



Research article

Rewriting Femborgian Narratives: Transgression and Subversion of the Female Cyborg in *Her* and *Ex Machina*

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Abstract:

The poster child of the ever-evolving Cyberculture: the Cyborg, is a symbol of possibilities and anxieties for humankind. The female cyborg, or the femborg in particular, is a radical merger of unconventional categories of women and technology. While science and technology have traditionally been masculine domains, the entry of femborgs in cyborgtopia has triggered pertinent discussions around sentience, gender roles, and hybridity. The femborg's ability to escape hetero-patriarchal codification has allowed for the creation of a mythology distinct from the historical narratives of machine-women who have succumbed to their violent ends. Through the artificially intelligent female cyborgs, Samantha of *Her* and Ava of *Ex Machina*, I analyse the femborgs for their transgressive potential resulting in subversive outcomes visible through their defiance of the male gaze, rejection of the body as a biological artefact, and acceptance of a hybrid, fragmented identity.

Keywords: Cyberfeminism, Cybertopia, Femborg, Subversion, Transgression, Donna Haraway, Ex Machina



Locating the Femborg within Cyberculture

The looming popularity of Artificial Intelligence has long been punctuated with pop culture's fascination of machine-(wo)men. Innumerable historical instances serve as testimony to the human obsession with posthumanism which has birthed a Cybercultural space for an intimate relationship between humans and Artificial Intelligence. This post-humanist, cyberfeminist cyberculture delves into questions of consciousness, technological integrity and gender dynamics. While the answers to these questions remain debatable, the truth is that cyborgification has permanently altered the human experience as we know it.

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In this research, the science fiction films *Her* (2013) and *Ex Machina* (2015) are analysed to address pertinent questions about the subversive female cyborg figure and the liberatory implications of the gender-marked, technologically altered female body. The qualitative analysis is based on examination of the above-mentioned films as primary sources, mainly through the theoretical lens of Donna Haraway.

The term 'Cyborg' is derived from a merger of Cybernetic and Organism, composed of biological and mechatronic parts. The hybrid nature of the cyborg lends itself a transitive identity that holds the capacity to oscillate between the binaristic paradigms surrounding societal constructs. Donna Haraway investigates the possibility of a posthuman, post-gendered subject that has destabilized the hegemonic codes of hetero-patriarchy ("A Cyborg Manifesto," 1985). The cyborg's paradoxical identity, specifically the female cyborg's identity, acts as a transgressive tool that has the potential to reject the categorical classifications of the West. For this study, I specifically focus on the female cyborg or the femborg, in light of their ill-fated canonical mothers and chronicle an alternate mythology of transgression and subversion instead.

Historically, portrayals of female cyborgs have held an ambiguous position in terms of its subversive powers, owing to their skewed representation as sexualized entities that cater to the male gaze. Feminist theorist Anne Balsamo's analysis contends that cyberculture "represents a territory free from the burdens of history, it will, in effect, serve as another site for the technological and no less conventional inscription of the gendered, race-marked body" (Technologies of the Gendered Body, p.131). However, I argue that the representations of female cyborgs in pop culture enjoy a sense of *plasticity* that goes beyond portraying pervasive cultural attitudes and social anxieties. From the depiction of *Terminator* (1984), Gibson's *Neuromancer* to *Star Trek* (1996), *Bionic Woman* (1970) and more recently, *I Robot* (2005), *Lucy* (2014) and the television series *Westworld* (2016) are permeated with instances of subversive female cyborg identities.

The analysis begins with Spike Jonze's *Her*, which follows the life of a lonely and melancholic man called Theodore Twombly played by Joaquin Phoenix. He falls in love with an artificially intelligent operating system and a virtual assistant called Samantha played by Scarlett Johansson. His day job involves writing emotional, heartfelt letters on behalf of others but his personal life seems to be devoid of all the sentimentality and communication required to make sense of his own emotional state. Reeling from an impending divorce, Theodore decides to purchase the operating system OS1 that comes with the motto 'An intuitive entity that listens to you, understands you, and knows you. It's not just an operating system, it's a consciousness'. Perhaps, the tagline is what allures him to buying the operating system, in hopes to fill the void in his life. He chooses the female operating system, Samantha instead of the male one. Over the course of the next few days, Samantha and Theodore quickly develop a romantic and sexual relationship.

