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The Gamble of Reproduction: Conceiving Ada's Queer Temporalities

Towards the end of Lynn Hershman Leeson's 1997 film *Conceiving Ada*, Ada Byron, Countess of Lovelace (Tilda Swinton) laments on her deathbed that she 'never became'; 'never was really what [she] should have been'. In this, one of the film's closing scenes, Ada, Hershman Leeson's fictionalized version of the Victorian mathematician who is often credited with inventing what we now know as computer language, describes her frustration at not having managed to write down – to get out – all of her ideas: 'It's all inside. It's still there.' Instead of birthing the information contained within her mind, Ada describes with disappointment what did in fact, 'come out of her': 'I don't know how my children even came out of me. They're not what I wanted to come out of me.' In this scene, Ada's pregnant mind is explicitly contrasted with her female reproductive body. Moreover, an antagonistic relationship is set up between her ability to birth her children and her ability to write out all of her ideas. The births of her children seemingly cause her to die with a full mind.

The larger narrative of the film follows Emmy Coer (Francesca Faridany), a contemporary computer scientist who aims to save Ada from being forgotten from history by accessing her memories using artificial life and computer code. However, Emmy's work is also threatened when she gets pregnant. Drawing on the concept of 'non-reproduction', I want to explore questions of feminist history and reproduction in *Conceiving Ada*. The scene above illustrates how Ada's ability to make history is threatened by both the imperative to reproduce and socially constructed understandings of pregnancy as a 'condition' which renders women unfit to engage in other kinds of work (usually for fear of harming the baby). Meanwhile, the recovery of feminist history is jeopardized by Emmy's pregnancy. Feminist scholars have explored representations of pregnancy in relation to foetal imaging technologies,¹ celebrity bodies,² and horror and science fiction films, particularly for the ways that these representations reflect certain tensions surrounding subjectivity.³ However, pregnancy in *Conceiving Ada* houses a different kind of tension: namely, the relationship between 'conceiving' as an act of embodied female reproductive practice and 'conceiving' as an act of historical recovery.

Hershman Leeson, a celebrated feminist performance artist as well as film-maker, has described *Conceiving Ada*, which is part of a trilogy including *Teknolust* (2002) and *Strange Culture* (2007), as being about ‘loss and technology’, stating, ‘Ada Lovelace invented computer language, but was never credited and was basically erased from history.’⁴ Hershman Leeson’s film then, through its telling of Ada’s story, becomes a corrective to the historical archive. As Marsha Kinder explains, Hershman Leeson’s making of this film about Ada ‘fulfils Emmy’s quest – of writing her into history and thereby making her visible’.⁵ Vicki Callahan in *Reclaiming the Archive* similarly describes how Hershman Leeson’s work more broadly ‘takes artifacts from the feminist past and rewrites history for future generations to see pathways yet to be explored’.⁶ *Conceiving Ada* not only rewrites history by telling Ada’s story but experiments with the process of recovering feminist history through its focus on Emmy’s aims to recover Ada’s memories.

In *Conceiving Ada*, this exploration is bound up with questions of technology, and particularly how technology might aid in the reconfiguration of and rewriting of the past. In terms of its production process, the actors were shot in front of a bluescreen and inserted into computer images depicting Victorian bed and breakfast rooms. Through this use of digital technology, Hershman Leeson explores the ways in which new technologies open up new relationships to the archive – here the Victorian photographic archive becomes the scenes on which the film stages its recovery of Ada. In the narrative, it is precisely through computer coding that Emmy is able to access Ada’s memories in the past. As Ariel Rogers argues, the film might be read as exploring how digital technology ‘severs consciousness from embodiment, equating it with the purported immateriality of information and emphasizing its transmissibility.’⁷ A chance coding error results in Emmy’s daughter being born with Ada’s memories so that it is through technology that Ada’s past becomes not only recoverable, but also given a future through Emmy’s daughter. Kinder points out that Hershman Leeson’s interest in the feminist possibilities of technology might productively link the artist to a lineage of feminist thinking, including the work of Ursula K. Le Guin or Donna Haraway.⁸

Importantly, however, the question of reproducing feminist history through computer code is bound up with the film’s preoccupation with biological reproduction. Despite the links that scholars have made between Hershman Leeson’s *oeuvre* and questions of subjectivity,⁹ there has been a lack of explicit exploration of *Conceiving Ada*’s representation of the maternal subject. In other words, there has been little reflection on the importance of pregnancy as the frame through which the film explores *conceiving* of feminist archival projects.

