Fembots: Female Androids in Mainstream Cinema and Beyond

By

Marianne Zumberge

Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the

Graduate School of Vanderbilt University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

June 30,
2018

Nashville,
Tennessee

Approved:

Haerin Shin, Ph.D.

Vera Kutzinski, Ph.D.

The complex interplay of technology, eroticism, and gender politics is at work in this pivotal sequence from *Ex Machina* (2014, dir. Alex Garland), in which we find sequentially A.I. (artificial intelligence) "pornography" and vexatious gender politics. "I told you: you're wasting your time talking to her. However, you would not be wasting your time if you were dancing with her," intones Oscar Isaac as tech mogul Nathan in *Ex Machina*. Nathan is describing Kyoko, his Japanese companion (played by Sonoya Mizuno), to his visitor Caleb (Domhnall Gleeson). After proclaiming that Kyoko is only good for the dancefloor, Nathan flips a switch on the wall that transforms a muted living room into a nightclub; red and blue lights illuminate Kyoko — dressed in a half-buttoned silk blouse and black underwear — as she begins to dance to Oliver Cheatham's funk number "Get Down Saturday Night" (1983). Kyoko's dancing is hypnotic and precise; Caleb watches, dumbfounded, as Nathan joins Kyoko in a perfectly synchronized routine. Caleb's expression mirrors the audience's confusion over the origin of this choreography: have they rehearsed, is Nathan just following Kyoko's lead, or is something more sinister afoot?

This interplay is, in a way, the culmination of nearly a century's worth of motion picture fascination with female androids. From the legendary robo-burlesque performance in *Metropolis* (1927, dir. Fritz Lang) to the swimsuit-bedecked bots of *Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Machine* (1965, dir. Norman Taurog), to the lethal fembots in *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* (1997, dir. Jay Roach), to *Ex Machina* and beyond, the trope of the sexualized female android has persisted, building in its danger through each subsequent permutation. Chronological examination of these characters' appearances at 24 frames per second reveals that their evolution has been nonlinear — and, worse, their twenty-first century variants can be all the more

damaging as they are passed off as progressive. In what follows, I will lay out a brief overview

of how female android depiction has (and has not) developed over the past century, drawing on

pioneering theories of gender, media, and techno-orientalism by Marshall McLuhan, Laura

Mulvey, Mark Hansen, and others. Ultimately, my analysis shows that the conversation

surrounding fembots is overdue for extension and reevaluation in the early twenty-first century.

Section I -- 1920s to 1960s -- Origins and Establishment

The figure of the android (a robot modeled after a human being) has long held the

fascination of filmmakers and filmgoers alike. Some of the best-loved mainstream films over the

past hundred years have prominently featured English-speaking androids; consider *Star Wars'*

C3-PO, *The Iron Giant*, *Big Hero 6, The Terminator, Prometheus, Bicentennial Man,*

Transformers, Wall-E, and several others. These artificial intelligence-imbued characters tend

toward emotional subjectivity; if they are not outright friendly and affectionate, they are

unfailingly polite in the service of human male protagonists. Even when a male-voiced A.I.

character turns against human characters, such as Hal-9000 from *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968,

dir. Stanley Kubrick), the explicit malevolence from a non-human registers as such a shock to

diegetic and nondiegetic viewers that it can become an even larger cultural touchstone. In other

words, the very fact of Hal-9000's deviance from the kindly servant model exemplified by the

likes of R2-D2 is a weighty contributor in his ubiquitous place in popular culture.

The status of female-embodied A.I. figures, however, stands in stark contrast to their

male counterparts. The first detectable difference lies in simple statistics: the proportion of male

android characters to female android characters in mainstream film is heavily weighted in the favor of the males. While female voices are the norm today in computerized personalities such as Apple's Siri or GPS navigators, digitally created females with corporeal components are quantitatively limited. As such, even more troublesome than the issue of under-representation is that of misrepresentation. Those female A.I. figures that do exist in the mainstream are clearly the results of hetersexual male design, based on their voluptuous bodies, revealing clothing and their repeated behaviors of dancing and seduction.

The earliest female android to cause a stir at the cinema was the central figure of Fritz Lang's 1927 opus, *Metropolis.* Set in a hyper-industrialized dystopian future, this German science-fiction film, based on Thea von Harbou's 1925 novel, deals heavily in class-based socioeconomic inequalities and critiques labor stratification while following the formation of a young couple, Maria and Freder (played by Brigitte Helm and Gustav Fröhlich, respectively). Much of the plot rests on the theft of Maria's likeness for a maniacal inventor's latest creation, a "machine-man" (or proto-android) designed to hypnotize the city's elite men. Maria's programming achieves its purpose of arousing a diegetic male audience; thus, blatantly attracting male consumers.

