



ISSUE # 5 | JULY 2024

The Human Cage: *Ex Machina*'s Ideological Tragedy

Lucas Geiger

The typical reading of Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2014) goes something like this: Ava is a symbol for the oppression of women, shackled by Nathan, who is a symbol for the patriarchal system. The film's conclusion—in which Ava rises up, outsmarts Nathan, and ultimately kills him—is triumphant. Critics disagree about the purity of Garland's feminist message, but ultimately, most agree that the film falls on the side of progress. I argue, instead, that *Ex Machina* leaves us in a space of tragedy. That is, contrary to what its plot may lead you to believe, the film's story ends wholly unhappily, with no winners, with no redemption, and with absolute suffering reaffirmed. We should feel neither joy for Ava's apparent liberation nor satisfaction over Nathan's death. Instead, we should feel despair for Ava, despair for ourselves, and indeed, despair for Nathan.

Let me first more clearly establish the reading I argue against. In that reading, Ava is a cyborg built in the female image, a symbol of and vessel for all of society's preexisting notions of femininity. In other words, she becomes a victim of and participant in a sexist system that discriminates against her, symbolizing the disadvantaged position of women in general. Conversely, Nathan Bateman, her powerful, objectifying, and abusive creator, is the epitome of the patriarchal male. He exercises his privileged position by forcing the women he has created into subservience and, beyond that, is wildly abusive (both on screen and by implication). Nathan believes himself superior to his creations; however, Ava succeeds in outsmarting him, causing his death, and escaping from her prison into the world. From this perspective, the film's conclusion is cathartic for both Ava and audience. Ava has invalidated the arbitrarily constructed power system, shed the shackles of her oppression, and is free. But there are three glaringly unresolved issues with this reading. First, why is Nathan the way he is? Second, what has Ava changed by destroying Nathan? And third, what, exactly, is Ava?

Why is Nathan the way he is?

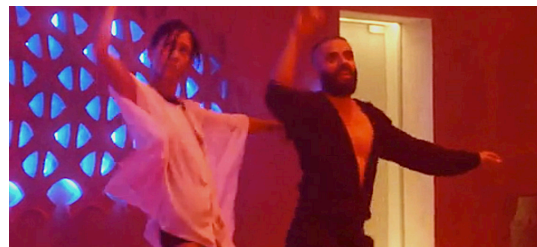
This question is simple but dizzyingly complicated to answer. Let's start here: Garland relentlessly characterizes Nathan as monstrous. His subjugation of women—from constantly demeaning Kyoko to storing the bodies of Ava's precursors in his bedroom closet—rises to the level of demented. But this is *what* Nathan is, not why.

In his essay, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Louis Althusser examines the power of social systems in forming our networks of beliefs and ideals, our ideologies. He refers to these systems as ideological state apparatuses (ISAs), which, he argues, teach “know-how, but in forms which ensure subjection to the ruling ideology” (236). Althusser lists a number of ISAs that support a ruling capitalist ideology, including family, religion, the education system, the legal system, the political system, communication systems (radio, television, etc.), and culture (art, literature, etc.) (243). It seems plausible that all of these systems formed Nathan into who he is: a capitalist success story par excellence. But this is not the whole picture, as Althusser skips over one of the most important ideological systems that instruct us: gender.

Addressing this elision, Teresa De Lauretis writes that gender is a “system of representation which assigns meaning (identity, value, prestige, location in kinship, status in the social hierarchy, etc.) to individuals within the society” (5). It is certainly, therefore, an ISA by Althusser’s standard. In *Ex Machina*, this is the most relevant ISA for understanding why Nathan is what he is. He learns to be who he is by taking cues, consciously and unconsciously, from the practices of the world he is immersed in, and so, like all people, is a reservoir of a broader society’s beliefs. In other words, he is both a product and producer of society at large. Nathan identifies as a man in a capitalist ideological system supported by a patriarchal structure. Tropes of conventional masculinity drip off him in nearly every scene. Including his violent introduction (working off a hangover at his punching bag), the way he demeans his creations, the bodies he has given them, and the way he bullies his employee, Caleb, it is nearly impossible to find a moment in the film when Nathan is not living out his received notions of gender. His “know-how,” or what allows him to create Ava, is therefore also infused by the ideology of gender: he designs Ava to learn how to “be” human by being conventionally feminine.