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Pregnancy is referenced from the very beginning of the film. As Kinder points out, the film's titular verb might be read in a number of ways, including as a referent for 'the creative activity performed by Hershman, Emmy, and Swinton as they try to imagine what the historical Ada must have been like' and 'the physical act of giving birth, Emmy to her daughter and Ada to her three children'.¹⁰ Though held apart by Kinder through two different interpretations of the verb 'conceiving', the maternal body's work of physically reproducing and the feminist work of conceiving of women's history are in fact intertwined in the film. While *Conceiving Ada* seemingly situates reproduction as antagonistic to the creation of feminist history, it also does not – and possibly cannot, given its investment in the recovering of feminist history – abandon the metaphor of reproduction altogether. As such, it does not embrace a non-reproductive stance but explores instead a conception of reproduction that challenges the binary of non-reproduction/reproduction.

This paper will firstly consider how the reproductive female body is represented as antagonistic to feminist history in the film. I will then turn to consider how *Conceiving Ada* explores another interpretation of reproduction in and for feminist history – one made possible by computer code. The digital is represented as being able to remedy the losses of the past by perfectly transmitting information from the past into the present. However, in the end, I argue that the film resists this turn away from the female reproductive body and instead reconceives of the maternal as a possible queer agent of history. This becomes possible, I suggest, through the emphasis on Emmy's daughter as being an imperfect copy of Ada – the question of whether or not she will recover Ada's memories completely or perfectly is, the film, suggests, a gamble. The gamble of reproduction, which the film so eloquently explores, enables a final reading of Emmy's pregnant body as queerly in touch with the past. While it is technology that enables Emmy's contact with Ada, it is her maternal body that births Ada's memories into the present – albeit not as a perfect transmission, but as a genetic gamble. While Emmy aims to use technology to literally make a digital copy of Ada, it is finally the gamble of reproduction – the failure of the perfect copy – that the film values. The film not only contributes to conceptualizing metaphors for the transmission of feminism through time, but also expands queer theory's work on the body as a historical agent through its focus on pregnancy and the queer potential of biological reproduction. Importantly, however, it manages this not by turning away from the female reproductive body, but by re-signifying it, through the metaphor of gambling, as a queer transmitter of history.

Reproducing Feminist History

The opening shot of *Conceiving Ada* is a close-up of Swinton as Ada. She stares straight at the viewer and gasps. This first moment of filmic time represents a startled subject – a subject who resists this encounter and goes on to cover her face from the viewer. The viewer is then introduced to Emmy, a contemporary computer scientist, through yet another close-up. But as the camera pans out, Emmy is revealed to be clicking a mouse, staring at a screen at the same time as she is represented onscreen for viewers. The context of the initial scene of Ada's gasp becomes clearer when it appears again later on in the narrative, this time framed as the first moment in which Emmy makes contact with Ada through her computer. The narrative follows Emmy's attempts to access the past through the use of artificial life – artificial life which would be able to act as a carrier of information from the past into the present. The moment in which Ada gasps is the moment when the distance between the two women's time periods evaporates in the digital realm. Emmy's encounter with the past, with the archive of Ada's now still living memory, utilizes the implied contact or point of interaction of the computer interface to bring the women face-to-face.

