis of Ford's green campaigns shows that Ford was seriously to pursue epi-
ronmentalism in the 1990s, primarily for business reasons. The company began to work on developing alternative fuel and hybrid vehicles, a mission funded in part by tens of millions of dollars in taxpayer-funded research grants from the U.S. Department of Energy. Luke argues that this "ecological reengineering" masks fundamental contradictions, beginning with the fact that the Ford Motor Company was the pioneer in an industry that has arguably "done more to destroy the environment than almost any other single act in the 20th century" (Luke 2001: 321). On the other hand, Luke overlooks the fact that Henry Ford's fortune has enabled the Ford Foundation to award many millions of dollars to social justice projects around the world, including those focused on sexual and reproductive rights and environmental sustainability.

Other critics of the Ford Motor Company have pointed out the hypocrisy of its environmental claims, given the fact that the company was a leading producer of gas-
guzzling SUVs in the 1990s. The company spent "more than $42 million between 1998 and 2003 to lobby Congress and the Bush administration in support of laws that suppress corporate fuel economy standards" (Common Dreams 2004; see also Robinson and Viscusi 2006; Shepardson 2008). Ford vehicles had the poorest fuel economy and worst greenhouse gas emissions of any American carmaker between 1999 and 2008. According to Sun Mi Ha, the fuel economy of the Ford fleet actually declined from 2003 to 2004, while CO2 emissions increased (Ha 2008: 14). Meanwhile, delving behind the scenes of the Ford ad, we learn that the appearance of twin
fatal polar bears is of particular significance, as "evolution brought about by climate change [which is, in turn, brought about by burning fossil fuels] has meant Polar bears very rarely have twin cubs." And in one additional paradox, the corn-based ethanol for which flexible fuel vehicles were initially designed has been blamed for food riots in several countries, and many biologists argue that it must be scrapped in favor of ethanol produced from less environmentally destructive sources (Shepardson 2010). Obviously there is no room in advertising to highlight such ethical or practi-
cal complexities.

To be fair, though, Next Generation does not claim that its flexible fuel vehicles will save the planet. It does, however, imply that consumers should consider the impact that car choice might have on the future of elephants, dolphins, and polar bears. Why did the advertisers choose these animals? First, because animals are important signifiers in modernity, as Nicole Snick points out, "marking a shift to "outward looking" or "life itself" as a new cipher of ... biopower" (Shukin 2006: 155). Second, these ani-
mals capitalize on the enduring popularity of cute, defenseless, imperiled baby animals dating back to Disney films such as Dumbo in 1941 and Bambi in 1942. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the elephant fetus in Next Generation seems a young, intru-
spective version of the big-eared Dumbo, updated for our biocentric times. (Just to demonstrate the recent biologization of origin stories, it is worth pointing out that the original Dumbo was delivered to his mother by a stork.) Third, charismatic mega-
fauna have a huge following. Conservation biologists at the World Wildlife Fund and Wildlife Conservation Society may lament the "distortion of priorities towards

charismatic mammals" (Goodwin and Leader-Williams 2000: 258), but they know from experience that donors are more prone to open their checkbooks when the pitch includes large, endangered, photogenic mammals. Funds raised in this way can be directed toward habitat protection, which biologists say is more effective than efforts directed at saving single species. Next Generation draws together both themes, mak-
ing a plea for protecting specific charismatic animals while implying that the womb is endangered habitat.

