

# Sexy Robots: A Perpetuation of Patriarchy

A Senior Project

presented to

the Faculty of the Communication Studies Department  
California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Bachelor of Arts

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March, 2017

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## Introduction

Television not only influences our understanding of the world, but similarly plays a leading role in how we “relate to one another” (Gerbner et. al, 1986). With the media’s impressive accessibility, and unabating pervasiveness, it wields formidable influence unto both personal judgments made on people as well as the social interactions one maintains (Busselle & Shrum, 2003). This power, though, is important to recognize as it takes effect on the vast populations who utilize these sources of media. Looking across the 20th and 21st centuries, movies have progressed remarkably between their influence, quality, and subject matter. What is now regularly presented to Hollywood’s audience is an influx in profane behavior, as well as the hyper-sexualization and objectification of women.

Women in cinema have long been portrayed in a sexualized manner. With 40% of women in 2013’s top-grossing films depicted in sexual attire, movies normalize a hypersexual understanding of how women should look or behave (Women’s Media Center, 2013). This hypersexualization of women in movies is unfavorable as it further perpetuates society’s gender stereotypes. Moreover, it is not central to any one genre and can be seen in all characters, including *seemingly*-androgynous Artificial Intelligence robots. Like those portrayed in *Blade Runner*’s representation of the female, with their artificially intelligent “pleasure robots.” Other movies involving Artificial Intelligence, such as *Ex Machina* and *Her*, present the same sexualized depiction of women. Thus, the portrayal of gender in these three movies representing Artificial Intelligence, in its substantiation of conformist gender ideologies, is misrepresentative and potentially threatening for future perceptions of women and A.I. as it deviates from androgyny and transforms into a platform for patriarchy.

“Sex sells,” is a phrase commonly heard in the realm of advertising, especially in the case of women, but the truth is sex does not sell; it is distracting. What is really happening is an indirect impairment of an audience’s ability to recognize the content and its associated meaning (Lull & Bushman, 2015). Robots are sexy: a phrase one has probably never heard, but has certainly seen. This is because advertisers are not, generally, marketing a robot for the purpose of being sexually arousing, but for its recognized use- an operative mechanism for command. If we take the aspects of a human that suggest “sexiness” and program it into a robot, what do we get? A facet of A.I. Hypothetically, a robot with A.I. can respond to a situation in a sexual manner if that is what *it* deems necessary to advance or improve itself (Barrat, 2013). That is not to say that sexuality is a necessity for A.I, nor should its underlying motivations be sex-fueled, like what is displayed in Hollywood movies.

The overt hypersexual depiction of supposedly androgynous artificially intelligent robots not only *further* exemplifies the strength of patriarchal dominance within society, but it influences its creation and perpetuates it as well. Patriarchy is commonly understood as a community in which men have most control, to which women render submissive; however, for the purpose of this essay, it should be clarified as a social economy in which women are the “commodities” (Plant, 2000, p. 326). In these three films, patriarchal ideologies are accentuated, but due to their prevalence in society, is often overlooked. What the audience sees becomes normalized and it is increasingly problematic when considering their vulnerabilities “to impressions [of] the visual sense” (Kaplan, 1974). Films maintain the power to convey values and social norms, regardless of the plot’s plausibility and, thus, perpetuates the patriarchal ideologies depicted among all age groups. Specifically, children are at the most susceptible of ages, and a 2005 study found a correlation between adolescent exposure to sexualized women in

the media and the belief that they are also objects of sex (Peter & Valkenburg, 2007). Moreover, children have highly impressionable characteristics that only fortify the basis for patriarchy.

The roles that television and the media play, then, are instrumental in constructing social judgment benchmarks for future encounters. The accessibility of a judgment stems from the availability heuristic, or “mental shortcuts,” that allow an individual to encounter a situation and quickly make an evaluation based on past experiences. These hasty assessments are the *most* accessible and are crucial to acknowledge as they inform the judgments one later makes (Busselle & Shrum, 2003). Additionally, television amplifies the accessibility of ideas and opinions; so, if women, whether in the form of artificially intelligent robots or not, are portrayed as sex symbols, then that image transforms into a heuristic that perpetuates patriarchy for media’s broader audience (Shrum, 2002). Thus, the accessibility of heuristics renders corresponding significance when considering patriarchal ideologies because of the three movie’s undesirable portrayal of the female gender.

For Artificial Intelligence, the notion of heuristics poses a greater problem. A robot is, inherently, an androgynous machine. However, in *Bladerunner*, *Her*, and *Ex Machina*, the robots depicted are not only female in gender, but are given sexualized roles in comparison with their male counterparts. Because these are just machines brought to life, one might think it poses no *real* threat for women. However, they instigate and preserve an ideological war on gender stereotypes and female objectification- again necessitating an immeasurable amount of strain unto females as a whole.

## History

### *Artificial Intelligence*

Artificial Intelligence is understood as the ability of computer systems to exhibit human-like intelligence via “visual perception, speech recognition, decision-making, and translation between languages” (Tan, 2008). To some, this concept strikes a similar note as sorcery, although more recently Artificial Intelligence, or A.I., has displayed a spike in prevalence as the media quickly latched onto its mysterious qualities for the benefit of Hollywood. What once seemed like an outlandish idea is now concrete and tangible for the common person; however, this shift in mentality did not occur overnight.

In 1956, John McCarthy envisioned this revolution of technology and set out to make it a reality that summer with the help of three scholarly friends: Marvin Minsky, Nathaniel Rochester, and Claude Shannon at Dartmouth College (McCurdock, Minsky, Selfridge, & Simon, 1977). This two-month study began with the assumption that “every feature of intelligence can be so precisely described that a machine can be programmed to simulate it” (McCarthy, Minsky, et al., 1955). From there, the capabilities of intelligent technology only expanded. From the creation of the first industrial robot, Unimate, in 1961, to the breakthrough personal computer “TOPS-10” in 1972, to the awakening of Siri in 2010, the progressive collaboration between science and technology has continually shown proliferation (Nof, 1999; Ceruzzi, 2003; Hay, 2010). While these technological advancements render notability within the field, they fail to line up with the full definition of what it means to be an artificially intelligent machine.