While it is this encounter that starts the film, this encounter is threatened by pregnancy. For it is pregnancy, and the socially constructed limitations it places on women's bodies, that is represented as threatening both to Ada's ability to make feminist history and Emmy's ability to recover it. Ada, a Victorian woman, suffers under the social imperative to reproduce biologically and dies due to a uterine infection – her reproductive organs quite literally kill her. *Conceiving Ada* criticizes the way in which the demand to reproduce threatens women's ability to make history – Ada's energy is spent making others, at the expense of becoming what she might be. As Mary Shelley (Esther Mulligan) tells Ada in one scene, 'Give this child life now and make your own later.' Ada asks, 'When is it going to be my time, Mary?', drawing attention to the fact that her time continues to be deferred to a future that never arrives. Throughout the flashbacks to Ada's life, Ada is shown frantically trying to fight the clock, working against time running out. On her deathbed she utters, 'There's not enough time. There's not enough time.'

Ada's struggles to make history with her work on codes are contrasted with a more contemporary character's efforts – those of the computer scientist Emmy. Emmy, who also works with coding, is developing a way of accessing memories from the past. It is the success of Emmy's work that allows for Ada's narrative to be part of the film; the footage of Ada's life and memories is accessible to viewers via Emmy's computer screen. Emmy's work then is

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not only about her desire to record history with her research, but also her desire to make feminist history by saving Ada from obscurity. In aiming to access Ada's memory patterns and copy them in and for the present, Emmy wants to guarantee, in her words, that Ada takes her 'rightful place in history'. However, Emmy gets pregnant early in the film and this, the film suggests, threatens her work in much the same way as it threatened Ada's. Both Emmy's doctor's demand that she get more rest and her boyfriend's attempts to stop her potentially dangerous work with artificial life are ostensibly for the sake of the child she is carrying. This comparison between the difficulties that pregnancy poses to both Ada's and Emmy's ability to work seems to comment on not only the barrier that reproduction poses to the women's work, but also the way that this conception of women's work as harmful to children has been reproduced. In other words, while Ada and Emmy are separated by hundreds of years, certain norms of the presumed relationship between pregnancy and creativity are seemingly reproduced. Ada's doctor's pronouncement that her uterus has been 'destroyed' by mathematics is mirrored in Emmy's doctor's demand that she stop working 'long, extended hours'. In this way, the film seems to gesture towards not only a similar narrative of the antagonism between the two women's bodies and their work, but a reproduction of this narrative throughout history.

While Ada and Emmy are seemingly in similar situations, Emmy's pregnancy competes with her ability to work and threatens to pull her away from the feminist past that her project is committed to recovering. Throughout the film, Ada describes her children as stealing her time, leaving her work and her goals in a state of permanent deferral. Emmy's predicament mimics Ada's in some ways in that the time of her child is in conflict with her work; however this dynamic plays out slightly differently in Emmy's case. In endangering Emmy's work, pregnancy not only impinges on her ability to reach her potential (and thus threatens her with the same fate as Ada), but, as her work is about retrieving Ada, her pregnancy threatens the reproduction of feminist history. Emmy's work in attempting to care for the feminist past is framed, in the film, as being threatening to the care that she should be bestowing on her future child. In other words, the care of the nuclear family and the reproduction of her child are positioned as antagonistic to her ability to recover Ada's memories.

It is here that the film might be seen as offering up another kind of reproduction, one that does not threaten feminist history but instead aids in its recovery. If time is what Ada runs out of, it is technology and Emmy's artificial life project that will save Ada, in part

because it challenges the linearity of time. When Emmy first makes contact with Ada, Ada asks, ‘Can you save me?’ and the term ‘save’ gets repeated in the film as well as flashed on the screen to explicitly reference the computer metaphor of saving information. Through computer code, Emmy is able to reproduce Ada’s memories in the present, giving her more time. Sharon Lin Tay argues that this ‘interface between past and present in *Conceiving Ada* unleashes temporality from the dictates of linearity’.¹¹ Importantly, this move away from linearity enables, for Tay, the film’s feminist potential, as cyberspace and virtual reality engender a model of feminist genealogy based on connectivity and continual becoming. Tay argues that the film explores the possibilities of technology (both in terms of its production and in terms of narrative) to conceive of feminist history away from a masculinist version of linear historical progress. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s work in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), Tay suggests that the film offers up a version of feminism through time that might be seen as a continual becoming.