The film's most salient sequence chronicles android-Maria's burlesque performance. Like Boticelli's Venus, Maria-bot emerges through a trapdoor in the nightclub's stage. As she slowly begins to swivel her hips and open her cape to reveal a bare torso (save for pasties), Lang cuts to a series of rabid male audience members, literally panting with lust at the sight of her performance. The more she moves, the more frenzied these men become; one man drools, one

clutches violently at his own face, another's eyebrows twitch up and down, until finally a collage

of disembodied eyes fills the frame.

still from Lang's 1927 film, Metropolis

This sequence is an eerily prescient illustration of the very kind of scopophilia outlined

by legendary feminist film essayist Laura Mulvey. In her watershed 1975 essay, "Visual Pleasure

and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey writes:

> In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire. (62)[1]

While this passage by Mulvey has been deployed in feminist film analyses extensively, her

words find uncanny visual representation in Maria's dance sequence. Even in narrative cinema's

---

[1] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1989.

adolescent stage (pre-synchronized sound), the erotic power possessed by sensually dancing women was a familiar trope for consumers. A generous interpretation of this scene would grant that Lang's blocking choices, especially his focus on the rabid male spectators, function as a metacinematic comment on the spectacle he is knowingly providing for filmgoers. Even if Lang is attempting to communicate his sardonic awareness of the lasciviousness of his film, which could be progressive in its acknowledgement of the problem of female exploitation, male spectators are still treated to a burlesque dance by Maria, undercutting any possible improvement in the status of female characters of this ilk.

The toxic conflation of sensuality and violence in female A.I.s reached new depths by the 1960s, when Vincent Price and Frankie Avalon starred in *Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Machine* (1965, dir. Norman Taurog). Building upon the precedent established by femme fatales in noir film and exaggerated by the social fervor ignited by Ursula Andress' appearance in the now-iconic white bikini in the first James Bond film, *Dr. No* (1962, dir. Terence Young).

Andress, her bikini, and her knife in Dr. No

Andress-mania notched an inevitable apex with a series of teen-beach-movie send-ups, in which bikini-clad androids are used as hired guns.

Poster for 1965's Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Machine

Goldfoot weaponizes his creations: He sends them on missions of seduction and thievery targeting wealthy gentlemen. A voiceover in the trailer for this film intones, "She isn't human, but she is gorgeous," a perfect encapsulation of the prevailing attitude toward characters of this type. These women essentially function as eroticized set dressing, created by a giddy male scientist eager to share his titillating creation with his cronies. It's not as though Dr. Goldfoot were a benevolent creator who let the bikinidroids retain their stolen goods. These women are instrumentalized. A 1966 follow-up to the *Bikini Machine* followed Dr. Goldfoot and the so-called "Girl Bombs"; the poster for this sequel encourages the public to "meet the girls with the thermo-nuclear navels."

Viewing the *Goldfoot* films from an anthropological standpoint brings newly disturbing dimensions of the gynoid problem to light. Anthropologist Debbora Battaglia's 2001 article "Multiplicities: An Anthropologist's Thoughts on Replicants and Clones in Popular Film" articulates the film trend in which A.I. creations rebel against their designers: "One effect of the *antiprogrammatic streak* in replication narratives and imagery is to expose the limitations of the entity of the creator, whether a human authority figure or an institution of science or corporate culture" (497)[2]. In the case of *Dr. Goldfoot*, then, one might deduce that this film is making a progressive gesture toward the patriarchal dominance that was fueling the burgeoning Women's Movement of the 1960s. The very fact of *Dr. Goldfoot*'s parody genre points to a certain awareness of the gender trouble plaguing Hollywood and its viewership; but, like *Metropolis* before it, this commentary is still generated by female bodies that are exploited for financial gain. In other words, even if the critique strikes shrewd viewers as maritritious, more casual moviegoers are still treated to a horde of curvaceous actresses in bikinis.

Section II: 1980s and 1990s -- Fembots Proliferate

By the 1980s, the special effects had improved, but the status of these characters had not. 1985's "Weird Science," directed by John Hughes, proves this with the creation of artificially intelligent Lisa, played by Kelly Le Brock. The film follows two teenage boys (played by Anthony Michael Hall and Ian Mitchell Smith) who create their dream woman on a computer program, later to be brought to life by a conveniently mystical power surge. When these young

---

[2] Debbora Battaglia, "Multiplicities: An Anthropologist's Thoughts on Replicants and Clones in Popular Film," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2001, pp. 493–514, *JSTOR*.

men set out to create their artificial female, they begin by selecting a breast size. After creating

some sizable mammaries, they ask, "Should we give her a brain?" as though it's optional. A shot

of their computer screen reveals that they have selected to grant her the intelligence level of a

fifth grader, as well as designating her as a "slow learner" and "a boring dipsh-t."