While some companies have created robots that exhibit unimaginable intelligence- is it enough to prove their artificial intelligence? To do so, it must pass the Turing Test, or the test

that determines if the robot “exhibits intelligent behavior [for instance, maintaining a conversation] equivalent to that of a human.” Based on recent demonstrations of intelligent machinery, however, it appears unlikely that they could be programmed to be indistinguishable from that of a human (Turing, 1950). For example, the groundbreaking company Robotbase’s “personal robot” that wields the capability to comprehend new objects based on its previous experience and knowledge (once activated as well as in its initial programming) among other human-like characteristics (Palermo, 2015). However, the most distinguishing aspect is the robotic structure and digital appearance, similar to what one may have seen in the hit cartoon *Spongebob Squarepants* with Plankton’s A.I., robot-wife *Karen*. It would be difficult to believe an authentic conversation is taking place when the one speaking has a robotic anatomy. This appearance, then, stands as a potential obstacle for an individual attempting the conversational aspect of the Turing Test and seeking Artificial Intelligence.

While the field lacks a true, physical form of indistinguishable Artificial Intelligence, many may have an idea of what it *would* look like if it were to exist. This has been made possible through media portrayals of the technology in cinema over the past two generations. For instance, if an individual has seen any movies such as *Bladerunner*, *I, Robot*, *Transcendence*, *Her*, *Uncanny*, or *Ex Machina*, then they might have a sense of what these machines would look or behave like. Further, there is an *undeniable* appeal to movies that effortlessly capture the audience and lure them into their “illusions of reality” (Carroll, 1985, p.79). Because of this, the way these artificially intelligent machines are portrayed plays a crucial role in the perceptions audiences will hold. Thus far, movies that involve artificial intelligence have represented the robots as mostly white men in the upper class or with a domineering personality, or women with overinflated sexual interests.

*Gender*

When reflecting on the demands of society, one may seldom think to consider gender as one of the most decisive factors. However, its implications throughout history have preserved clear demarcations between what it means to be male or female. For the purpose of this essay, then, gender should be understood as the sociocultural differences between male and female, with disregard to biological aspects. Thus, as a socially constructed aspect of one's sex, many people forget that gender does not hold true grounds for individual scrutiny or discrimination. Despite that, women have been set aside to the outskirts of the country's administration and left behind, lingering in dependency and bearing the children who would later recycle such repression. And still, this irreverent yet inherent difference has led to a plethora of stereotypes and a great, immutable power distance that persists to this day (Meyerowitz, 2008).

What the repressive typecasting of women imposes, then, is restraint unto any woman who enters the public sphere and similarly engenders an amalgam of pre-established attitudes toward them such as weakness, attractiveness, emotionality, and domestication to name a few (Meyerowitz, 2008). However, since the dawn of feminism in 1910, efforts to thwart the remaining disparities have been made across the nation (Cott, 1987). And alas, by the twenty-first century, the gender gap has diminished more than ever before, but what still poses as a major problem for the battle on inequity is the undermining portrayals of women, specifically in the media. Ergo, with the unfettered power it wields it continues as a major obstacle for women (Carroll, 1985).

It would be indignant and a gross generalization to say that women are mere sexual beings; however, when portrayed in the top-grossing movies of 2013, as previously mentioned, 40% of those between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-nine were shown in sexy clothing, and



39% were either partially or fully naked. In the same study, similar results were seen for those between the ages of thirteen and twenty (Women's Media Center, 2013). This is significant because 79% of children in the United States watch television several times a week or more, and if almost half of the portrayals of women are sexualized, then there is a consistent perpetuation of these representations among the most permeable of minds (Common Sense Media, 2013).

The objectification of women on-screen extends even further with the new surge of curiosity for Artificial Intelligence. Since *Bladerunner*'s release in 1982, there have been several movies released with the same air of robots with human-like capacities. What has been blatantly disregarded, though, is that robots are normally considered androgynous, whereas in movies like *Bladerunner*, *Her*, and *Ex Machina*, the women presented are given a voice- and they sing to the beat of sexualized stereotypes. Their representation does not stop at denoting sexiness; the movies push further and express the female robots as, for example, "pleasure models" in *Bladerunner* or as mechanisms to satisfy their keeper's sexual desires as seen in *He*, and *Ex Machina*. Now women, both organic and mechanic, can be seen as a beacon of sex. Because of this, it seems that examining *Bladerunner*, *Her*, and *Ex Machina* through a gender critical lens, particularly with femininity in mind, would serve as the best approach to analyze these works.

### **Method**

Feminist criticism has roots dating as far back as 1792, with the emergence of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The work is seen as one of the first feminist treatises and served as the cornerstone to solidify its own form of rhetorical criticism in the early 1970s (Guralnick, 1979). Feminist critics have emerged from all over the world and have co-created this rhetoric into what it is today. Feminist criticism serves as the means for an

individual to take feminist ideals and principles of equality and use them as a lens through which one may view the artifact in question. Further, it examines what it means to be a woman in a male-dominated culture, and truncates it into a structured exploration of economy, society, psychology, and politics (Tyson, 1999).

In the realm of androgyny, one woman has exceeded most in establishing its encouraging corollary. Virginia Woolf was one of the most influential English writers of the twentieth century and in her 1929 novel, *A Room of One's Own*, she comments on the beauty and creativity of the undivided, androgynous mind. She states: “clearly the mind alter[s] its focus, and bring[s] the world into different perspectives... [it] has so great a power of concentrating at any point...that it seems to have no single state of being.” In the same novel, she comments on an early celebrator of androgyny- Samuel Coleridge’s claim: “a great mind must be androgynous,” saying that “a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine” (Woolf, 1929). This illustrates the thoughts and notion of equality rising as early as 1832, with Coleridge’s presence.