Importantly though, this continual becoming is conceptualized through metaphors of digital copying. If biological reproduction comes to represent a hindrance to the transmission of feminist history, to its continual becoming, the digital seemingly offers a guarantee that the information from the feminist past can be saved into the present. Indeed, that it might be transmitted perfectly into the present. The advantage of the digital is that it provides both a means to access Ada’s memories and a way to reproduce them exactly for the present. As Jackie Stacey argues, both genetic engineering and digital manipulation (here brought together in the film) confuse linear teleologies, so that temporality ‘is accelerated, compressed, and distorted through genetic interference, producing the possibility of embodying two generations simultaneously, blending the traditional genealogical teleologies of Western kinship’.¹² As well as gaining access to Ada’s memories, Emmy explains that she has found a way to ‘clone’ Ada’s memory patterns: ‘everything you’re thinking, everything you’ve remembered’; ‘I’ve found a way to copy your memory patterns exactly.’ This form of reproduction is contrasted to the narratives of biological reproduction, where cloning signals ‘an interruption to so-called natural generative patterns’.¹³ Emmy continually insists that the promise of the digital is the unfettered access to the past and to information from the past – the digital makes the past present. Through the metaphor of saving, Ada’s memories can be copied into Emmy’s present. If at first the film represents biological reproduction as a hindrance to feminist memory or history projects, reproduction becomes reconceptualised

through the digital as a form of perfect copying – reproduction, in the sense of the copy, becomes the means by which feminist history might be conceived in the present.

The Gamble of Reproduction

Importantly though, while the film sets up the digital as a kind of alternative form of reproduction – the technological metaphor that re-signifies reproduction outside of the female pregnant body – it also works against dichotomizing the biological and the digital. The film conceptualizes memories as information waves that are never lost or deleted – with the right carrier or agent, they can be easily accessed from the present. Emmy, through the use of artificial life (the carrier), is able to access Ada's memories as information in a database. However, Emmy becomes more ambitious and desires to make 'direct contact' with Ada. To do this, she uses her body, asking, 'if water and salt are conductors of electricity, why can't we use the fluids of the body to carry information... like agents?' In order to make direct contact, Emmy mixes computer code with her own DNA – using a combination of her own bodily data and digital code to access Ada's memories. In a kind of posthuman turn, the film seems to conceptualize memories as, in N. Katherine Hayles' words, information that 'can circulate unchanged among different material substrates'.¹⁴ While the reproductive female body is at first framed as antagonistic to feminist history projects, the body returns in this instance as a carrier for feminist history – it is reconceived through coding metaphors as being able to transmit information from the past into the present. In other words, the body becomes a conduit for history. It is through the coding patterns of Emmy's body that she can make direct contact with Ada; through her body's codes that her present is opened up to the past.

While this transference of information through the body might be interpreted as a posthuman relation, I think that it is also possible, in the context of the film's interest in history and temporality, to read Emmy's body in relation to queer time. If code allows Emmy's body to become a conduit for Ada's memories, this is a moment in which the present's coherence and the past's otherness are challenged through a bodily experience of contemporaneity. In Emmy's contact with Ada, the singularity of her present is challenged. As she explains, 'I feel as if Ada's real life is in my computer, running along right next to mine. At the same time she's in here [gestures toward her body]. I even dream about her. I can't seem to separate our lives.' For Emmy, Ada's temporality runs 'along next to' hers as an experience of the past that does not come before her time, but coincides with it. It is these

moments, where the past can ‘touch’ the present, that Carolyn Dinshaw argues might be conceived of as historiography’s queer temporalities. As Dinshaw explains it, ‘[t]here is something corporeal – queer – about an extended now, a shared contemporaneity’.¹⁵ *Conceiving Ada* emphasizes this touch of the past, or the technological touch of the past, through the way in which these shots are framed. Ada and Emmy are in contact through the screen of Emmy’s computer – the viewer watches Ada ‘on screen’ and Emmy’s reflection is displayed in the corner of her screen. The interface of the computer, the screen itself, becomes the point of contact where Emmy and Ada’s faces are close to ‘touching’. Via the computer interface, Emmy is brought face-to-face with the past.