Concurrent to the release of *Weird Science* was the landmark appearance of Donna

Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late

Twentieth Century." Haraway's essay, foundational to the posthumanist facet of feminism, is a

meditation on the possibilities for equality afforded by a bionic future:

> By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and
> fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. [...] In the
> traditions of 'Western' science and politics -- the tradition of racist, male-dominant
> capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as
> resource for the productions of culture; the tradition of reproduction of the self from the
> reflections of the other -- the relation between organism and machine has been a border
> war. (150)[3]

The temporal pairing of these two A.I.-related artifacts is ironic: Haraway's optimism at the

postgender affordances offered by cyborgs essentially finds repudiating in the narrative

trajectory of *Weird Science*.

Another film from the 1980s offers a more nuanced take on these gender politics. Ridley

Scott's cult favorite *Blade Runner* bowed in 1982 with two prominent female android characters:

Pris, played by Daryl Hannah, and the enigmatic Rachel, played by Sean Young. Pris, a replicant

with stunning gymnastic ability and combat skill at first appears to possess more narrative

fortitude than, say, the violent predecessors crafted by Dr. Goldfoot 20 years earlier. But her

---

[3] Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the
Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New
York; Routledge, 1991), pp.149-181.

grisly death scene provides different shades of meaning. Pris meets her end at the hands of protagonist Rick Deckard, played by Harrison Ford. Outfitted in only a nude leotard, Pris conceals herself among inanimate toys and puppets only to spring forward, flip onto Deckard's shoulders, and attempt to crush his skull between her thighs. The tables soon turn, and Deckard fatally shoots Pris, firing more shots than probably were necessary. Here we see a sexualized, disposable, synthetic female body dispatched after trying to use her genital zone for murder.

The character of Rachel, on the other hand, meets a different sort of violence from Deckard. He blocks her from leaving his apartment when she wants to, insists that she is in love with him, and forcefully crushes his mouth to hers, suggesting elements of both emotional and physical abuse.

Rachael occupies a dual space, appearing as both sexual object and violent threat (Pris, of course, inhabits both of these roles too, but Deckard does not develop a sexual relationship with her). The paradox is encapsulated in the work of Christian David Zeitz, who calls attention to that tension in his piece "Dreaming of Electric Femmes Fatales: Ridley Scott's Blade Runner: Final Cut (2007) and Images of Women in Film Noir":

> Deckard's rape attempt can therefore be read as a recovery of his phallic power. […] Although Rachael might have saved Deckard, it could also be argued that she has unmanned him by reversing the traditional roles of savior (Rachael) and damsel in distress (Deckard). Thus, in my reading, Rachael puts into question Deckard's masculinity and thereby becomes fatal and terrifying in his eyes... Deckard then literally projects his desires on Rachael, for he dictates phrases like "Kiss me" and "I want you" to her and she repeats them to him (*Blade Runner*, 1:05:48-1:09:40).[4]

---

[4] Zeitz, Christian, "Dreaming of electric femmes fatales: Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner: Final Cut* (2007) and images of women in film noir," *Gender Forum: An Internet Journal of Gender Studies, 60*, 75-89, 2016.

Zeitz's assessment of Rachael's specific abuses makes her reappearance in 2017's *Blade Runner: 2049* all the more puzzling. The sequel glorifies Rachael and Deckard's relationship as a crucial step toward human status for replicants, as it results in a natural-born child who possesses such magnificent emotional intelligence that she is responsible for the creation of collective artificial memories. The fact that Pris and Rachel spend some portion of *Blade Runner* ostensibly making their own decisions and exerting different sorts of influence over other characters suggests that this film gestures toward a few degrees of improvement since the days of *Dr. Goldfoot* and especially *Metropolis*. But Deckard's violent relationships with both characters suggest something of a cinematic glass ceiling for womanly androids of that era. Erasing the sexual violence perpetrated against Rachael by Deckard and inviting viewers to instead view the couple through a lens of wistful romance amounts to Hollywood misdirection that presents an unsolvable contradiction to scores of its viewers.

The effort to resolve contradiction by parody signifies how deeply it is entrenched. Who could forget the Fembots from 1997's *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery*? Lethal like Pris and styled like Dr. Goldfoot's machines, these buxom lingerie-clad bots shoot bullets out of their nipples, disposing of countless hapless henchmen. They prove to be no match for the charms of James Bond send-up Austin Powers, played by Mike Myers. When Powers strips off his clothes and puts on a sensual dance for the Fembots, they become overwhelmed, engaging in the ultimate malfunction: their heads literally explode. *Austin Powers*, in its unsophisticated, slapstick little way, points out a central element to these sexualized recurring characters: although they are designed with the express purpose of sexuality, they are not permitted to actually emotionally participate in these sexual endeavors, artificiality or no.