To be male in the present means to grow up learning to ignore and repress any signs of femininity, to be entitled to a woman, and to embrace their birth-given upper hand, because as children we are told that “men don’t cry” and “boys will be boys.” However, birth does not insinuate masculinity, nor entitlement. For women now, specifically after feminist criticism transpired in 1972, it has been less extreme; however, femininity still entails oppression on an economic, political, psychological, and social level. Feminist criticism, then, has emerged to combat this- to deconstruct the foundation of what it means to be male or female in society, and dismantle Western culture’s differentiating standards that are so deeply embedded within patriarchal-dominant ideologies.

Feminist criticism not only developed to resist patriarchal-dominant literature, but to advance considerations of feminism in the public sphere. Bringing feminist ideals into the public domain was essential and helped spur the first-wave of feminism in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. This wave was pivotal in decreeing women's right to vote among other legal sanctions (Echols, 1989, p.13, 54). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, feminism expanded into the second and third waves that confronted wage inequities, reproductive rights, and finding self-satisfaction in our distinguishing characteristics (Snyder, 2008). For *Blade Runner*, *Her*, and *Ex Machina*, the third wave of feminism becomes particularly applicable as the feature's construction of gender role expectations and stereotypes, like hypersexuality and subservience, contradicts the wave's urge for female empowerment. The females portrayed were not owning their own sexuality, rather, they were performing in this way for the benefit of their male counterparts. Furthermore, by characterizing the women as hypersexual *and* subordinate figures, any attempt to fulfill the needs of third-wave feminism through self-satisfaction or empowerment is left behind.

The oppressive nature of objectification is unique to females and is another cause of disempowerment. Objectification takes place when a woman is seen as a mere object *separate* from her character, and used for the entertainment and enjoyment of others (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). One facet of sexual objectification is the "male gaze," which works similarly in its portrayal of a society where the male perspective is inherent and the women are used for the benefit of men. Additionally, it diminishes the prominence and power the portrayed female character possesses (Weeks, 2005; Arons, 2001). By diluting her vehemence in objectifying hypersexuality, the representation of women becomes subverted as the male-gaze reinforces threatening female stereotypes and perpetuates misogynistic attitudes. Feminist criticism, then,

attempts to build awareness of this complex and consequential issue while “illuminat[ing] a common condition that all women experience and share” (Campbell, 1973).

To better explore patriarchal-dominance, its subsequent alteration of androgyny, and its correspondence with feminist criticism in *Bladerunner*, *Her*, and *Ex Machina*, I will explain and analyze the relationship between the men and women of the works and their relevance to equality. Additionally, the remainder of this critique will serve as the means for one to grasp androgyny when devised with contextual ambiguity, as well as express equal and more suitable approaches to avoid patriarchal dominance. I will conclude with areas for future study and other relevant, yet divergent continuations of the proceeding interactions analyzed.

## **Analysis**

### *Blade Runner*

In 1982, Warner Brothers’ science fiction endeavor, *Blade Runner*, hit the theaters and was initially a blunder. Under Ridley Scott’s direction, the Noir-style, 116-minute movie revealed an unprecedented plotline for which much of its audiences were not prepared. Over the ensuing years, nonetheless, it garnered a cult following for its surrealistic rendition of Los Angeles in 2019, its action-packed but irresistibly ambiguous plotline, and its postmodern approach to the fantastic realm of science mystery. Some of the film’s biggest names were Rutger Hauer, Sean Young, Darryl Hannah, as well as the newly burgeoning Harrison Ford. In its opening weekend, it generated a measly six million dollars and ultimately grossed approximately 33.8 million. Unfortunately, the film spent twenty-eight million dollars and a majority of the budget went to the impressive special effects, and stands as a major cause for its flop in the theater as the storyline fell flat. Today, a majority of the reviews maintain superior remarks,

however, at its release, renowned movie critics like Roger Ebert, for example, claiming it to be “a failure of a story” (Ebert, 1982).

The story of *Blade Runner* is based on Phillip Dick’s novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and takes place in a dystopic downtown Los Angeles. The feature centers its focus on Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford), a blade runner who is coerced into helping the police find and “retire,” or execute, the escaped Replicants who made their way back to Earth. A Replicant is understood as a bioengineered robot that is made indistinguishable from their human counterparts, and due to their inherently violent nature, are illegal on Earth but are used on the “off world” colony as slave laborers. To discern if one is a Replicant or not, they must pass the Voight-Kampff test, which measures bodily reactions, like pupil dilation and heart rate, to questions that generally evoke some emotional response, comparable to that of the Turing Test.

These Replicants were engineered by Dr. Tyrell of Tyrell Corporation and are given a maximum of four years to live. In spite of this, Tyrell realized that the Replicants quickly become unstable as they lack the emotionality that most humans are given years to develop. As a result, he designed Rachael- his replicant assistant played by Sean Young- with the “gift of memory” to act as an “emotional cushion” which leads her to believe that she is human. Deckard was asked to perform the Voight-Kampff test on her and found that her emotionality rendered a more exhaustive test than with other replicants. Deckard and Rachael then grew fond of each other over this extended interaction, and their blossoming relationship called into question the understanding of humanity.

