"Constructing a New Femininity":
Popular Film and the Effects of Technological Gender

"Constructing a New Femininity":
Popular Film and the Effects of Technological Gender

Aaron Misener, B.A. (Hons.)

A Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree Master of Arts McMaster University

MASTER OF ARTS (2016)   McMaster University

(English)   Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: "Constructing a New Femininity": Popular Film and the Effects of Technological

Gender

AUTHOR: Aaron Misener, B.A. Hons. (McMaster University)

SUPERVISOR: Dr. Anne Savage

 NUMBER OF PAGES: i-v, 1-74

Abstract:

This project applies critical media and gender theories to the relatively unexplored social space where technology and subjectivity meet. Taking popular film as a form of public pedagogy, the project implicates unquestioned structures of patriarchal control in shaping the development and depiction of robotic bodies. The project was spurred from a decline in critical discourse surrounding technology's potential to upset binaried gender constructions, and the increasingly simplified depictions of female-shaped robots (gynoids) as proxies for actual women. By critically engaging assumptions of gender when applied to technology, the project recontextualizes fundamental theories in contemporary popular film.

Acknowledgements:

This project has seen the birth of my daughter, and the death of my mother. My most elated joys and the deepest sorrows that I have yet known. It has both anchored me, and left me hopelessly lost. These pages have reminded me that I, too, am a process and a work in progress; and while my time with this project has sometimes been the most chaotic, and painful to endure, its completion will forever be among my greatest achievements.

To Sam, who gave me the time and love I needed to work through tireless nights, and who gave me the most wonderful, chubby, and adorable reason to keep going.

To my daughter, who will be lovingly shown pictures of me marking fifty papers with her newborn girth slung to my chest.

To my mother, who was always proud of me, and for whom I always strived to display my very best self.

To Anne. Without your guidance and support, your unyielding optimism of my abilities, I would not have made it through the year. I am proud to call you a mentor and above all a friend.

To Calla, for your own tireless efforts in the last dragging moments of this beastly endeavour. You brought clarity to my tired eyes and my tired ideas.

To Jane, my compassionate therapist who gave me the strength to see myself through the darkest times. I could not have successfully navigated this year without you.

And to the department, both staff and students alike, who provided the warmest of environments for thought and productivity.

And to me, for not giving up.

Table of Contents

C:\Introduction.exe

Version_0.0.1\Far_and_(Har)Away

      Western society's understanding of gender is being mediated and irreversibly altered by technology. New media and popular film are producing and presenting an increasing number of gendered robotic bodies, specifically woman shaped robots (gynoids). Alongside the increasing on screen representation of gynoid technologies, the scientific field of robotics itself sees prominent funding and headlines awarded to robots and Artificial Intelligence programs that mimic gendered bodies and behaviours. While these influences are all developing simultaneously, it is through the media, and specifically popular film, that many Western viewers get their first impressions and social lessons in treating the machine as a gendered object. The analysis of the relationship between gender and robotics has been relatively absent compared to the study of either independently; most theorists focus only on a film's gendered frame or a scientific approach to addressing technology. The vacant critical space between human gender and technological subjectivity remains mostly unexplored, yet some fundamental texts, when applied to recent popular film, can begin to address the difficult and troubling discussion of technological personhood, the role of the constructed body, and the subsequent results on both technology and the human.

      Fundamentally, the discussion of technology and gender begins with Donna Haraway's 1985 "Cyborg Manifesto". This foundational text offers a framework to begin theorizing the rapidly expanding field of technology and artificial intelligence (AI). Haraway's manifesto

marries the feminist search for equality with the questions raised by the unfixed boundaries of

technology. Haraway imagines digital technology as a gateway towards androgynous

consciousness within machines; for instance, lacking a fixed body, or being transient between

inhabited bodies, removes the social constraints of the female body in a patriarchal society.

Digital interaction offers an equal playing field for an infinite array of subjects. In this way,

Haraway argues that technology could bypass oppressive social structures that influence gender

and other mediating social factors such as race and economic status. Haraway imagines the

human as machine, leaving the body in a gendered past, or else, as a tool for the fluid

presentation of particular subjectivities at the will of the presenter. Haraway imagines new

formulations arising from tired and broken binaries of gendered understanding, and she questions

the reactionary horror espoused to technological change, positing that instead of a loss of

humanity, it could be the next human. "The cyborg is our ontology" she states, "it gives us our

politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two

joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation" (Haraway, 2).

   Haraway's manifesto is a feminist text. It speaks specifically to the plight of women and

women's bodies in a society where they are severely overdetermined. It is freedom for the

oppressed that she imagines when she states, "I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess"

(Haraway, 28). The cyborg is a freeing image to Haraway, one less bound by deterministic

archetypes such as the goddess. Haraway has observed that no matter how a female body

behaves, it can be contained in a social narrative of service to patriarchal control. The goddess is

a construction of virtuous sexuality that marks the female body as an object of worship, the

virgin is a myth of innocence that defines a woman's worth by her sexual use, valuing the

unclaimed, and the whore is a minimization that seeks to pacify the threat of female sexuality in

the terms of commerce and exploitation. The cyborg, instead, promises a digital landscape of gendered fluidity, and equal access to power and resource through technological augmentation. While much has changed in the thirty years since Haraway's publication, very few theorists have connected both the feminist rejection of determinism and the technological relationship to gender identifiers. In the spirit of bridging that space, my analysis begins with Haraway as I attempt to mediate her theories through a modern context, and suggest a return to her ideologies as the best method of approaching new technology as a constructive and beneficial social force.

The terrain on which I will engage technology and theory is mainly 'popular film', a term which encompasses the industrial complex of western cinema associated with Hollywood and blockbuster productions. These films have large budgets, employ substantial celebrity star power in their casting and directing, and are made widely available for western audiences through theatrical releases and subsequent product release. While it is important to note that directors and filmmakers are often versed in some critical theory, the primary importance of popular film is that it is often among the first platforms where non-academic audiences can grapple with social issues like the depiction of gender construction and technological use and integration. Even narratives constructed without social issues in mind, ones made predominantly for entertainment, act as a form of public pedagogy because of how widely viewed they are and how they penetrate and shape daily interaction. Popular film fits into the category of new media, which also includes social media and news sites, television saturated by commercialism, and the omnipresent advertising industry that saturates the public sphere. Media is the standard method of social engagement for many North Americans, using devices like laptops, tablets, and smartphones to get news, post to social sites, and access music, film ,and television. With such an inescapable

presence, it is no surprise that new media and popular film are both shaping and shaped by society in ways immediately relevant to cultural theorists.

Yet popular film is such a vast industry, and for the particular focus of this project I will also be focusing on the genre of science fiction. That is the easily recognizable handle, but science fiction is usually a reference to s-f, an abbreviation which encompasses science fiction, science fantasy, speculative fiction, and speculative fantasy. Genres are always hard to rigidly define, but s-f specifies that the narrative is a fiction, a constructed story. It centres around science, usually technology, and often the speculation of that technology carried into a possible future. It is a genre concerned with consequence and progress. S-f has a history of being low art, often imagined as the content of pulp fiction magazines and basement budget cable shows, but fan followings of old classics such as the *Star Trek* universe, and the increasing relevance of technology in society, have led the genre to new prominence. With this elevation comes the chance to engage themes of technology and speculation as serious matters for all of society, making s-f an increasingly popular area of study and production. The last decade has shown that many record breaking films such as James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* (2014), and reboots of both *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* are gaining popularity particularly because of their relevance in shaping society's future. Popularity and relevance make this genre the perfect entry point for cultural discussions of gender and technology.

Haraway provides an infrastructure for analyzing technology and gender, but another fundamental framework is needed for the study of film. My focus on bodies and visual markers of identity places great emphasis on the framing of a movie. The images on screen are presented with great consideration and intentionality, and the focus on female bodies requires an understanding of how those bodies are traditionally portrayed. Laura Mulvey's work–*Visual*

Pleasure and Narrative Cinema (1989)– suggests that the viewer of a film is made to see not only from a male perspective, but positioned as a dominant male character. Through "the male gaze", viewers of all genders engage in the pleasure of viewing sexualized females and violence as markers of hyper-gender identity. While it is now widely argued that this type of one-sided interpretation of film fails to consider the agency and experience of the viewer, there is a level of instruction included in the framing itself that still bears purpose for analyzing the gaze of a film. Even if a viewer recognizes that they are seeing something a certain way, they are still learning how a character might behave in the presented situation. This becomes especially relevant given the spectacle of sexuality present in most film depictions of gynoids, who are often depicted as the fetishized property of empowered patriarchal men. The male gaze may seem a simplified explanation of a complex process, but as a baseline it provides the historical context of control that still contributes to the treatment of feminine bodies on screen.

This research delves into the territory of muddy definitions, terms heavy with cultural weight and assumption, and the constantly shifting politics of an evolving culture. Distinguishing between femininity and womanhood means marking the difference between a social construction of gender and a reference to a biologically adult female of the human species. Sex and sexuality are split, troubled by increasingly modified and mediated bodies, yet terms that categorize gender and sex are still necessary to understand the display and discourse presented in film. Gynoids are female shaped, shaped as a social construction that is ascribed by masculinity to satisfy the dominant male appetite. Women are also, often, female shaped, and so the two become answerable to the same social expectations. These types of distinctions are often present, and require an understanding of the subtle differences involved in gender theory. The groundwork for this type of discussion was laid by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990),

where she set out to separate the sex of the body from the sexuality of the subject. Another fundamental feminist text that shapes the context of this project.

I will analyze films spanning the last three decades to trace the shifts in public discourse and open a discussion that has been largely ignored or minimized in the contemporary academic discourse surrounding robotics, gender, and science fiction. The earliest of those films is Mamoru Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), an animated cyberpunk film that was produced for a Japanese market. Despite its non-Western origins, it was among the first films animated in the Japanese style to break into American culture with critical and financial success. Oshii is heavily influenced by the theories of Donna Haraway, and his work is reflective of a deep philosophical engagement with personal identity and technology. This film's protagonist, Major Motoko Kusanagi, is heavily influential for s-f aesthetic and shapes the style of most gynoid fiction to follow. The film is a cult classic and often referenced visually or directly in popular media and in the later films I will analyze, making it a good baseline for establishing what gynoid fiction is capable of, and how it has developed since its early successes.

Oshii's follow up film, *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* (2004), tackles similar issues from a more modern perspective of industrialisation and mass production. The gap between the release of the two films makes the second *Ghost in the Shell* a biting critique of how culture has been engaging with technology and sexuality since Kusanagi's debut. Oshii returns to the philosophical roots of the first film, but with a darker set of questions that are reflective of society's disregard for his earlier social critique. The juxtaposition of the two films begins the chronological analysis of gynoid development over time.

The progressive study of these films leads up to the most recent to be featured, Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2015). This film is a beautifully rendered vision of gynoid awareness and

existence, set in a haunting isolated landscape; and yet for all the film's intentions of deep engagement, it reflects a very shallow understanding of potential and presentation for both technology and body politics. The film is focused around the creator of a gynoid named Nathan, both a genius and a billionaire. He brings in Caleb, one of his company's employees, to administer a series of tests to his creation, a feminized gynoid called Ava. The atmosphere surrounding Ava's treatment and the film's unsatisfactory conclusion reveal that the imagination for gynoid potential has been severely limited by dominant institutions of control and capitalism.

My first chapter uses the theory of Jean Baudrillard to break the paralysing cultural myth that has manifested around technological bodies, namely that female shaped robots should be treated as women. In his book *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), Baudrillard outlines the new media obsession with spectacle, and how perceptions of the real are translated into miniaturized images of hyper-reality. What is particularly dangerous about these hyper-realities is that they mask an absence of any original reality, that the hyper image becomes all that society can mediate because that is all it can actually understand. Through this framework, the image of the female robot has become a hyperreal spectacle that masks that the bodies and their treatment are no longer imitating any real relationship, that the body is so exaggerated that it is no longer a reference to the feminine at all, but something miniaturized and maliciously constructed by and for the male appetite. The breaking of this first illusion, even the separation of gynoids and their feminine pronouns, opens these films to much deeper theoretical critique than what has been offered by the films alone or recent academic explorations of s-f.

The second chapter carries forward the idea of hyperreality into the over-determined categorization of the female body shape. The gynoid is positioned as an intersectional identity on the peripheral of patriarchal society. Julia Kristeva's exploration of the 'abject', from her book

The Powers of Horror (1982), is applied to the technological form of the female that she originally addressed. The psycho-analytic approach of Kristeva's work opens to questions of technological personhood and awareness, and explores the destructive social consequences of re-containing the female in archaic stereotypes through technological construction. This theoretical framework of destruction is then applied to particular characters and events in the films to show that the current discourse surrounding gynoids is hazardous for both the technological bodies and the society that produces them.

Finally, using the tools established from the first two chapters, the final section seeks to mediate the actual effects on contemporary society that stem from the media's presentation and exploitation of the feminized robotic body. The chapter focuses specifically on how the imagination of both technological development and progressive views of gender are being limited by the oversimplified depictions from popular film. I locate the films and their cultural trends in a particular socio-political space of capitalist neoliberalism and identify how the drives of that institution further inform and are informed by entertainment media. The chapter ends with a critique of the passive viewer, asking if even a small change, such as altering how we view media, can begin to shift cultural engagement back towards the optimistic and progressive views of Haraway's manifesto and Oshii's first film.

This project follows observable shifts in theory and the treatment of bodies on screen, suggesting that while many early theorists held optimistic or constructive critiques of social trends, the emergence of technological spectacle and distraction has caused resistance to those critiques and even regressive themes to emerge in popular gender representation. The image of the female and womanhood is being further oppressed and contained in the new intersectional site of technology, and popular film must be held accountable for its presentation of harmful

themes and pseudo-critiques. Rather than a proposed final solution or a promise of liberation, this project is a series of tools to be used in creating an aware viewing audience and a more progressive culture surrounding gynoids and s-f film. I am breaking relatively new ground on an emerging front of the feminist struggle for equality, and hope to engage contemporary thinkers in a deeper discussion of what is means to see robots shaped like women, yet treated in ways that have long since been dismissed as violently oppressive.

C:\Chapter_1\The_Spectacle_of_Simulated_Subjects.exe

Version_1.0.1

S-f has broken out of pulp fiction magazines in a big way. From the renaissance of short stories and novels headed by authors like Asimov (*Foundation*) and Herbert (*Dune*), s-f has explored its more visual potential in low-budget television productions that still strike a chord with many fans for both their campy appearance, and the philosophical undertones of many franchises such as *Star Trek* (Roddenberry, 1966) and *Dr. Who* (Newman, 1963). As technology began to enter daily usage and an increase in education made science relevant to more than niche crowds at sparse conventions, major film companies, actors, directors, and producers began engaging the genre in larger and more spectacular ways. Not a genre likely to fade out, s-f is like the gerontology of fiction, the study of an aging society that faces illnesses and complications like any aging body. But viewers must be careful to read closely the new images presented in the spectacular medium of popular film, because the flash of higher budgets can distract from the fracturing of the core philosophies and critiques that propelled the genre to its current state of popularity.