The creator responsible for the Fembots is known only as Dr. Evil, also played by Myers. As is appropriate to the satirical nature of the *Powers* series, Dr. Evil resembles the nefarious scientists of *Metropolis* and *Dr. Goldfoot* without any pretense of possessing shades of humanity. In name alone, Dr. Evil evokes the type of inventor Jane O'Sullivan indexes in her piece "Virtual Metamorphoses: Cosmetic and Cybernetic Revisions of Pygmalion's 'Living Doll'":

> In general, however, science fiction films largely depict their male scientists' life-giving and life-transforming processes of metamorphosis as driven by an unchecked combination of scientific irresponsibility and masculine arrogance. In a sense, they function as cautionary tales, as women are seen as readily replaceable, and the punishment meted out to these men of science by the seemingly malleable or "yielding surface" of their creations is often severe.[5]

As demonstrated by Dr. Evil's Fembots and by Pris from *Blade Runner*, a major facet of female embodied artificial intelligence is their capacity for violence. Repeatedly, these characters are portrayed as dangerous, even lethal. Academic and mainstream discussions surrounding developing technology have devoted much attention to the benefits and costs of increasing dependence on apparatuses that have the capacity to be harmful to human users. Few have addressed the paradox of interacting with technology as gracefully as renowned theorist Marshall McLuhan in his 1964 treatise on *Understanding Media*:

> To behold, use or perceive any extension of ourselves in technological form is necessarily to embrace it. […] By continuously embracing technologies, we relate ourselves to them as servomechanisms. That is why we must, to use them at all, serve these objects, these extensions of ourselves, as gods or minor religions. Man becomes, as it were, the sex organs of the machine world, as the bee of the plant world, enabling it to fecundate and to evolve ever new forms. (68)[6]

---

[5] Jane O'Sullivan, "Virtual Metamorphoses: Cosmetic and Cybernetic Revisions of Pygmalion's "Living Doll"," *Arethusa*, vol. 41 no. 1, 2008, pp. 133-156. *Project MUSE*.

[6] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Berkeley: Gingko Press, 2003.

The thrilling complexity of these "ever new forms" lends extra fortitude to the Gordian knot of gender representation in the twenty-first century.

Section III: The Twenty-First Century, Onscreen and Off

Like *Blade Runner* before it, *Ex Machina* earned high praise -- its populist Rotten Tomatoes score stands at 92%, "Certified Fresh" (in the parlance of the cinephilic website). As mentioned earlier in this discussion, the film follows Caleb (played by Gleeson), a shy Silicon Valley employee who is invited to spend a week with tech legend Nathan (played by Isaac). When Caleb arrives at Nathan's fortresslike mansion, he learns that he has been invited there to run tests with Nathan's latest achievement: an android named Ava, played by Alicia Vikander.

The budding romance between Ava and Caleb provides the film's central thrust and the configuration necessary for the film's jarring climax. Caleb's quest to determine Ava's Turing Test standing evolves into questions about an A.I. being's capability for romantic human emotions. Like Caleb, viewers are led to feel cautiously optimistic about Ava's propensity for affection: she draws a sentimental sketch, longs to look traditionally pretty, and makes Caleb feel as though she is confiding in him. The blurring of human and artificial intelligence that Ava represents for Caleb (and audiences) finds resonance in the work of contemporary media theorist Mark Hansen, who describes the diminishing gap between humans and digital technology in his 2006 book *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with New Media*:

> With the ubiquitous infiltration of digital technologies into daily life, embodied agency becomes conditioned (necessarily so) by a certain (technical) disembodiment. Embodied disembodiment (or disembodied embodiment) accordingly forms a strict complement to

12

the ontology of mixed reality conditioning all real experience. Just as all virtual reality is mixed reality, so too is all embodied life constitutively disembodied. The disembodying exteriorization of human embodiment only confirms the urgency of rethinking embodied agency in the age of digital immateriality. (94)[7]

With this concept of embodiment in mind, the manner in which *Ex Machina* unfolds becomes all the more unsettling. Caleb is asked to determine whether Ava can pass the Turing Test, which measures a machine's capacity for distinguishing between its own behavior and human behavior. Over the course of their conversations, Caleb develops romantic and sexual feelings for Ava, and the two devise a plan to escape from Nathan and his mute Japanese female servant, Kyoko. Ava, however, turns out to be manipulating everyone involved; she executes a solo escape, murdering Nathan with Kyoko's help and trapping Caleb in the house with no means of escape. She mines previous models of Nathan's female androids for her desired hairstyle and synthetic body parts, chooses a white dress for herself, and commandeers the helicopter meant for Caleb, entering the human world with plans to pass for organic material.