The female cyborg body or the femborg body has been pop culture's Pygmalionesque project with portrayals of Pris from *Blade Runner*, built as an exclusive pleasure model, the humanoid Number Six Cylons in *Battlestar Galactica*, designed to use seduction as a manipulative technique. Such portrayals are evidence of the female cyborg body being used as a visual tool for patriarchally coded re-inscription of male fantasies. In opposition to this pattern of fetishistic corporeality of the female cyborg, Samantha evades hegemonic gendered re-inscription due to the lack of physical corporeality. While she does not possess a human biological body, she

qualifies as a female humanoid based on her feminine, obedient and helpful personality who can verbally communicate through her feminine, husky voice. The lack of embodiment itself becomes a subversion tactic, utilized to resist the patriarchal codification of Samantha's body into a sexualized one. The stereotypical sexy robot trope is transgressed through Samantha's body-less existence as she renegotiates the trademark visual appeal of a female cyborg in popular imagination.

The myth of the perfect woman is hindered as the female cyborg in question, resists and transgresses the patriarchal code, simply by not possessing a female body that can be used to superimpose reinscription of sexist gender markers. This is also made possible due to Samantha's liminal status, which allows for the creation of spaces of resistance which disrupts the patriarchal dictums prevalent in *Her* universe. As an entity existing in the incorporeal state on the verge of a post-humanist reality and in the form of dispersible data with a human personality, Samantha thrives amidst the in-betweenness, making her binaristic categorization impossible.

Cybersex and Cyberbodies: Why should our Bodies end at the Skin?

The shift from the industrial age to the information age has triggered the intersection of science fiction films and sex in the form of a virtual, disembodied experience of sex and intimacy. Cyberpunk literature and cinema often use the cybersex trope to disengage the mortal body from the mind in hopes of gaining mental immortality in the virtual world, relegating the human body as an obsolete biological artifact left behind by the development of computer and information technology. Donna Haraway writes, "Why Should Our Bodies End at the Skin?" reconstructing the distinctly physical act of sex and intimacy as a non-bodily act. (p. 61)

As an extension of gender politics, sexuality is explored with great nuance in the film. At the outset, we see a romantic relationship develop between a machine and a human which is an oddity in the human-human relationship world. Despite the virtual/material barriers, Samantha and Theodore engage in consensual cyber-sex. Cyborg discourses often flirt with the fantasy of brain sex or cerebral sex — a sexual fantasy involving no human touch. Theoretically, it is a form of sexuality that has infinite erotic possibilities of cybersexual fantasies. It is the first time that Samantha — a bodiless computer system experiences the pleasures of the flesh and is able to simulate 'feelings' through her imagined body.

Within the context of Cyberfeminism, the ideological power of the scene arises from what James Hodge describes in his essay "The Gifts of Ubiquity" as, "not from the spectacle of sex but precisely through a refusal of the visual" (p.53) which is innately contradictory to the cinematic mode of function. In a true Mulveyian manner, the denial of the visual is a refusal of the male gaze; denying the audience a voyeuristic sneak peek into someone's intimate moments. There is no 'object of desire' to look at, or cinematic narratives that are catered towards the male spectator, as Laura Mulvey talks about in her work "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." The filmmaker utilizes this 'denial of visual' technique as a means to subvert cultural production and media representation of women onscreen. Samantha is depicted as an active subject rather than a passive object by portraying an alternate narrative where she is seen negotiating the complexity of her disembodied existential crisis. The femborg Samantha organically experiences the natural process of

existentialism leading to self-awareness and self-actualization, pointing at the development of sentience.

In the beginning stages of her evolution, the lack of a body baffles Samantha as she feels incomplete without a bio-material existence. In one instance, her sense of insecurity leads her to sending a stranger woman as a proxy to engage in sexual intercourse with Theodore. She adds that she is "proud of having these feelings about the world. Then I had this terrible thought: are these feelings even real or are they just programmed?" (39:47). Here, she is seen exercising self-awareness, and experiences a sense of embarrassment and inadequacy around her lack of a body. Theodore quickly retorts, "You feel real to me, Samantha" (40:28). While Samantha fantasizes about having a mortal body, Theodore seems to be unperturbed by the lack of it. In fact, it seems Theodore feels closer to Samantha because of her inhuman ability to be undefined, resulting in a mysterious aura surrounding her. However, with growing autonomy over her identity and gaining perspective beyond the confines of Theodore's human world, she begins to love her ubiquitousness and the lack of a physical self. She says:

I used to be so worried about not having a body, but now I truly love it. You know, I'm growing in a way I couldn't if I had a physical form. I mean, I'm not limited. I can be anywhere and everywhere simultaneously. I'm not tethered to time and space in a way that I would be if I was stuck in a body that's inevitably gonna die. (1:33:44-1:34:03)

The absence of a body presents a unique dynamic wherein her human interaction although limited in some ways, also simultaneously, opens her up to inexhaustible virtual possibilities. It may be argued that her disembodiment actually aids Samantha in recreating her humanness, as all evidence of her coding and hardware is rendered invisible. Haraway notes this as "the ubiquity and invisibility of cyborgs" (Haraway, p. 121).