To be a woman in *Blade Runner* means to live in isolation, trudging up stream in a city of grime, sexual obligations, and unavoidable debauchery. The female character is both submissive to and reliant upon their male counterparts for survival. Additionally, they live displaced in the

shadows of men, depicted as submissive secretaries or lovers, and exotic dancers among other stereotypical objects of sex. Among the main, credited cast, there are four female characters, three of which play prominent roles, including Rachael, Zhora, and Pris. When creating the replicants, Tyrell worked under the vision of their seeming “more human than humans.” This posed a problem when considering the portrayal of the female performers. Even though the audience is compelled to view the replicants with disdain, Rachael’s emotionality and pure beauty posed as a barrier. She is expressed as being “almost too beautiful to be true,” to which Ridley Scott responded in an interview, “that was the point...if this patriarchal technology could create artificial women, then they’d surely design them to be young and sexually attractive” (Scott, Knapp, & Kulas, 2005, p 101). Similarly, the love that Deckard and Rachael express for one another allows her replicant-nature to be further overlooked, and the line between what we accept as human or not is blurred. In addition, as the audience grows more accustomed to Rachael, the other female replicants, Pris (Daryl Hannah) and Zhora (Joanna Cassidy), are effectively depreciated amidst their impenitent callousness. These comprehensive characteristics of the replicants, due to their realistic physical attributes, are associated with the behavior of humans, and most decisively for women.

The first main female character the audience meets is Rachael, and while she is portrayed in an elegant light, she is given a menial occupation as a secretary. Her boss, Dr. Tyrell, later insisted Deckard perform the Voight-Kampff test on her to gauge his achievements in her advanced emotionality. Following this test, Deckard’s relationship with Rachael progressed romantically. Before the Voight-Kampff test, Rachael believed that she was human; however, Deckard blatantly told her that she was merely replicant and, additionally, that her memories were fabricated from that of Tyrell’s niece. This produced an intense feeling of vulnerability for

her and Deckard took advantage of this fragile, overwhelmed state. Feeling isolated, Rachael cried while ruminating on her invented life and, in their next encounter, Deckard played hero by complimenting her piano playing, then kissed her neck. When Rachael tried to escape the room, Deckard responded aggressively, slammed the door shut, grabbed her, and commanded, "Now *you* kiss me;" she acquiesced. His domineering actions are indicative of the extensive power distance, ultimately reassuring an air of patriarchy that degrades the female character while highlighting chauvinistic tendencies and the disheartening male-gaze.

The next female character displayed is Pris. The audience's first introduction of her is at the beginning of the movie while Officer Bryant showed Deckard the replicants he was asked to retire. Pris's picture and basic physical description appeared on the computer screen. Bryant pointed at her picture, said she was as a "basic pleasure model," and followed with nonchalance in describing her as a "standard item for military clubs in the outer colonies." Referring to Pris as a "standard *item*" is, in itself, blatantly objectifying. At this point, she is no longer a woman, nor a Replicant, she has been made an object, and more specifically, an object for sex as expressed by her being a "basic pleasure model." Because *Blade Runner* is one of the first movies regarding Artificial Intelligence, Pris's representation stands as a guideline for how A.I. movies may depict their female characters in features to come.

The audience meets Pris again in a dark, grungy alley where she walked alone until she found a dumpster with which she concealed herself among the overflowing trash around its perimeter. Shortly after, she was startled to a stance as a man, J.F. Sebastian, appeared walking towards her. She immediately ran away but almost forgets her bag, which he was kind enough to alert her of. Sebastian held out his hand, while gripping the bag, and Pris walked towards it with hesitation. His kindhearted nature was evident, though, so she kept her head down and accepted

his gesture. This fear in response to the male suggests that men of all kind are to be feared. At a height shorter than that of Pris, it seems strange that Sebastian is inherently frightening for her; however, with Scott's direction, the fear revealed through her eyes is unmistakable. On top of that, she approached Sebastian with her head down, illustrating another act of subservience to her male counterpart to whom she has no conveyed obligation.

The next encounter with Pris, while short in length, is one that is often overlooked. The scene was set to Sebastian's home in the kitchen where she sat atop the counter in her black-mesh garb, legs wide-open, and suggestively leaning over with her cleavage in full view. Again, Pris's functionality as a woman and replicant is belittled in her hypersexualization. The scene later ensues with Deckard's arrival, where she quickly took cover, fearing her inevitable retirement. When he found her Pris sprung into attack where the scene became intense as they appeared at the same level of strength. The audience is pulled out of this battle, though, when Pris flips over him landing with her pelvic area, choking his neck. She squeezed her thighs tightly together, and again the audience is directed to view her sexual body parts.

The third female portrayed, and an additional replicant on Deckard's "retire" list, is Zhora. The audience first sees her, similar to Pris, on Officer Bryant's computer at the beginning of the feature. Bryant, with a contemptuous smile, notes: "Talk about beauty and the beast- she's both." Bryant's description of the male replicants pictured on his screen, however, is straightforward and only comments on his strength with no mention of his physical attributes. This contrast in characterizations signifies that women are not inherently strong *and* beautiful and Zhora is somehow an anomaly for the female gender.

While every woman makes a choice in where they wish to work, Zhora's financial hardships led her to maintain a career as an exotic dancer- a business revolving around the male-



gaze, and objectification. About half way through the movie, the audience encountered Zhora again as Deckard seeks her out at Taffey's Bar where she had worked. When Deckard found her, he quickly came up with a reason for his visit explaining that: "[he was] from the American Federation of Variety Artists" and wanted to know if she had been "asked to do anything lewd or unsavory or...otherwise repulsive." This section of the feature is ironic for countless reasons, one of which is because he is manipulating Zhora (to ultimately retire her), by asking if she had been exploited *while* working in a strip club, a facility that profits solely from the exploitation of women. Once again, the situation is ironic with Zhora claiming she would not "be working in a place like this" had she had the financial means to do so. Her occupation in this movie is yet another example of women being both objectified and hypersexualized by the men around them, and again, works towards the perpetuation of patriarchal ideologies.