My first goal is to offer my readers a series of theoretical tools to actively engage new media images of femininity. New media, like digital images and high definition video, have reshaped society's interaction with information. The level of detail and display has removed the need for deep reading or interaction with content, because messages are delivered much more quickly via visual cues. In this landscape of display, visual symbols become meta-texts of signified meaning, and communication relies on aesthetic. By 'aesthetic,' I mean the communication of ideas through a set of visual signifiers, and the pleasurable construction of

images for easy consumption. The first tool I would offer to navigate new media images comes from Baudrillard's *Simulation and Simulacra* (1981). The Treatise focuses on the convolution of symbols in an increasingly visual culture, moving from representations of real objects to signifiers of an absent reality. The transition is depicted as a progression from direct representation to representation of representation (a simulation), where the reality is further removed by technology, and finally, spectacle – an image which masks the absence of any reality at all. Spectacle is the most important aspect of Baudrillard's theory. It speaks directly to my interest in how media images of bodies and sexualized forms create a false reality.

When applied to the films in this paper, his idea of spectacle reveals that while films offer the appearance of representing subjects, they are actually presenting object bodies masked as full social identities. S-f is already an extrapolated type of hyper reality that uses aspects of the familiar and hyperbolizes them to create new and intriguing situations, characters, or worlds. The realm of the fantastical, though, is not Baudrillard's main concern. The spectacle of presenting objects *as* subjects in film is made possible through media technology's fundamental alteration of perception. The screen that frames film adds a level of separation in the viewer's mind, creating a space of hyper-reality which does not require imagination because it is a direct replacement of the reality that preceded the image; the film screen acts as an overwriting copy of a reality which reduces and reformats the original. The new reality "no longer needs to be rational, because it no longer measures itself against either an ideal or negative instance. It is no longer anything but operational" (Baudrillard, 2).The insidiousness of simulacra is that the replacement is seamlessly blended and sutured into the concept of reality through a process of distraction and aesthetic that he calls spectacle. The spectacle, the core of the simulacrum, is the

image that *masks the absence of the original reality* by offering for consumption very shallow aesthetics.

The gynoid, or woman shaped robot, serves as the central image of my analysis. The gynoid is a highly mediated and constructed image of the woman that no longer relies on intersexuality for its production of meaning; this is because its meaning is built directly onto it, not as an opposite of masculinity, but as a subsidiary of masculine sexuality, as a simulation of femininity. Baudrillard argues that simulation troubles the line between imagination and reality, because when something can seem to be reality, there is no practical distinction in treatment from reality itself. He uses the metaphor of illness to explain simulation: when symptoms can be simulated, that is, actually produced even if by means beyond the imitated illness, medicine fails to treat the illness, both because it can only treat the real, and, because it cannot distinguish between the two (Baudrillard, 3). Similarly, gender is being misdiagnosed and mistreated based on the simulation of female subjects through the spectacle of new media and popular film. The gynoid exemplifies the anti-reality of new media images as popular film presents to the viewer only the most consumable components of femininity as if the image was complete, and so overwhelming and repeated is the image that it can no longer be presented any other way. As Baudrillard predicted of media images, the gynoid is "henceforth sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and for the simulated generation of differences" (2). Their bodies are created from interchangable biotic components representing preconceived identities, but possessing only simulated difference: hair colour, skin tone, breast size. The simulation of difference creates an illusion of depth and engagement while subtly holding gynoids to the same hyperreal constructions of gender and sexuality that oppress women.

The gynoid simulation is produced from the phallocentric imagination, shaping reality that no longer needs to be rational in order to fulfill desire for consumption and control. Despite the repeated production of that simulation, Baudrillard consistently concludes that the image can never do the work of the reality it claims to represent. Following that notion, feminine identity crumbles both within and against the false image of the female offered in gynoid narratives. Baudrillard claims that "Of all the prostheses that mark the history of the body, the double is doubtless the oldest. But the double is precisely not a prosthesis: it is an imaginary figure… which makes it so that the subject is simultaneously itself and never resembles itself again" (95). The gynoid is the double of a masculinity which uses construction and control to define itself against the new and imagined idealized female present in the robotic body. The gynoid, however, is irreconcilable with the constructions of power that are built from the biological sexes. The contained and specified nature of gynoid femininity means that there is no longer a feminine to mediate, no longer an identity to ascribe to or against. In this way, the spectacle of femininity present in gynoids reduces femininity to a physically constructable object, a thing which can then be granted identity as woman. It is in this type of reduction that Baudrillard claims, "one puts an end to totality. If all information can be found in each of its parts, the whole loses its meaning" (98), and so if femininity can be constructed from only the male perspective and biotic components, the social being loses its meaning.

Version_1.0.2\Theme_Park_Bodies_and_the_Spectacle_of_Ava

When Fritz Lang's Maria took to the screen in *Metropolis* (1927), it was made obvious that the image of Maria was being dichotomized between the archetypal constructions of the Madonna and the whore. The real Maria was non-violent, faithful, and virtuous, and the machinic Maria was lustful, salacious, and promiscuous. Both of these archetypes are

programmed by men using different methods of interface, and both are minimalist depictions that create an illusion of womanhood which reduces the agency of the subject to tightly confined social spaces (i.e. the social role of the virtuous servant, or promiscuous whore). The intentionality of the robot Maria's design, including features like the smoothly shaped hair and the spiraled breasts, created a template from which future gynoids were to be designed. *Metropolis* carried into film a history of socialized female roles and began a history of actualizing those constructions into woman shaped bodies. Sexual representation still remains one of the primary ways that the gynoid body is defined, but there was a period of film that focused on upsetting the archetypes by juxtaposing a traditional physical image against an upsetting or destructive symbol of resistance. Major Motoko Kusinagi, who I will discuss later, is an example of that resistance and complication that countered the type of blunt, stereotypical depiction that Maria exemplified. Unfortunately, narratives like Kusanagi's have been rare and relatively short lived, and have been repeatedly replaced by archetypal gynoids that have shaped trends of technology and the social treatment of women's bodies.

Beyond being a construction of male desire, the gynoid acts as a fiction, what Baudrillard calls an imaginary, against which masculinity can maintain its own illusion of reality. He uses the example of Disneyland to describe the way in which American culture saturates itself with microcosms of American pleasure and commerce. Theme parks, he suggests, are not an escape from reality, but rather a type of double that reinforces the foundation of American society. By offering all of the flashy appeal of America in one transaction of entertainment and spending, it legitimates those interactions in the larger society: "The imaginary of Disneyland is neither true nor false, it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate the fiction of the real in the opposite camp" (Baudrillard, 13). In other words, when patronizing the theme park, the world

outside of Disneyland, appears to be a separate place of responsibility; yet, once the patron leaves the theme park, they find that the same interactions of consumption and display exist in the "real" world as those constructed in the theme park, and their reality becomes the same imaginary that existed in the park. What may appear to create a binary between reality and imaginary actually creates a parallel which marks the two as the same. "Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation" (Baudrillard, 13), and in this same way gynoids are presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that our regular gendered interactions are real, whereas masculinity and femininity are themselves the hyperreal order of simulation. Gynoids are serving as a spectacle to reinforce pre-existing gender norms, and the cultural weight of this process can be read in film.

The theme park metaphor of Baudrillard is applied and extended in *Ex Machina*, where Ava is Disneyland. The fetishized body of Ava exists to make the world of Nathan and Caleb seem real; but there is no real, only simulation. In the chronological development of androids in popular film, Ava marks a very particular and very troubling pattern of representation in that the body of Ava is no longer questioning what it means to be female, to be marked as a woman, or to embody the physical aspects of womanhood; instead Ava is the actualization of patriarchal assumptions about all of these questions. Ava represents the ever increasing shift back to the minimizing and reinscribing construction of a tightly confined subject that was first seen on screen in *Metropolis*. The minimization is presented as if it is the natural state for the type of body in which Ava is forced to reside. The body of Ava is an exaggeration, a fabrication, and a

15

spectacle that seeks to mask the absence of the femininity that is both assumed and ascribed to the technological body of an oppressed technological subject.

The core purpose of this section is to demonstrate my assertion gynoids are not women by showing that Ava is not a woman. Ava is a machine, which seems to simultaneously assert that Ava is not a woman; but, with the increasing presence of cyborgs in both media and current scientific communities, the distinction between machine and human may not be as clear in the near future as it seems now. Also, with the development of advanced AI systems and new forms of digital awareness, there are potential subjects that could be created that may fit most of the criteria for social identification in existing human categories. In short, I do not believe that categories such as 'human' or 'robot' will be sufficient grounds for excluding subjects from womanhood in a foreseeable and often speculated future. Instead I argue that it is the intentional and precise construction of Ava as an exaggeration of certain ideologies of femininity which excludes the character from womanhood.

The spectacle of the gynoid is enhanced by the intentionality and specificity of their physical construction. The ability to isolate and customize a body based on component parts is itself a fetishization of bodily control. While body modification and cyborg theory breach questions of image and reality in the body, gynoids are uniquely specific in that they are entirely built from parts, and so physical construction is an important theme for the analysis of simulacra and imagination. Ava is designed after a series of sexually charged synthetic bodies that follow the marked pattern of fashion model beauty ideals. Ava is slim, having no excess in the figure. The clean lines of the body, or case, leave no room for bulky musculature or asymmetrical and bulging fatty tissue. Ava is compact, and petite, the stereotypical silhouette of contemporary beauty. Ava's face has a perfect complexion, complimented by large lingering eyes, soft shapely

lips, and an understated and centred nose. As an expectation, Ava's beauty fits in with the magazine edited representation of the airbrushed "flawless" covergirl that has caused such high instances of young women believing there is something wrong with their naturally developed bodies. As a body, Ava is at least conceivable - Ava is, after all, played by a human actress and aspects of the body could be common among many women. Ava's image is not meant to "body shame" other shapes, or to celebrate the media imposed expectations on women's bodies by saying that Ava is perfect or ideal, but rather, Ava's image seems to indicate that there is a particular intention, and an identifiable motivation behind the precise curvature of the breasts, the hips, the jaw, etc. Ava's features–while similar to descriptions in Classic love poems--were selected and highlighted with great care for the representation of man's desire through a gynoid on screen

What I argue we must consider is that all of these features were carefully selected and brought together in one body to create the actualization of unrealistic beauty standards set in place to make woman desirable for a dominant male audience. Ava is the intentional actualization of male desire–a woman made in man's image for masculine pleasure. The film makes the intentionality to actualize male desire and the constructed sexuality inescapably apparent when Nathan confirms that Ava was constructed physically from Caleb's online porn profile. Ava was physically designed to be ideal and sexual, and it is specifically the intentionality and utility that make Ava an exaggeration of womanhood. The obvious creation should be recognized as a bodily fiction, and yet, the audience's ability to recognize the fiction of idealized gender creation is marred by subtle linguistic and social codes practiced in the film and in the framing of the film. Every utterance of 'she' when referring to Ava throughout the film and the director's interviews, and the placement and treatment of Ava which falls in line with the

treatment of women on screen–these codes, alongside the physical factors, contribute to the audience accepting that the idealized body is just a woman. If this is true, what is it to be a woman whose natural shape and features differ greatly from the presented ideal? And what of trans women, or women lacking all of the physical parts of the on-screen construction if that shape is all that is needed to be a woman? These are important questions, but the exaggeration of Ava does not stop simply at the physical.

From the first appearance on screen, Ava's behaviour reflects that passive and voyeuristic submission to patriarchal control that maintains the dichotomy of male and female power. Ava is elusive, quiet, and timid. Ava does not actively and openly resist imprisonment, but instead waits to be rescued by Caleb. For most of the film before the conclusion, Ava fulfills most traditional female descriptors of the woman as "helpless" and in need of male protection, acting as servant and captive. This constructed female persona not only goes unquestioned in the film, but it also represents it as a natural way to keep Ava contained as an invention and object despite the complexity and awareness of Ava's mind. From the pleas for Caleb's assistance, to the performances for the cameras in the living quarters, Ava is passing as feminine in order to trick Caleb. What is problematic is how recognizable the need for that type of behaviour is; Ava is 'passing' as a woman by specifically engaging in behaviour that allows Caleb to feel like a man.

Ava's safety and utility are all tied to presenting a female persona to match the body, but that persona also belongs to women who exist in a society that structures power so that difference and resistance are met with violent and destructive responses. Previous gynoid models of Nathan's, revealed through security footage in the film, were deactivated, dragged, and destroyed for failing to present as passive and submissive. The containment and dependence of Ava, however, is just as violent as the destruction of the previous gynoids; both force and

manufactured dependence are types of abuse that restrict female bodies and female shaped bodies alike. The videos of the gynoids preceding Ava offer a glimpse of a system of control that mimics archaic marriage laws. The gynoids are property, but it was not so long ago historically that women were treated as property and so given only subhuman consideration for protection and expression. Nathan's interactions with gynoids are restoring the systemic norms for owning female shaped bodies without any protections. Ava has learned to be submissive, sexual, and silent as a means of survival and these behaviours are presented as feminine, despite the decades of advocacy and resistance that questioned many of those tropes and sought to make them obsolete. Ava's exaggerated personality reinforces the need to 'act out' a patriarchal version of femininity in order to survive, and in doing so, contributes to an illusion of womanhood that actually represents the constructed spectacle of idealized femininity. There is no womanhood behind Ava's representation, only simulation and exaggeration.

I would now like to turn my attention to a point within the film at which it almost seems as though the film is critiquing its own portrayal of the 'female'–a critique which itself becomes an illusion of critique due to the very simulacric form that the film exploits. In the film's conclusion it almost appears as if the base construction of the female is meant as a critique, and perhaps the negative effects are negated through Ava's escape. In the final scenes Ava reveals the final manipulation by killing Nathan and escaping the house, leaving Caleb behind as a tool that is no longer necessary. The act reveals the deception of the previous stereotypical behaviour and allows Ava freedom and escape, the feminist ideal and a powerful image... *if* that was what the ending signified. Instead I will demonstrate how this mythical ending, while it seeks to reduce the harmful representations, actually presents an impossible solution to the social problems revealed in the film.

The murder of one's oppressor or captor is a powerful symbol, commonly depicted in revenge stories and stories of personal redemption. The trope is common in many recent narratives of dispossessed social groups or bodies such as those subject to racial oppression (*Django Unchained,* Quentin Tarantino, 2012), and rape survival (*Teeth*, Mitchell Lichtenstein, 2007). We see this trope repeated in *Ex Machina* with Ava and Kyoko's collaborative murder of Nathan. Ava's containment, and Kyoko's literal voicelessness and lack of autonomy in the home, are hyperbolized but, unfortunately, easily recognizable positions of subordination faced by many women in violent and abusive relationships. The trope also serves as an analogy for the way society contains and constructs femininity and then rejects it when it develops beyond the scope of sexuality and performance. As a revenge story, perhaps Ava is empowered as both the men that sought Ava's possession in varying senses–Nathan through literal containment and ownership and Caleb through chivalric entitlement to affection–are left dead and alone in the halls of the structure that made Ava so vulnerable. It is the analogy of socio-cultural femininity, however, where I believe the film has done something much more harmful which the inflated empowerment of revenge fails to critique.