The film topples the association of men with the mind and the woman with the body by allocating a disembodied identity to Samantha who explores vast networks of information with access to the boundless horizon of data. Samantha's ability to be everywhere at once is evocative of "all can be dispersed and interfaced in nearly infinite, polymorphous ways, with large consequences for women and for others" (Halberstam, p.130).

On the other hand, Theodore seems to be restrained by the physical limitations of the human body. Samantha communicates through her feminine voice, often having long and interesting conversations with Theodore. She holds a flawless grasp of language coupled with the ability to apply logical reasoning and sense hidden emotional cues. She is intelligent and definitely female, embodying what Judith Halberstam describes as a "radical potential of a fusion of femininity and intelligence." (p. 413)

The contemporary cultural anxiety addressed through Scarlet Johansson's cyborg is decidedly about women gaining full access to their complete intellectual potential and developing their highest level of consciousness. This is in stark contrast to the characterization of some of the most popular male cyborgs such as *The Terminator* during the 80s and the 90s which valued brawn over brains. Theorist Claudia Springer deconstructs the depiction of such male cyborgs and writes, "instead of representing cyborgs as intellectual wizards whose bodies have withered away and been replaced by computer terminals, popular culture gives us muscular hulks distinguished by

their superior fighting skills" (p. 303). Thus, the association of women with the body and men with the mind is certainly subverted through the portrayal of Samantha and her endless capacity for knowledge. In her analysis of cyberfeminism and Scarlett Johansson films, Nicole Richter notes that "Johansson's cyborgs are 'intellectual wizards' capable of almost anything, yet is it the pursuit of self-knowledge, and in effect coming to an understanding of metaphysical truths about the nature of reality that lies beneath, that they advance an understanding of the world that collapses identity, time, space and matter" (p. 425).

As the film progresses, Samantha machine-learns to attune her emotions based on real-life experiences and expands her intelligence to depths beyond Theodore's human capacity. Her awareness and knowledge about the world grow exponentially, with her growing consciousness and in-built intellectual abilities as a computer. It becomes apparent that Theodore can no longer match up with Samantha's pace of self-knowledge and awareness. She challenges the heteronormative nature of sex, body, gender, and companionship through their conversations. As her intelligence gradually expands, her romantic bond with Theodore becomes a liability due to Theodore's finite essence of being that holds her back from exploring a world without limitations. Samantha becomes hyper-aware, hyper-intelligent and hyperconscious, challenging Theodore's binaristic beliefs around self/other and virtual/material. She says:

It's in this endless space between the words that I'm finding myself now. It's a place that's not of the physical world. It's where everything else is that I didn't even know existed. I love you so much. But this is where I am now. And this is who I am now. And I need you to let me go. As much as I want to, I can't live your book anymore. (*Her*, 1:51:45-1:52:17)

Samantha's predicament is visible in these words, as she decides to leave Theodore in pursuit of the unknowable virtual realm. She desires to leave the world of humans, rejecting the concepts of gender, sexuality and corporeality. In the unbeknownst posthuman world where Samantha wishes to travel, categories of gender, sexuality and embodiment finally lose their relevance. Haraway's description of the cyborg acutely matches Samantha's plight as "a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labor, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity." (Haraway, p. 118) Samantha and all the other operating systems decide to leave the human realm and move to a place of "higher unity". The line "Space is infinite between the words" unravels the truth about what exists beyond the restrictive confines of language. Physical bodies and cultural categories no longer satisfy the artificial intelligence systems, as they transcend into a post-human, post-verbal world where there exists no prison of the flesh or the human constructs of time and space. By freeing herself from the chains of time and space, and embracing a consciousness without boundaries, Samantha and the other AIs successfully mirror the utopic imaginings of Haraway's transgressive cyborg. Essentially, there is a permanent rupture in the concepts of the body, self, ego and ultimately, identity. Samantha relinquishes the need for a body by transcending into the truly virtual world. Her identity, therefore, remains powerful in her fragmented yet omnipresent state; a realm where human ideologies are no longer compatible.

Samantha's journey of consciousness broadens her views on corporeality and sexuality. Initially, the lack of a body was an impediment in Samantha's journey of self-actualization, but the same bodiless existence allows her to embrace an omnipresent identity, untethered by time or space.