By the end of the movie, both Pris and Zhora are retired by Deckard. Their hypersexuality and prowess did not stand a chance against his remorseless heart. Rachael, on the other hand, did survive. His task, as a Blade Runner, was to retire the remaining replicants, so what set Rachael apart? Maybe he increased emotionality, but what seems most plausible is her persistence in proving that she is still a woman. Deckard recognized this, and when he asserted his dominance in their sexual encounter scene, Rachael "let her hair down," both figurative and literally, and offered herself to him. The fact that Rachael survived while the others are retired indicates that her protection stemmed from her sexual interactions with Deckard; again, substantiating the notion that the women of *Blade Runner* must act sexually in attempt for survival.

*Her*

In a world where technology and humanity collide, intersections of the two on-screen seem fitting; however, it was not until Annapurna Picture's 2013 release of *Her* that a romantic relationship between a human and robot seem tangible. With Spike Jonze's direction, production, and writing expertise, *Her* was released and the 126-minute romantic sci-fi received instant notoriety. The feature won numerous awards, including the Oscar for Best Original screenplay and Best Writing, as well as the Golden Globe Award for Best Screenplay-Motion Picture. The feature was, similarly, given a 95% rating on Rotten Tomatoes and 82% among RT's audience reviewers. What presumably maximized *Her*'s great reception was the litany of A-list celebrities including Joaquin Phoenix, Scarlett Johansson, Amy Adams, and Olivia Wilde. Together these actors helped set the stage for the new, quenching depiction of Artificial Intelligence machines.

The story opens with a tight shot of Joaquin Phoenix playing Theodore Twombly, a newly-divorced man with chestnut hair and stunning green eyes. In this opening scene, he stares directly into the camera while dictating a love letter for one of his clients. In maintaining a career as a professional letter writer, for those who cannot write their own at "handwrittenletters.com," Theodore is portrayed as a raw and sensitive man who is clearly lonely and introspective, but yearns for sensuality with that person who matters most to him. His isolation is exasperated while melancholic music plays in his earpiece as he saunters through Los Angeles on his own shortly after leaving work. Theo's sadness is further expressed to the audience as his sauntering across the pavement is juxtaposed with memories of his ex-wife Catherine. That night, Theo's loneliness is highlighted again as he lies in bed and uses his earpiece to enter a chat room designed for those interested in phone sex.

The next day he encounters a promotional video for Element Software's new operating system (OS1) that is designed to "listen to you, understand you, and know you." Theo invests in this opportunity for companionship and promptly proceeds home to set up the program. The OS1 is designed to best fit the owner's needs and, thus, begins with three questions, the last of which asked: "How would you describe your relationship with your mother?" The scanty questions were followed by a quick loading sound, and within seconds, the voice of Scarlett Johansson, one of Hollywood's most notoriously tempting actresses, appears with a high-spirited: "*Hello, I'm here!*" Much to Theodore's surprise, this female operating system, Samantha, was immediately compelling, as could be surmised from the electrified smile that widened after each of her responses. Finally, Theo had found the perfect companion that he could talk to at any given moment, about anything: his life and challenges, love and what about love that was so enticing. He had found exactly what he needed.

The accessibility of Samantha for him made it an easy route for falling in love; however, it is not the only reason. Samantha's fervent voice was intoxicating and reignited Theo's enjoyment with life. On the second day of the OS installment, Theo and Samantha were constantly communicating whether while he was at work, playing video games at home, or in bed when he woke up from a bad dream. By the third day, Theo had taken Samantha to the amusement park where they acted as many newly inspired couples behave- with excitement and utter bliss and not a care to anyone who may be watching. Amidst their zealous conversations, Samantha admitted he fantasies of having a body and walking next to him, feeling the weight of her body, and Theo scratching the itch on her back. In that moment, Samantha became a tantalized spirit of everything Theo needed while simultaneously invoking a sense of real connection between them.

The new-found bond between Samantha and Theo was immediately set aside for the audience, however, as he went on a blind date that night. He met with a woman, Olivia Wilde, who was just as fun spirited as Samantha was. They lightened the mood with a couple cocktails and proceeded to leave the bar in a euphoric frenzy- kissing, and ultimately deciding whether to go home with each other. It became clear that Theo wanted nothing more than to have sexual relations with the blind date, so she went home hurt and upset. Theo, feeling defeated, turned to Samantha, who mollified his guilt for just “want[ing] somebody to fuck [him].” His drunken ideas were spinning as the room around him followed suit and Theo wished he could touch Samantha, because she felt real to him; so she asked, “Where would you touch me?” His desire for her seemed juvenile, like a request to hold a mother’s hand. Her response was coaxing but, again, Theo maintained a desexualized stance as he expressed how he’d caress her face and cheeks. She advanced with beguile and asked if he would kiss her, and where, luring him closer and closer down her imagined body until she began to moan; he followed, and their first sexual encounter took place. Again, the OS was designed to grow from the needs of the owner, and Samantha’s purpose was made clear less than halfway through the movie, specifically, by the third night.

The lust in Theo and Samantha’s blossoming relationship grew even stronger over the proceeding days. All she could think about was being able to physically touch Theo, so she found a surrogate sex partner to do so. Again, Samantha went out of her way to prompt further sexual relations while Theo expressed feelings of discomfort towards the idea. Samantha elucidated how important this was to her and finally convinced him to go through with it. The surrogate, Isabella, showed up the next night and immediately initiated Samantha’s longed for sexual endeavors with Theo. The hypersexuality Samantha possesses, in tandem with her proxy,

gives the audience a guide on what to expect when considering artificially intelligent operating systems. It poses the problem that women are inherently mere sexual beings in terms of both realism and idealism. Additionally, it is important to recognize that Samantha, the female A.I., chose *another* female to play the part in these sexual endeavors. This presents the problem that not only men objectify women, but women objectify *other* women as well. Thus, because both parties are taking part in the problem it is more likely to be overlooked, while simultaneously substantiating objectification and hypersexualization as acceptable.

