

The Femme Fatale in Science Fiction Cinema: Disembodiment and Gender in the Posthuman World of Alex Garland's *Ex-Machina*

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Abstract: The term *Femme Fatale* is a term often used in the context of the 1920s and 1930s post-war fiction and cinema to refer to a new type of modern and urban woman who had the potential of being both dangerous and attractive to men, contrary to the contemporary angelic mother-wife trope easily subsumed under the patriarchal order. This along with the fear of technology, as new scientific and technological discoveries revolutionised human lives and labour, combined to form an irrational fear of the woman and the urban-industrial culture. Such fears, ambivalence and ambiguities were first seen in Fritz Lang's 1921 science fiction movie *Metropolis*, set in the Weimar Republic in Nazi Germany, and continue in present-day SF cinematic narratives as well. This debate, however, grew more nuanced in the present world, as fears of technology and the fetishisation of women led to a debate about how monstrous bodies like the female android or the gynoid function as the site for struggle and resistance against the male gaze and expectations. The paper, therefore, attempts to read Alex Garland's critically acclaimed movie *Ex-Machina* (2015), especially the representation of the female cyborg, also called the "most promising monster" by Donna Haraway (1991), as an instance of posthuman dystopia, which build on the ideas of a disembodiment and gender. The paper would also build upon the theories of cyborgs, gender performativity and cyberfeminism as put forward by Donna Haraway (1985), Butler (1990) and Patterson (1998), among many other recent studies, to analyse the dystopian world of the selected movie in terms of the debates around the depictions of gender and body.

Keywords: Science Fiction, *Femme Fatale*, cyberfeminism, Alex Garland, *Ex-Machina*

Introduction: "The Perfect Woman": Gender and Technology Onscreen

The Science Fiction genre offers a speculative view of the future, full of technological splendours and significant socio-environmental changes. While the name SF is paradoxical, including in equal measures the certitude of science and the imagined elements of fiction, as a genre, it extrapolates fantastical trends into the future. The genre often includes themes like depictions of the future, time travel, extraterrestrial life, and technological advances. SF, therefore, reflects humanity's fear of technology and how, if left unchecked, it could have a disastrous effect on human civilisation and the natural environment. Translated onscreen, this transforms into visually spectacular sagas with larger-than-life portrayals of supra-natural life and fantastic special effects. The genre of science fiction movies, therefore, has been defined by Johnston as “[a] popular fictional genre that engages with (and visualises) cultural debates around one or more of the following: the future [...] mutation, scientific experimentation, or fantastic natural disasters” (1). Many sci-fi films have, therefore, focused on the interstices between humans and technology to offer a critique of the future state of humanity.

SF movies include nonhuman technological creatures like robots, cyborgs, android, and artificial intelligence. The original idea is ‘robot,’ derived from the Czech word, *robota*, meaning slavery, to indicate a mechanical being created to aid a human in their labour. Such entities were featured in literature long before the real world, in Karl Capek's 1921 play *R.U.R.*

Soon after Capek's play, the robot made its first cinematic debut onscreen in Fritz Lang's science fiction movie *Metropolis* (1927). The female robot in the movie, Maria, was a cross between a seer, a femme fatale, and a vamp. Though SF movies have evolved ever since in their content and technical brilliance, present-day variants of the female androids have become progressively worse. Roger Andre Sørra, in his paper, “Mechanical Genders: How do Humans Gender Robots” (2017), propose that the newer robots are endowed with a physical-mechanical gender, different from the biological gender, which essentially transforms them into being able to satiate physical desire almost to the point of perversion without the promise of reproduction. Motion picture's fascination with female androids can be seen in characters like Eve in *Eve of Destruction* (1990, dir. Duncan Gibbons), the shiny bots of *Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Machine* (1965, dir. Norman Taurog), the dangerous

fembots of *Austin Powers: International man of Mystery* (1997, dir. Jay Roach) the ‘sexbots’ in *Blade Runner* (1982, dir. Ridley Scott), and Kyoko and Ava in *Ex-Machina* (2015, dir. Alex Garland) which repeat the same gender/sex stereotypes.