The body has become of key importance to queer temporality theories, which have tended to highlight the essential role that the body – its movements, its desires, and its erotics – plays in historical projects. Just as Dinshaw’s work explores as queer the felt contemporaneity of historiographic projects, other queer investigations pursue the possibilities of reading the body as a site where the concept of linear time is interrupted. For instance, Elizabeth Freeman, through close reading of experimental video, argues that bodies might register ‘on their very surface the co-presence of several historically contingent events, social movements, and/or collective pleasures’.¹⁶ An indicative case study is Freeman’s work on Elisabeth Subrin’s film *Shulie* (1997), a shot-for-shot remake of a 1967 film which interviews the then unknown Shulamith Firestone. Freeman explores the way in which 1970s feminism is ‘dragged’ in the film and argues that the film’s performance of the past invites a reading of the way in which this past might be neither entirely past nor entirely present, but instead might productively interfere into the inevitability of the contemporary moment. Freeman thus foregrounds how bodies on screen might be read for the ways in which they resist a ‘vision of time as seamless, unified, and forward moving’ and instead ‘propose other possibilities for living in relation to indeterminately past, present, and future others: that is, of living historically’.¹⁷ This emphasis on the way that the body might perform the multiplicities of the present is similarly shared in José Esteban Muñoz’s description of how the ‘ephemera’ of the past – its lost histories – might be transmitted through bodily gesture.¹⁸ In Muñoz’s work, the body both houses and performs queer history, so that bodily movements can be read for the imprint of queer histories, performing the past in the present.

While these queer theorists consider the body as a historical agent, none of this work has turned to consider the queer possibilities of the pregnant body. However, in ‘Maternal Publics: Time, Relationality and the Public Sphere’ (2012), Lisa Baraitser brings together the

maternal and the queer, suggesting that both figures might both represent a certain interruption to what Lee Edelman has termed ‘reproductive futurism’. In *No Future* (2004), Edelman polemically positions the figure of the queer as oppositional to the figure of the Child, which, he argues, as a figure of futurity, comes to stand for the normative social order. For Edelman, a queer resistance to the normative social order must resist the ‘reproductive futurism’ that demands that the present always acts in the future interest of the Child.¹⁹ This orientation, in Edelman’s view, necessarily limits the political present, through privileging heteronormativity and ‘rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations’.²⁰ Baraitser draws on Edelman’s work to posit that ‘the maternal queers public time’ through the way in which ‘motherhood simply takes too long’.²¹ In other words, Baraitser argues that the impossibility of speeding up reproductive time – of making it more productive – might enable a reading of the maternal in neoliberal global capitalism as ‘curiously resistant to productivity’, a time of waiting that interrupts ‘totally qualified time’.²²

At the same time that Baraitser brings together these two figures, she also reflects on this move: ‘I would be the first to admit that I have arrived at a rather queer place’.²³ Her surprise at the pairing of the maternal and the queer, particularly Edelman’s version of the queer, is understandable. Not only has the maternal subject not featured in queer temporality work, but, as Jennifer Doyle has argued in relation to *No Future*, it has at times been more forcibly erased.²⁴ Doyle suggests that Edelman’s manifesto for an anti-relational queer theory is made at the expense of the female reproductive body. As a striking corrective to Edelman’s project, Doyle points out that in exploring the figure of the Child apart from the maternal subject, ‘Edelman comes awfully close to speaking from exactly the reproductive position he so forcefully challenges – speaking as Child cut from the body of mother’.²⁵ Doyle argues that in Edelman’s work, radical feminist criticism of reproductive discourse is erased, as is the figure of the ‘anti-reproductive, abortive, and monstrous woman’, who might be function as the feminine version of Edelman’s radical (male) queer who says no to the future.²⁶