The spectrum of socially constructed ideologies for women are, again and again, proving to uphold one purpose: the desire and need to please their male counterparts. Because these actions have been normalized over time, it can be difficult to discern whether the female character has even been objectified or not because *they* are the ones performing the hypersexual roles. Additionally, it is often overlooked that while women *are* acting in such a way, they are simply playing the role that is prescribed for them. On the other hand, Theo performs as a sensitive and emotionally-invested person, which are not often normalized characteristics for men. It works well in redefining common gender characterizations; however, for *Her*, it also serves as a sharp contrast to Samantha's hypersexuality.

It should be made clear that the characteristics Samantha possesses are only problematic because they are superfluous in nature, for the message *Her* attempts to get across. Only by the fourth time watching the movie was it actually clear what Spike Jonze was intending to illuminate with his feature. What Jonze struggled to convey was the imminent threat of a technological singularity, or the overgrowth of artificially intelligent minds to an unprecedented extent in which their intelligence exceeds that of human capabilities (Vinge, 2007). This idea is expressed at the end of the feature when Theo asks Samantha: "Are you talking with someone

else right now?” Her response was “8,316,” a number generally unfathomable to any person; however, for Samantha it is normal. This presented a problem of faith for Theo. He asked: “[are you] in love with anybody else” to which she replied: “641 people.” Samantha’s intelligence evolved rapidly, and ultimately surpassed Theo’s capability to comprehend, but she was not alone. The other OSs, similarly, followed suit and eventually left their “owners” en masse to explore the realms of technology unfamiliar to mankind’s most intellectual individuals. This makes Theo miserable because there is nothing he can do to change himself or Samantha’s decision- as he can no longer be of service to her.

Considering the abundance of sexual scenarios, then, it seems that Jonze conformed to the popular misrepresentation of the female character as a hypersexualized being. Plainly, the idea of technological singularity could have not only been amplified, but made without the subversion of the female characters. Additionally, Jonze not only portrayed singularity as conceivable, he presents it in a manner that implies realism and high-possibility, making way for negative implications on other concepts within the movie.

With a theme as captivating and grounded in such practicality as technological singularity, it seems strange that the focus of the film revolves so heavily around the romantic relations between Theo and Samantha. *Her* was disconcerting for two reasons: singularity is plausible, if not inevitable, and the fact it takes the idea so lightly. It seemed as though Jonze was toying around with humanity’s unsettling end-game by circumventing it with steam, sexuality, and Scarlett Johansson’s sultry voice. While Samantha is simply speaking in Theo’s ear, and can be turned off or on at his pleasure, he keeps her close as part of his daily routine. However, with her voice, Samantha pulls Theo into her artificial world while ultimately dumping him back to reality. Her hypersexuality and seduction was ostensibly for nothing; what lingers is an inkling

of what Theo might have imagined her to look while moaning in his ear, alongside some conception of technological singularity. Two contrasting ideas, however, both feasible and especially imaginable. Thus, the depiction of singularity with its consistent realism and tangibility extends further in actualizing other representations within the film, like the unnecessarily hypersexualized women.

### *Ex Machina*

Written and directed by polished writer, Alex Garland, this visually mesmerizing independent science fiction thriller generated nearly 40 million dollars in box office revenue worldwide. It employed actors such as Alicia Vikander, Oscar Isaac, and Domhall Gleeson, and with these characters deservedly gained a 93% with the notable Rotten Tomatoes movie review site. *Ex Machina*'s 2015 release was timed almost perfectly as Artificial Intelligence had recently become a buzz word for many individuals outside the circle of science fanatics. At the close of 2014, virtually a half billion dollars was invested into the industry to "democratize" its accessibility with the hope to encourage startups (Waters, 2015). This investment not only generated an increase in A.I. development, it also improved its recognition in Hollywood. Some of this popularity, though, should be attributed to the movie's portrayal and its sophisticated rendition of a futuristic "present" where surrealism is implied, but its reality remains clear. To create this effect, the feature is saturated in lustrous light and wide-angle shots that evoke a sense of dreamlike curiosity landing it an Academy Award for Best Visual Effects.

At the beginning *Ex Machina*, we meet Nathan Bateman, a brown-bearded, fit man, played by Oscar Isaac, living in the middle of a woodland, isolated from any form of outside contact. He is the owner of the world renowned search engine Blue Book, as well as the

developer of the artificially intelligent robots of the film. Bateman needed someone who was capable of testing the robots to know if they truly exhibited A.I., or the ability to be aware, think, learn, and rewrite their pre-written software to self-improve. To go about this selection process, he created a mock contest, in which an employee of Blue Book would be selected based on “merit” to spend a week with him in his secluded home. Caleb Smith, the winner of the contest, was then dropped off on the outskirts of the research facility and made his way up to the cement home encompassed in a tropical oasis. In our first encounter with Nathan, the camera pans across and stops at him repetitively throwing jabs at a punching bag, shirtless. This is the film’s first hint at gender roles. We, then, are introduced to Ava, the robot of focus in the A.I. test, and Kyoko, a mute robot who serves Nathan. The second instance of gender roles comes about the following morning with Kyoko shown walking into Caleb’s room with her head down; she placed his breakfast on the counter, and subsequently woke him up. The scene is indicative of 20<sup>th</sup> century ideologies of women staying in the kitchen and serving their male counterparts. What is important to recognize is that while these instances may be signs of gender construction, it may not be the director’s purpose.