This message contains several ironies. In spite of the fact that feminists have criti-
cized efforts to depict wombs as "maternal environments" (Dalsak 2001: 4), recent epidemiological research shows that fetuses can suffer when pregnant women are exposed to traffic pollution. In 2009, epidemiologists in New Jersey found that "ambient air pollution, perhaps specifically traffic emissions during early and late preg-
nancy and/or factors associated with residence near a roadway during pregnancy, may affect fetal growth" (Rich et al. 2009). In other words, cars may exacerbate, rather than alleviate, problems of fetal endangerment. But of course humans are exposed to many toxins outside the womb (O'Connell 2003: 122), and one wonders why the the epidemiologists in New Jersey chose such a biocentric research topic? Why did they decide to focus on the risk to fetuses rather than to children or other vulnerable bod-
ies? The womb is not the only "environment" endangered by our collective addiction to fossil fuels. As I was writing this chapter, an explosion at the Deepwater Horizon oil rig off the coast of Louisiana killed eleven workers, and oil gushed uncharted into the Gulf of Mexico for several horrible weeks. Dozens of dolphins and a sperm whale were caught on film, coated in oil and struggling to survive as a direct consequence of our collective addiction to fossil fuels. Meanwhile, around the same time, 220 peo-
ple died in the Democratic Republic of Congo while siphoning precious petrole-
um from a tanker truck that had overturned on the highway, in an incident that was unique only for its exceptionally high mortality. Such images provide fitting context and an ironic antithesis to Ford's claim that automobility, even of the "flexible fuel" variety, could ever save the animals (human and otherwise) on earth. As Luke wrote, Ford is committed only to the proposition that, "Auto enthusiasm must remain the balance point for any sort of environmentalism" (Luke 2001: 317). There are indeed plenty of contradictions in Ford's history, legacy, and record of corporate social responsibil-
ity (for additional examples see Hartmann 1995: 124; Korey 2007; Shukin 2006). It may be easy to assume a cynical attitude about claims made by car manufacturers, but what does this have to do with fetal bodies? As Bordo points out, we can be both critical of advertisers' manipulations "and still feel powerless to resist their messages" (Boedo 2003: xxvii). This brings us back to the question Taylor posed earlier. "Or should I say, a car tried to sell me a fetus?" Are you feeling yourself drawn in by the image of womb as gravely threatened location, or by the implication that we should all be concerned for the beings that reside there? The car is depicted as a symbolic womb or, in the words of Deborah Lupton, a "protective mother." The car's interior, Lupton says, sometimes represents a "little capsule" that shields passengers from "the harsh realities of the world outside" (Lupton 1999: 60). Cars are commonly cast as extensions of one's physical and psychic body, she says, and car advertisements play this idea by representing cars as "merging into the body/self or engaging in a syn-
ergistic interrelationship of sex and machine in which the boundaries between each entity blur" (Lupton 1999: 61). Lupton makes reference to a print advertisement that
considering the wider political context in which the ad aired. In the United States and elsewhere, legislation was being introduced that would make ultrasound exams mandatory, criminalize fetal death, prohibit “abortifacient” forms of hormonal contraception, and define fetuses as juridical persons. Next Generation draws on some of the same rhetorical devices as anti-abortion advocates, especially by painting the womb as endangered space and its inhabitants as threatened with destruction. The ad does not need to take an explicit stand on abortion for this meaning to bleed through, as one commentator at AdCritic.com said of the Next Generation ad, “It’ll definitely win the hearts of pro-lifers.” Meanwhile, the ad erases real adult women, especially those who might have reason to consider abortion. The “Stop Female Foeticide” campaign in India, for example, ignores the plight of women who are not permitted to work outside the home, inherit property, or otherwise increase the value of their gender and so are under pressure to produce male children.

If megafauna are especially vulnerable in their unborn condition, consumption is proposed as their salvation. The idea that what adults consume affects fetuses is, of course, ancient (see Markens et al. 1997). In recent years, though, advertisers have taken that notion quite literally, for example, in an ad for a jalapeño hamburger from the fast-food chain Carl’s Jr. (see Taylor 2008: 128). The ad shows an animated, hip-hop-influenced, computer-generated fetus, womanizing proficiently while yanking on the umbilical cord and berating “Mom” from inside the womb for eating too many chili peppers. In a more upbeat, woman-friendly version of a similar message, the Italian beverage company Ferrarelle produced a 30-second television commercial it called “Baby Dance.” A pretty pregnant woman takes a sip of sparkling water, whereupon viewers are instantly whisked inside the womb to watch the fetus start to smile, snap its fingers, and dance happily to the surging tune of “You make me feel like dancing.”