Conceiving Ada, I am suggesting, expands upon the question of what kinds of bodies can signify as queer, opening up the possibility for a re-signification of the female reproductive body. Heather Love explores the potential of feeling the tug of the past and particularly past losses as a queer refusal of narratives of progress.²⁷ Taking this turn away from the progressive future and attachment to the losses of the past as a queer orientation in time, Emmy’s insistence on making contact with Ada becomes not just a feminist history

project but a queer turn away from the future. In this, the film produces the maternal subject as one that is not in the service of reproducing the future but is instead in ‘touch’ with the past. Moreover, the film further challenges the so-called straightness of maternal reproductive time through unpacking genetic inheritance as a gamble. This, I would argue, enables a queer temporality that goes beyond the dichotomy of reproduction/non-reproduction. In other words, if Edelman’s queer politics require an anti-reproductive stance in the face of reproductive futurism, *Conceiving Ada* challenges the dichotomy of reproduction/non-reproduction through the metaphor of gambling. Gambling, in the film, comes to represent the possible failures of processes of reproduction (be they coding, copying, or birthing). In other words, *Conceiving Ada* destabilizes notions of reproduction as a process that can be controlled. Reproduction, in *Conceiving Ada* becomes not one side of an either/or, but a process that is open to chance, failure, and interference – not a guarantee, but a gamble. In this gamble, the relationship between the future generation and the past is productively unpredictable. As Ada is shown dying, Emmy explains that she has found a way to copy her memory patterns ‘exactly’ – she offers her own body for Ada to colonize. This, for Emmy, will guarantee that Ada can ‘take [her] rightful place in history’. However, Ada refuses to ‘colonize’ Emmy’s body, explaining that, ‘the redeeming gift of humanity is the ability of each generation to recreate itself.’ In refusing to have her memories copied into Emmy’s present, Ada’s dying words evidence a desire to preserve a level of creativity in relation to historical inheritance and transmission. In emphasizing the necessity for each generation to recreate itself, Ada refuses the process by which the past might be perfectly copied into the present.

The film’s final twist builds on Ada’s valuation of the present’s creative possibilities. In a reversal of the non-heterosexual reproduction of Ada into the present – a reproduction based around technology and the two women’s bodies – the film returns to give Emmy’s boyfriend a prime role in the transplantation of Ada’s memories into the present. While Ada refuses to colonize Emmy’s body, a chance coding error, caused by Emmy’s boyfriend tampering with her computer, means that Emmy’s daughter is born with Ada’s memories. Given the film’s pains to establish Emmy’s boyfriend as, at best, ignorant about her work and, at worst, a bumbling nuisance, this narrative point is particularly surprising. It is seemingly his action that finalizes the reproduction of Ada’s memories. Perhaps we might read this male interference in a narrative of female genealogy not as a return to the necessary role of the father in reproduction, but as a chance interference. While it is Emmy’s DNA combined with computer code that allows her to access Ada’s memories, it is her child that

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completes the transfer of Ada's memories from the past into the present – it is the child that disrupts the present's singularity through her possession of these memories from the past. In other words, it is through pregnancy and not in spite of it that Ada's memories are reproduced in and for the present. Tay reads this birth as representing the film's 'feminist ideal', for in Emmy's daughter inheriting Ada's memories, she 'provides Ada with an embodiment that transcends all the patriarchal impositions that had stifled, and effectively killed, Ada'.²⁸ For Tay, it is on this continuation of feminist memory through the promise of the next generation that the film's conclusion rests: 'The little girl is she who would take this series of feminist transformations further still.'²⁹