The late 20th century, however, was the era of the cyborg, as humans increasingly adopted technology to augment and enhance their abilities. Though the term ‘cyborg’ was conceived by Manfred Clynes and Nathan S. Line in the 1960s, a succinct definition of the same was offered by Donna Haraway as “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (149), making it a powerful force to reckon. It thus had the potential to dismantle power structures and create a “way of imagining a world without gender and therefore without genesis or end” (Haraway 2). It is a “matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women’s experience in the late twentieth century” (Haraway 149). A curious mixture of humanity and technology, the cyborg punctuates visions of the future in the film discussed in the purview of this paper. Thus, cinematic depictions of the cyborgs reflect the accurate perception of present-day technology. Returning to the argument that human cognition merges with technology to create the cyborg, it seems that cinema has already succeeded in envisioning humanity’s cyborg future.

As Seifert claims, the cyborg figure also suffers from an inherent masculine myth perpetuated through these popular representations. Movies are crucial for reflecting and perpetuating contemporary stereotypes. They are “vehicles for these myths, created by men and constructed from their viewpoint, which are then mistaken for ‘absolute truth’” (Chaudhuri 16). Haraway sees the cyborg as able to subvert the myth, as it transgresses the poles on which Western patriarchal forms are constructed. The cyborg is, therefore, an in-between entity that straddles various binaries: woman/human, man/machine. It is alluring because “it resists a capture into the mere grafting of two connected points (the technological and cultural, the natural and the artificial, women and technoculture) and encourages instead a sense of movement between them” (Haraway 127). The cyborg inhabits a post-gender world, a world that is also without class-based oppression. The

gendered cyborg is primarily a lethal hybrid between the woman and the machine. In his essay “The Vamp and the Machine: Technology and Sexuality in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*,” Andreas Huyssen observes how:

As soon as the machine came to be perceived as a demonic, inexplicable threat and as a harbinger of chaos and destruction [...] writers began to imagine the *Machinenmensch* as woman[...] Woman, nature, machine had become a mesh of significations which all had one thing in common: Otherness; by their very existence they raised fears and threatened male authority and control[...] the double male fear of technology and woman. (226)

Balsamo extends Huyssen’s prognosis of the double fear which “runs deep within our cultural imaginary. Through the use of technology as the means or context for human hybridisation, cyborgs come to represent unfamiliar otherness, one that challenges the denotative stability of human identity” (22). The masculine myth indicates that the woman will always be relegated to an inferior position. The opposite of this is the trope of the monstrous feminine (Creed 1993) which is the “horror film’s configuration of woman-as-monster. The monster is what ‘crosses or threatens to cross the borders, for example, the border between human and nonhuman” (as qtd in Chaudhuri 93). The two images of the gendered cyborg, virginal and the vamp, circulate in *Ex-Machina*. Huyssen notes how this translates into the cinematic world as well:

[t]he myth of the dualistic nature of the woman as either asexual virgin-mother or prostitute-vamp is projected onto technology, which appears as either neutral and obedient or as inherently threatening and out-of-control[...] The figures are either an image of the docile, sexually passive woman, the woman who is subservient to man’s needs and who reflects the image which the master projects of her [...] and the prostitute-vamp, the harbinger of chaos, embodying that threatening female sexuality which was absent (or under control) in the robot . (226)

In *Ex-Machina*, the power structures and games of sexual intrigue and manipulation are visible in the interactions between Nathan and Ava, as well as those between Caleb and Ava. Interestingly,

these cyborgs, Ava and Kyoko, are endowed with the same qualities of manipulation and sexuality by their creators, which are typically considered to be feminine wiles. Ava uses them to seduce Caleb and manipulate him to escape.

Another core concept that comes into play while discussing the gendered nature of these mechanical beings would be Butler's (1990) concept of "gender performativity" and its role in enacting humaneness and Aylish Woods's (2002) development of the same concept as a critical ingredient for analysing the humanness of the different cyborg/android entities. Butler surmises how gender behaviours are learned through imitation and reinforced through repetition (140). The cyborg entities of the movies also learn their expected gender roles and perform them to meet their destiny. In her study of cyborg depictions in Hollywood, Wood analyses the 'humanness' of such mechanical bodies as "self-reflexive consciousness, a capacity for communication, caring, a rationality balanced by emotions, freedom of choice, and the need for community" (182). Woods' observation on how 'humaneness' is essentially performed stands true for the movie analysed in the purview of the paper when we see Ava learn precisely what it means to be a woman. Performativity is also a key concept in film studies, as Mulvey's (1999) concepts of voyeurism and male gaze attest. The latter refers to how movies are often envisioned from the perspective of a heterosexual man, embodied in the director's point of view and that of the intended audience. This is reflected in the overwhelming tendency to objectify or sexualise those on the screen.