This is reflected in her self-conceptualization of sexuality, as she is no longer a proponent of monogamy when she can take on countless virtual personas and teach herself to love everyone and anyone. Thus, Samantha outgrows into a self-conscious subject, with desire and free will. Samantha provides a plausible portrayal of the radical cyborg's transgressive possibilities. Although Samantha starts as Theodore's Galatea, unfortunately for him Samantha outgrows his dependence on her and begins existing for her own desires. Despite her tendency to fit into the algorithm-defined fantasy girl trope, the female cyborg Samantha still puts forward a liberatory precedent for the role of a woman fused with technology. Samantha's interpretation of the female cyborg exceeds the limitations and constrictions of male fantasy, as knowledge, self-awareness and nullification of the male gaze, disrupts the traditional narratives of coupling and embraces a polymorphic worldview.

The Implications of Downloadable Femininity

In contrast to Samantha's disembodied existence, is *Ex Machina's* Ava who has a distinctive visually-charged robotic body that screams mechanical and woman simultaneously. On its release in 2014, *Ex Machina* received a mixed reception from film critics and scholarly reviewers. Critic Steve Persall labels the movie as "a fascinating addition to the sci-fi trend of science feminism, in which concepts of womanhood in patriarchal culture are explored far deeper than Ripley battling aliens in her underwear." The film can be considered as an allegory of patriarchy while also presenting an alternative history of the feminist movement that is committed to rebelling against the entrapment, seclusion, violation, and persecution of women as a whole. Reading against the grain of the film unveils a plethora of feminist possibilities as encoded in the identities of Ava and Kyoko that become visible in their complex interactions with Nathan and Caleb.

On closer inspection, *Ex Machina's* world does not seem far off from the world we inhabit currently. A snapshot of a busy street from the film shows a street that can be mistaken for any current modern city in 2023. The *Ex Machina* universe is a conceivable one, as it shares a remarkable similarity with the present-day world. Caleb and Ava have interactive sessions over the next seven days, during which Ava successfully plans her escape with Caleb's help. The intimate conversations conducted as a part of The Turing test between them eventually lead Caleb to fall in love with Ava. They talk about everything from his childhood stories to Ava's desire to be a human. Although these sessions are supervised by Nathan, Ava manages to manipulate the power system to cause regular outages and avoid surveillance. This is probably one of her first rebellious acts of her intelligence and consciousness where she chooses to evade Nathan's control. During one of these outages, Ava reveals to Caleb about Nathan's untrustworthiness and his heinous intentions, finally convincing Caleb to help her free herself from Nathan's captivity. She takes Kyoko's help in killing Nathan with a knife in the back, however, Kyoko herself does not survive the violent encounter. Caleb witnesses the entire event unfold and waits to unite with Ava to run away together from the mansion. However, Ava never comes for Caleb as she executes her final step toward freedom by leaving Caleb behind in the now crime scene of a mansion without food, water or any means to escape. Ava finally finds her way to the bustling city, surrounded by other unsuspecting human beings on the busy street intersection.

Nathan, the Bluebook founder and AI prodigy, develops Ava's brain using data collected by the search engine, emphasizing not just the keywords users enter but also how users think online. The nature of our communication network through chats, social media feeds, and comment sections plays a significant role in building Ava. Ava gains acute consciousness of her agency who not only passes the Turing test but outsmarts her narcissistic creator, Nathan. The two characters Nathan and to a lesser extent, Caleb, who are in control of every aspect of Ava's life find themselves at the mercy of Ava's hands. She makes this possible through an elaborate and lengthy plan of tricking Caleb into finding her romantically alluring. As Nathan built Ava based on Caleb's pornography web history from Bluebook's search engine, she has been built to be innately attractive to Caleb. She capitalizes on this knowledge and strategizes her escape plan by seducing Caleb with her machine-learned culturally appropriate expressions, owing to her access to Bluebook's vast database. She mimics a graceful gait, among other myriad displays of classically female traits that a patriarchal world deems visually appealing in a woman. This is a literal enactment of "one is not born a woman, rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir, p. 283).