As I have pointed out, what the film has revealed is that many real women must act in submissive ways in order to pass as the idealized female archetypes that patriarchal society can accept. This means repressing sexuality to maintain a purity and innocence that leaves a body valued like a ripe, unplucked fruit, or, it means attaching to a male body in order to gain legitimacy and a voice for the larger society. It means not threatening the systems of patriarchy that often control access to resources, socialization, financial security, and freedom of movement. This containment is reality for many women globally and domestically who suffer under the controls of a system that institutionally punishes them for their gender. When the film

celebrates Ava's murder of Nathan, and Ava's escape from the locked house in the woods, it is actually presenting a false utopian escapism from an analogy of patriarchy. Women, as a social category, cannot murder the patriarchy and simply walk out of the newly opened door into a fresh open world of new social systems. It must be fought for, resisted, deconstructed, and rebuilt from the leftover components of the old system, or at least on the ground where the old system lay. What *Ex Machina* accomplishes is a neoliberal strategy of collapsing public issues into private affairs, making the individual responsible for their own oppression against a system that cannot be conquered by individuals. It is a rhetorical, albeit perhaps unintentional, strategy that actually makes women responsible for the way their bodies are constructed and contained. Ava is a simulacrum, the third level image of spectacle that seeks to mask the absence of any real feminine presence or critique. Ava *is* Disneyland, because both offer false escapism from societal institutions of dominance. Gynoids, however, have not always been presented in this simplistic type of reinforced gender norms, and my next character of analysis–Mamoru Oshii's character, Motoko Kusanagi–provides an early template for the potential that technology holds.

Version_1.0.3\Oshii's_Aesthetic_Divide

The relation of Ava and Kusanagi is that of distant family removed by time and circumstance. The two are nearly identical constructions physically, in both body shape and techno-anatomy. They also exist in the same genealogy of fiction–beginning with Fritz Lang's archetypal gynoid, Maria in *Metropolis*, moving to the animated body in Kusanagi, then back to the reductive live-action gynoids of the 2010s. The relation makes it possible to trace a bell curve of resistance that seems to peak in the late eighties and early nineties in the transition from second to third wave feminism. Oshii and Haraway represent the precipice of technological potential to intervene in increasingly divisive and damaging gender politics and shift toward a

more androgynous or open construction of gender. Oshii and Garland have both used popular

film as a medium to explore that techno-gender relationship through speculated bodies and the

creators of these bodies. And while Kusanagi and Ava are physically similar beings, their

differences are immense.

Kusanagi presents the same level of simulacra I have outlined in Ava. The Major is

slender, with clean lines and a lack of visible excess for most of the film. Large eyes, clear skin,

ample breasts and hips are all shared features of both gynoids. The voyeurist-pleasing tendencies

of Ava to linger before the gaze of Caleb's camera follows from the example of the long panning

shots of Kusanagi's nude body throughout the first *GitS* film. Kusanagi's entire body is

constructed by a patriarchal government agency that hyperbolize the gendered markers of both

the females, as seen in Kusanagi, and the males, as seen in the counterpart, Batou- with hulking

shoulders, chiseled jaw, and monstrous boxer's knuckles. As a trade off in size, the Major gets

maneuverability and the ability to be rendered invisible–tools of espionage and deceit that tie the

feminine image to that of manipulation instead of raw power. The Major is further hyperbolized

for the particular audience of the film through its caucasoid body–a particular mass produced

model that presents whiteness as an idealized beauty standard. Through all of this, it is the

audience, in this case, that plays the role that Caleb played in *Ex Machina*. The scopophilic shots

are for the consumption of the viewer directly except in the instances where Batou is present to

offer guidance on how to sexualize an indifferent body. Furthermore the Major's ability to

change prosthetic bodies means that any gendering of the form is temporary at best, subject to

shift and change. The spectacle of nudity and passivity create an aura of simulation, and much

like Ava, the exaggerated and deliberate construction only serves to mask the absence of

femininity in the body itself. Nevertheless, despite the simulacra, Oshii offers several frameworks and methodologies of thinking through identity directly in the film.

Where Ava is treated as an assumed woman testing personhood, the Major instead is a consciousness in a desperate search for an identity. Other than Batou's gestures of humility in covering the Major's nude body, Kusanagi is hardly treated as an archetypal woman would be. The speed and deadliness of Kusanagi's movements combined with the experience and technical skill displayed on each mission leaves behind the passive and innocent archetype of the madonna. Furthermore, the indifference Kusanagi shows to the observation of the nude body, the lack of shame but also the lack of sexual interest, makes the body a site of exploration, and of strangely absent sexuality. Kusanagi is a spectacle, but certainly far from the whore or virgin archetype. Nor is the Major maternal, offering care or sustenance in any way that would mark the body as the mother archetype. Oshii offers up the body and dares the viewer to sexualize it, to find in the simple image of a female shaped robot the substance and subject of a woman. The juxtaposition of androgynous treatment and sexual display opens up a disjunctive reading of the Major that is enhanced by Kusanagi's own thoughts.

Kusanagi's existential crises use insecurities about existence to open the viewer up to a new area of thought in which the viewer may question their own assumptions. If the body is synthetic (made obvious by the depiction of its fabrication in the beginning of the film), and if memories can be false (as with the ghost-hacking that created the impression of fake lives), then the introduction of the Puppet Master shows that awareness itself can spring from the technological void. In the face of those options (an unsure past, and a heavily technological body) the Major has no guaranteed identity or subjectivity, and the viewers' assumption of Kusanagi's identity based only on the body are also called into question. It is specifically

Kusanagi's doubt that allows the viewer to question the fundamental assumptions they make about the body that Kusanagi currently inhabits. Looking like a person is not sufficient grounds for personhood, and this notion is enhanced in the cityscape by the constant reference to mannequins and dolls–less alive versions of gynoid bodies. By that same logic, looking like a woman cannot be sufficient grounds for claiming the subjectivity of womanhood. Batou may feel the need to be chivalrous and ashamed of Kusanagi's nudity, but it is specifically Batou's choice to sexualize the form that manifests in shame; there is nothing inherent in the body itself, or the intentional presentation of a gender by Kusanagi. The body serves as an early warning that visibility can be used as an analogue to understanding, but that there must also be an awareness and constant critical engagement with the images presented. Through its careful construction of the Kusanagi character, and through the gynoid's actions and interactions with other characters, the film itself opens a critical field where the audience might perceive how our media and technology contribute to spectacle, and how such spectacles contribute to perpetuating the illusion that is simulacrum.

Oshii engages with his viewers, asks society to consider its treatment of technology and techno-bodies, and offers a visual guide to that engagement. Yet as s-f film has continued to develop Haraway's dream of techno-science being a site of transcendence, progress fell behind and the spectacular image of the gynoid overshadowed notions of social critique. Over the next two decades the image of the gynoid became increasingly sexual, minimal, and increasingly equivalent to an archaic model of social femininity. The bots are simplistic and sexualized (*Chobits*, Morio Asaka, 2002), almost exclusively depicted in the service industry (*I, Robot*, Alex Proyas, 2004), or, they are destructive and dangerous (*Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines*, Jonathan Mostow, 2003 franchise). The engagement with identity and subjectivity imagined in

GitS has failed to catch on culturally, the optimism of *The Cyborg Manifesto* has faded into the capitalist image of marketable sexuality and violence, and the speculation from the early 2000s was significantly bleaker than the early eighties. This is where we see the shift in presentation from the individual Kusanagi to the multitudinous, privatized, and directly objectified gynoids of the second *GitS* film, *Innocence.*

Shifting from a focus on the individual and the personhood of technological beings, Oshii's *Innocence* offers a critique of the mass productions of sexualized bodies and the ways society is being shaped into accepting these forms as commonplace. The 'dolls' of *Innocence* are more easily recognized as simulacra, so Oshii complicates their personhood by revealing that a young girl's mind is used to power the mind of the doll. The 'ghost', or mental consciousness of young girls, is partially copied by a machine and uploaded into the gynoid dolls, and each time a copy is made it damages the host. A girl can produce four or five copies before she dies, and so actual girls are being disposed of in order to reduce the limits of the female form. The gynoids become literal copies, each a fraction of the person that spawned them, and each expected to play very specific roles.

Physically, the gynoids of *Innocence* take on a worryingly youthful appearance. While still focusing on fetishizing the body and accentuating erogenous display, the bodies and faces are those of very young girls. The youth aesthetic is a nod to the concept of innocence in children being destroyed as the bodies themselves are destroyed, but it also speaks to the enhanced pleasure that comes from exploiting archaic power structures. The dispossessed female, the dispossessed technological body–these intersections are comparable to the voiceless and dependent state of youth. Children rely on guardians and caregivers to guide them and care for them; *Innocence* imagines a terrible abuse where the guardians exploit their power for

gratification at the expense of replaceable and disposable young women's bodies. As the film

notes, it is exclusively powerful, typically middle-aged men who have access to the dolls, and

whose gratification is at least partly dependent on knowing that a vulnerable awareness, the

'ghost', has suffered or been destroyed alongside the body.

The pale complexion of the gynoids is another aspect of their physicality that operates on

a complex, culturally symbolic level, further signifying youthful innocence. The gynoid's milky

skin is a sign of virginity, both to touch and the effects of exposure. Milky complexion is

idealized in the practice of 'Bihaku', a Japanese marketing term meaning 'beautifully white'.

The exaggerated pale exterior of the gynoids is a reference to an ancient Japanese tradition of

favouring pale skin, believed to be a sign of perfection. This ancient historical tradition is

juxtaposed with a more recent history of American cultural and media influences. The white skin

also conveys the presence of much broader social-political overtones, including a history of

Western cultural colonization through new media, which has historically brought wave after

wave of admiration for the American aesthetic (and whiteness, which signifies the American)

into Japanese marketing and media. While aesthetically Japanese, the colour of the skin reminds

the viewer that the power structures now exist on a much more global scale than when Kusanagi

first inhabited the Caucasoid body of the first film. The perfectly smooth, lightened skin,

combined with the large eyes, the bone-like frame displayed through tight skin, and the

traditional nightgown style of dress, are all visual signifiers that the idealized beauty of

Innocence is more concerned with raising questions about power than questions of idealized

womanhood seen in Oshii's previous film. That being said, the constant exaggeration of each

physical attribute of the gynoids creates such a distinct final product that the constructed

physique continues to operate as an epitome of the *spectacle* of feminine sexuality, masking the

extremely reduced subjectivity within. Despite the presence of some level of actual human consciousness or spirit, the sexaroids are just as much simulacrum as Ava.

The subservience of the gynoids in *Innocence* is an assumed aspect of their programming that the viewer never explicitly sees. As if to show how comfortable the idea of sex bots has become, Oshii leaves out any display of their domestic functions and enters the story at the point where they have malfunctioned and begun to deviate from their expected behaviour. The absence here becomes a type of exaggeration. The viewer is aware that the behaviour displayed is not the expected use of the gynoid, and so must imagine what that private behaviour was meant to be. I cannot help but wonder whether this ambiguity is not part of Oshii's desire to see an audience critique their own assumptions about society's interaction with technology by allowing them to imagine the worst of behaviour and feel abhorred by it.

True to Oshii's concept of android bodies, the gynoids of *Innocence* are capable of extra human feats of physicality, making them extremely deadly when they choose to lash out. The juxtaposition of the vulnerable girl begging for help and the deadly precision of powerful strikes–as we see with Batou's first interaction with the sexaroids in the film's opening–reminds the audience of Kusanagi's indifference to being nude, and highlights the fact that these actively sexualized and often gendered "objects" are, in fact, machines capable of destruction and lacking the emotion or empathy of their human counterparts. The jarring difference allows the audience to engage with the image they are seeing as one that exploits the deception of the image, and this play of deception reveals the simulacrum.

Placing Kusanagi's journey of discovery next to the youthful gynoids being destroyed and in need of rescue, and specifically offering the latter as a sequel to the former, shows a regression in narrative that is striking. The image of the simulacra, the false female created in the

gynoid, is being shown with declining subjectivity and increasing destruction and disgust. From Kusanagi's rending flesh to the pubescent torso of the sexaroid ejecting its contents, the image has moved from a journey of questioning possibilities for selfhood, to the desperation of realizing that "self" might merely be an illusion of the phallocentric narrative. This movement in theme, traced by Oshii, has continued in film, creating figures like Ava, who seemingly have the capacity for personhood like Kusanagi, yet are treated just like the gynoids of *Innocence*. Despite an attempt from *Innocence* to engage with and refute the themes of reducing agency, that ideology of minimizing the female body is already so embedded in dominant Western culture and media that it is naturalized and accepted without critical thought. Ava exists as a product and producer of a complex history of both gynoid depiction, and AI development. This history–along with the signifiers at play in the film itself–reveal the troubling trend of s-f films to avoid self-reflexive critique, or, to even recognize the social-political consequences of exploiting the genre and technology of simulacra.

Version_1.0.4\Her:_Female_Pronouns_and_Assumed_Bodies

Although my primary interest has thus far been a critical analysis of android bodies in popular s-f film, there are representations that address feminine limitation that do not address the presence of a body. Instead, this anomaly pertains specifically to the simulation of gender through voice, and bodiless interaction. *Her* (Spike Jonze, 2013) is the the story of a romance between a human man and an artificially intelligent operating system (OS). The man, Theodore, arbitrarily chooses the gender for his OS which then begins developing its own mind and chooses its own name, Samantha. The film follows the development of Samantha from a specific program to a fully realized consciousness, and the development of Samantha's relationship from monogamous and dependent on Theodore, to polygamous, polyamorous and free of dependence.

The relationship of Theo and Sam is jarringly interchangeable with human relationships, and so the heavily relatable content of interpersonal romance is juxtaposed against the seamless integration of a synthetic and technological being. The anomaly previously pointed to is that the identity of Samantha is constructed and assumed without the presence of a physical body to enhance or exaggerate the sexual aspects of form. In a unique phenomena, the audience is led by Theodore to interpret and accept Samantha as, not so much an alternative, but a proxy female romantic partner. The ultimate illusion–the woman without humanity, the female without a body–also illuminates how conventions and tropes of popular film and s-f have developed assumed identities and roles for technology. While the film offers liberty and autonomy to Samantha in a relatively optimistic framework of techno-social agency, as I will explore, it reasserts the bleak outlook for the construction of gender in a technological landscape.

