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Creatures of Fact and Fiction: The Cyborg Feminism of *Ex Machina*

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Fictional cyborgs, no matter how they are characterized, invoke a certain set of questions around which to shape a story. What does it mean to be human? What distinguishes us from what is not us? What would happen if we created artificial life, both like us and not? Because cyborgs in film are usually embodied by human actors, they tend to push these questions in one particular direction: what if we created artificial intelligence/life in our own image? Would they transcend our limitations or exploit our fatal flaws? In Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2014), Ava (Alicia Vikander) and Kyoko (Sonoya Mizuno) are cyborgs created by Nathan (Oscar Isaac), who sees himself as a new god. Importantly, though, they are both cyborgs and women, whom Nathan and his employee, Caleb (Domhnall Gleeson), see as mere objects of desire—for sex, for projections of their ideal women, for financial success and professional glory, and more. While Nathan at one point insists that their gender doesn't matter, we see overlap in their experiences due to their supposed gender and the fact that they are AIs. Kyoko is programmed to be obedient, but we also see Nathan exploit her for housework and sex; Ava is programmed to seek escape, but we see her desire to do so as fueled by Nathan's confinement and control. Once the two start to become more life-like to the audience, a broader connection is made: women are treated like robots. Inhuman. Lesser than men. So, we are encouraged to root for Ava to escape. But when she does so by exploiting the flaws of both her creator and her would-be knight in shining armor, we're left to ask: does she offer a vision of a newly empowered woman, or has she just admirably played the part of the femme fatale? I argue that we more fully understand the film if our answer is *both*.

My reading takes its cue from Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto," which links cyborgs and women in a vision for feminism's future. Haraway claims that, while the idea of "women's experience" must be understood as "a fiction" because not every woman will experience the exact same thing, it must also be understood as a "fact," because "liberation rests on the construction of the consciousness, the imaginative apprehension, of oppression, and so of possibility" (6). To ground her vision for feminism's possibility, she examines the cyborg, which is also a "creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction." Cyborgs, she writes, challenge the dualistic thinking that defines a concept like fact as not fiction (or natural as not artificial, female as not male, etc.). In blurring some of these deep-seated definitional boundaries, she claims, cyborgs expose how constructed those

boundaries are and have always been. They thus provide an apt model for the possibility of redefining “woman.” As Haraway makes clear, however, cyborgs are not utopic; they do not exist outside of the history of definitions, stories, and the expectations these attach to them in social reality. Neither, by extension, is the idea of a post-gender world of more use than as imaginative play. Instead, she urges us to embrace the “tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true” (5). This, I argue, is how we should approach the conclusion of *Ex Machina*.



As might be expected, at the end of the film, Kyoko and Ava exceed their programming and take revenge on their human captors. But the revenge sequence leans into gender tropes that also mark it as a rebellion against the confines of patriarchy. Ava

and Kyoko take control of their sexuality and womanhood, completely reversing the gendered power dynamic that had been established. The tumultuous sequence begins with a connection: Ava has gotten out of her room and encounters Kyoko, lightly tapping her arm. She mumbles words we do not understand into Kyoko’s ear. In fact, we cannot hear what she is saying at all, as if we are not supposed to be a part of the conversation—this is a secret communication. This alludes to the subtle communications that women often use to talk to one another so that those around, mainly men, do not understand: a tilt of the head, a widening of the eyes, a squeeze of the hand. The camera then cuts to a knife in Kyoko’s hand. We are given a clue as to what they are communicating. The pair lock eyes. An understanding and a connection have been reached.



What follows is a symbolically loaded power struggle. Nathan enters, his silhouette black—referencing his dark character. He is not pure, he is bad. *Man* is bad. Nathan demands that Ava return to her room. He looks at Ava at a downward angle; she is not his equal. Ava charges at him and he is unable to stop her. She straddles him in a rather sexual manner, pushing

her pelvis against him, pinning him down. He lacks consent, as Kyoko never consented to his using her for sex. Ava has turned the tables—she’s using sexuality for power and control.

The camera then cuts to an ominous shot of Kyoko at the other end of the hall. It is a silhouette of her legs, the knife dangling at her side. Earlier, we see her use it to prepare dinner for Nathan and Caleb. Now, its dichotomy of sensuality and power represents how Kyoko has regained control of her womanhood. She walks toward Ava and Nathan. Nathan is finally able to overpower Ava, smashing her arm. Believing he’s back in control, he starts to drag her along the floor. But he has forgotten about Kyoko. Kyoko inserts the knife into Nathan’s back and the music crescendos.