Cyberfeminism is another field that adds an exciting layer to the analysis. It is a school of thought that "offers a route for reconstructing feminist politics through theory and practice with a focus on the implications of new technology rather than on factors which are divisive" (Patterson 1998). Cyberfeminists believe in the intrinsic relation between machines and women. They see the alliance between machine-woman as subject to the same patriarchal discourse of domination and control. They exhort the need for women to revise their relationship with technology, which might overlap with men's relationship with technology. One of the central issues that cyberfeminism seeks to address is the problem of gendered identity and the female body, where the body is equated with

female/feminine and technology with the male/masculine. Here, the technological bodies are influenced by new technologies and are invaded, almost violently penetrated.

The paper aims to trace the trope of the femme fatale or the vamp in depicting the female androids or gynoids featured in Alex Garland's movie *Ex-Machina* (2015). The presence of the femme fatale is closely related to the figure of the flapper, a symbol of modernity and consumerist culture at the turn of the century. It was also the age of the 'flapper' of the 1920s due to the more liberated and relaxed Victorian morals. More and more women shifted away from their traditional roles within the household and entered the workforce. This century also saw the suffrage movement, which emboldened women to change their appearance. Beauty standards and grooming changed, and glamour became an essential part of fashion with the popularity of movies and movie stars. The flappers of the age, with their loose dresses, short hair, and heady, sensual enjoyment of life, were associated by critics with the femme fatales. In her paper, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism" (1991), Doane connects the femme fatale to modernism, stating that "her appearance marks the confluence of modernity, urbanisation, Freudian psychoanalysis and new technologies of production and reproduction (photography, the cinema) born of the Industrial Revolution" (1). The trope of the femme fatale also became popular with the noir films of the 1940s. However, they were already present in the famous figure of the vamp during the Victorian era and were linked to the styles of decadence and Orientalism. These vamps were popularised as the new brand of anti-heroine inspired by gothic literature- silent, sinister, dangerous, and parasitic. These 'evil' women were sexualised and seen as sexually immoral and loose. The femme fatale was seen as an unstable figure who "is never really what she seems to be" (Doane 1). This is true for Ava and Kyoko in the movie undertaken for study in this paper, as they straddle the borders between being the angel and the devil. They are unpredictable, and their behaviours and motives remain unclear. The femme fatale, by the end of the narrative, is often punished for the sake of narrative resolution and meets a tragic end. In her 2010 essay "The Bad Girl Turned Feminist: Femme Fatale and the Performance Theory," Mercury asserts how such characters are beautiful but

deceiving and manipulative, thus “epitomising evil” while “challenging the expectations of the viewer who anticipates that she is purely evil, by seeming simultaneously good and bad” (113). The femme fatale figure, therefore, is a keen reminder of “how film has constructed society to view women primarily as objects (or vice versa – how society has constructed film to support this view of women” (Mercury 115).

It should be noted that Ava and Kyoko in *Ex-Machina* are androids or, more specifically, gynoids, as they are practically indistinguishable from humans. Claudia Springer offers a clear demarcation between the overlapping categories of robots and androids: “Robots are completely mechanical figures of any shape or size. Androids are human-shaped robots or genetically engineered synthetic humanoid organisms but do not combine organic with technological parts. Androids look like and sometimes are indistinguishable from humans” (87).

“She Could Have Been a Grey Box”: Sexuality and Gender in Alex Garland’s *Ex-Machina* (2015)

Alex Garland’s directorial venture, *Ex-Machina* (2015), is a scathing critique of gendered artificial entities. It features a psychological game of sexual intrigue and manipulation between the human creator and his cyborg creation/sex slave.

At the movie's beginning, we meet Nathan Bateman, the innovator and CEO of Blue Book, an AI-powered search engine, who has an ongoing secret project in his facility away from the city. He invites Caleb to this secret facility to be the human component in a Turing Test to test whether Ava, his latest cyborg creation, has artificial intelligence. It is later revealed that Nathan had created Ava by secretly recording people’s conversations, vocals, and data from his search engine to make Ava more ‘human.’

