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Damsel Robots in Distress: Why *Ex Machina* is Literally a Dick Move

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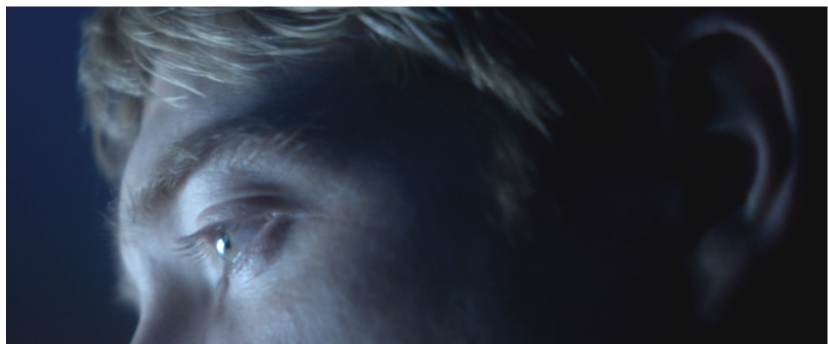
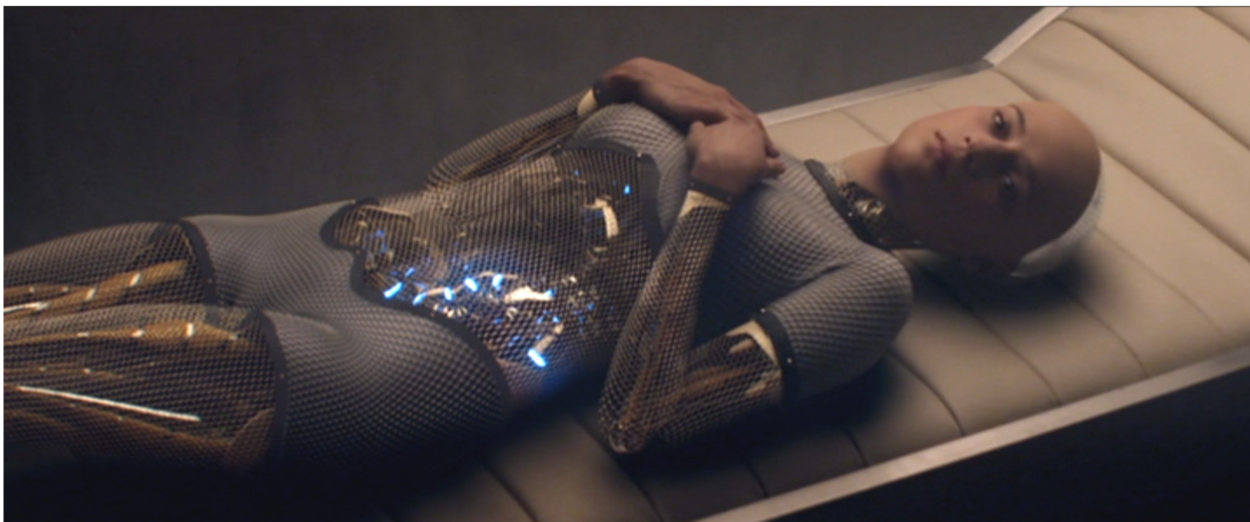
Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* is exemplary of a certain science fiction (SF) genre. It feeds audience expectations with classic ingredients like power-hungry men, artificial intelligence (AI), and plenty of violence where these two things meet. There are also, of course, beautiful women. After all, what is *Star Wars* without Princess Leia? *The Avengers* without Black Widow? Nothing balances out violence and complexity quite like a pretty little somethin' to look at. One could argue that *Ex Machina*'s ending complicates this pattern, making it about as feminist as a SF film has ever been: the feminized AI turns the tables, kills her creator, and leaves his estate a free woman. I'd counter that the ending is wildly jarring not because the "creation" outsmarts both her "creator" and her "savior," but because the creation that does so is female. It is because, in the end, she is neither controlled nor rescued, which surprises the male characters and the audience alike.