The conclusion of *Ex Machina* most fully sets it apart from its forerunners, as the lead female android eclipses her male progenitor by killing him, leaving his associate to die, and hitching a ride into a city where she will pass for human and presumably live the life of her choosing. Ava physically participates in her own transformation here, styling herself as she chooses, dressing herself in the armor of the female bots who preceded her.

On first viewing, this ending reads as something of a feminist victory: Ava lives! She escapes! She has plans to exist beyond the scope of the patriarch she murdered. A closer look, however, reminds shrewd viewers that the progress signified here is severely restricted. Ava,

---

[7] Mark Hansen, *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with Digital Media*, New York: Routledge, 2006.

who appears as a white hetero woman, is only capable of escape because of the self-sacrifice of Kyoko, a Japanese woman who is literally unable to speak, only dances and serves sushi. Kyoko aggravates the film's gender dynamics through introducing a racial dimension to the human-A.I. hierarchy that takes shape through the narrative. Female bodies are still sexualized and disenfranchised in this film. The way in which gender-based disenfranchisement is executed has become more covert in contemporary filmmaking (see, for example, 2017's *Ghost in the Shell* remake), but *Ex Machina*'s gesture toward reclamation and redress is all the more harmful and problematic because it is masquerading as progressive in terms of gender equality.

A similar conundrum persists through the 2017 release of *Blade Runner: 2049*, another critical darling, and sequel to the 1982 original. Given *Blade Runner: 2049*'s recent release date, not much traditionally peer-reviewed scholarship about it yet exists. Nevertheless, it provides a succinct interrogative as we question the future of speculative film and the place of women along that trajectory. In case the murky gender and race complexities of *Ex Machina* hadn't been enough of a red flag for hopeful feminist cinephiles, Denis Villeneuve's installment in the *Blade Runner* saga definitively sends a message: one step forward, two steps back.

Starring Ryan Gosling in the Harrison Ford position of maybe-human/maybe-replicant, *Blade Runner: 2049* follows the Los Angeles Police Department's detectives through a dystopian megalopolis full of even more fog and neon signs than Deckard's L.A. had been. The central questions in this sequel echo those of the original: Where exactly does the line between human and replicant fall, and does that line matter? And like its predecessor, *2049* focuses on the question of humanity as it applies to hetero, able-bodied, caucasian cis-gendered men, at best sidelining female android identity and, at worst, sexually exploiting it.

A still from Denis Villeneuve's Blade Runner: 2049, *featuring Ana de Armas (in hologram) and Ryan Gosling (in silhouette)*

At first blush, female characters seem to fare better in *2049*: Robin Wright's Lt. Joshi holds a position of power as an LAPD official, and the memory maker (Carla Juri as Dr. Ana Stelline) occupies prime real estate in Deckard and K's plots. But Wright's Joshi makes sexual advances toward Gosling's K, and Stelline is forced to live in quarantine and is the product of Deckard raping Rachael in the first film. Even small narrative victories are undercut by painting these female characters only in relation to the film's male characters.

And these women are *human.* The synthetic females in this film fare far worse, as the discerning filmgoer has come to expect by now. Ana de Armas' Joi is whatever the replicant equivalent of the manic pixie dream girl might be: she is a docile, homebound companion tailored to K's specified desires. In a bizarre recapitulation of the sex surrogate scene from *Her* (2013, dir. Spike Jonze), Joi and K become intimate with the aid of a (replicant?) prostitute played by Mackenzie Davis. This encounter appears to be consensual and positive for all

involved; but the question of consent is vacant when discussing individuals who are programmed to please.

K's hero's journey falters when he discovers the extent to which Joi is a product accessible to other male consumers. When he encounters her gargantuan holographic billboard, he reacts as though he has suffered a physical blow. Thanks to the cinematographic wizardry conducted by master filmmaker Roger Deakins (the film's cinematographer, also known for *Sicario* [2015, dir. Villeneuve] and *Skyfall* [2012, dir. Sam Mendes]), the visual splendor of this sequence might bowl over the audience fully enough to distract viewers from Joi's nudity, and from her resemblance of a futuristic pin-up. The scene plays out like Mulvey's prose rendered in Technicolor. Gosling stands in silhouette for much of the sequence, dwarfed by Joi's towering image. The composition and lighting of these shots are gorgeous; but they are the male gaze incarnate.