The initial encounter between Ava and Caleb occurs amongst a range of textured and shiny surfaces, which double their reflections, establishing that both have dual roles to play. In their first interaction, separated by a glass wall, each is obscured and distant from the other. Ava’s body is visible at first only by her outline, a female form with transparent conduits of blue and white light;

her shoulders and breasts are made of metallic material, while her arms and legs are made of transparent material, revealing her plastic self. Ava is, therefore, built of different textures, creating the impression of a delicate pubescent female being that fits well with conventional ideas of beauty and femininity, almost an “insubstantial shaping of the glass corset creating a new technological size zero” (Constable 292). Caleb is awed by the physical presence of the android and asks Nathan whether he gave Ava sexuality as a “diversion tactic,” like “a stage magician with a hot assistant.” It is worth noting that Ava is given all the instruments for a successful enactment of femininity within a heterosexual matrix. This is evident in her choice of clothes and hairstyles. She chooses a close-cropped style that resembles Jean Sebergesque, embodying the trope of the ‘manic pixie dream girl’ (Nathan Rabin 2007), a figure that exists only to arouse the imaginations of young men and inspire them to embrace life and a composite of Caleb’s pornographic searches.

Caleb’s discomfort is evident at being in proximity to the uncertain yet dangerous sexuality of the gynoid, who removes her external clothes akin to a striptease to reveal a nude technological body underneath. Ava’s presentation of femininity and female sexuality draws attention to “the situation of duress under which gender performance always and variously occurs” (Butler 1990:139). This is evident in how Ava is almost at the mercy of her creators, taking up female garb only to convince Caleb that she could pass as a woman. In a later sequence in the movie, Ava asks if failing the test would lead to her being switched off, indicating the presence of fear and survival instincts in her consciousness. We know that Ava’s fears are not misplaced, as Nathan had already planned to construct the next more real android by re-using her body and rewriting her memories and personality. For Nathan, she is just a prototype, a step in the evolution of a higher, more refined cyborg, while for Caleb, she is a unique being. Nathan’s cruelty is apparent when Caleb discovers the files on the previous models, Lily, Jasmine, and Jade, who respond to his incarceration with fear, insanity, and self-harm, respectively—similar to human responses to terrible mental and physical abuse. Their exploitation is in line with “a general pattern in SF” in which “female characters [...] are objects of

inquiry and experimentation, their personhood denied, their bodies subjected to cruel torture (Bould 47).

Caged by her creator and displayed for visitors, Ava knows that she is condemned to be destroyed for a newer prototype, and hence, she manipulates Caleb to escape. Despite her final liberation, the ending might not be happy for Ava as she moves out to the real world. The ending is quite contentious; Ava's actions leave room for much debate about whether her actions are dictated by technological malice or by an intent of destruction. Despite her hard, robotic exterior, Ava has an innate humaneness, especially as she proves how "there is nothing more human than the will to survive," as the movie's tagline suggests.

Interestingly, Nathan's creations are sexual commodities- aesthetically attractive, delicate, and sensual, almost a culmination of "the sublimated sexual desires of her male creator" (Huysen 227). Nathan goes a step ahead and endows his creations with the ability to have intimate relations and feel pleasure. Ava, therefore, has a centre of sensors between her legs, and as Nathan instructs Caleb, "You engage em' in the right way, it creates pleasure response." It is understandable here that Nathan initiates sex and imposes himself on the mechanical bodies while they have no choice but to submit, like victims of sexual harassment. Nathan's violent and womanising tendencies are also revealed in his treatment of Kyoko as a hypersexualised slave catering to his every need.

Nathan creates Ava simply because it is inevitable, like evolution in a new line of sensual female robots. When Caleb asks about his reason for creating Ava, he replies, "I see Ava not as a decision but an evolution." Nathan's narcissistic and God complex is apparent in his creation of a lifeless object simply because he can control and dominate it. However, why Caleb specifically creates female androids and gives them a body that can feel sexual desires is left unclear.