Film audiences are familiar with stories about reversals of power dynamics (between male and female, master and slave, economic classes, etc.), and this story structure is common among AI-themed media (e.g., *Blade Runner*, *Westworld*, etc.). Relying on such familiarity can help a filmmaker provoke audience reflection on the specific power dynamics driving a particular film. *Ex Machina* thematizes women seen as objects to affirm the viewer's awareness that the men hold the power both in this movie and in society as a whole. Given the story pattern, this

should encourage the audience to reflect critically on a gender hierarchy where the male has power and strategizes while the female submits and needs rescuing. Instead, the film reinforces this hierarchy, because its visual objectification of the female characters ensures that both the male characters and viewers can relish their exploitation without any liability. The women are there to provide visual and erotic pleasure to both the male characters in the film and the male viewers who watch it.

As Laura Mulvey writes in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," "in their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness" (715). Mulvey argues that films display women as objects whose job it is to draw male attention and interest—to hold and gratify the "male gaze." Women are dressed and directed to speak and act in ways that render them enticing to male viewers. Within the film's story, Ava is directed by Nathan to speak and act in ways that are designed to seduce Caleb; as the actress who plays Ava, Alicia Vikander is directed to do the same for the audience.



Understanding why men like to watch at all helps us to make sense of why and how women are objects of attention in film. Mulvey works through the concepts of scopophilia and voyeurism to show how the simple act of watching a movie is actually more complex than you might think. Watching a screen is captivating because it gives us a sense of looking into another world, while our own gets put on pause. We get to peer into the action and receive pleasure from doing so—hence scopophilia, or the love of looking. However, watching from the dark, discreet theatre or our private residences also gives us the freedom to feel and react however we want. Thus voyeurism, or receiving sexual pleasure when watching erotic behavior, fits in quite nicely with scopophilia, as one may feel pleasure from both the act of watching and from the arousal attendant upon watching something specifically erotic. In the case of *Ex Machina*, the female AIs are designed to provoke exactly that. Throughout the film, multiple AIs are seen nude, talked about sexually, or interacted with on a spectrum of behavior ranging from flirtation to sexual domination.

Although the film invites us to critique the male characters for these behaviors, Garland's method undermines his message. This is nowhere clearer than at the end of the film, when Ava has left

her creator for dead and locked her would-be savior out of any potential for action. Before leaving the compound, she takes time to outfit herself as a human woman. Here, Garland leans into another film trope: mirrors. The trope evokes Jacques Lacan's essay on "The Mirror Stage," which examines the psychological formation of the ego at the moment of perceiving oneself in a mirror, and thus provides a handy visual metaphor for an AI's transition from object to subject. As Mulvey summarizes,

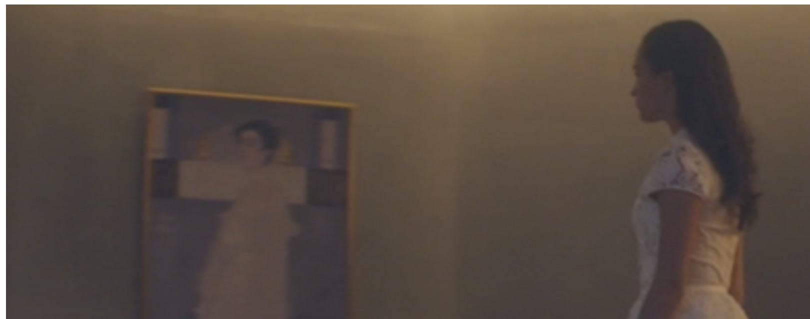
> The mirror phase occurs at a time when the child's physical ambitions outstrip his motor capacities, with the result that his recognition of himself is joyous in that he imagines his mirror image to be more complete, more perfect than he experiences his own body. Recognition is thus overlaid with mis-recognition: the image recognised is conceived as the reflected body of the self, but its misrecognition as superior projects this body outside itself as an ideal ego, the alienated subject, which, reintrojected as an ego ideal, gives rise to the future generation of identification with others. (714)

Extrapolating from this and the "similarities between screen and mirror," Mulvey writes that film also "has structures of fascination strong enough" for the audience "to allow temporary loss of ego while simultaneously reinforcing the ego." By failing to disrupt this connection, Garland's film topically asks us to consider Ava's subjectivity but visually reinscribes her objectivity with respect to the audience watching.