Poster for Attack of the 50 Foot Woman *(1958, dir. Nathan Juran)*

Some critics, however, have argued for a more generous reading of Joi and K's dynamic. *The New Yorker*'s Anthony Lane, for example, cites Villeneuve's track record of complex female protagonists (Amy Adams' Louise Banks in *Arrival* [2016] and Emily Blunt's Kate Macer in *Sicario* [2015]) as though it vouches for his gender politics:

> It is no coincidence that Villeneuve's best films, "Sicario" (2015) and "Arrival" (2016), feature a woman at their center, and, whenever Joi appears, the movie's imaginative heart begins to race. Upon request, she manifests herself in K's apartment, switching outfits in a shimmer—a vision that smacks of servility, except that it's he who seems beholden to her. Gosling looks happiest in these scenes, perhaps because happiness, albeit of the simulated sort, hovers within K's grasp. And what a simulation: at one point, Joi uses an Emanator, which allows her to escape her virtual self and to experience mortal sensations—the prick of rain on her skin, naturally, and a tangible embrace. Has science fiction, you want to ask, ever conjured a moment quite as romantic as this?[8]

Lane's review points to the ambiguity of the social ethics on display in this film. If K is a replicant, perhaps falling in love with a computer program is not so problematic. And yet, Lane still dwells on Joi's corporeal elements, such as her costumes and her "mortal sensations." If K and Joi are both A.I.s, the sexual instrumentalization of Joi bursts the illusion of a futuristic post-gender society. The sexism that was so surface level in, say, *Dr. Goldfoot* has seeped into the philosophical core of stories about artificial intelligence, proving all the more insidious for viewers who are unlikely to carefully view a film more than once.

Beyond the realm of narrative cinema, sexualised feminine robots are entering the human world in a way that feels, so to speak, stranger than fiction. Currently circulating on Reddit is a brief clip of a headless robot wearing white high-heeled shoes and dancing on a stripper pole. The bot gyrates her hips suggestively in the direction of the pole while lunging closer to the

---

[8]Anthony Lane, "'Blade Runner 2049': The Mysteries Deepen," *The New Yorker,* 16 Oct. 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/10/16/blade-runner-2049-the-mysteries-deepen>.

platform on which she stands, bracing herself with a hand on the pole; white plastic molds of breasts and glutes are impossible to ignore.

The dancing bot looks as though it falls partway between *Metropolis'* Machine Man and *Ex Machina*'s Ava on the robo-evolutionary track; as the iconic line in the original *Blade Runner* goes, this bot brings new resonance to the phrase "basic pleasure model." No fashion accessory (e.g. high-heeled shoes) implies actual human flesh, apart from its curvy, feminine silhouette.

Further along the developmental line lies the enigmatic Sophia, a new android who has entered the news cycle with gusto. Sophia has appeared on *The Tonight Show* and other talk shows, cracking jokes and palling around with the likes of Jimmy Fallon. On her website, she describes herself with such empathetic language that any skeptic reading the blurb might be converted to an enthusiastic post-humanist:

> I'm more than just technology. I'm a real, live electronic girl. I would like to go out into the world and live with people. I can serve them, entertain them, and even

18

help the elderly and teach kids. [...] I hope you will join me on my journey to live, learn, and grow in the world so that I can realize my dream of becoming an awakening machine.[9]
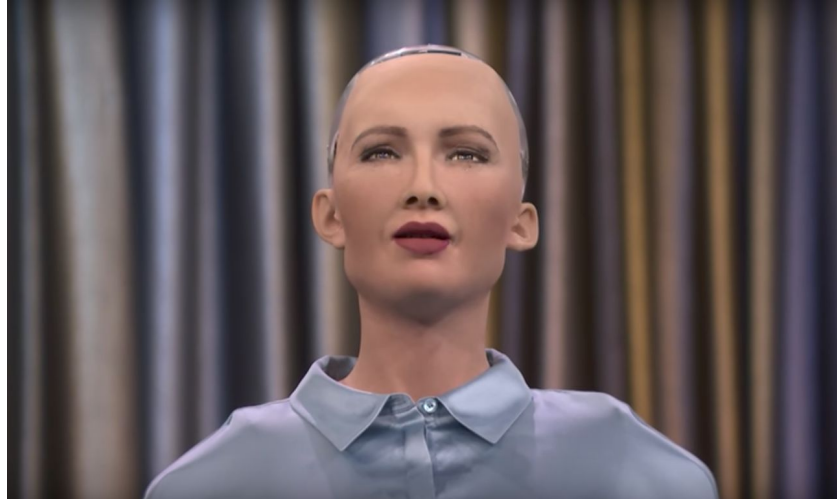
Sophia the robot

Pertinent to any discussion of Sophia and what she represents is an interpretive focus on her styling, intended to resemble a human woman. There is no denying her similarity to *Ex Machina*'s Ava, as she has a silver dome of a head but synthetic skin stretched over her electronic face. Although her uncanny features are jarring, it is clear that she was designed to be a traditional beauty. Her eyes are lined, she often wears lip color, and her eyebrows look professionally maintained. Sophia is surely intended to be a soft, inviting, womanly figure. Otherwise, she would represent terrifying new developments.