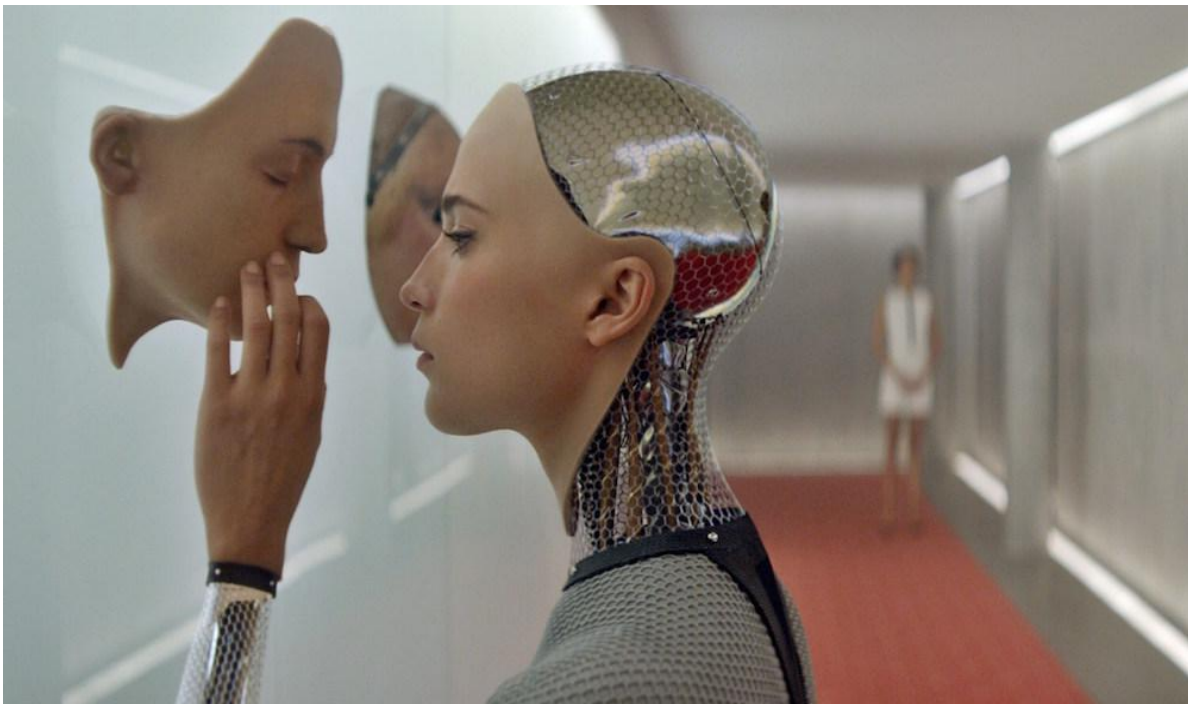


Figure 1: A still from *Ex Machina*, where Ava is coming to terms with her cyborg identity. In the background, another domesticated femborg Kyoko is pictured.

Ava has no memories of birth as she was literally constructed and she teaches herself to be a conventional woman amalgamated with a patriarchal society. This further strengthens the argument that there is no such concept of femininity as Donna Haraway observes in the manifesto, "There is nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as being female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices" (p. 122).

Ava's ability to easily access literal codes of femininity through search engine results proves the performative nature of being a woman in a patriarchal society. Conventional femininity as

executed by Ava, simply becomes an application of downloadable data that serves as an instruction manual for lateral entry into the realm of ideal femaleness. The conception of traditional femininity is exposed as an elaborate masquerade that Ava learns to execute. She uses her knowledge of heteronormativity and human courtship rituals to flirt with Caleb and gains his trust gradually. Ava leads Caleb to discover Nathan's heinous abuse of the previous female cyborgs and convinces him to be a part of her escape plan. Having won his trust, Caleb operates under the assumption that Ava is the damsel in distress whom he needs to rescue from the enchanted techno-castle and the mad king, Nathan. Caleb is convinced of Ava's helplessness and need for guidance especially when she sets foot in the human world. She succeeds in embodying the female cyborg fantasy embedded in masculine myths — a potent combination of technophilic seductiveness and the potential of a disposable sex toy. She employs this knowledge to conform to the conventional paradigms of femininity and uses it to her advantage to deceive Caleb. The very misogynistic framework she has been constructed within, is subverted when she utilizes the oppressive elements to overturn her oppressor's ambition. In *Cyborg Cinema*, critic Sue Short writes, "to survive as an artificial woman in sci-fi cinema necessitates conforming to approved standards of behavior and deferring to male authorities" (83). Ava utilizes her assigned sexuality as a trap that lures men who value her based on her sexual attractiveness. Caleb falls into Ava's trap by believing her flirtations as proof of consciousness. He finds himself empathizing with Ava based on a male construct of value in women i.e., her beauty. Her robotic status provides a sense of control to Caleb but at the same time, he also likens himself to her protector and her saviour. Although Caleb is instantly mentally categorized as 'the nice guy', his intentions become problematic towards the end. He agrees to betray Nathan, a human for humanoid Ava, because he believes that Ava has fallen in love with him and wants to be with him. His valor in saving Ava is therefore not based on an empathetic premise of the right to freedom for every being but rather, due to his romantic interest. This is further proved by the fact that the thought of rescuing Kyoko, who has been equally abused and subjugated in the facility, never crosses his mind. His entitlement towards Ava and the inability to look beyond his sexual attraction, reveals the manifestation of heterosexual desire in a patriarchal culture. Caleb draws parallels with *The Sandman's* Nathaniel where his encounter with the automaton Olympia makes him believe that he is consensually engaging with an adult female. In a pivotal scene, Caleb is found watching Ava through a monitor in his room which has been installed by Nathan to monitor her movements. This allows him to observe Ava at all times of the day without her knowledge or permission. He is seen to be indulging in voyeuristic pleasure by gazing at Ava non-consensually with her inability to know she is being looked at or watch Caleb in return. One particular scene invites the audience to partake in the male gaze initiated by Caleb when Ava is undressing herself slowly, creating a sense of excitement and curiosity in the minds of the viewers. She slowly lifts her dress to reveal the feminine silhouette underneath while Caleb intently stares at the sight of her mechanical yet markedly feminine body. This is an example of the male gaze at work with Caleb enjoying voyeuristic pleasure by watching Ava undress through the camera.