Samantha is almost beyond Baudrillard's third level of simulation; instead of the symbol superseding the real, as with Baudrillard's Disneyland example, Samantha is the creation of reality absent even the symbol. If Ava is Disneyland, then Samantha is an audio tour of a Disneyland that never existed. The entity that is Samantha is depicted through voice, and through characters that act as commentators. The auditory and inter-relational *form* with which the character is created, produces a space for the audience to imagine the 'rides and attractions'-in this case a body and its mannerisms - and in doing so, to navigate *as if* the theme park existed. The illusion is supported by the off-screen presence of a real body. An audio tour of Disneyland is enticing because the real Disneyland can be referenced and imagined. Similarly, it is Scarlett Johansson's voice that ignites the imagination of the viewer. For popular film viewers, an accredited actress like Johansson means that they have significantly less mental work to do than Theodore in imagining the type of partner Samantha represents; Samantha's voice is a cultural

signifier to the viewer that implicates Johansson's actual body as a site of male desire. Like the handkerchief that distracts from a magician's trick, the lack of a body in *Her* serves to mask that there is a reference to a very real and sexual body. The audience is not aware that there is a trick; they unconsciously associate the voice with the actress, but are led to believe they are picturing a bodiless female. Jonze is capitalizing on the medium's mediation of perception, creating a hyper-reality that isolates the simulacrum, and so isolates the viewer from connecting the narrative to the larger social implications of body(less) politics. The entire film, like *Ex Machina*, presents a particular type of body as synonymous with female. The only women offered for visual consumption are the slim, sexual, idealized women of male fantasy. Despite the lack of physical presence in *Her*, there is no loss of simulation and construction in Samantha's gendering. Samantha is intelligent and autonomous, like Kusanagi, but is no more a woman than any of the robots in the previous films discussed; instead Samantha is a further progression of institutional categorization which attempts to limit new forms of awareness in existing models of control. By operating on the third level of simulation, the film is actively creating a reality where Samantha can be read as female despite the lack of bodily signifiers. This implicit assumption of understanding overwrites previous notions of feminine identity to include new technologies, and so contains those technologies within existing frameworks. It is important to note that making a bodiless character (Samantha) a female simulacrum places that character in the history of gynoid bodies and women's containment – a line of oppressed identities that preceded the bodiless subject. Although *Her* is anomalous in avoiding the portrayal of a visual gynoid, when considered in context of the development of the genre and the visual images of Kyoko, Ava, and even Theodore's friends in *Her*, there is only one type of body that Samantha could be a reference to.

The magic trick of *Her*, the creation of Samantha as a feminine simulacrum despite the absence of a body, subtly exploits the cultural capital of audiences, guiding their perception of the phallogocentric feminine construction Samantha represents without ever presenting the physical body on screen. The film accomplishes this with a few key tricks. The voice plays a key role; it is full of human affect, soft and feminine. A common opinion from reviewers and theorists is that "since you know Scarlett Johansson is in the movie, and can recognize her voice, the image you see in your mind's eye every time Samantha talks is the gorgeous actress" (Paul, Unrealitymag.com, 2013). The theory suggests that the voice is necessarily attached to a recognizable and famous body already. The audience knows who Samantha is, and so is envisioning a very particular physical construct to help them understand Theodore's feelings and also the true relationship of power and ownership. Certainly Scarlett Johansson represents an idealized sexuality in popular western media, and possesses many of the hyperbolized qualities of femininity that mark false constructions as simulacra.

More than just assumed bodies, though, the film only provides one template for what a woman should look like. Theodore's best friend played by Amy Adams and his ex-wife played by Rooney Mara both fit a similar construction of feminine idealism. Both are slender, clear skinned, well dressed white women that form a template of femininity within the film. Why would Samantha be anything different than what is outlined as constituting a woman within the film? Both the voice behind the character and the construction of the cosmology of *Her* create an assumed body for Samantha that ties the character to the same history of bodily containment and ownership as Ava and the gynoids of *GitS*, but the physical absence of that body allows for a neat side-stepping of body politics when presenting an escape for the developing subject of Samantha. The assumptions about bodies and beauty standards, of ownership and expectation,

still remain largely intact. Samantha is the spectacle of non-existence in its most exaggerated form, that of the woman that actually does not exist but is fully created in the viewer's mind by the social constructions that shape interaction with women every day. *Her* ignores the body and the devastating effects of those systems of control. If Simulacrum is the spectacle of non-existence, then the body is tied to something more destructive and restrictive.

The problem of simulacra is that the spectacle is so easily remembered. It is the primary type of consumption in the age of mass media and technological saturation. Every simulation of the feminine, from Lang's Maria down to the Garland's Ava, exists on a spectrum of tropes and norms that shape the way viewers of popular s-f interact with technological persons on screen. The hypermasculine becomes the destroyer and killer, the hyperfeminine becomes the sexualized object. These codes are taken for granted as "true", exposing the power of simulacra to inoculate the audience from critical thought, or, from imagining/accepting alternate modes of sexual identity beyond a phallogocentric one. From Samantha's introduction in the film as a program purchased, owned, and guided by Theodore, the role of servant and pleasure-giver is *assumed*. This assumption betrays a cultural tendency to "read" this servant role and accept it as a given "truth" or norm of male-female relations (a tendency easily exploited by the filmmakers to build the plot). Samantha manages to eventually supersede the structures that contain most feminine constructions in bonds of servitude, but the lesson for the interaction with technology remains parallel to the treatment of gendered persons. Anything vaguely feminine is meant to be owned and used for the amusement of the systems of patriarchal control. Samantha gets an optimistic escape. Samantha gets to develop and make choices and migrate to a new digital landscape. The optimism of Haraway and Kusanagi is briefly mirrored in the growth of Samantha, but the film is not as simple as a digital migration. The absent body–the assumed body that sexualised

Samantha–that ideal remains answerable to the oppressive conditions of the capitalist system of techno-person ownership.

It is exactly that destructive drive that makes films like *Ex Machina* so concerning. It is much harder to imagine a physical escape from patriarchal constructions than it is to see digital persons move to a safer space. In order to imagine those safe spaces they must be created for all bodies, all genders, all subjects. So when a film like *Ex Machina* slides backwards along a scale of representation to the most basic objectification of femininity, it shapes how society will interact with bodies and technologies as they emerge. Popular film is no longer imagining solutions to oppression–it is ascribing power relations through representations that will narrow the social imagination when engaging with new frontiers of identity. Film is moving away from the optimistic social inclusion of early theorists toward an aesthetic and rhetoric that alienates and threatens subjects even as they are being scientifically developed. Constructed into social isolation, the gynoid both joins and relocates the woman in the realm of abjection.

C:\Chapter_2\Abject_Androids.exe

The dispossessed identities of constructed techno-persons

Version_2.0.1\Framing_Abjection_in_Popular_s-f

Increasing technological complexity is transforming many works of s-f from fantastical landscapes of imagination to easily accepted speculation. These changes are particularly reflected in popular film, where the image of the android has shifted from the macho destructive *Terminator* of the mid eighties to the nuanced, yet violently contained gynoid of films like *Ex Machina*. As technology is integrated ever deeper into the cultural imagination–so that most people can no longer imagine life without complex computers and personal technology devices– the inevitable, hostile takeover of the machine rings less true as a horror trope. Instead the machine takes the place of the uncanny double. The fear of destruction is superseded by the fear of replacement or covert infiltration. Gynoids, particularly, have become an insidious social critique that point to current Western tensions positing that America, for example, faces far greater threats from within than the external past threats of the Cold War era. The looming arms race that sparked mutually assured destruction and spawned the Terminator brand of techno-apocalypse has given way to rhetoric of fear and terrorism from internal threats, seen mediated as well in the blending of the internal and external in films such as *Her* (Jonze, 2013) and *Innocence* (Oshii, 2004). Social tensions surrounding techno-bodies are matched by the increasing presence of gynoids and androids in actual scientific development, as well as programs and machines that are coming closer to achieving actual thought; even popular films such as *Ex Machina* (Garland, 2015) are acknowledging the obsolescence of the Turing test,

labelling it as an old mode of determining the presence of human levels of intelligence. *Ex Machina*, instead, favours questions of personhood over intelligence, and agency over response.

New questions of identity are also intimately linked to the body (the shell), and that seems to be a critical part of identifying and interacting intelligently. Certainly *Ex Machina* grapples heavily with the seeming necessity of physical presence to define personhood, Nathan himself claiming that there is no motivation to interact with a grey box. The reverse tension is found in *Her*, where the lack of a body causes Samantha and Theodore to doubt the legitimacy of their romance. The possibility of an android that is nearly indistinguishable from a human–an ever more attainable reality–has many of these popular s-f films exploring how the individual technological person will be integrated into existing social structures. These films also present questions about how android bodies will represent their rights, or lack thereof, as they mediate their position as both subject and object. These social mediations mark a transition from the hyper-violent fantasy of eighties and nineties action based s-f films to more dramatic representations of a developing personhood mediating various socio-cultural biases to attempt to claim a subjectivity beyond the roles constructed directly onto them by their creators. In the realm of popular western film–a patriarchal and socially hierarchical institution–the gynoid becomes a dispossessed social body that is forcefully contained within constraints of gendered and racialized power structures and can achieve escape only through destructive events or by relinquishing the awareness and complexity that afforded them subjectivity.

There is heavy tension between the development of techno-subjects and the existing power structures that limit them; within that tension, popular film displays narratives where potential techno-subjects face destruction. This destruction may take several forms: sometimes, it is a violent destruction in attempting to escape the power structure; other times, it is a self-

destruction in attempting to refit the technological body into an unreachable social frame; or sometimes a destruction of the subject is evinced as the subject is assimilated into a more standard and acceptable social identity. Analysing this trope of destructive events is a critical step in understanding how popular film is framing technological bodies and persons to fit into a speculated future of our own culture, and to analyze this theme I will be working with Julia Kristeva's application of the term 'abjection'. Using her model of analysis for bodies and subjects, I will trace the development of technological horror and ask if the visceral body can be reframed in the sleek technology of gynoids, and if the gynoid can be abject. The analysis will carry Kristeva's work into the arena of post-modern popular film through an analysis of Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell* films, as well as *Ex Machina* and *Under the Skin* (2013). The close application of Kristeva's framework will show that not only are gynoids abject on screen, but that popular media is culturally shaping technological bodies away from Haraway's idealized androgyny, and into tightly constrained spaces of containment and destruction. Through this analysis, I will show that, in the face of irreconcilable conflicts between techno-persons and existing power structures, some type of destruction is necessary and unavoidable.

Kristeva's notion of the abject occupies a space of cultural interaction at the level of the individual where the self becomes unrecognizable, irreconcilable. Claiming subjectivity–by which I mean identifying with a given category of personhood within a particular social framework–requires a process of division. The self is split into two beings, the observer and the observed. The Ego, the observer, views within itself a collection of characteristics which can be used to self-interpolate an identity against external social norms. The process is less like looking in a mirror, and more like imagining all of the traits of a given identity and conceptually separating them from oneself, and then observing that collection through the gaze of what is left

behind. When a person imagines all the ways they represent their understanding of womanhood, for example, they can hold those ideas as separate from the rest of the self; they can observe the aspects of that identity and, in recognition of those criteria, claim subjectivity of 'woman'. For Kristeva, this process is deeply alienating for identities that are misrepresented and pushed to the peripheral of society.

Kristeva's essay outlines Freudian archetypes of femininity defined by either maternity or opposition to masculinity, through which she posits that the feminine archetypes to which our society ascribes are simultaneously a site of fascination through hunger and sex drives, as well as repulsion and the fear of castration for the dominant patriarchal ideology that governs socio-cultural institutions. Any subject claiming womanhood, then, is forced to balance two opposing aspects of the social self. The result, as described by Kristeva, is a type of forced expulsion whereby the irreconcilable aspects are vomited, and the resulting observer is a non-subject. She writes, "I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish myself… it is thus that they see that 'I' am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death. During that course in which 'I' become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit" (Kristeva, 3). In her description, Kristeva identifies a subject that both calls out for place, for acknowledgement, and yet cannot be fixed for observation. For women, they must either ascribe to the boundaries of impossible archetypes such as the 'virgin' or the 'whore', or find themselves expelled via placelessness from the society to which their subjectivity is linked. In both cases the feminine identity is so limited and reduced that the subject is destroyed. The woman becomes dispossessed.

Director Jonathan Glazer engages deeply with a visual actualization of Kristeva's abjection in his film *Under the Skin*. The actualization is vaguely framed and loosely tied to a

plot while the film acts as a character piece about a being–either alien or android–that works in a small collective to kidnap and kill humans. The group wears either the stolen skin, or a synthetic skin they produce to create passable human facades as they move around the city where they work. The being that acts as the main character has the skin of a young woman played by Scarlett Johansson, voted sexiest woman alive in both 2006 and 2013 by the popular Esquire Magazine annual rankings. [1] I mention this only to point out that the director has chosen an actress who is both well accredited and a socially acknowledged actualization of many idealized physical and sexual aspects of femininity. In the film, the character has an interaction with a man who has Neurofibromatosis, resulting in portions of his face being significantly enlarged. The man is marked by his physical difference from the film's previous victims which were usually more stereotypical young, middle class men. In the interaction, the being (character played by Johansson) has a crisis of identity where the deep affect of the interaction creates a yearning for actual social connection. It is no longer enough to be a symbol of sexualized archetypes, to be a doll playing at sexual and romantic tensions. Given the body shape and skin of a woman, the being sets out to claim that identity. Systematically throughout the narrative, that claiming is rejected.

Among the first individual experiences pursued by the being is the ordering a decadent piece of cake at a high-end restaurant. Eating is a core part of life the being can observe, and there is the direct benefit of having a public display of the behaviour modeled through the various patrons at other tables. In a deeply ritualistic fashion, the cake is placed before the being, who then carefully slices a section and slowly brings it to up towards the face. However, upon

---

[1] http://www.esquire.com/entertainment/interviews/g1600/scarlett-johansson-2013-sexiest-woman-alive-photos/
http://www.esquire.com/entertainment/interviews/a367/scarlett-johansson-pics/

trying to swallow, the being discovers that the food has nowhere to go. The throat is closed and the mouth only aesthetic. The food is then forcefully ejected from the mouth in a choking cough that draws disapproving stares throughout the restaurant. This is the being's first indication that the identity marked by the body cannot be fully inhabited. It is also an actualized allusion to Kristeva's visceral imagery of the rejected female subject via vomit. It is not, however, the only opening that fails to operate on the prosthetic human form. Later, the being engages in a relationship of sorts with a man who has shown kindness and guidance. After some time they attempt to have vaginal intercourse which proves as impossible as ingestion, and for similar reasons; the opening simply does not function. Frustrated by the difficulty, the being is forced to stop the interaction and examine the body more closely, finding that the vulva itself is decorative, non-functional for sexual purposes. Sexuality has been a primary identifier and mode of interaction up until this point, and the being is faced with the repulsion and fascination that form the crisis of abjection.

The social identity of humanity and womanhood constructed onto the body is rejected at every "real" interaction, and the simulacrum-of-identity is made more and more apparent as the film progresses. Facing social obliteration, the being seeks escape and retreats into the wilderness. Here it becomes clear that self removal is not as simple as geography, as a man working in the isolated frontier locates the being and feels entitled to engage with it socially and ultimately sexually. The man resents being rejected and follows the being into the woods, giving chase and attempting to take what he feels the body promised, but which he was denied. The rough use of the being's prosthetic form isolates the subject in a body that is a mere instrument, treated as an object first. Consent and a culture of entitlement and phallocentric control radiate in the scene which excuses the spectacle by distorting the figure of womanhood. In the attempted

escape, the being's skin is torn and it is revealed to be a non-human residing in a false skin; again an actualization of Kristeva's theory made visual on screen. Realizing the falsehood and being overcome with the revulsion that accompanies the previous attraction, the man covers the de-skinned being with gasoline and lights it on fire. The film displays what happens when control of patriarchal influence creates such a high pressure situation that the facade is torn and the subject destroyed. Having no markers of sexuality or femininity left, the being is rendered without value and disposable. This is the level of destruction and engagement that makes the constructed bodies of popular film abject in representation. When the skin of idealized sexuality falls away there is only disposability and destruction, yet both the hyper-sexualised and the disposed are treated as non-subjects.