The pregnant woman laughs in delight at these antics; if fetus is happy, then Mama is happy. The ad was made by a company in Milan, using a professional dancer in Los Angeles to model for the animation. Post-production, including “the 3D animation of the child, required six weeks in CGI [computer generated imagery] with daily renderings” (Pubblicità Italia 2007; translated by Míriam Marchesi). The computer animation is so compelling that words are unnecessary; unlike the talking fetuses of yesteryear (Morgan 2003), the fetuses in the Ford and Ferrarelle ads sell their products (and their fetal bodies) just by looking at us. The irony, of course, is that while these computer-generated fetal bodies are reacting to products we consume, we as viewers are consuming ever-more computer-generated fetal bodies. And apparently we are buying it, which is why you are reading a chapter called “fetal bodies.”

It is nonetheless worth asking, as Chari Thompson (2002: 166) does of efforts to save the African elephant: what are they to be saved from? How, when, where, and by whom should they be saved? How will success be assessed? To these questions we might add: Who monitors fetal bodies? Who gets to decide the fate of fetuses? Who is authorized to speak for fetuses? Next Generation implies that Ford will provide the intrauterine surveillance. This trope builds on the routinization of obstetrical ultrasound, as in the site where pregnant women are “constantly monitored” (Mitchell and Georges 1998: 112, quoted in Jones n.d.: 3). The trope is especially effective in Next Generation because wild animals are also patently “the objects of intensive surveillance and regulation in the name of conservation” (Whitmore and Thorne 2000: 187). When the authority to monitor and speak for fetuses is vested in Ford Motor Company, however,
the claim must seem nothing less than absurd. Yet this is precisely what Next Generation implies. To the extent that viewers accept the assertion, the effect is achieved in part by casting fetuses as innocent, vulnerable surrogates for Planet Earth crying out for protection. And who dares question the assumption of the “transcendent innocence of the fetus-as-child”? (Tsing 2007: 236). Likewise, who among European and American car buyers would dare question the assumption that more baby elephants are good for the planet?

This is precisely the assumption that must be questioned, however, in order to disrupt the sentimentalized, prontalist, naturalized anti-choice implications of Ford’s message and of “fetal bodies” more generally. To take just one concrete counter-example, we might consult Thompson’s work analyzing different interpretations of what to do about the rapid growth of the elephant population in Kenya’s Amboseli National Park in the 1990s. There, a surplus of elephants threatened to ruin the local environment, eating an enormous amount of biomass, trampling forests, and compacting soils, leading to erosion. Conservationists who met to discuss the problem agreed that elephants had a “destructive effect on biodiversity,” although they disagreed about how to handle it. Some advocated elephant contraception or the euphemistic “culling” of the population (Thompson 2002: 173). More recently, the production by a single elephant of ozone-depleting methane gas has been estimated at 2,000 liters per day, or a half-ton per year. One blogger put the equation in terms the Ford Motor Company might comprehend: “An elephant produces enough methane in one day to run a car 20 miles.”22 In other words, adult elephants are neither innocent nor ecologically inert. There are ecologically sound arguments for reducing their numbers. There can be such a thing as too many elephants.

With respect to the question of who gets to decide the fate of these fetuses, Next Generation makes the answer clear: you do. The choice is yours. You are the neoliberal consumer who takes personal (i.e., private) responsibility for making the right consumption choices. In this case, the Ford ad turns viewers into consumers, not just of cars but of fetal bodies; we are asked to consume these products of (their) conception (Morgan in press). Meanwhile, the parameters of our supposed consumer choices are restricted and overdetermined. Certain options are left out, such as the option to give up driving. We are not offered the option to take the train, bicycle, or walk. “In a marketplace economy,” Jain writes, “freedom is only ever that which can be bought, never what one already has or does.” (Jain 1999: 45; see also Lake 2001). Not driving is not an option. Likewise the option to give up reproducing is verboten, childlessness is not an option. Taylor talks about the Volvo ad working to “channel political passions into purchasing passions.” Like the Volvo ad, Next Generation assumes and asserts that viewers and car buyers will of course want to protect these precious fetuses.