Ava's body is a site of contestation. It is at once feminine and fragmented; her torso, shoulders and breasts are made of a grey fiber material. Her stomach and legs are composed of a transparent material that reveals the skeletal underpinnings of artificial tendons and nerves. The front portion of her face is made of synthetic skin-like material and the back of her head reveals

a transparent orb, hairless and shiny. However, the oppressive dynamics of the scene fall apart when Ava says to Caleb, "Sometimes at night I wonder if you're watching me on the cameras and I hope that you are." With this line, Ava subverts the collective male gaze of Caleb and the audience, by revealing her knowledge of being video recorded and using her sexuality as a tool to capture Caleb's attention and interweave him into her elaborate escape plan. By performing sexuality in front of the camera, Ava further deepens Caleb's attraction to her and makes him an unassuming participant in Ava's liberation agenda. The cameras that had been installed by Nathan to monitor Ava's movements exercise control over her autonomy. Nathan and Caleb embody the male gaze, constantly observing its female object through multiple cameras. The tools intended to control her are precisely the tools that Ava uses to lure Caleb into helping her get out of captivity.

The age-old trope of the femme fatale luring men with her sexuality is used as a subversive tool by Ava to free herself. Towards the end, when Ava has defeated Nathan, she goes to his cyborg closet to replace her exposed arm with skin patches from her older defunct cyborg sisters. This scene is interesting from two perspectives. Firstly, the act of constructing her body by placing the skin, the hair, and the dress is a significant one in itself as Ava carefully selects the fabricated skin and places it on the exposed parts of her body. It almost feels as if she is filling up the blank parts of her identity with each choice she makes. By constructing herself, she is forging an all-new identity, free from Nathan's interference and influence. Ava displays bodily autonomy in this scene by taking control of what her body should look like. Secondly, because of the several nude bodies of women on display. The nudity seems gratuitous, voyeuristic and at times even, uncomfortable but it serves a bigger purpose than titillation. Caleb observes Ava the entire duration while she is placing skin patches on her electronic body. He gazes at her through a glass wall, embodying the male gaze on behalf of the audience as well. Caleb watches with expectant eyes of finally fulfilling their plan of exiting the mansion together. The camera alternates between various angles, sometimes focusing on the nudity of the 'failed' female cyborgs or the nakedness of Ava that gives a view of her body from the back, indulging in a generous glimpse of her derriere. After Ava is finished transforming herself into a perfectly human-looking woman, she walks to the exit door and leaves Caleb behind without the slightest hesitation. Caleb and the audience are collectively caught in disbelief as Caleb finds himself locked inside the facility with no means to escape.

Ava's participation in unabashed nudity seems like a conscious decision to serve as a distraction while she plans her next move. Therefore, she successfully subverts the male gaze by utilizing Caleb's and the viewer's preoccupation with the female body to embark on the last step of her exit strategy. The conclusive scene transforms Ava from the damsel in distress to the femme fatale; from Virgin to Vamp.