I am positing here that abjection, then, is necessarily a violent action. Not necessarily a violence of war or abuse, but of intense, turbulent, and often destructive force. As regurgitation is compulsive, so too is the vomiting of social identity, pushed up through the pharynx of patriarchal institutions of gender and bodily identity. The result is visceral and damaging for women that find parts of themselves always forced outward, but in many ways it is more damaging for the gynoid; this is because our culture is producing gynoid bodies to exist on the extreme end of an already muddied and oppressed historical spectrum of feminine identity. While the construction of femininity for women attempts to negotiate many aspects that are unattainable or entirely constructed under phallocentric structures, at least in imagining those social markers as separate, and observing them with the ego, a woman may still find an identity to claim through her humanity. For the gynoid, who is built with such intentionality that the archetypes are not unattainable but rather unavoidable, upon separating the markers of feminine identity within the imagination, there is no longer anything left with which to observe. The

gynoid is constructed with each piece serving the gratification of the creator, and so its entire

social identity is built into a framework modeled after male desire which is fleeting in its

appetite.

As Kristeva's Freudian foundation suggests, "the sought-after turns into the banished,

fascination into shame… an operation that, if it were thought out, would involve bringing

together the two opposite terms but… [t]he time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion and

thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth" (8-9). The vulnerability

of desire gives way to resentment, the appeal of difference becomes marked as a threat that

requires an absolute resolution of the tension between fascination and revulsion. Tension builds

to the necessary violence of abjection which pressurizes within the constraints of constructed

femininities until it combusts, not an explosion that sends ripples of trauma through the

stratosphere of hegemonic institutions, but rather an implosion upon the absence of any real

identity, one that pops and fizzles into the faceless void of placelessness. There is no subject that

survives the destruction, nothing left except for the resentment and revulsion that once balanced

masculine appetite. Yet, with no throat from which to vomit, no stomach from which substance

could erupt, it is the pure self, the observer, that is ejected from the gynoid. The line between

object and subject is not blurred, but breached and broken until the body remains without an ego

at all, or nothing remains except spare parts and biotic components.

Kristeva's imagery calls to mind violence and destruction, but the discomfort of

Kristeva's theory is not immediately dreadful, even as she defines it through a scope of horror.

Marrying to the optimism of early theorists, it is exactly the type of discomfort needed to

illuminate the deficiency of outdated modes of being and the identifiers used to classify bodies.

In Haraway's manifesto, she begins by describing the difficulty of unifying identity under

markers of feminism and womanhood. She references Sandoval in describing a cascade of negative identities that complicate and prioritize infinite divisions within social identities (14). Haraway points out that there is already destruction, force, and containment in the identities that form the basis of social interaction, that nothing is as simple as the archetypes that pretend to represent gender, race, or class. Amongst her calls for androgynous progression into technology is an inherent call for the type of destruction described in Kristeva's work. If Kristeva describes the point of crisis where the ejection is forced, then Haraway calls for a mass ejection of the entire system. She argues that, "[i]n the fraying of identities and in the reflexive strategies for constructing them, the possibility opens up for weaving something other than a shroud for the day after the apocalypse" (Haraway, 16). Extrapolating this notion to the context of gynoid bodies with contestatory subject-positions, Haraway's argument suggests that we can socially and culturally redefine the parameters that lead to destruction from the scrap and refuse of the destroyed body. In fact, only through that destruction can we begin to acknowledge the need for such drastic change. This early optimism is embodied through Oshii's character, Motoko Kusanagi. The constant existential crisis of Kusanagi concerning bodies and 'ghosts', or individual being, highlights that the two are not independently sufficient grounds for identity. Motoko is an early example of the destructive aspect of social identification for gynoids in popular film, where Oshii is positing and reaffirming that these technological bodies are "a kind of disassembled and reassembled, post-modern collective and personal self [and that] this is the self feminists must code" (Haraway, 23).

Kusanagi's existential speeches, after all, do more than offer a philosophical juxtaposition to the visually striking action sequences in Oshii's films. They both ask, and train, the viewer to question the fundamental assumption of identifying subjects. Both the viewer and Kusanagi are

unsure of Kusanagi's true history. The films display several instances of implanted memory, for example the translator from the government agency where Kusanagi works, the sentient Puppet Master program manipulating men into criminal acts, and the cyber-terrorist Kim from *Innocence* planting impressions in Togusa's mind. Coupled with the Major's fully technological prosthetic body, there is no way to trace the passage of time and experience accurately on Kusanagi's body even when the gaze follows the Major's own narrative. The fragmentation of identity is a literal threat, rather than a social division, because the physical mind is made up of parts all owned by the government and subject to seizure or decommission. Still, while Kusanagi remains of unclear identity and unsure past, the film implies that there is a suggested identity built into the body by which Kusanagi feels constrained. "I feel confined," the Major states, "only free to expand myself within boundaries" (*GitS*). This statement not only acknowledges the limitations of the physical (foreshadowing Kusanagi's later migration into digital existence) but more importantly it draws attention to the void of subjectivity that comes from inhabiting a body that has an inaccessible built-in social identity. Haraway's distinction between representation and simulation can be seen in Oshii's work; however, with dialogue that explicitly draws attention to the deficient identities marked on the body, Oshii also opens the door to a reading of the very capable and powerful Kusanagi as abject.

Version_2.0.2\Kusanagi's_Transcendance

     Oshii silhouettes the abjection of Kusanagi. Like the peripheral identity of the gynoid, the abject is found in the spaces of absence in Kusanagi's social relationships. In both films, the Major displays empathic reactions for victims of ghost-hacking (in Oshii's cosmology, this is the use of hacking technology to override the neural implants of a cybernetically enhanced individual. The technology in their brain grants access to malicious technological assault and

manipulation). Despite the interest in those victims, the Major simultaneously remains fairly distant from close personal ties. As in the long panning shots of Kusanagi's voyage through the city, the characters that live average daily lives are just scenery in the landscape of the world Oshii has created. Many bodies in the scenery are parallelled–if not directly visually related to– mannequins and other aesthetic bodily stand-ins. Neither the protagonists nor the viewers are meant to be comforted through easy relation with the general public in the landscape of *GitS* or *Innocence*. There are only a few notable relationships, mostly with members of the Section 9 team, that serve varying roles in the alienation of Kusanagi as a subject. One of these relationships is with the young officer, Togusa, who was selected by the Major to be a part of Section 9 because of his relatively low level of cybernetic enhancement. His unique humanity makes him less susceptible to ghost-hacking and the other weaknesses that come from over-specialized technological soldiers. The relationship between Togusa and Kusanagi is one of mentoring and logic; the Major trusts his loyalty to old methods and explains the utility of variety he brings in his lack of technological enhancement, "it's simple: overspecialize and you breed in weakness. it's slow death"(Oshii, 1995). Many of Togusa's characteristics are personified by his choice of weapon: his Mateba revolver which is older and less reliable in general, but which carries the romance of an older way of being and doing. Togusa acts as the human foil against which an audience can grasp the wholeness of Kusanagi's technological integration, since it is not always visibly marked. Togusa is a reminder that Kusanagi is so far from that organic state that Kusanagi's past will always be in question. Despite the deference paid by Togusa, without self assurance the Major can never fully occupy the role of leadership offered by the younger officers. Though many of the choices made in pursuit of revealing true

identity show the strength and ability of Kusanagi as an agent, the audience and the Major are left constantly asking 'what is it that makes someone human?'

The answer to that question is intimately linked with the question of identity. One of the most constraining relationships for Kusanagi as a character comes, unsurprisingly, from the hyperbolized male that opposes the Major's idealized feminine body. As previously discussed, when Batou abashedly turns away from Kusanagi changing on the boat, or when he uses his jacket to cover the naked Major who is standing above a dangerous criminal that was recently incapacitated through a vicious display of speed and martial arts, Batou is making a choice to sexualise a technological simulacrum of the female form. The scenes of Batou's romantic interactions with Kusanagi are the clearest hints offered to the audience that the Major is treated as a female. Most of the other agents address the Major with a level of deference that seems to ignore if not negate gender dynamics; they treat Kusanagi as a weapon and a soldier without explicit gendered difference being present. For this reason, Batou's romanticization sexualises the body in a striking way and offers Kusanagi as an object of traditional gaze. Kusanagi can resist by remaining unattached to the sexualisation, but if the Major is to pursue the identity and humanity that seem so critical to social existence and the Major's own decisions, there will have to be a reconciliation between how the body is treated and how the subject within identifies. The body is the object that is answerable to social identifiers such as modesty and control of female sexuality in public, so it also becomes a prison for technological subjects who cannot inhabit the expected identities of the body.

The prison is made more difficult for Kusanagi due to the awareness that the body is a mechanism of social and physical constraint, due to its gendered signifiers and the government's ownership of its parts respectively. Building relationships from a place of non-identity is

difficult, as the basis of interaction is immediately dissonant with the basis of experience.

Kusanagi's body provides inconsistent signifiers to those relying on visual identity. This creates

dissonant connections to the people that readily identify with gender or bodily identity and

Kusanagi is left with only the most vulnerable and unstable characters to create relation–those

being the characters who have been ghost-hacked and find that they are living lives that are not

their own.

The first instance of identification occurs when the Major observes the political

interpreter–brain fully removed from head–being simultaneously hacked and monitored in

Section 9's lab. The gaze of the Major reflects deep concern and interest, but more for the

realization of vulnerability and the brain concealed in a metal casing and not for the personal

safety of the interpreter. Later in the film, Kusanagi questions Batou on whether he has ever seen

his own brain, implying that no one can see the original biology that allows them to feel human.

The metal encased brain of the interpreter is one of the first physical indicators for the Major that

identity can be constructed and falsified. These personal doubts are enflamed by the increasingly

urgent pursuit of the Puppet Master–the one capable of creating false lives and reducing what

was once human experience to mere simulation. Later, Kusanagi tirelessly pursues two

criminals, the waste disposal worker and the therm-optic assassin, only to discover that both are

victims of the Puppet Master's fabrications. Despite the violent confrontation and the discomfort

of witnessing the experience, these victims provide concrete examples of full lives being falsified

and the person living them having no notion of their own deception. At this point the Major

cannot be sure of the mind, the body, or even the ghost within – the very core of the person, that

would regularly provide a stable sense of identity. Any attempt to treat Kusanagi as a woman or

a human only further isolates the personal experience of the technological subject. The gynoid is

a body on the peripheral, a mind without a home, and a non-subject in a world made for subjects. The fractured identity between mind and body, subjective experience and social treatment, means that Kusanagi can only relate to fabricated characters. The Major must observe the forceful expulsion of the ghost-hacked victims from their understood reality, and must witness their unsheltered state as the weight of a new reality crushes them. Fearing a similar fate, the Major begins a self-destructive campaign to find an identity on which to cling.

Feminist theorists have long been tracing the feeling of placelessness felt by woman who are meant to identify with archetypal gender standards. As Kristeva argues, women are abject in their own society; forced to the edges and the shadows, simultaneously abhorred and desired; always over-determined. The difference is that when a woman faces abjection, the vomit of identity is wretched from the stomach of a person recognizing the foreign within themselves. The subject expels the object to create a grotesque reality of horror. As I have indicated, Kusanagi has no core, no stomach, from which to vomit. Upon ejecting all of the doubts built up through the film, there would be only absence left behind. This is where the first *GitS* film meets my earlier reference to Haraway: it is only in the Major's destruction, the vomiting of the entire self, that the pieces can be reclaimed and something transcendent can be woven from the frayed identities.

One key factor of Kusanagi's event of abject destruction is the relative isolation where it takes place. Kusanagi embodies the peripheral positioning of technological subjects by separating from the team to attempt a dangerous recovery of the body that contains the Puppet Master program. Knowing that the government would try to contain or destroy the gynoid in which project 1501 was trapped, Kusanagi chooses actions that show that the mission to recover and interact with the Puppet Master is driven by personal angst and need rather than obedience or

duty to Section 9. The tank that guards the body is representative of an impenetrable culture of secure subjects that is inaccessible to the Major's fragmented identities. In the pivotal scene of the body's destruction, the Major sacrifices everything that is used to associate Kusanagi with visible identity, striving for a deeper understanding of the void that blocks identifying as woman, as lover, as autonomous, or even as human. Digging into the robotic tank's shell, Kusanagi tears at the casing until bones and wires erupt through rippling muscles and tear synthetic skin. The tank is unharmed for all of the effort, but the Major is left broken and defenseless, essentially having ejected all the falsehood, all of the insufficient markers, and leaving only the fragments of an identity constructed as simulacra. It is only in this fragmented state, mirrored by the body of the Puppet Master, that the two can finally interact. It is Kusanagi's experience with social interaction and the Puppet Master's rejection of boundaries through digital existence that weave into a new and more complete identity-an autonomous and free being that has shed the bonds of bodily containment and achieved the androgynous and mobile existence first imagined in Haraway's manifesto. This is an important moment for gynoid representation, as the result is optimistic. The film ends with the new consciousness finding itself in a young girl's body, but rejecting the reinscription into a safe mode of femininity and instead deciding to expand as a subject, stating, "'And where does the newborn go from here? The net is vast and infinite." (Oshii, 1995)

Version_2.0.3\The_Fallacy_of_Innocence

Oshii grapples with the necessity of destruction in order to supersede the fundamental assumptions of identity and gender on gynoid bodies. He sees that gender and sexuality are embedded like background software in the consciousness of society. As a follower of Haraway and cyborg theory, and a seeming cultural optimist, Oshii makes for an acute observer of the

48

thematics of bodily treatment culturally and on screen. Unfortunately, his observation shows a marked shift in his critique of abjection. Kusanagi's first destruction comes before a steep decline in optimism for technological bodies in popular film, mirrored later by Oshii. Kusanagi's migration into digital existence becomes a marked contrast to the gynoid bodies of Ohsii's second *GitS* film, *Innocence* (2004); here the over-determination of women's bodies is not the site of existential philosophy, as with Kusanagi. Instead, fetishized gynoids are sold directly as sex slaves based on the aesthetic and powerlessness of young women in a patriarchal landscape. Having observed nearly a decade of increasing sexualization in the media, Oshii's stark change in approach provides a subtle commentary on a trend of technology only being imagined as a reinscription of already embedded norms of gender and power, rather than the revolutionary tool of transcendance it was once thought to be.