However, I suggest instead that Emmy's daughter is no guarantee of a feminist future. Rather than read the child as the promise or assurance of feminist transformation, I would like to read the birth of Emmy's daughter with Ada's memories a little bit more queerly. I locate the queerness of this reconceptualisation of pregnancy in the name of feminist history projects in the way that it also gestures toward the potential failures and slippages in this transmission. While the digital seemingly provides Emmy with a record of Ada's memories, her daughter is not a perfect copy of Ada. The birth of Emmy's daughter with Ada's memories is a more tenuous reproduction of feminist history. Indeed, this kind of reproduction starts to look more like a gamble. While Emmy's daughter inherits Ada's memories, there is the gamble of what she will remember, how she will use these memories, and this thwarts the idea that she is a perfect copy of Ada. The relationship between genetics and gambling is an ongoing theme of the film, particularly in relation to what Ada has inherited from her father, Lord Byron. In a scene in which Ada's mother is chastising her for her loose morals in relation to gambling, she makes reference to her attempts to stop the morals of her father from being transferred to Ada. Her mother explains to Ada how she aimed to 'thwart your father's hereditary genes from transferring to you', adding, 'I've attempted to perform moral surgery on your brain and I have failed.' In response, Ada describes how her gambles with code are not so dissimilar from her mother's gamble, the gamble of reproduction: 'You talk of my betting on the horses as if it were something completely different from your gamble, to which you've dedicated your whole life. [...] Well all genetic linkage is a gamble, isn't it?' It is here that Ada brings together the two forms of reproduction that the film has been fluctuating between. As Emmy merges her DNA with computer code to make contact with Ada, Ada similarly connects code with genetics, through

the metaphor of gambling. Emmy's daughter is not an exact replica of Ada; instead, what she will or will not remember or inherit from Ada is, Ada suggests, somewhat up to chance.

This final metaphor of gambling might also be read as a refusal to idealize the transmission of feminism through time as a perfect reproduction of the past into the present. Robyn Wiegman describes the fears clustered around the millennium about the failure of feminism to reproduce itself through time as both a political and a knowledge project, as 'apocalyptic'.³⁰ Wiegman explains that apocalyptic narratives discipline the timing of feminism through their demands for teleology. Teleological time, according to Wiegman, demands historical coherence that makes "movement," itself a referent for the future, temporally solid'.³¹ She argues for the need to resist these narratives and instead conceptualize 'the political value of feminism's inability to remain identical to itself'. Wiegman interestingly describes this as a 'nonreproductive end'.³² Resisting the field-limiting disciplining that she argues is an effect of the injunction to 'carry the feminist torch', Wiegman proposes that a 'nonidentical feminism' allows for what I would describe, using the language of the film, as the queer gamble of reproduction; it 'holds out the possibility that the knowledge that feminists will need in different futures is not "our" knowledge; that any particular future and "our" knowledge will have no necessarily productive relationship'.³³ *Conceiving Ada* contributes to thinking through this idea of feminist transmission or reproduction through time in the way that it sits finally neither as a narrative of reproduction, nor a resistance to reproduction. It suggests that reproduction is never controllable in the first place and this is perhaps what makes it a plausible metaphor for feminist history. In *Conceiving Ada*, copies do not always come out as planned.

Conclusion

Conceiving Ada, in my reading, reconceives a model of inheritance that resists the binary of reproduction/non-reproduction. On the one hand it mobilizes a feminist critique of the social controls that reproduction exerts on women's bodies, exploring how this imperative has impeded women's ability to make history. It also, however, explores the potential necessity of some form of feminist reconceptualization of reproduction – feminist history, it suggests, seemingly requires a model of reproduction. Without a way of transmitting women's experiences, the film suggests that there is danger that the ills that women have suffered historically will continue to be reproduced. Emmy faces similar stigma to Ada as both their work is imagined as antagonistic to their pregnancies. The film finds a model of historical

transmission in digital technologies, as it is via computer code that feminist history becomes saveable. Digital reproduction enables Ada's history to be remembered in Emmy's present, a kind of perfect copying that challenges the erasure of women's lives from history. The past becomes downloadable through digital technologies and this opens up new models of the transmission of feminist history, models which guarantee that women's knowledge and historical experiences will never be lost. However, while the film seemingly sets up the embodied and the digital as two quite different forms of reproduction, it also offers a third option that reworks reproduction without turning away from the pregnant body.