Making Fetal Bodies

The genius of Next Generation is that it gives us both fetal bodies and the means to rescue them (Taylor 2008: 21). But how, precisely, are the models and computer-generated images produced? As with other kinds of fetal images that appear in the media, it is extremely difficult to find out how they are made (Morgan 2009: 219). Neither Ford nor National Geographic makes any effort to instruct viewers about which images are photographs and which are not (probably because there is no clear line between the different modes of visualization). With swift editing and computer animation, the distinction between real fetuses, models, and computer-generated inventions is repeatedly and deliberately fudged. Yet the (literal) mode of production of these fetal bodies is important to understand, because it helps us to appreciate the enormously complex and expensive technical apparatus devoted to producing fetal bodies and make them real as the “real thing.” It is well worth the effort to undo them.

Animated fetuses are so ubiquitous today that the mere fact of animation may escape our notice, so it is worth pointing out explicitly that today’s fetal bodies often move and that this is a recent achievement. Animation is a vital feature of claiming to represent life; static images will not do. The use of 4D (or real-time 3D) ultrasound images – that is, those that move – is the basis of National Geographic’s claim to novelty, which claims to allow us to “see inside the unique world of animal fetal development in a way never before possible.” But the program never tells us how those images are created, or who must stick his or her arm up an elephant’s rectum to perform an ultrasound:

It’s a little trickier to get an ultrasound of an elephant [than of a dog]. The vet must first perform an enema to flood the animal’s entire system and clear a path in the rectum for the ultrasound transducer to be inserted. (The elephant is held in place with ropes.) The vet then inserts the probe to get images of internal organs. But because of the elephant’s size, the process only yields partial views on the ultrasound screen...A dolphin can be trained to float on its side before the procedure. (Olsen 2006)

Yes, the techniques used to custom-make these fetal bodies are mind-boggling, which may explain why producers prefer to obscure the details of how such images are produced. One source of information for those details is the advertising trade literature, where we learn that Next Generation was conceived by Ogilvy Stockholm and directed by Martin Krecji at a company called Smirk.tv. A London-based firm called Glassworks took five weeks to create the custom-made silicon models and computer-generated imagery. The resulting ad won a prestigious Escape award in 2008,12 drawing praise from the judges for “the beautiful imagery without a vehicle in sight.”13

Obviously, the profit motive is the only reason to go to such trouble and expense to produce animated fetal forms. National Geographic plumbed the infrastructural animal theme in several episodes of its In the Womb series. Animals in the Womb was broadcast in December, 2006. The hour-long documentary featured the development of elephant and dolphin fetuses, and a litter of Golden Retriever puppies. National Geographic hired a visual effects production company, Bandito, based in Winchester, United Kingdom. Bandito, in turn, used a combination of images from models, CG1, and 3D ultrasonograms of actual pregnant mammals. The 4D ultrasound technology does not produce high-quality images on its own, but the use of even grainy, jerky images from ultrasound lends scientific legitimacy to the synthetic images. Scientific legitimacy was also provided by three consultants from the Cornell College of Veterinary Medicine, who “provided numerous photographs of canine uteruses, fetuses and placentas and critiqued the models that were made to portray stages of fetal development” (Cornell University 2006). In other words, professors from the veterinary school provided photographs of dead animals’ reproductive organs taken
from their comparative anatomy and embryology collections, and National Geographic re-presented those dead specimens as icons of fetal life (Morgan 2009: 197).

This layering of different technologies is characteristic of how bodies – including fetal bodies – are represented now; images from one realm – biomedicine, education, entertainment, propaganda – are freely appropriated in another. Such loose layering is both visually appealing and ontologically confusing, perhaps by design (Morgan 2006). It does not really matter whether the images are “real,” however, if one is rushing to cash in on a winning formula. Animals in the Web spawned a 2007 sequel called Inside the Living Body, and a six-part series about parasites (not to be confused with fetuses, despite the alluring temptations) called Monsters Inside Me.15 A run of knock-off documentaries about gestational development among non-human animals included programs about domestic dogs and cats (predictably, given the huge market of pet owners) as well as “extreme” animals that rank high on the scale of weird-and-gross modes of reproduction: a red kangaroo (marsupial), emperor penguin (following the 2005 sleeper hit, March of the Penguins), parasitic wasp (dramatically kills its host), and lemon shark (“self-sufficient hunters from the time they are born”). The series continued with human gestation, with separate programs devoted to a singleton pregnancy, identical twins, and multiples; a four-piece boxed gift set of DVDs is available for $44.99 on Amazon.com. It takes a remarkably expensive social and commercial apparatus to produce “nature’s” fetal bodies.