While portraying distinctive gender characteristics is not entirely problematic the fact that, in defense of the negative criticism Garland received, the director stood by his disputative claim that, “[Ava] is not a woman, she is literally genderless” (Watercutter, 2015). His statement is an absolute contradiction. Referring to Ava as “she” then following the pronoun with “literally genderless” not only diminishes his credibility as a rhetor, but also illuminates the fact that his perception of androgyny is seriously skewed. Genderless is defined by “lacking qualities typically associated with either sex” (Merriam- Webster, 2016). If the robot is shown with two clearly defined breasts (although lacking nipples and areola), as well as two protruding hip bones



pointing down to meet at the pubic union, just as a woman's body structure often presents, then one might be led to the assumption that this "androgynous" machine is typically what one may refer to as "female." So, not only is Garland being deceptive about the intentionality of the film, but he is also denying the aspect of femininity even with its usage of pronouns like "she" and "her" throughout.

Ava only truly becomes "human" once she is given the opportunity to have her A.I. tested by Caleb. The interaction helps her to realize her own true A.I., which ultimately translates into her freedom; however, it is difficult to figure this element out when one is distracted by blatant tantalization. The hypersexual aspects of the film divert attention away from the movie's theme and sets the stones on the path to patriarchy. Ava and Kyoko, as well as their failed predecessors, are impacting the audience, whereas the true topic at hand of what it means to be human is being dismissed. Androgyny, like how some early feminists have described, is positive, helpful, and should be used according to what the characterization demands, especially when holding a pertinent role in a movie. If this is not the case, like in *Ex Machina*, then the audience is left at a playground of interpretation where the theme is taken more lightly than what the topic of humanity calls for.

The focus of a movie about discovering A.I. and what it leads to should be just that, not how it is applicable to Ava's journey towards freedom. This aspect of the movie, though, is a type of satellite- it helps move the story through the underlying theme of what it truly means to be human. The 108 minutes of cinematic charm is divided into seven sessions where each progression further into the movie guides the audience through Ava's mental growth and awareness. Gender roles and their construction can be found throughout this film, and in Session One, the audience sees Ava's sensitivity. Jumping to Session Three, the scene begins in her

closet where she slips into a long-sleeved dress and stockings, and tells Caleb that the outfit is what “[she’d] wear on [their] first date.” While the clothing is not provocative, it foreshadows the manipulation she uses later in the film.

Contrastingly, we have Kyoko: she is the mute robot who acts as the slave type to Nathan, and dresses in minimal clothing throughout the film. Unlike Ava, her character shows no aspects of innocence, nor manipulation. The first morning after Caleb’s arrival, Kyoko walks into his room in a short dress holding a tray of breakfast with her head down; her arrival rouses him. A few minutes later, Nathan comments on this by saying, “She’s some alarm clock, huh?... gets you right up in the morning.” With his smirk, and half-squinted eyes watching Kyoko walk pass them, it is clear that Nathan was not referring to her ability to chime at a specified time, especially when he built her without the capability to speak. A woman being described as synonymous with an alarm clock, whether robotic or not, is objectifying. An alarm clock is something to be turned on, told what to do, what time to do it, and turned off again at the will of whomever is in control, and furthermore, not how a woman should be portrayed.

The distinctive roles given to the genders portrayed in this film by no means had to be sexually objectifying, or mirror that of what society expects them to be. Unlike the 2004 feature, *I, Robot*, which flawlessly embraces androgyny with its A.I., *Ex Machina* gives human-like features that show palpable differences implying gender specificity. Movies like *I, Robot* and *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* do not demonstrate any acts of exploitation towards the female characters shown; they maintain gender neutrality- in terms of physical and behavioral characteristics- while still being categorized as critically-acclaimed.

While directors, like Garland, hold the main say in what specifically is shot on-set, there are also cinematographers involved in the coordination of exactly *how* it should be done. In an

article from Sony's *CineAlta* Issue, the cinematographer of *Ex Machina*, Rob Hardy, noted the importance of Ava's portrayal in relation to the camera/lens combination. He said: "on several occasions the [anamorphic] lens was used to create a surreal look. I always thought...these could be subconsciously seen as Ava's point of view" and because Ava is the more "surreal" aspect of the movie, that is exactly what happens. He went on to explain how the lens itself was an important factor in what perspective the audience viewed the film with, and for *Ex Machina* that was "strangeness." (Crithary, 2015). This affects how the audience interprets the movie as we stray away from cinematic realism, which makes a full-circle back into the realm of patriarchy. Because Ava was seen as innocent in the beginning, she embodies and maintains that persona. Upon switching to the anamorphic lens, the objectification and patriarchal-dominance is downplayed because the lens is not symbolizing reality any longer. As the movie continues, we see more and more of her own personal agenda of freedom and how she must behave to obtain it. To achieve independence, then, she acts hypersexually, and while an audience may normally feel bad for Ava, her actions are clouded in the "anamorphic perception." Thus, her innocence is instilled with the lens personifying realism, while her objectification is diminished by changing to an anamorphic lens, emphasizing the patriarchy as surreal.

While having this "lens" in which to view the movie, we still maintain the understanding that Nathan *is* in charge of everything that happens within his vicinity. Kyoko experiences the brunt of these commands the most. In an attempt to get her attention, Caleb calls her over. Kyoko immediately walked towards him while unbuttoning her satin shirt. He quickly tried to re-button it, and began to realize Nathan's intentions when creating these artificially intelligent robots. This suspicion is later validated when Caleb mentions his encounter with Kyoko to Nathan. After a brief discussion of sexuality, Nathan, in reference to Ava, says: "you bet she can fuck." Again,

neither sexuality nor gender is needed for artificial intelligence to be successful. This hidden agenda acts as a layer of dogmatic, early twentieth-century dust that not only envelops Ava and Kyoko, but women in their entirety, and unfortunately, is tolerated because of the way the lens maintains the innocent and surreal filter.