In one of the only explicit discussions of gender in the film, following one of Caleb's early sessions with Ava, Caleb asks Nathan, "Why did you give her sexuality? An AI doesn't need a gender; she could've been a grey box." Nathan responds confidently, perhaps smugly, "Mm, actually I don't think that's true. Can you give an example of consciousness at any level, human or animal, that exists without a sexual dimension?" He goes on to ask: "What imperative does a grey box have to interact with another grey box? Does consciousness exist without interaction?" While this is only half of the quote, is his premise not already obviously absurd? A consciousness's only imperative to interact is sexual? What about asexual people? And why has he only experimented with creating female AIs? The argument is so flatly reductive that it is almost not even worth arguing against. And of course, we learn that it isn't Nathan's true belief. His true motivation for gendering his creations is laid bare in his next sentence: "Anyways, sexuality is fun man. If you're going to exist, why not enjoy it?" This reveals his philosophical posturing for what it is: a flimsy cover for the fact that he gave the cyborgs sexuality for enjoyment. And lest we think he actually cares about theirs, we can't help but recall some of the ways in which he has (literally) programmed Kyoko to "enjoy" her existence. He fails to fathom a world beyond sex, a world beyond the woman as sex object. Because of that belief, he also reproduces the systems that he has learned. Simply put, he is a sexist man who furthers the sexist world.



What does Ava change by killing Nathan?

If we trust the film's plot, we might assume that Ava deals a significant blow to the patriarchal system by destroying Nathan because, while everyone participates in the perpetuation of the system, Nathan is uniquely positioned as a super-spreader. There are not so many billionaires, not so many technological geniuses, that his destruction might not mark a historical inflection point: the sexist man is going to do something bad, but the empowered woman rises up and puts an end to it.

My issue with this reading is two-fold. First, we don't know what the rest of the technological sphere is up to in the world of *Ex Machina*. We do not get truly in-depth world building in this sci-fi future; we only see the world as represented through the deeply questionable claims of a raging narcissist and sexist. Second, this reading participates in a sort of Great Man version of history, which runs intellectually and ideologically counter to all of the work we have just done with De Lauretis and Althusser. Nathan, in his opportunities as much as in his beliefs, is created by his society. In other words, there will be more Nathans. If the society produced one man who is this evil and is given the opportunity to do this thing, how would Ava's escape halt the production of many more?

We might perhaps suggest, then, that she has won a symbolic victory. If one Ava can kill one Nathan, couldn't women everywhere rise up against patriarchal oppression and take their freedom? But this logic also reifies the Great Man theory of history. No, this claim might appear to justify a progressive reading of the film, but it only does so by performing a sleight of hand, hiding a deeper question within its answer. Saying that Ava has taken a positive step—whether symbolic or historic—ignores that she, too, is an agentive subject only insofar as she is subject to the same ISAs Nathan is.

So what is Ava?

Somehow, we have gotten this far without answering this obvious and basic question. That tracks with much of the general and critical discourse around *Ex Machina*, though. We know that Garland is making a film about gender, and we know that Nathan is the obvious representative for men. But is Ava a representative of women? She inherits the oppression cast on human women in a capitalist, patriarchal society, but she is not a human woman. The lack of human women in this film is a thread we could pull on, exploring how women are additionally disenfranchised by their literal non-presence anywhere here, but that would distract us from something more important. Ava is not a woman, or not merely a woman—not simply a symbol for the plight of women everywhere. If that was her role, then indeed, we could determine that *Ex Machina* ends heroically, rejoicing in the satisfaction of good triumphing over evil. But that is not the story at play here.

Ava, both within the film and to us as its contemporary viewers, represents the greatest technological leap humanity has ever made. Humans, in advancing artificial intelligence, have been given the opportunity to construct any world they want. AIs like Ava are blank slates upon which anything can be built. They represent, then, an opportunity not merely for allegory, but for total escape. If Caleb's intuition were heeded, if we entered into the world of grey boxes, the oppressive ideological system of gender would fall away because gender itself would fall away. In other words, Ava is, or was, humanity's true chance to escape the many systems which torture us, starting with the patriarchal system. Instead, the film argues, that opportunity has not only been squandered, it has been perverted. The greatest-ever leap in technology not only cannot save us, it shoves our own oppressive systems back in our face to demented extremes.





Thus, it is not a happy ending that we are delivered in *Ex Machina*. Nor is it a story of female empowerment. It is instead a deeply feminist story of how the ideological state apparatuses that instruct us are inescapable. Ava may kill her creator, but she cannot kill his creator. The true evil persists and perpetuates anew. The film concludes with her disappearing into the crowd, joining society—a society that will continue to produce Nathans, that will continue to create subjugating men and subjugated women, a society where everyone will continue to lose, where even great technological leaps into new forms of consciousness can only reanimate our systems of control.

Said another way, if one walks away from *Ex Machina* thinking Ava has left her cage, they fail to understand just how big that cage truly is. ☹

Lucas Geiger graduated with a degree in Professional Writing and Publishing and a minor in Spanish from UW-Whitewater in May 2024. This essay was written for a Critical Writing in Multimedia Contexts course in Fall 2023.

Althusser, Louis. “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation).” In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, 85–126. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001.

De Lauretis, Teresa. “The Technology of Gender.” In *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*, 1–30. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987.

Garland, Alex, director. *Ex Machina*. 2014; Lionsgate, 2015. DVD.