CONCLUSION

The fetal bodies portrayed in Next Generation teach us how to see by building on several familiar tropes. There is the trope of fetal autonomy, in which female bodies are rendered largely invisible, extraneous, and unnecessary. There is the trope of car as womb and car/womb as Mother Earth (see Duden 1993), the site where environmental contamination and its antidote get generated, internalized, and reproduced, and where intervention can make a difference to the next generation.16 There is the trope of consumption, which implies not only that fetuses deserve good “stuff,” but that fetal well-being depends on our “choices,” with all the loaded political connotations of that word. It is scarcely possible in this context to “choose” to encounter fetal bodies that have not been computer-generated or digitally enhanced (Durnit and Davis-Floyd 1998: 2; see also Mitchell and Georges 1998: 120). Those of us who do not work in obstetrics or gynecology have few, in any, opportunities to encounter unmediated fetal bodies. The only exceptions include the cordoned-off rooms of traveling anatomy exhibits (Morgan 2009: 239–240), the pages of teratology textbooks (Hunter 2010), the halls of the few remaining prenatal anatomical displays (Cole 1993), or through personal (and usually quite isolated, and isolating) experience with miscarriage (Layne 2003).

Now, in 2003, virtually every celebrity image you see – in the magazines, in the videos, and sometimes even in the movies – has been digitally modified. Virtually every image. Let that sink in. Don’t just let your mind passively receive it. Contemplate its implications. This is not just a matter of deception – boring old stuff, which ads have traded in from their beginnings. This is perceptual pedagogy. How to Interpret Your Body 101. These images are teaching us how to see. (Bozzo 2003: xviii)

The category of “fetal bodies” is problematic in part because the collective capacity to see them critically is being worn down under pressure from an onslaught of (often) gorgeous and glamorized imagery. At times I am susceptible to it myself. I feel myself being gathered among the many participants, to use Bruno Latour’s term, who make “this thing ... exist and [who] maintain its existence” (Latour 2004: 246). Meanwhile, the power of feminist critique to counter the personification and embodiment of fetuses seems to be waning, as even the most sophisticated theorists of embodiment shed their critical countenance in favor of “fetal fascinations” (Franklin 1991). This brings us to the theoretical crus of the proverbial fetal matter: the production of computer-generated imagery overwhelms other ways of imagining and knowing fetal bodies, including those produced by embryological anatomy and the phenomenology of pregnancy (Duden 1999; Morgan 2009). Fetal bodies are a national and global hegemonic project, to the extent that they are liberated from prior constraints and corporeal contexts. I find myself inescapably drawn into the project of granting an independent existence to these “things,” as in the writing of this chapter which makes me complicit in a project I abhor. But it is too late now, I suppose, to urge you not to read it.

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NOTES

1 A video of the advertisement can be viewed at http://notadclip.com/02007/07/10/refined/refinedfuel.mp4 (accessed 14 November, 2010).

2 Elsewhere I have argued that Western theologians increasingly frame their arguments about the beginning of life in embryological terms, leaving aside outdated religious arguments (Morgan 2009: 21).


4 Paul Wells draws attention to a phenomenon he calls “recombination” in animated television programs: “if ... recombination is more obviously understood as the recirculation of materials and cultural resources which already enjoyed favorable dissemination and market acceptance, it is important to note that each version of the film ... still operates as a re-in- terpretation of the material and an echo of the primary developments that prefigured the Disney style” (Wells 2003: v25; emphasis in original).

5 A 2010 book on human sexuality contained the sentence, “Some, perhaps many, pregnant couples are afraid to have intercourse for fear of hurting the fetus” (Grosebroth et al. 2010: 248).

6 Thanks to Monica Gogna for bringing this to my attention.