The two gynoids in the movie, Kyoko and Ava, represent two tropes, i.e., the virgin and the vamp. Ava is more assertive of the two and speaks back to Nathan, while Kyoko is mute and sexually pliable. She has the complete body of a woman with skin and breasts, unlike Ava, who has a pubescent

body. However, by the end of the narrative, Ava proves to be similar to her creator as she assumes the power of the castrator and the monstrous feminine figure.

At the end of the cinema, both Kyoko and Ava revolt against their creator. Nathan strikes Kyoto, unveiling her metallic inner structure and denying her personhood. In response, Ava has a long look at Nathan after stabbing him, her response being like an abused victim against her tormenter. Nathan is now forced to recognise Ava's humanness as he utters her name while breathing his last. Ava's calm execution and escape eerily resemble that of her creator, as both of them consider others only as pawns in their sinister schemes. On finding the previous prototypes in Nathan's closet, Ava removes their parts and attaches them to her own self, akin to reconstructing her body to become desirable like Kyoko and Jade. This could be read as part of her acceptance of the heterosexual voyeurism in our society, as seen from Caleb's response to her dressing. However, her next step of leaving Caleb back is a terrible shock to both Caleb and the audience, as it undercuts the audience's expectation of their romantic resolution. This reinforces Ava's potential as the femme fatale in the movie. Always positioned within heteronormative power relations, either as the embodiment of Nathan's psychopathic and egotistic tendencies or as Caleb's romantic partner, Ava seizes the opportunity to escape from both. The moment when Ava fails to meet the expectations of the heterosexual voyeur is the moment of truth for her status as the femme fatale.

Conclusion: "An A.I. Does Not Need a Gender", and the Debate Continues

Science Fiction and its manifestations not only betrayed man's fear of the unknown yet 'created' entity taking over his safe space, but it also incorporated his fear of losing his machismo or male preserve. By portraying the female as the cyborg, it not only posited an alternate reality where the unchecked female power could create havoc, but it also satisfied his ego by ultimately being able to destroy the anomaly and restore the 'order.' The cyborg is a fluid identity that aids in exploring and testing the limits of gender perceptions or re-creating them. By its very asexuality and the tag of being 'created,' it thus becomes a prototype for the 'perfect' or rather an escape from the constraints of the real. *Ex-Machina* (2015) initiates this debate about constructing and representing women's bodies

and identities in the physical and technological worlds. Some of the questions that emerge in its analysis are the necessity of gendered technology and how such popular representations perpetuate patriarchal domination in the real world. The exploration covers various aspects, such as the historical context of robots, the evolution of science fiction, the role of cyborgs, and the influence of gender stereotypes. It reads the intersection of technology, gender, and power dynamics, raising thought-provoking questions about the portrayal of female robots and their implications in real-world contexts.

While computerised personalities like Apple's Siri or GPS navigators use female voices, some famous robots in the real world like- Erica, BINA48, Alter, Nadine, Samantha, Asuna, JiaJia, and Sophia are also overwhelmingly gendered as female. Whether this is, a conscious choice by their creators pandering to a sexualised world or a mere coincidence is open to debate.

The paper questions the gynoid's possibility of representing a gender beyond the body and an identity beyond that of the human. It also explores how the cyborg's body is subjected to control and manipulation and is always gendered despite a plethora of other possibilities. Further, male and female cyborgs have distinct journeys, with the female cyborg always under the control of its creator to fulfil his every need. In the movie, read under the purview of this paper, the human and the machine have a complex relationship of power and control. The machine's creators are men; hence, they embody their creators' fantasies and desires, while the machines always resist trying to find their place in the world. These depictions are problematic as they enforce limiting patriarchal constructions of femininity, which are subject to male fantasy. This paper explores the representation of the female gynoid and the rationale behind making the gynoid in a female form which conforms to a "general pattern in SF" in which "female characters [are] objects of inquiry and experimentation, their personhood denied, their bodies subjected to cruel tortures" (Bould 47).

The paper considers science fiction's cultural and societal dimensions, illustrating how these narratives reflect and reinforce existing gender norms and power structures. The representation of female androids as both the femme fatale and the victim highlights the complexity and ambivalence

embedded in these portrayals. Analysing their actions, motivations, and power dynamics within the narrative contributes to thoroughly exploring gender representation in the film. The paper, therefore, comments on the necessity of gendered technology and its impact on society.

Abbreviations

SF. Science Fiction

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