In this final metaphor of reproduction as a gamble, biological reproduction is brought together with the language of coding. I have argued that through this metaphor the film contributes both to queer work on the body's relationship to history and to feminist thinking on models of inheritance and transmission. Emmy's pregnancy is imagined as a mode of history – her body's birth of a child with Ada's memories opens up queer temporality work to the potentially queer possibilities of genetic linkage. The film signifies the pregnant body as both one that might be oriented towards the past – that might resist the way in which others want to place this body in the care of the future, figured through the child – while also challenging the dichotomy between reproductive futurism and queer turns away from the future. The film's construction of queer temporalities does not rely on refusing the pregnant body, or adopting a non-reproductive stance. Instead, *Conceiving Ada* represents the queerness of genetic inheritance, exploring how inheritance is both always tied to the past yet never entirely determined by this past. As well as pushing queer temporality theory in its representation of the pregnant body as queerly in touch with the past, the film might also resuscitate reproduction as a model of feminist transmission – where reproduction is neither a barrier to feminist history nor a guarantee that the future will always be tied to the present. In *Conceiving Ada*, reproduction does not provide the security of transference, but instead is always a gamble.

¹ See Sarah Franklin, 'Fetal Fascinations: New Dimensions to the Medical-Scientific Construction of Fetal Personhood', in *Off-Centre: Feminism and Cultural Studies*, ed. by Sarah Franklin, Celia Lury and Jackie Stacey (London: HarperCollins, 1991), pp. 190-205; Valerie Hartouni, *Cultural Conceptions: On Reproductive Technologies and the Remaking of Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Carole Stable, *Feminism and the Technological Fix* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994); Rosalind Petchesky, 'Fetal Images: The Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of Reproduction', *Feminist Studies*, 13.2 (1987), 263-292.

- ² See Imogen Tyler, 'Skin-Tight: Celebrity, Pregnancy and Subjectivity', in *Thinking Through the Skin*, edited by Sarah Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (London: Routledge, 2004), 69-83.
- ³ See Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993); Mary Ann Doane, 'Technophilia, Technology, Representation, and the Feminine', in *Body/Politics: Women and the Discourse of Science*, edited by Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller and Sally Shuttleworth (New York: Routledge, 1990).
- ⁴ Tatiana Bazzichelli, 'Hacking the Codes of Self-Representation: An Interview with Lynn Hershman Leeson', *Leonardo Electronic Almanac*, 17.1 (2011), 28-33 (p. 32).
- ⁵ Marsha Kinder, 'A Cinema of Intelligent Agents: *Conceiving Ada* and *Teknolust*', in *The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson: Secret Agents, Private I*, edited by Meredith Tromble (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2005), 169-182 (175).
- ⁶ Vicki Callahan, *Reclaiming the Archive: Feminism and Film History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), p. 420.
- ⁷ Ariel Rogers, "'You Don't So Much Watch It As Download It': Conceptualizations of Digital Spectatorship', *Film History: An International Journal*, 24.2 (2012), 221-234 (p. 224).
- ⁸ Kinder, pp. 172-173.
- ⁹ See Meredith Tromble (Ed.), *The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson: Secret Agents, Private I* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press). For a reading of Hershman Leeson's film *Teknolust* in relation to cinematic representations of genetic technology, see Jackie Stacey, *The Cinematic Life of the Gene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).
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- ¹¹ Sharon Lin Tay, 'Conceiving Ada, Conceiving Feminist Possibilities in the New Mediascape', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 18.2 (2007), 182-198 (p. 187).
- ¹² Stacey, p. 193.
- ¹³ Stacey, p. 95.
- ¹⁴ Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press), p. 1.
- ¹⁵ Carolyn Dinshaw, 'Temporalities', in *Oxford Twenty-First-Century Approaches to Literature: Middle English*, edited by Paul Strohm (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 107-123 (p. 10).
- ¹⁶ Freeman, Elizabeth, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 63.
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- ²⁰ Edelman, p. 2.

- ²¹ Lisa Baraitser, 'Maternal Publics: Time, Relationality and the Public Sphere', in *Re(con)figuring Psychoanalysis: Critical Juxtapositions of the Philosophical, the Sociohistorical and the Political*, edited by Aydan Gülerce (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 221-240, p. 235.
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- ²⁴ Jennifer Doyle, 'Blind Spots and Failed Performance: Abortion, Feminism, and Queer Theory', *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences*, 18.1 (2009), 25-52.
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