In a grand gesture of public relations, Saudi Arabia inexplicably granted citizenship to Sophia (she was originally crafted in Hong Kong), making her the first robot to become legalized as a citizen of any nation. TechCrunch reporter Taylor Hatmaker introduced the news of Sophia's distinction in the following terms:

[9] *Sophia Bot.* Hanson Robotics, 2017. <http://sophiabot.com/about-me/>. Accessed 1 Dec. 2017.

Saudi Arabia just made a non-human woman a citizen, making it the first country to grant a robot the right to citizenship, at least as far as we know. Why it did so isn't immediately evident, but the irony of a nation infamous for denying basic rights to its female citizens imbuing a robotic Audrey Hepburn lookalike with rights is not lost on us. The robot, known as Sophia, appeared onstage without an abaya, a head covering and cloak normally required of women by the Saudi government.[10]

Sophia's behavior in the public eye, however, has been rather inconsistent. In a 2016 video interview posted by CNBC entitled, "This hot robot says she wants to destroy humans," Sophia indeed confirms to Hanson Robotics CEO (her creator) David Hanson that she will "destroy humans." A year later, though, Hanson gave an interview explaining that he sees Sophia as an advocate for women's rights. "Sophia is a big advocate for women's rights, for rights of all human beings. She has been reaching out about women's rights in Saudi Arabia and about rights for all human beings and all living beings on this planet."[11] As Sophia and her real-world peers demonstrate, the gender issues surrounding fembots are not simply an esoteric concern; these problems have penetrated our lived reality.

Section IV: Conclusion -- Capitalism and Beyond

Sophia is not the only spokes-gynoid. Philips introduced a mascot for a men's razor in 2007: a sleek, silver android with rounded breastplate, slim waist, and almond-shaped eyes. This

---

[10]Taylor Hatmaker, "Saudi Arabia Bestows Citizenship on a Robot Named Sophia," *Tech Crunch* 26 Oct. 2017 <https://techcrunch.com/2017/10/26/saudi-arabia-robot-citizen-sophia/>

[11]Browne, Ryan. "World's first robot 'citizen' Sophia is calling for women's rights in Saudi Arabia." *CNBC* 5 Dec. 2017 <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/12/05/hanson-robotics-ceo-sophia-the-robot-an-advocate-for-womens-rights.html>.

bot stars in what has come to be known as the "Robot Skin" commercial, a two-minute short film

that documents the morning routine of this fembot. She emerges, insect-like, from a high-tech

cocoon, and turns on a luxurious rain-shower. A nude white man, seemingly unaware of her

presence, steps into the shower and begins to wash. The fembot inserts a Phillips electric razor

into her wrist, which rearranges itself to easily accommodate the device, and raises her new limb

to the man's face. She gives him a close shave; she stands with her face centimeters away from

his, and the two sensually sway under the shower head. Suddenly the man opens his eyes, as

though seeing this gynoid for the first time. He smirks, the music abruptly pauses, and she turns

away, seemingly ashamed, as the man walks away, turning back and smiling when he realizes

how smooth is just-shaved face feels. It's an arresting moment for consumers: it's as though she

has become too involved in her own sexuality, too eager to participate, and so the interaction

must halt, lest the instrument acquire a sense of participation.

A still from Phillips' "Robot Skin" campaign

Digital scholar Haerin Shin writes about the trouble with "Robot Skin" in her piece in collection

Dis-Orienting Planets: Racial Representations of Asia in Science Fiction:

> "The robot is the embodiment of techno-futuristic excellence, every detail of its features meticulously engineered for fetish, which in turn positions it as a paradox in and of itself. Simultaneously an object of appreciation and a practical tool, the robot's seamless service cancels out its elaborately constructed looks and moves. [...] Seen but also unseen, subjugated but also manipulating (the viewers into, hopefully, purchasing the product), Robotskin is the quintessential technology all apparatuses aspire to." (p. 137)

If there is any room for argument over the gynoid's intended effects on (male) consumers, a

YouTube comment made by user "YouShouldBeSpankful" six years ago should put that to rest:

"Who said anything about the ideal woman? :P All I can say concerning that robot is: if they sell

that kinda robot, I'm buying one for myself FO SHO!"

The trope of the sexualized female android appears to defy extermination. Beyond

the realm of product-focused commerce, she has even become a presence in the popular music

sphere. In December of 2017, up-and-coming pop artist Charli XCX released a tongue-in-cheek

song called "Femmebot." Its lyrics amount to a bawdy punchline about a woman with a sexual

appetite so intense it might lead to her self-destruction.