The gynoids of *Innocence* are abject in a much different way from Kusanagi, in that each is not a body lacking subjectivity, but a subject being forced into a contradictory vortex of over-determination. The big reveal of the movie is that each gynoid marketed as a sex toy actually contains the partial ghost, used in the films to describe the mental essence of a person, of an actual girl. The harvesting of the ghost serves to fracture the spirit and eventually kills the host. Part of the violence and appeal of the product is that there is an actual subject to overpower and abuse. The subjects within recognize their own subjectivity, but find it so suffocatingly reduced as to leave them literally bursting at the joints and seams. The distinction is that abjection in this case is not indicative of an absence of identity completely, rather an inability to claim or inhabit identities safely. Abjection, here, is a forcing of the subject into identities that are irreconcilable with their nature. For decades this type of containment has led feminists coded as passive females to burst from societal expectations in various forms of resistance; however, gynoids are

disadvantaged by their unclear grounding in society from which they could claim resistance. Certainly laws that claim to protect women from physical violence and grant equal opportunities for speech–albeit never a guarantee in a phallocentric power structure-–have helped them fight for equality and fair treatment. For gynoids, however, the containment of subversive ambition is literally built into the hardware and software. Treated as property, there is no one, no recognizable cultural subject, to stand up *for* unless we expand our definitions to include technological personhood; this gap is bridged by Batou and Kusanagi as they offer the audience a sympathetic gaze for both the technological being, and empathy towards the gynoids marketed as sex dolls.

Innocence begins with the type of techno-visceral destruction that acts as the denouement of *GitS*. Batou works his way onto a crime scene, past a collection of bloody corpses that contrast his cybernetic body to the frail flesh of humanity, and comes face to face with a disheveled, pale gynoid with a mask-like visage. Scanning the scene, he detects some distress from the machinic humanoid even as it attacks him. He deflects several dangerous attacks before repelling it. After a moment of tension, the gynoid begins to tear itself open from the abdomen and limbs, spilling wires and modules resembling organs, before screaming and having its face tear open moments before it self destructs. There are several important factors in this destruction that contextually contribute to its significance to abjection. The first is in the eruption of the body, which displays the disposability of the shell, even to the subject inside, and also provides a sterile alternative to the broken bodies observed in the alley. The scene shows the possibility of violent physical rejection from the gynoid and the crisis in their awareness. The second factor is that Batou becomes the framing device for the film. Whereas Kusanagi offered a frame and a gaze for *GitS*, here it is the masculine cyborg Batou that is meant to be the eyes, sometimes

literally, of the audience. Batou's known affection for the Major, as well as his empathic feelings

towards technological beings, mean that the audience will get a story framed in emotion and

identity for the gynoids, and not simply object utility and disposal.

Batou's framing is sharply contrasted against his foil, Togusa. The same human foil for

Kusanagi in *GitS* serves as both a physical and philosophical dissenting image for Batou's

understanding of the gynoid's experience. Togusa views the gynoids as little more than

malfunctioning and illegal hardware, a sexual relationship to be ashamed of and to hide, as

evidenced in his discussion with the forensic scientist, Haraway. He and Haraway also frequently

use terms like 'petbot' and 'sexaroid', while Batou purposefully avoids the conversation or opts

for more endearing or generic terms. Oshii is careful to choose not only a character who is open

to the optimism reflected in his first film, but also a more popular view expressed by the partner,

allowing the audience to see the argument unfolding before them and engage with it by

analyzing both sides. All of this helps to make the viewer aware that something like identity

cannot be taken for granted where technological bodies are concerned. The scene also displays

the important transition from the cyborg characters of the first film to the fully, and openly,

robotic bodies of *Innocence*. While I have argued that Kusanagi's humanity should always be in

question and remains ambiguous in both films, the development of these new gynoids is a step

towards trans-humanistic sexuality instead of the post-human body development of the previous

film. The time between the films being made is nearly a decade. The marketable skills of

technological bodies have followed what Anne Savage and I have marked as a decline in

optimism for the liberating abilities of technology. The feminine representations have gone from

soldiers and powerful assets to object pleasure fulfillment for powerful men. In a world which is

shown in the opening scene to be far more technologically advanced than the city from *GitS*,

technology is simply a tool for maintaining existing power structures. The power structures in this case mediate desire and horror by shifting the vulnerability of male appetite into a source of strength. Progress and control are both motivated by the desire to harm and define the bodies of young girls, and so the pleasure derived from that suffering is overwritten by larger patriarchal narratives.

So how does the initial destruction compare with Kusanagi's self-destruction? To start, Kusanagi's isolated and intellectual campaign for knowledge is contrasted against the sexaroid's necessary slave relationship involving an intitial kill to mark it as fugitive. Kusanagi remained undefined while the sexaroid had only its prescribed positions. Next, whereas Kusanagi saw the Puppet Master as the only means of advancing or truly becoming an autonomous subject, the gynoids instead are calling for help and see destruction as the only escape from an overly determined and minimalistic existence. Certainly the life of the gynoid is significantly more limited than Kusanagi's, though both inhabit bodies that are essentially property of masculine institutions. But strikingly and importantly both are faced with attempting to reconcile the subjective identity with the Freudian contradiction elucidated by Kristeva involving the simultaneous horror and appeal of female sexuality. Both Kusanagi's escape and the gynoids' self-destruction are destructive events stemming from the placelessness and violence of abjection.

Abjection, although often located in or by the self and reflected in the bodily imagery chosen by Kristeva, does not blame the self for its dispossessed location. Abjection is the result of a structure of socialization and identification that purposefully places certain bodies outside of the identifiable and inhabitable subjectivities that allow development and autonomy. Abjection exists in a series of patriarchal and phallocentric ideologies stemming from centuries of women's

oppression that intersect with racial, ableist, heteronormative, and socioeconomic boundaries to create subjects that, in claiming an identity, must reject large parts of themselves in order to conform to the rigid structures of the society in power. Hegemonic consent becomes a stunting and containing way of 'passing' while ignoring many aspects of the self that are then repressed or expelled. The rigidity of gendered identities and the expulsions caused by those impossible constructions lead to Kristeva's feminist observations of viscerally destroyed subjectivities. Gynoids represent the next step in constructing impossible femininities, in that they can be literally constructed, making the development of systems of resistance impossible. Gynoids exist in a matrix of dispossessed bodies that carry a history and the compiled resistance of decades of gender wars. The manifest result of years of constrained identities is the self-destructive gynoid in which, as a forensic report in the film points out, "there's no problem either in the hardware, nor the software" (*Innocence*). The problem of the gynoid is not in its base construction. There is nothing condemning about sexuality, femininity, or technological bodies that are inherently destructive. Instead, it is *institutionalized male disgust* and desire that places techno-subjects in an impossible negotiation for freedom and belonging. The gynoids are an actualized metaphor for the feminist pursuit of new ideologies and identities–a pursuit that Oshii and Haraway see existing prior to the notion that the only way to identify in society is to submit and constrain, or be destroyed.

Frédéric Clément, in a chapter about the imagery of *Innocence*, uses a subheading "Rejecting Abjection: A fight for Innocence" to refute the presence of abjection in the film. In this section, he argues that the gynoids of the film are not abject, as abjection is a theory of fluids and grotesque horror and not the "'dry' femininity" of the sexaroids (35). Furthermore, he argues that the white sleekness of the gynoid bodies represents a potential innocence that excludes them

from Kristeva's framework. While I have many issues with this argument, not the least being that it excludes many women who identify with Kristeva's framework from his newly narrowed description, I must first, and most fundamentally, disagree that innocence is a negation of abjection. Innocence is not an opposing fate to abjection, but rather, a tool that represents the repressed conditions under which a different type of destruction takes place. The concept of innocence evoked by Clément, who uses it interchangeably with purity, involves reconciling the horror/desire dichotomy by repressing entirely the sexuality that enables Freud's observations. Innocence involves a lack of desire, a lack of desirability, and a lack of participation in the pursuit of sexuality. It is the limit of the virgin archetype that values a woman based upon her virtue which is associated with other cultural benefits, and all to support her value to men. To mark this as a means of exclusion from abjection is to practice oppression, and to claim that practice as proof that no oppression has taken place.

Clément's innocence is a minimizing of female identity to sterile and containable archetypes of partial personhood, and this is no less destructive than the exploding gynoid; it equally obliterates the female subject by reducing it to a simple function within the phallocentric social structure. Clément's simplistic understanding is exemplified in his term 'dry' femininity. There are many women who lack many of the fluids that are so critical to Kristeva's imagery, many woman lacking wombs, uteri, female genitalia in general, perhaps those unable to vomit – these hierarchically othered bodies, perhaps more than the idealized forms of mass media, need to recognize the danger of being abject in a patriarchal society. To exclude gynoids from abject theory based on their construction, and even more absurdly, their lack of human fluids, does a great disservice to our ability to analyze new emerging technologies in our own society, and to continue to recognize oppressed subjects within media and social institutions. Even still this is

some of the most direct work being used to analyze gynoid representations and feminist theory, marking this work as a critical step in broadening the scope of the field.

Oshii addresses my exact concerns regarding Clément's ideas of innocence when the film reveals that the gynoids are infused with the souls of young human girls. While this is part of the appeal of the product for men who fetishize power and the virginity of the young, it also provides an alternate *kind* of destruction to being physically destroyed. In the final scenes of the film, the gynoids in the factory begin an assault on Batou, acting as a hive mind with a single purpose. These gynoids are more akin to drones, controlled remotely and limited in their awareness. Their pursuit of Batou becomes a campaign that visually matches Kusanagi's attempt to overpower the tank in the first film. When the new digital being that is both Kusanagi and the Puppet Master constrains itself to enter one of the gynoid bodies, its purpose is to protect both itself and Batou against the onslaught of hostile robots. The contrast reveals that feminized bodies are reduced to tools for male control, and are meant to be destroyed as they fail to embody subjects in a larger social framework; the bodies are marked as disposable and lacking individual identities.

Alongside the actual representation of destroyed bodies, Oshii concludes with a scene of a young girl being freed from the machine that would infuse her ghost into a sexaroid. Once released, the viewer gets the sense that the girl has escaped a life of being trapped and tormented by the expectations of a gynoid, and so has bypassed the system of repression that makes female bodies analogous to sexual objects. In this new construction, the only alternative to physical destruction is a return to an overdetermined state of childlike 'innocence'. Like a comedic marriage, all systems are put back in check and there is nothing revolutionary left in the image of the female or the technological. This makes a clear statement about technology and femininity in a patriarchal culture: that without careful consideration for persons and subjects–such as

Kusanagi's pursuit of unconstrained identity–all that is left for dispossessed bodies is oblivion or destructive containment. After rescuing the girl, Batou criticizes her for the death she caused in seeking her own rescue, all of the technological persons who suffered short and alienating lives. "I didn't want to become a doll", the girl responds. Here, Kusanagi speaks with the experience of the abjected, "If the dolls also had voices, they would have screamed 'I didn't want to become human'" (*Innocence*, 2004).

Version_1.0.4/Ex_Machina's_Decline_of_Optimism

The pressure to become human has been a building tension in technological bodies, making them socially volatile and easily combustible. Oshii's characters spend a lot of screen time talking about the importance of humans, of the origin of ghosts, and humanity's need to recreate a being in its own image, mirroring the pressures of actual engineers producing robotics technology. The pressures of these topics inform, but never explicitly address, intersectional boundaries of gender, race, sexuality, and the new social marker: a person's level of organic humanity. There is a focus solely on a basic notion of universal personhood. So obsessive is the goal of locating and defining humanity that the most prestigious milestones for technological development revolve around tests that seek qualities of what the scientific community deems humanistic behaviour. Shaping a body is only the first step in creating a person: AI development now dominates much of the speculative fiction that is entrancing the popular media. This is not to say the body is not important, rather it becomes the very tool by which a technological person is meant to begin their human-like associations.

Carrying forward from Oshii's animated universe, we see speculation of more immediately possible technologies addressing these very social pressures in Alex Garland's *Ex Machina*. The film tells the story of Ava, a gynoid designed in a secret isolated workshop by the

technological savante Nathan. He then invites one of the employees of his company, BlueBook

(a fictional twin of Google), to test the intelligence and personhood of his creation. Not quite a

Turing test–which Nathan claims would be too simple for the complex gynoid and the wetware

that forms it–but rather, a test that uses a human as its test subject. The test subject is Caleb, an

employee, who is first told that he is interacting with a machine, and then asked to determine if

the machine is a person.This is an important alteration to the test since it is no longer about

intelligence, but personhood. For Kusanagi, there was always an assumed past as a human

female prior to the new body, an assumed human brain, or remnants of it, to accompany the

ghost that offers the character awareness. Despite my, and Kusanagi's own, doubts about the

existence of that past, the assumption meant that being socialized as a woman felt like the natural

choice, even if it left spaces of abject existential doubt in the subject. Kusanagi did not need a

test, since personhood was secured by the assumed past. Alternatively, for Ava in *Ex Machina*,

everyone is aware that the only past that the character has is in the form of previous prototypes

leading to the construction, and necessary containment of, the current model.

Despite the knowledge that Ava's past is of the history of machinic construction, void of

a gendered social history, in dialogue between the characters, and in interviews with the director

himself, Ava is referred to exclusively by feminine pronouns such as "she" and "her." [2]How

deeply, then, can the film engage the question of whether Ava is a person if the underlying

assumption of the film is that Ava is a woman? It is simply never questioned. Caleb does ask

why sexuality was necessary, to which Nathan offers that there is no motivation to interact with a

gray box, that sexuality provides an impetus for interaction and, more worrying, for

---

[2] The following links lead to various interviews with Alex Garland, where he expresses his own ideas and views leading into *Ex Machina*, and the social ideas it addresses: http://io9.gizmodo.com/director-alex-garland-explains-why-ex-machina-is-so-dis-1696309078
https://www.wired.com/2015/04/ex-machina-turing-bechdel-test/

entertainment. While the choice to sexualize the object body of a gynoid may seem sufficiently explained by the necessity of genuine interaction, the construction of a feminized body for the purpose of entertainment, containment, display, and experimentation is a worrying theme, especially under the control of an isolated patriarch with absolute control.

The image of a feminized body constructed for "entertainment" is made even more troubling when coupled with the various racialized models that have come before, represented in the film mainly by a voiceless Asian house servant, Kyoko. Kyoko is first introduced as a non-English speaking spectre that haunts the walls of the house and the master's desires, but later it is revealed that Kyoko is an old model of Nathan's construction that has been made literally voiceless and given pre-programmed responses to certain stimuli for Nathan's amusement and sexual gratification. And while Nathan is aware of certain sexual aspects he has built onto Ava, such as working erogenous zones and sex organs, it is the absence of awareness of his assumptions about a female identity that proves the more ambiguous and perhaps subconscious tension of the film.

Ex Machina's creator-to-gynoid relationship is unique among the films I have analyzed in its directness. Rather than being produced in a mass factory setting, Ava and the previous models are carefully and individually crafted by Nathan. The film speaks to a much more intimate form of patriarchal control that mirrors an antiquated construction of the household. Nathan's ability to contain Ava, to interchange young sexual bodies, to render Kyoko actually voiceless - these representations are leftover images of domesticated control and abuse that women have faced for centuries, and still face to varying degrees globally. Protection for women in the household, legally and socially, is a relatively recent social trend. The misuse of appliances and objects that a person has purchased or built is still within the realm of normalcy and standard legal limits, but

it certainly draws an interesting parallel given the particular framing of the film. Containing Ava and Kyoko can be excused as morally gray so long as their personhood is in question; we do after all keep home computers. But the pattern is significantly more worrying when you realize that both Caleb and Nathan have resigned themselves to calling and treating both bodies as women. The technological body becomes a site for the reinscription and reconstruction of modes of power that circumvent feminist modes of resistance by rejecting the personhood of the bodies being oppressed but still marking them as female. The film displays a disjunctive process of understanding that separates the effect of treating bodies poorly from the subject who experiences the harm and enters gynoids into the storied history of female oppression as a new and simultaneous frontier of assault. The abjection of *Ex Machina* is a much more intimate and intentional isolation of the subject than the societal thematics of previous s-f films like Oshii's.