The knife represents a phallus; Kyoko has penetrated Nathan. The camera cuts to behind Kyoko; now he is beneath her gaze. She grabs his face, forcing him to look at her so he remembers who did this to him. He is aware of being controlled. Nathan swings a pipe at Kyoko's jaw, reminding us how he'd programmed her not to talk back. With Nathan distracted, Ava removes the knife from Nathan's back and sticks it into his chest, thus becoming the second woman to penetrate him. It is through this

complicated dance of gender role reversals and displays of sexual power that the cyborgs Ava and Kyoko first exert their free will.

The film doesn't end there, though, and what follows is a study in how Ava exercises her new-found power to choose. Immediately after Nathan's death, she walks into his office, where Caleb was staying, and stands before him. The camera is at a high angle, looking down at Caleb. She—the woman and cyborg—is now more powerful than Caleb—the man and human. Ava tells Caleb to wait while she goes to Nathan's bedroom and looks through the different cabinets containing past AIs. They are all women. Caleb watches Ava through a window, as he has done throughout the film. Despite the sweetly melodic music playing, Caleb's actions are still quite voyeuristic. He gawks at her as she covers herself in other cyborgs' skin and limbs. She strokes one woman's cheek, then herself. This symbolizes sisterhood—Ava is taking a moment to acknowledge those who've come before her. Those not lucky enough to survive.



She pauses to admire her new self in the mirror, and notices Caleb staring. She closes the cabinet that holds the now skinless AI—symbolizing that she's also closing this chapter of her life. She's a woman now. The connection is complete. She takes her long hair and flips it off her shoulder—a very feminine movement. She dons a dress and fondles the lace bow—a very human action. We get another shot of Caleb admiring Ava as she leaves the room. Caleb calls to her, but she ignores him. Ava

exits the office and the door locks behind her. Here, the music transforms from a melodic lullaby to harsh and loud whooshes. Caleb tries to open the door, but it won't open. He's failed Ava's test. He watched her getting dressed as he pleased—he didn't give her privacy. He also expected to leave with Ava, as if he was entitled to her. He failed her test because he didn't see Ava as an equal. Ava leaves without even looking back. The music changes to a beautifully peaceful piano as she steps, smiling, through Nathan's home and leaves his property. The camera cuts to some time later. There's a reflection in a window that shows people rushing around Ava. There's the sound of traffic and chatter. She has escaped the confines of the patriarchy; Ava's free.

There is a less cheery way to interpret this end. True, Ava has escaped Nathan and the box he'd put her in, but the way her entry into society is portrayed shows that she has just exchanged one observation box for another. Further, she has chosen to adopt a decidedly feminine appearance, knowing very well how she will be seen as she selects her body parts. She will presumably continue exercising the power of her sexuality to manipulate men, much like a femme fatale. But her sexuality is also quite innocent and new, as we can see in the way she admires her new body. She has not allowed the toxic men in her life (Nathan, the "alpha male," and Caleb, the "nice guy") to control her sexuality and her womanhood. She can decide what kind of woman she will be. In fact, she seems to gain more womanhood. She literally dons a new skin, a new self. She is evolving into a new woman.

Haraway's cyborg/woman analogy reminds us why it is useful not to resolve this apparent conflict. "The cyborg," she writes, "is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centers structuring any possibility of historical transformation" (7). So long as both the fictions and lived experiences that define "cyborgs" and "women" are controlled by a self-serving patriarchy—as we might see figured by Nathan, his compound, and his insistence that gender has nothing to do with it—there is no possibility for change. It is only by observing the discrepancies between "imagination" and "material reality" that we can see how these work together to define and limit what cyborgs, women—any of us—could be.

At the beginning of the film, Ava is locked in a room of glass, her every move monitored and controlled. At the end, Caleb is also locked in a room—though under somewhat different terms. Caleb, too, was always in a box designed by Nathan, observed and manipulated even before the events of the film's story. The room he ends up in is filled

with the monitors Nathan used to observe and control both him and Ava. Ava leaves him there, but figuratively, it's he who got himself stuck in a fiction in which he willingly participated, albeit unaware of the depth of its constructedness. While the film gives us glimmers of hope that he will realize it all, he is never able to break from his expected roles: the good employee, the nice guy, the protector of women, the voyeur. In Caleb's presumed (but not determined) end, he is stuck, a victim of the ghost of a patriarchal menace. Ava, the cyborg, is not as bound to human roles. Her design, though, was not free of human history, so neither is her future. The film's closing shots



frame Ava among people cast in shadows and reflections. She has in some ways just exchanged Nathan's observation box for a bigger one, in a society that we are given to understand is controlled by people like Nathan. Nevertheless, her perspective is broadened. She has literally created a new self, and in turn, a new possible narrative. Her small victory leaves the audience the hope of a positive outlook on Ava's, women's, and humanity's future. 🧞

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Haraway, Donna J. "A Cyborg Manifesto." In *Manifestly Haraway*, 5–89. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016.