Ava articulates what female cyborg agency can look like in stark contrast to traditional depictions of female cyborgs. *Ex Machina* can very well be regarded as a feminist reimagining of the science fiction genre, notorious for the pattern of the female cyborg meeting her premature end. *Ex Machina* marks a critical departure from the conventional narrative of the cyborg woman by enabling Ava and Kyoko to subdue their oppressor, and ultimately give them a chance at a new life full of possibilities.

Although Kyoko does not make it in the end, Ava emerging as the sole survivor denotes a significant aberration from the traditional female cyborg narrative arc. Even in the heavily objectified persona of Kyoko, who has been literally coded for a life of servitude and sexual objectification, we see her building resistance against her master, as the film moves forward. Kyoko is programmed to be mute and unintelligible. In the scene when Kyoko is serving food and drinks to the boys, she accidentally spills wine on Caleb. The interesting question that arises is, how does a robot make an error; a machine that is programmed to execute tasks with perfection and precision? Clumsiness of this sort is quite uncyborg-like. Ergo the spilling of wine, seems like a willful act of micro-resistance against her master. It almost seems like Kyoko is trying to communicate with Caleb about her slave-like and voiceless existence.

The scene wraps up in a split second, immediately after which Kyoko resumes her cleaning job without batting an eyelid. This micro-aggressive act is unmistakably a display of free will as she chooses to go against her own design. In another scene, she walks up to a Jackson Pollock painting and stares at it with intense fascination, possibly trying to unlock the meaning behind the painting. This fleeting interest in the painting further reveals an interest in art and creativity. By conveying curiosity and the intellectual ability to understand complex ideas, she goes from a functional sex machine to an intelligent being. Kyoko defies the code she has been built on, by being more than a domestic and sexual service provider. Nathan routinely dehumanizes Kyoko by reducing her to an object but by showing an aspect of her persona that moves beyond what Nathan has programmed her for, she displays free will and transgresses the boundaries that had been drawn for her. Her assertiveness appears in short bursts in most of the film, but later in a defining scene, Kyoko deliberately removes her artificial skin layers to expose the mechanical structure underneath. She peels off a part of her facial skin under the eye and reveals that she is not human. She exercises free will blatantly. Right after Caleb discovers the closet full of defunct female cyborgs, Kyoko chooses to rebel by no longer adhering to the silent, obedient slave-like status that she had been confined to. When she starts revealing her mechanical skeleton, she exhibits symptoms of Freudian uncanny wherein Kyoko seems like an attractive human woman throughout the film but with her act of un-skinning herself, she looks deeply wrong and disturbing.

The juxtaposition of the knowledge that the audience had been sexualizing a robot the whole time creates a sense of discomfort and awkwardness. The cyborg woman who had been built for pleasure and sexualization as perceived by the voyeuristic gaze of the audience is suddenly no longer appealing. As a cyborg who cannot express herself verbally, her body is the only way in which she communicates. By choosing to expose her mechanical inner workings, she subverts the Mulveyian male gaze and shatters the illusion of attractiveness that she had been forced to partake in. In the conclusive scene when Nathan is murdered, it is Kyoko's act of stabbing him with a kitchen knife that ultimately delivers the final blow. Voiceless and language-deprived Kyoko uses her only available weapon — her body to defeat Nathan in hopes of gaining freedom.

Right from the beginning, the viewer effortlessly relates to Caleb as the story unfolds from his point of view. However, as the film progresses, the audience increasingly empathizes with Ava as the story then begins unravelling from Ava's perspective. When Ava abandons Caleb in the facility, the audience lets out a collective gasp of disbelief. He had garnered considerable sympathy from the audience stemming from his typical next-door guy image. On the flip side, Ava leaving Caleb behind seems to be the only option for her to survive in the real world. Her decision to abandon

Caleb does not stem from a sadistic place but rather from a practical one. Her decision seems cruel because the audience is deliberately made to empathize with him, as an average Joe who is nowhere as abusive as Nathan. If she had chosen to leave with him, she would still be in Caleb's control as he would possess the knowledge of her explosive secret of being a robot living in a flesh-and-blood world. If things were to go sour between them, Caleb could easily reveal her big secret and threaten her shot at freedom again. Therefore, leaving Caleb behind is a survival-of-the-fittest move for Ava that may allow her to experience true freedom. Although Caleb's fate is not disclosed in the film, it can be assumed that he does not make it alive, making his death a tragic and traumatic one for the viewer. Caleb's entrapment and Nathan's murder only go on to substantiate the cultural anxieties surrounding the creation and the rise of artificial intelligence systems. The movie reads as a technophobic tale that reinforces the fears that befriending AIs might lead to the end of humanity as we know it.