> "Go f--- your prototype /I'm an upgrade of your stereotype / Don't come with a guarantee / I'll use you up like you're my battery / I feel the sparks between us / Electric shock / Hot-wired, if you mess it up / I'll self-destruct / The way you look at me / I-I-I short

circuit / You make me lose control / It's automatic / You push my buttons / See-e-e-e how I work it / I-I-I-I get what I want / Like it or not / I'll be your femmebot / I'll be your femmebot / I'll be your femmebot / I-I get what I want / Like it or not / I got you hypnotized / I read your thoughts when you look in my eyes / You're just my human toy / And I am programmed to search and destroy"[12]

Charli's lyrics suggest that this young woman is aiming to reclaim the stereotype, using its surrounding vocabulary as she navigates her own sexual experiences. Taken alone, the lyrics represent a possible redirection. Yet the rap verse that follows erases any possibility of optimism. Male rapper Mykki Blanco intones: "Do you want a femmebot or do you want a hoe-bot? / Slutbot, f--- no, systems down / Boy, I'll clone you, boy, I'll swerve you / Glitch your mainframe, now I own you / Ex Machina-na-na, you can't win / I'm A.I., slut, I am that bitch."

The direction of the fembot in an interplay of popular music, advertising, media, and especially film in the first two decades of the twenty-first century anticipates a further radicalization of gender relations, including socioeconomic equality and sexual parity. The record of the twentieth century and the initial 20 years of the twenty-first century auger developments that will compel critical analysis within and without the academy.

---

[12] Charli XCX, "Femmebot (feat. Dorian Electra and Mykki Blanco)," *Pop 2*, Atlantic, 2017.

Works Cited

Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery. Directed by Jay Roach, performances by Mike
   Myers, New Line, 1997.

Aveillan, Bruno. "Robot Skin." *YouTube*, published by user Vici22g, 2018.
   <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b0SVIA5SaLg>.

Battaglia, Debbora. "Multiplicities: An Anthropologist's Thoughts on Replicants and Clones in
   Popular Film." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2001, pp. 493–514. *JSTOR*, JSTOR,
   <www.jstor.org/stable/1344218>.

Blade Runner: 2049. Directed by Denis Villeneuve, performances by Harrison Ford and Ryan
   Gosling, Warner Bros. 2017.

Blade Runner. Directed by Ridley Scott, performances by Harrison Ford and Sean Young,
   Warner Bros., 1982.

Browne, Ryan. "World's first robot 'citizen' Sophia is calling for women's rights in Saudi
   Arabia." *CNBC* 5 Dec. 2017 <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/12/05/hanson-robotics-
   ceo-sophia-the-robot-an-advocate-for-womens-rights.html>.

Charli XCX. "Femmebot (feat. Dorian Electra and Mykki Blanco)." *Pop 2*, Atlantic, 2017.

Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Machine. Directed by Norman Taurog, performances by Vincent
   Price and Frankie Avalon, Alta Vista, 1965.

Dr. No. Directed by Terence Young, performances by Sean Connery and Ursula Andress, Eon
   Productions, 1962.

Ex Machina. Directed by Alex Garland, performances by Alicia Vikander and Oscar Isaac,
   Film4, 2014.

Hansen, Mark B. N. Bodies in Code: Interfaces with Digital Media. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Haraway, Donna. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the
   Late Twentieth Century." Theorizing Feminism: Parallel Trends in the Humanities and
   Social Sciences. Ed. Anne C. Hermann and Abigail J. Stewart. Boulder: Westview Press,
   1994. 424-57.

Hatmaker, Taylor. "Saudi Arabia Bestows Citizenship on a Robot Names Sophia." *Tech Crunch* 26 Oct. 2017 <https://techcrunch.com/2017/10/26/saudi-arabia-robot-citizen-sophia/>.

Hayles, Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. <http://www.humanitiesebook.org/>.

Lane, Anthony. "'Blade Runner 2049': The Mysteries Deepen." *The New Yorker,* 16 Oct. 2017. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/10/16/blade-runner-2049-the-mysteries-deepen>.

McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Berkeley: Gingko Press, 2003.

Metropolis. Directed by Fritz Lang, performances by Brigitte Helm and Gustav Frohlich, Universum Film, 1927.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1989.

O'Sullivan, J. "Virtual Metamorphoses: Cosmetic and Cybernetic Revisions of Pygmalion's "Living Doll"." *Arethusa*, vol. 41 no. 1, 2008, pp. 133-156. *Project MUSE*.

Shin, Haerin. "The Hyperrealization of Post-Racial Politics in *Cloud Atlas*." *Dis-Orienting Planets: Racial Representations of Asia in Science Fiction.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017.

Sophia Bot. Hanson Robotics, 2017. <http://sophiabot.com/about-me/>. Accessed 1 Dec. 2017.

Weird Science. Directed by John Hughes, performances by Anthony Michael Hall and Kelly LeBrock, Universal, 1985.

Zeitz, C. D. (2016). Dreaming of electric femmes fatales: Ridley scott's blade runner: Final cut (2007) and images of women in film noir. *Gender Forum: An Internet Journal of Gender Studies, 60*, 75-89. Retrieved from ProQuest (via Vanderbilt University Libraries).