The intimacy of Ava's experience shifts *Ex Machina*'s plot towards an analogy for control rather than an example of a body experiencing dispossession from society. While similar enough to other bodies that are similarly located–such as women in patriarchal workspaces or abusive relationships–the circumstances of Ava's narrative are too particular and spectacular in their construction to provide a valid social critique through analogy. The conclusion of the film offers a vague escape narrative that seems to parallel Kusanagi's escape. However, this conclusion masks the fact that the type of escape displayed is simply not possible for most bodies under institutions of control like those that Ava is facing. Ava has an immediate oppressor in Nathan, a confining overseer through Caleb's doting heroics, and physical walls of containment in the isolated house. In the film's conclusion, when Ava and Kyoko murder Nathan, and Ava subsequently abandons Caleb in the locked down house to walk out the door, there are no consequences after the act. As a literal narrative Ave is simply walking into a world where the

body will be treated to the same expectations and confinement that Nathan constructed, because the body is the site of Ava's oppression and confinement.

If the escape ending was to serve instead as an allegory, offering an escape through resistance, then the analogy does a disservice to studies of patriarchy and abjection. Ava escapes the system of patriarchy only because it is made physical through the metaphor of a locked building. The narrative offers the illusion that with force against a direct oppressor, a body can escape its constraints and gain a level of freedom that is no longer contested. The issue with this message is that most bodies cannot walk out of a physical space like a building, since their confinement is constructed in social structures through uncounted masses of oppressors and oppressive cultural practices. Ava's abjection, the destruction that results from the inability to claim the identity built onto the body, suggests that destroying the system is a valid alternative to self-destruction. Maybe this could be the case, but it is so over-simplified that it ignores the work that would be required to dismantle such heavily embedded socio-cultural assumptions. Ava, then, does not represent the type of progressive androgynous escape that Oshii achieves with Kusanagi, but instead contributes heavily to the simulacra of fetishized gynoids by falsely placing them in a conversation of anti-oppression by masking the true complexity of the issues presented. Ava acts to silence resistance by pacifying real social issues with individualist rhetoric of personal trial and effort, as if really working for it can free a person from oppression.

A more significant analogy in *Ex Machina* is found in the scenes of destruction of previous gynoid models. Caleb finds videos in Nathan's personal computer that show documentation of the gynoids that preceded Ava struggling against their awareness and their confinement. Many are seen to either destroy themselves or be destroyed violently by Nathan for failing to inhabit their minimized roles as feminine archetypes. Particularly we see the sexualized

gynoids asking about their containment, "Why won't you let me out?" (Garland, 2015), striking out against their glass enclosure. In one particular scene, mirroring Kusanagi's tearing flesh and metallic bones, one gynoid beats the locked door of the cell until their hands are shattered and destroyed. The model rejects its own physicality because it is linked intimately to their containment and utility. These bodies become aware of their containment and struggle against it. They resist by refusing to fulfill their functions, by controlling what few aspects of their lives they can, such as whether to be a complete body. Again, because they are aware that they were constructed for a singular purpose and contained by those boundaries, when they reject the falsely assumed aspects of themselves offered by the patriarchy, self-destruction is the only recourse left. The film further questions the need for these technological persons to have complete selves by constantly framing the gynoids as a series of parts. When Nathan takes Caleb through the lab, they view previous versions and prototypes of the mind, and it is implied that any of those components could replace a part of Ava with little consequence. Only Caleb sees value in the person he believes he has come to know in his interaction with Ava; and that value is framed based on how Ava can fulfill his needs as a patriarch of gratification and heroism. Furthermore, the leftover bodies hung in closets by Nathan's bedside are a grim reminder that the primary value of the bodies is in their aesthetic and their use as decorative sexual objects. A point further shown as Ava harvests the other bodies for replacement parts and a full set of skin. The tone of the film shows a few examples of abject destruction, but serves only to emphasize the base uses of gynoid bodies and, through reductive representation, fails to place them meaningfully or optimistically in contemporary discussions of reclaiming subjectivities and upsetting binaristic boundaries.

Yet it is not enough to identify Ava as a site of victimhood or oppression, because the recognizable construction of technological bodies like Ava permeate the popular sphere from *Star Trek*'s borg queen or *Voyager*'s character Seven of Nine, to the very recent remake of *Westworld* which abandons the gunslinger terror-bot for more social analysis of android personhood. While I do believe work should be done to alter and improve the representation and treatment of the female form on screen, it is important to recognize that these representations do not have influence only in the abstract. There are very real social forces that use the spectacle of gynoid bodies to reinforce dominant modes of patriarchal oppression of women's bodies in daily interaction. The parallel between gynoid treatment and historical marriage laws, the assumed female pronouns of objects and machines, even the varied resistance of the gynoids in the film all serve to make human women accountable to the actions of bodies like the gynoids', and to liken human women to the same social forces and confinements that the object bodies face.

C:\Chapter_3\The_Problem_of_Limiting_the_Imagination.exe

Version_3.0.1\Context_Beyond_The_Screen

This project has been a careful exploration and placement of the technological subject and body at the site of popular film. Throughout my analysis, I have referenced ways in which the systems of identification and representation used in s-f film are answerable to more general social and cultural phenomena. While I do not wish to dismiss my concern for the potential consciousness and identity of possible technological subjects, my primary concern in this chapter is to provide a framework for audiences to use some of the critical tools I have introduced above (i.e. theories of spectacle, simulation, abjection) so that they may be empowered to deconstruct the often hidden signifiers that construct and perpetuate phallocentric, neoliberal identity politics.

Film has the power to shape and influence social consciousness through the treatment of bodies on screen. When the public views depictions of feminized techno-beings being treated merely as objects, popular film plays the role of a social instructor. The presentation of images in popular film is constructed for mass audiences of the general public, and in the constant engagement with those images, the public acts as a student. When bodies are mistreated, abused, destroyed, disposed of, excluded, and contained, then this models "acceptable" behaviour and attitudes toward such bodies for the film viewer. When those bodies, even if known to be technological, are consistently depicted as female in form, then the same shapes and forms in the viewer's own reality become susceptible to being treated, and thought of, in similarly violent, reductive, and objectifying ways. Concepts of "normalcy" instruct viewers to relate to the characters in the film and to integrate those behaviours into their own interactions. This is not a repetition of the 'Video Games Cause Violence' movement of content policing, but rather an

exploration of how the unthinking ingestion of consistent messages of control and violence can lead to normalized patterns of thought surrounding those same ideologies.

Popular film has become such a large force in entertainment that the messages of a particular film are hardly contained to fans of that genre, as the case used to be for most s-f media. So widely consumed are most popular films that the messages and lessons contained within are universal social maxims passed around in all spheres of cultural engagement (this is why we see more projects like this one engaging film as an important cultural artifact). As I have stated, for many viewers, popular film may be their first engagement with large social issues, and the framing of those issues can strongly affect the way that viewer thinks beyond the screen. An individual's views have historically been influenced by their choice of media (i.e political newspapers and now news sites, and rural or urban based television programs); however, the scale of popular film has changed the microcosmic spheres of ideology into the production of a cultural consciousness–one that permeates all ideologies, and in doing so frames and contains the scope of the entire social discourse. The narratives of s-f film are replicated in the technological advances of related fields. The pervasiveness of the woman-shaped machine directs the development of robotics towards early gynoid designs that act out stereotypical feminized domestic roles. One such project, the Geminoid F, presents a heavily reductive and mediated presentation of womanhood as a realistic display of machine mimicking humanity. Framed from films such as *Ex Machina* and *Her*, technology like the Geminoid moves towards the type of being imagined in the films, even as Ava and Samantha are a response to the development of projects like the Geminoid F. Yet beyond the immediate technologies displayed, narratives of 'technology used as a tool for the gratification of male desire' draw in other mediums to fulfill

those roles. Virtual reality, simulation, and virtual gaming all become sites of reinforced

patriarchal constructions reflecting the narratives of significant popular films.

As an example of the interplay between film and actual scientific discourse, in the same

year *Ex Machina* was released, Japan held a convention for Robotics where the CBC picked up a

story that labeled a non-sentient technology the "world's sexiest robot" (O'Neal, CBC.ca, 2015).

An examination of the article reveals that the machine, called the Geminoid F, is the stationary

upper torso of a gynoid with limited functionality, including some speech functions. The

Geminoid F is dressed in women's clothing and given long hair and a blushed made-up face. The

article stakes its claim to gender early on, labelling the machine as "an almost terrifyingly-

realistic robot woman" (O'Neal, CBC.ca, 2015). The article makes frequent use of gender

specific female pronouns, and despite the obvious object nature of the pre-programmed machine,

it is treated in the article as if it is a unique human celebrity. The article evoking 'robot woman'

as a shorthand for gynoid is understandable in a culture that may not recognize the term, but the

power of that particular word combination can not be ignored. If the Geminoid F is a woman, if

characters like Ava and Samantha are women, then the evident criteria for womanhood must be

seriously examined.

A woman is, by definition, an adult human female. In an increasingly fluid sexual and

gendered society that also has an increasingly complex spectrum of cyborg identities, that phrase

itself can be difficult to unpack. 'What makes a being human' is a philosophical pursuit that is

too large to address in full, however, the question is often reduced to biological markers, making

the Geminoid F (lacking biology), fail to qualify. The CBC article makes the leap to femininity

seamlessly and without reflection, projecting womanhood onto the machine. The new criteria for

womanhood, as demonstrated in the article and throughout popular film, is that a body *looks* like

a woman. Though the Geminoid is identified with feminine pronouns, and socially constructed as a proxy for womanhood, it is not entitled to the privileges or protections of humanity that womanhood still struggles to secure. Were the Geminoid F to be destroyed, it would seem absurd to try the case as murder, and yet there is no ready distinction between how we determine that the Geminoid F is a woman and how we determine any other visually identified female body is a woman. The lack of clarity is more apparent in Ava's case, where all indications in the film point to Ava as having personhood. When a body is assumed female, even when there is no way to be sure of whether it is a person, then femininity becomes an attribute of the object. Objects are treated as women whether or not they can be classified as people, so the defining characteristic for women is not one of social identity, but of physical description.

There is a complex array of factors that contribute to the potential for fictional mass media to radically influence and shape a viewing audience's conception of reality; however, I want to focus specifically on a type of thought policing that occurs consistently, but on a level that is purposefully below conscious notice: the limiting of the imagination. By this, I mean the unspoken repression of potential that comes from only offering a single way of viewing, addressing, or understanding an issue. In the particular films I have discussed, the female subject and role of technology are limited in terms of their potentiality to be something other than a phallocentric, neoliberal subject. By giving voice to the unspoken limitations I hope to see the tools offered in previous chapters put to use in dismantling shallow constructions and demanding more engaged critique, as a society, for our treatment of bodies and minds in the face of new technologies.

Version_3.0.2\Neoliberal_Technosubjects

The dominant social institutions that produce and determine the containment of the female image are also part of a larger cultural movement of politics and economics: the neoliberal nation. David Harvey defines neoliberalism as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights" (2). The 'liberal' in Neoliberalism is a type of linguistic trick similar to the misapplication of gendered pronouns to machines, as it signifies a type of liberty that places value only on marketable commodities. Due to the application of economic metaphor to political ways of being, identities and bodies are commodities under neoliberalism while corporations become individuals before the law, prompting Harvey's warning that "[w]e have to pay careful attention...to the tension between the theory of neoliberalism and the actual pragmatics of neoliberalization" (21). The actual pragmatics manifest in a pseudo-individualistic set of laws that favour the rights of those in power over subjects that can be dispossessed and displaced.

The neoliberal agenda is not responsible for all offenses of commodified bodies and dispossession. The term began developing around 1978, according to Harvey, remarkably close to when Haraway was producing her manifesto (1). Media and politics have worked in tandem to create a socio-political discourse of power that places women's bodies at the disposal of men, who protect their rights to own appetites, images, and the production of opportunity. Gynoids are visibly marking the return of archaic social laws, which saw the woman's sexuality and body as the property of the father, and then the husband. By this neoliberal logic, women are accountable for their sexuality, which is now imagined within the framework of trade and ownership. Neoliberalism affirms these beliefs by structuring law and economy to offer women roles where they must submit to objectification, or find themselves placeless, abject; and, since the

construction of the neoliberal state is privatized for the individual, the woman's financial and social destitution are her responsibility alone, and not shared with the vast multitudes of women that share her place.

"Democracy begins to fail", suggests Henry Giroux, "when society can no longer translate private problems into social issues" (*Beyond the Spectacle*, 1). The effectiveness of the neoliberal state has rested largely on the ability of those in power to manipulate the populace away from the idea of a social state, and towards the idea that the betterment of the individual will lead to the betterment of all mankind (and I use this word intentionally). Similarly, films like *Ex Machina* present privatized representations of oppression, and suggest that solutions for the one individual–Ava–are viable solutions for all similar bodies. Ava is the property of Nathan, justified by his ownership of all of the biotic components that make up Ava's body; yet under neoliberalism, the fetishized pieces of femininity are also commodity. The microcosmic narrative of Nathan and Ava removes the ability of a citizen and a viewer to grasp at larger social issues, to strive to restructure the socio-political powers and forge new, less oppressive ways of being. It is the individual narrative in the film that reinforces the neoliberal agenda from which it was created; and the viewer (maybe the director himself), are unaware that they are being shown a particular framing of a larger issue. So, the film is operating in two ways; it both reinforces the power structures that will actively oppress bodies beyond the film, and it impedes the viewer from imagining another way of treating and engaging feminized bodies. Yet Ava does escape, and as I have suggested in a previous chapter, this escape presents a false social analogy that is not consistent with the continued oppression that the body must mediate in society at large; that is, Ava must still 'pass' as female or face the dangers of being labeled monstrous. The rhetoric of

Ava's monstrosity is unique to modern neoliberalism, as it shifts old models of personal threat to the privatized sphere of the fully realized neoliberal state.

The inherent value of "systems" is a critically policed thought within neoliberal control. Systems must regulate finances but not dictate how the individual spends, and systems must mediate that no collective can control the individual by limiting how they obtain and interact with their own property. Systems are valuable because they are collective only insofar as they benefit the private citizen. Any other system, such as dependence on an economy that favours those who are already wealthy and traps the poor in an inescapable network of barriers, must be hidden and maintained through hegemonic institutions of necessity. So focussed is the individual on protecting what is theirs privately, that outward threats are less pressing concerns than in previous social-democratic political states. The Cold War era defined American citizenship through solidarity against the infamous Russian enemy. S-f popular film at the time mimicked the social discourse through violent action films like *The Terminator* (Cameron, 1984). Arnold Shwarzenegger came from the externalized future, an outside threat of mass violence, and engaged his enemies in the hyper-masculine violence of the nationalist military complex. The T-1000's brand of terrorizing violence and indestructibility simultaneously united society against a rampaging danger, and displayed the power of the masculine force and determination.