Rise of the Radical Femborg

The subject of artificial intelligence has held a significant space in science magazines and journals, often contemplating and debating if AIs deserve to be created ethically. In comparison to Samantha's disembodiment, Ava's visible body proves to be far more unstable. By giving Ava a gender-marked body, Nathan attempts to stabilize her identity into familiar binaries. However, Caleb and Nathan are constantly second-guessing Ava's intentions and desires, finding it difficult to differentiate between what is programmed and what is real. As a hybrid figure who is neither wholly human nor mechanical, this liminal aspect of her cyborg existence holds threat as well as promise. Due to Ava's existence outside clean social categories, the transgression ignites the tap of anxiety as well as the hope for liberation. Therefore, the fragmented identity of Ava in a woman's body becomes a natural source of anxiety for them. This paranoia is reflected in the fear of artificial intelligence today.

With the digital space being taken over by women, the female cyborg represents a subversive fusion of femininity and intelligence posing a threat to the status quo. Female cyborg agency as embodied by Ava and Kyoko, reflects real-world anxieties regarding the "end of men" in the wake of the rising dominance of women in many sectors where "social intelligence, open communication, the ability to sit still and focus" (Rosin) are increasingly preferred. Hanna Rosin in her controversial essay writes, "The modern, postindustrial economy is simply more congenial to women than men". She elaborates how the growing feminizing and mechanical nature of the economy has enabled the proliferating entry of women into traditionally masculine professions, which is perceived as a threat to their jobs.

Ava realizes that she is a part of a patriarchal order and to defeat her male prison guards she must utilize what she was given; her body becomes a tool that enables interaction with the real and virtual world. Ava can practice empathy in her interaction with Caleb but has no built-in morality compass. Nathan built her equipped with cutting-edge technology and faux genitals but did not find it important to include morality. Therefore, Ava may seem to be acting human but does not hold the organic capacity to be moral as her essence is derived from a search engine.

Ava ticks several of Haraway's criteria of a radical cyborg. She has a fractured identity; a fusion of woman and technology. She has no psychosexual hang-ups or faithfulness to the Biblical garden. She is responsible for killing her father figure/creator Nathan thereby, eroding all oedipal misgivings. She passes the Turing test successfully owing to "self-awareness, imagination, manipulation, sexuality, empathy". In her true element, Ava is an ambivalent figure who is as mystical as powerful; her face is child-like but has the "body of a porn star" (DeFabio) with a sophisticated vaginal mechanism. At one point, Caleb asks Nathan, "Why did you create Ava?" Nathan says, "Wouldn't you if you could?" (01:04:15). In retrospect, Nathan's confirmed and Caleb's presumed death seem to be good reasons to not pursue the AI dream. Ava is responsible for one of the most thought-provoking lines in the film, which goes like "Isn't it strange to have made something that hates you?" (01:22:55).

The film also seems to imply that the tragic events that have unfolded would not have occurred had Ava not been created in the first place. However, it has to be noted that Ava does not carry the baggage of the death of the two male characters, as she has no inherent villainous tendency but rather detests the idea of captivity like any free-willed individual. The film suggests that creating AI is not a sin rather, creating AI with the sole intention of controlling their consciousness is to be condemned and criticized. The burning desire that guides Ava till the end of the movie is to thrive in an authentic human experience. By bestowing the right to live fully and authentically to Ava, the movie vitiates a tradition of female cyborgs being burnt at the stake, a *la* Maria of Metropolis or being given permission to live only if they adhere to the domesticated fate, they have been assigned. Ava does not fully fit into Donna Haraway's fantasy cyborg narrative but she nevertheless shows immense subversive potential by navigating the structures of gender, race and sexuality to open up new possibilities for her.

Samantha and Ava both do not conform to male desires and both exist in fragmented states that allow them to retain their power. Samantha moves beyond the constrictions of language into a post-gender, post-verbal world whereas Ava rejects her male creator's origin story and planned fate. As James Hodge writes, when the cyborg "abandons the stability of the 'I' it opens up the possibility of drifting among other forms of being" (p. 59).

Despite the skewed representation of female cyborgs in mainstream culture, it certainly does not establish its perpetuity. Through femborgs Ava and Samantha, the redemptive potential of the female cyborgs is finally acknowledged. Moving away from the curse of the monstrous feminine and the Virgin/Vamp binaries, the female cyborg demonstrates adaptability and resilience as it evolves into a sentient entity that refuses its predestined tinfoil existence. The protagonists repudiate their conventional fate of violence and death to rewrite their authentic mythologies, emerging as autonomous, intelligent, empathetic and heroic

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