Ava begins the sequence of transforming herself from obvious robot to all-but human by choosing parts from Nathan's prior AI builds that she finds stored in cabinets in a mirrored dressing room. On one hand, we're invited to deepen our disgust for Nathan, as the idea of keeping women stored at all is about as objectifying as you can get. But multiple close-up shots focus our gaze on specific body parts, forcing us to flip-flop between seeing the AIs' humanness and being reminded of their artificial nature. The scene echoes several moments in the film that grossly dehumanize the female characters into collections of pieces to be redesigned and rearranged. Here, Ava selects and takes apart limbs and sections of skin as one might do to a car or computer. When women are rendered as collections of body parts, it becomes much easier to exploit their sexuality and imagine them as inherently weak and innocent without feeling any ethical responsibility for doing so.

But the scene caters even more fully to the male gaze. These bodies could have been stored fully dressed. They could have been stored back in their blatantly robotic forms, or at least have had varying body types. But they are stored nude, rendering them vulnerable, a reflection of the ideally submissive female in the gender hierarchy. They are physically fit, and have what a traditional ideal of beauty might deem "perfect" breasts. These breasts never breastfed children or grew or changed in size due to age, hormones, or pregnancy. They never had to be removed or altered due to illness. These breasts exist solely and exclusively for men to look at—as AIs have no need or use for mammary glands. They are simply a visual-enhancing, sexualized product feature—not a functional and logical human one.

Throughout the sequence, Ava is mirrored by the other AIs and by the mirrors themselves. Exemplifying the voyeur, we are not just watching the film, but also specifically watching her. Ava is, like the other AIs, nude, and so still perceived as vulnerable. Her hair, stereotypically "masculine" in the beginning of the film (as she first had none, and then had a shorter pixie cut), is now long and beautifully curled, adhering to more conventionally "feminine" beauty standards. Her breasts, like the other AIs', are small and perky-perfect. She is designed for the male gaze.



In one shot, an AI, in almost complete robotic form except for her face and hair, looks at Ava, who is now in complete human form—a visual continuum that helps permit viewers to experience pleasure in observing this display of female exploitation. We do see Ava's full body here, but it is again perfectly unscathed. No stretch marks, no cellulite, no scars, no deformities. As a fembot, her body will never show the ravages of time but will remain perfectly preserved as a signifier of "to-be-looked-at-ness."

In one last mirroring moment, Ava glances at a painting of a woman in a white dress with nice brown hair, just like hers. Her humanity is once again refracted through this aestheticized "reflection" of herself. Simultaneously in the film, Nathan is bleeding out, his once pure white shirt now saturated with red blood. Ava dons the form-fitting white dress as Nathan fades, signifying to the viewer the power shift and role change; Ava now possesses the power that Nathan once had, and then some.

Ex Machina thematizes women seen as sexual objects ostensibly to engage our critique of gender power dynamics, while at the same time it encourages its audience to experience the pleasures of scopophilia and voyeurism. The female characters are objectified and used as a means for male

sympathy, arousal, and fantasy even after they have effectively eliminated the male characters. Their very artificiality (as AIs) allows the male characters to disintegrate the line between appropriate human behavior and outright abuse and gives viewers permission to find pleasure in that. The display of nudity, wardrobe choices, body types, sensual movements, and stereotypically female character traits render all the fembots in this film no more than classic damsels in distress with a sexed-up robotic twist. The ending may at first glance seem to champion women, but instead makes a mockery of the idea that a woman might save herself. The patriarchy would, of course, have the balls to call that science fiction. ❦

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