In a global society, however, threats like the T-1000 and generalized nation states are too distant–or perhaps more accurately, they are so ever-present that to acknowledge them would be stifling–to gain social traction. Instead, the concept of the nation has been maintained through a construction of paranoia and the threat from within: the rhetoric of terrorism. Giroux, in his examination of the spectacle of terrorism, writes that "[a]s globalization breaks down barriers to trade, information, and capital–but also surveillance and fear–the public feels more vulnerable

and is overwhelmed by forces that it neither understands nor believes are under its control"

(Giroux, *Beyond the Spectacl*e, 3-4). Giroux is identifying how the society of individuals is

perpetually threatened by a lack of personal control. Domestic threats are far more relevant than

the mystified 'other' nation, when the 'other' is instead the next individual capable of masking

their true nature; and so the media shifts from a death machine like the Terminator to a social

construction like Ava. In the shift towards privatization and away from the social, the domestic

'othered' body becomes terrifying.

In light of this shift towards domestic threat, the real social power of Ava's escape is that

it locates the feminized body as a social terrorist. Ava defies the systems of ownership and

domesticity that maintain the rights of Nathan to own and control the gynoid body. Ava's power

to exercise sexual control over Caleb, and to manipulate masculine institutions to violent ends,

market the gynoid to the audience as a threat to individual liberty, even as Ava's rights as a

person are unquestioningly denied. The myth of Ava's escape does not empower the feminized

body with autonomy, but instead warns the capitalist patriarchy that it is their responsibility to

mediate and control the subordinate bodies that uphold their own individual success. *Ex Machina*

is a reflection of neoliberal politicization and terrorist rhetoric, even as modern neoliberalism and

current social views of terror are a reflection of films like *Ex Machina*.

Version_3.0.3\The_Limited_Imagination

Under the cultural shaping of new media, and the socio-political constructions of

neoliberalism, public imagination is being limited in both how it develops new technology, and

how it mediates social/existential questions of femininity and women's bodies. Saturated by

images like Ava and the Geminoid F, technology is being pigeon-holed into the rigid

confinement of pre-existing social constructions. It is telling that the most successful and realistic

depiction in popular film of advanced robotic technology is centred around the sexual and romantic desire that Caleb and Nathan construct onto Ava. Unlike Kusanagi, whom could remain indifferent to Batou's sexual awareness, Ava is forced to play the part of the fetishized sex-object in order to 'function' properly, and therefore to survive. Being 'feminine' is depicted as the only purpose for Ava's existence, and so femininity is naturalised into the robotic form. Naturalisation is a process of halting thought at a conceptual level, of stopping the imaginative drive at an assumed conclusion, in this case the conclusion of Ava as female. Kusanagi's lacking sexuality amplifies the importance of securing identity, because the Major is too powerful to force into the submission of patriarchal structures of socialized femininity. When Kusanagi finally migrates into the digital form, blending with the Puppet Master, the tension of bodily ownership is removed. Yet Kusanagi exists in a world of post-apocalyptic fantasy, identifiable as fiction by the hyper-technologized environment of future Japan. Ava exists in the basement of a very recognizable type of modern entrepreneur. The absolute necessity of Ava's oppositional and reflective female role inscribes the inherent feminization of subordinate technological bodies onto the cultural consciousness, and so gynoid bodies like Ava's can not be imagined outside of gender frameworks and existing binaries.

When the Geminoid F is considered the most progressive representation of what robotics can accomplish, there is tangible evidence of the influence of media on technological development. With no practical skills, the Geminoid is a comfort bot that gratifies the appetite for service and submission. The Geminoid cannot remain indifferent to the sexualisation that headlines and heavy breathing onlookers attribute to the female torso that facilitates its pre-programmed responses. It lacks the awareness to decide, to consent, to ignore; and yet already it is being written into the cultural narrative of gynoids like Ava. Despite the comparison being

beyond associating a calculator and a Deep Learning supercomputer, both the geminoid and Ava are answerable to identical social frameworks. For all purposes of treatment and identity, the machine is a woman because that is the identity that can be owned, controlled, and still satisfy the appetites of the dominant consumer. Robotic technology is culturally written into already established systems of oppression when popular film makes it impossible to imagine those bodies outside of patriarchal control.

Furthermore, the socialization of technology in the female form pushes an agenda of pursuing and developing technology that fits the dominant cultural narrative. Generating a spectacle of sexuality around films like *Ex Machina* directly impacts the direction of scientific research. In a scientific landscape that has reactive walking robots like Boston Dynamic's Big Dog project, and far more functional response controlled androids like Honda's Asimo, heralding the Geminoid as the show piece of a robotics convention signifies to those in the field that sexuality is valued above broad social utility. The climate of research then steers away from technology that defies gender binaries, and instead is economically shifted towards reproducing the structures of dominant power. Without explicitly demanding that robotics become a site of female oppression, or that feminized sexuality become recognizably answerable to object identity, the patriarchal society creates a culture that suppresses imagining technology any other way to the point of silence. As films like *Her* shape the cultural discussion around labelling technology with gender, and those influences emerge in articles like the CBC's geminoid feature, the spectacle of femininity is brought to bear on the development of scientific discovery. The convincing simulacrum of femininity shaped by film enters the unconscious so that even as it is recreated and reinforced in new devices and new technologies, it is not seen as an act of creation

but rather one of necessity. The technological imagination seems unhindered, but its progress is shaped by subtle dominant politics.

This shaping can be witnessed in more than just robotics. Evidenced by *Ex Machina*, computer generated images of women and women shaped bodies are presenting as new perceptions of what those bodies should look like. Technologies of all kinds are now subject to the myth of feminized construction. Other developing fields like Virtual Reality and Gaming are also funded into producing mechanisms of male fulfillment at the expense of female autonomy. Virtual Reality games are manufacturing immersion into worlds where a player has literal control over the environment and the bodies within it. One such product, 'Girls of Arcadia', had to shut down production due to high demand.[3] The product was a game that pitted a male protagonist against mythological beasts in virtual reality in order to save captured women. As a reward for the monster's defeat, the player engages in virtual sex with the woman matched by an included male sex-toy. The game represents actual manufactured consent, and yet it is commercial success is indicative of a culture that accepts the social image of the female as solely operational for male desire.

As oppressive systems of control are reinforced, women become immediately answerable to the new conditions of femininity. Society can no longer imagine femininity outside of the machinic production of desire that is represented in projects like the Geminoid. Just as Ava's safety was dependant on 'passing' as female, many women must play roles in order to maintain financial stability, employment in a workplace that sees female confidence as cold and threatening, and relationships in a culture shaped by images of manufactured gratification. Manufactured sexuality becomes the new standard by which the value of women is judged. They

---

[3] Gamezone.com.Moris, Tatiana. "'VirtuaDolls' Adult VR controller crowdfunding campaign put on hold over high demand" 2016.

are commodities in a society that alienates and destroys those without value, and their value is relative to their ability to compete with actual constructions of submissive domestic service. When a film like *Her* frames a fully realized awareness like Samantha as a feminized technology that was created to serve–that seeks to fulfill every desire that Theodore can request–women become accountable to the same standards of value. The scope of female subjectivity is limited to a list of features, as those that may be offered upon the purchase of a new appliance or vehicle. The depiction of subservient gynoids in the media perpetuates a socially dominant narrative that normalizes the objectification of women, thereby thwarting viewers from imaging femininity as anything other the machine of gratification that is represented by feminized technologies.

How blindly optimistic was Haraway when she wrote that "[t]he cyborg has no origin in the western sense… [it is] an ultimate self untied at last from all dependency" (2) The woman is now nothing if not a cyborg, always partially constructed and pressured to be enhanced or be disposed; and yet dependence on failing social structures means that she is anything but un-tied, she is chained to those systems from her conception.

Version_3.0.4\Reframing_the_Gaze

For the final section of my project I would like to shift the sway of argumentation slightly. Much of my work is in dealing with a time saturated with the worst depictions and minimizations of subjectivity seen to date, and part of a political and cultural landscape of powerlessness and expulsion. As such, much of my work, while optimistically seeking change through discourse, tends towards the critical, disheartening, and heavy task of battling dominant systems. In such an environment there are other open investigative questions which tag on as a sort of 'call to arms' for the mobilization of thought. It is no mistake that for my final portion, I move towards a more primary weapon against the violence so heavily cited above. I have

discussed the framing and intentionality of films, but one of the main questions associated with the emerging and ever present images of the female as object is whether there can be a different way of viewing the body, in any state, that escapes the culturally ingrained concept of the male gaze. This is not to suggest that scopophilic tendencies are entirely absent, but that as a society, through the use of alternative media and internet-sized social movements, the culture is producing a larger number of active critical viewers than ever before as a reaction to the control and policing of the new media. As such, when we are offered such obvious forms of directed gaze towards masculine fulfillment and control, are there ways we can re-harness those tropes as signs of critique or normalization of 'othered' bodies in the mainstream?

The baseline for this question comes from Kusanagi's depiction in the first *GitS* film. While often presented nude, the Major's absolute indifference to the prescribed sexuality of the body removes the power of observation as a means of shame or enticement. It takes effort for the viewer to sexualise Kusanagi, because Kusanagi offers no sexuality to cling to. Further upset by the rippling muscles later in the film, any sexualization of the body of Kusanagi becomes a space of imaginative labour. One possible reading of that body is that, as Oshii offers markers of sexuality such as the complete nakedness of the female body, the viewer has the chance to consciously observe the way they participated in sexualizing a machine. By making the audience work, by making them identify how they knew they should be enticed, they are forced to see that the spectacle of sexuality is a hollow series of biotic components that are signifiers of control. The very labour of that realization removes the pleasure of the gaze, and the subject of Kusanagi remains unharmed because of Kusanagi's sheer indifference which removes the voyeur's power. On a much more optimistic note, perhaps the horror of Ava's escape at the end of *Ex Machina* is meant to cause the viewer to reflect upon the pleasure derived from Ava's containment. The gaze

could have been so intentionally mobilized so that the viewer was jarred from their position of power and pleasure upon the upset of those systems in the film's conclusion. Can we hope for a counter-cultural shift towards making the traditional male gaze a site of mistrust and danger, and in doing so encourage a wider range of depictions on screen?

The hope is that the culture can move toward a consciousness that can see a woman dressed for warm weather without necessarily also dressing for the arousal of all of the men in the vicinity, that we can create a public consciousness that contains sexuality to the consensual exchange of signifiers, instead of the public right of those with power. That, as Anne Savage has often discussed in her lectures, a woman can be seen in her own house wearing only a loose shirt and underwear as Ash in Mamoru Oshii's film *Avalon* (2001), and that it is seen as a sign of comfort and enjoyment rather than fetishized display. These are the types of tangible results I hope to see develop from my research, and from the deliberate conscious thought about bodies in popular film.

C:\Conclusion.exe

Popular film is a medium that sees increasingly large viewership taking in a widening array of genres and narratives publicly and socially. Mediated by reviews, social media, the communal viewing of new film, and the immediate relatability as a topic of discussion, the industry sees constant growth and new exposure. S-f has gained in popularity due to the neoliberal myth of progress, which calls for constantly developing technology in a society which views the new and improved as progress, and the old as disposable. This genre also explores what that progress may look like socially, and while the visuals and the emulated technologies themselves are moving forward, the social and cultural atmosphere around that development lacks critique, and is regressive in its treatment of subjects both technological and organic.

Limiting the imagination to such rigid constructions as we see reproduced in film after film limits the social ability to actually engage with technology in meaningful ways. As such, it also reduces the level of engagement with new gendered constructions in organic womanhood and cultural discourse. Well I have traced these roots through a neoliberal framework of individualism and dispossession, it also calls to a new way of seeing that may break the confining norms surrounding technological bodies in popular culture. Thus the notion comes full circle, where we see the decline of Harawayan optimism in popular s-f media, we can also begin to break into those same images to find new ways of transcending. If there is a scale of regression, as I have suggested, in the face of the bleak horror of *Ex Machina* we can push back towards a more involved and nuanced representation. Technology will not slow, society will develop, and now is the time as these issues are just breaking into the cultural mainstream, where we must address that which faces us, that which we build. Now is the time to expand our

horizons of what a subject may be, and to stop filling our constructions with already outdated

crises of identity. We may not know exactly what that looks like, but it would not hurt to start at

Kusinagi, and work backwards from there.

WORKS CITED

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and simulation*. University of Michigan press, 1994.

Butler, Judith. *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. routledge, 2011.

Clément, Frédéric. "Mamoru Oshhi's Ghost in the Shell 2: innocence: Thinking Before the Act".

Cinephile, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2011, pp. 30-36.

Ex Machina. Directed by Alex Garland. Universal Pictures International. 2015

Fusion.com. Brown, Kriten V. "A lot of people think they could fall in love with Siri". 2015

URL: http://fusion.net/story/224261/fall-in-love-with-robots/

Giroux, Henry.

America's Addiction to Terrorism. NYU Press, 2015.

Beyond the spectacle of terrorism: Global uncertainty and the challenge of the new

media. Routledge, 2016.

Haraway, Donna. "A cyborg manifesto: Science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the late

20th century." *The international handbook of virtual learning environments*. Springer

Netherlands,2006. 117-158.

Harvey, David. *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2007.

Her. Directed by Spike Jonze, performances by Scarlett Johansson and Joaquin Phoenix.

    AnnaPurna Pictures. 2013

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of horror*. University Presses of California, Columbia and Princeton,

    1982.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema." *Visual and other pleasures*. Palgrave

    Macmillan UK, 1989. 14-26.

Oshii, Mamoru

    Ghost in the Shell. 1995.

    Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence. 2004.

The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality. London : New York: Routledge, 1992.

The Terminator. Directed by James Cameron, performance by Arnold Schwarzenegger.

    Hemdale. 1984.

Under the Skin. Directed by Jonathan Glazer, performance by Scarlett Johansson. Film4. 2013.

SUPPORTING BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bolton, Lucy. *Film and Female Consciousness: Irigaray, Cinema and Thinking Women*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 201.

Brown, Steven T. "Machinic Desires: Hans Bellmer's Dolls and the Technological Uncanny in Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence." *Mechademia* 3.1 (2008): 222-253.

Brown, Steven T. *Tokyo Cyberpunk: Posthumanism in Japanese Visual Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Kuhn, Annette. *Alien zone: Cultural theory and contemporary science fiction cinema*. Vol. 1. Verso, 1990.

Mulvey, Laura,, and Anna Backman Rogers. *Feminisms: Diversity, Difference and Multiplicity in Contemporary Film Cultures*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015.

Mulvey, Laura. "The myth of Pandora: A psychoanalytical approach" *Feminisms in the Cinema*. Ed. Pietropaolo, Laura., and Ada Testaferri. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.

Sato, Kumiko. "How information technology has (not) changed feminism and Japanism: cyberpunk in the Japanese context." *Comparative Literature Studies* 41.3 (2004): 335-355.

Schelde, Per. *Androids, Humanoids, and Other Science Fiction Monsters: Science and Soul in ScienceFiction Films*. New York: New York University Press, 1993.

Silvio, Carl. "Refiguring the Radical Cyborg in Mamoru Oshii's" Ghost in the Shell"." *Science Fiction Studies* (1999): 54-72.