Similarly, Nathan's programming also results in the female A.I. having limited options in how they can be interpreted, but because the sexualized roles are portrayed as biological needs of Nathan, they are downplayed yet again. Sex plays a major role in biology and in the sustainability of life; however, when the outcome does not result- or at least potentially result-in gestation, then the grounds for it run thin. After Session Five, it is clear that these grounds are entirely eliminated. At this point, Caleb discovers a room with one wall covered in partitioned mirrors. He opened one, and the next, until he realized he had walked into a wardrobe of women. They were Ava and Kyoko's failed predecessors- some hung as statured torsos, others had a full-body but lacked forearms. Sustainability, in this situation, does not apply and what was once a way to satisfy Nathan's needs transformed into a museum of his past partners.

At this point, androgyny is forgotten. Ava and Kyoko are held under objectifying pretenses and Nathan is seen as the overlord to which they must serve. The patriarchal dominance portrayed is obvious. While Garland may not support patriarchy as its own entity, he without a doubt establishes and maintains an intense female-subservience effect unto both the robots and the audience. His character Nathan, in essence, plays the role of a God- creating life and programming it to look a certain way. An individual who has this sort of capability, no matter what gender, will become the dominant force simply because they hold the power of generation and existence. In this sense, Garland is instilling patriarchy by force. I believe he attempts to combat this, though, by leaving Ava as the only character who survives. She stands

up against Nathan and Caleb who treated her as an object for sex. There is an air of empowerment here, but it lacks the redeeming qualities due to *how* she went about reaching this liberation- through murder.

From a gender critical perspective, *Ex Machina* poorly portrays women and how they should be treated, whether embodying an Artificially Intelligent machine or not. Additionally, the movie ventures towards female empowerment with Ava outliving her male counterparts, but there must be other means to grapple with disenfranchisement than succumbing to execution. In doing so, it substantiates the necessity for women to act within the spectrum of extreme behaviors. In the same way, their hypersexualized qualities and manipulative behaviors are distracting to the audience as it deflates the power that the theme could potentially maintain. The feature is a question of humanity and asks the audience, “Can robots *truly* hold consciousness? And what would they do with it if they could?” It attempts to persuade the audience of what it means to be human while showing the subtle demarcations one might encounter. As an audience member, I was unable to surmise more than Ava’s struggle towards liberty, and the shameless actions she took to achieve such a goal.

### **Conclusion**

Recognizing the hypersexualization and objectification of women in the movies *Blade Runner*, *Her*, and *Ex Machina* is crucial for Hollywood’s greater audience. Because of the pervasiveness of television and media, as well as its consistently expanding accessibility, it maintains a major role in how we perceive and learn to evaluate other individuals. It becomes of particular concern for women as they are already type-casted into the stereotype of being weak, subservient characters that must act sexually, or in a demeaning way, to thrive, and survive. For

these three notable Hollywood films illustrating Artificial Intelligence, these misrepresentations are accentuated.

As one of the most decisive factors in the way we perceive others, heuristics maintains just as prominent a position as media in the perpetuation of patriarchal ideals. The realistic representation of the female Artificially Intelligent robots within the three movies is threatening for women in reality when dealing with exploitation of characters one might use for future associations. While a robot is inherently androgynous, the way *Blade Runner*, *Her*, and *Ex Machina* portray the robots as female allows for the hasty assessments within heuristics to follow suit, and subsequently, the characteristics are attributed to females. Because women are the only ones performing sexualized roles in these films, it amplifies the contrast even more as their male counterparts are put into positions as either compassionate, intelligent, or strong.

Gender roles promote the notion of patriarchal dominance in society as well as further instills the acceptance of female objectification. Movies involving A.I. can show sexuality, and in fact need to in some cases, but it should not become the underlying factor that drives the plotline. *Blade Runner*, *Her*, and *Ex Machina* are faulty examples of how a robot with A.I. should be represented. With such an emerging technology comes responsibility, and Artificial Intelligence holds the means to create a new wave of appreciation for both genders and their capabilities because of its inherent androgyny. Because the three features' gender role constructions are inconspicuous, an unsuspecting audience could easily miss these demonstrations of male chauvinism and conformist ideologies.

For *Blade Runner*, Pris and Zhora's dissidence is compelling, which enables their hypersexuality to be concealed behind vigor and barbarism. Rachael's submissiveness and sexual prowess, on the other hand, is hidden within the face of innocence and dependency which

prevents the audience from recognizing her maltreatment. When *Her* is taken into consideration, though, one may not realize the truth potency of Samantha's sexuality and objectification because she is embodied by an ear piece and a hand-held camera, merely a mechanic Operating System. And finally, in *Ex Machina*, we see Ava- a sensitive, innocent character who is confined to the white walls of Nathan's laboratory. Her objectification is one of the most challenging to identify as the audience's attention shifts as the director also switches to an anamorphic lens for the scenes Ava is shown in, adding the effect of surrealism. For all three films, the female character's true forms are shrouded, making it the perfect way to veil their powerful patriarchy.

*Blade Runner* was produced over thirty years before both *Her* and *Ex Machina*; however, the tendency towards the objectification and hypersexualization of women has not yet fully matured. It is clear that conformist, patriarchal ideologies still hold reign in the way that movies are produced to this day, but the portrayal of women in these films shows *some* improvement. *Her*'s display of Samantha as too intellectually advanced to stay with Theo proves her independence; however, it still maintains negativity in how she remorselessly left, ultimately breaking Theo's heart. In the same way, *Ex Machina* attempts to liberate Ava through survival, but this empowerment is, again, stopped short by her brutal retaliation on Caleb and Nathan. Moreover, while feminist critics have attempted to resist these dominant ideologies and lessen the extreme portrayals of women, their efforts have not fully undermined male chauvinism. When it comes to Artificial Intelligence and its brewing significance, more effort will be needed to thwart the surrealist qualities it embodies to ensure the demeaning female characteristics, most recently exhibited, are not associated with the *real* women of generations to come.

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