

Cyborg myths, masculine myths:  
Representations of masculine control  
and the female cyborg in Alex Garland's  
EX MACHINA.

Bachelor thesis

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## **KEYWORDS**

EX MACHINA, Cyborg, Monstrous Feminine, Power, Control, Masculine Myth

# INTRODUCTION

Female cyborg figures have populated visual culture. One of the first female cyborgs to appear in film is Maria, the cyborg figure from Fritz Lang's *METROPOLIS* (1927). Though (science fiction) films have the opportunity to break with gender/sex boundaries through these cyborg figures, after Maria there followed a long line of stereotyped female cyborgs, including "the destructive force", for example, *Eve of Destruction* (Duncan Gibbons, 1990) or "the sexbot": *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), *Cherry 2000* (Steve De Jarnatt, 1986) and even Kyoko in *EX MACHINA* (Garland, 2015). Ideas about gender and sexuality are deeply embedded in gender representations and the reproduction of stereotypes, thus with the coming of the cyborg, Donna Haraway sees an opportunity to break with the power structures that are formed around these ideas.

To pick up with these possibilities in my thesis I will focus on Ava (Alicia Vikander), a female cyborg figure from Alex Garland's 2015 film, *EX MACHINA*, in order to discuss how issues of masculine control in relation to the female body are represented within the film. My aim is to show how what feminists have called the "masculine myth" might still have effect in the representations of female bodies — in this case the female cyborg body — and to consider the potential for this figure to operate as a site of change. It is an attempt to create awareness and look critically at images through which we create meaning about femininity and the representation of female bodies.

In this thesis I want to get a closer look on power in terms of control and femininity through the cyborg body in *EX MACHINA*. Thus my topic is:

**"Cyborg myths, masculine myths: Representations of masculine control and the female cyborg in Alex Garland's *EX MACHINA*."**

To get to the answering of that question I will answer my sub questions:

1. "What role does the masculine myth play in representations of cyborg bodies in *EX MACHINA*?"
2. "How is femininity represented through the cyborg in *EX MACHINA*?"
3. "How do the representations of the cyborg in *EX MACHINA* fit into cyborg politics?"

# BACKGROUND

*Masculinity tries to stay invisible by passing itself off as normal and universal. Words such as 'man' and 'mankind', used to signify the human species, treat masculinity as if it covered everyone. The God of Genesis is supposed to be all-powerful and present everywhere. He first makes 'man' in his own masculine image before going on to create male and female. If masculinity can present itself as normal it automatically makes the feminine seem deviant and different.*<sup>1</sup>

## Masculine myth

The masculine myth is mentioned by different writers like Donna Haraway, Simone de Beauvoir and Barbara Creed. “Myth”, writes Creed:

Divests the sign ‘Woman’ of its denotative meaning (a human being or person with the potential for bearing children) and replaces it with connotative meanings, such as ‘Woman as Other’, ‘the eternal feminine’<sup>2</sup>, or ‘object of male desire’, which give the air of being women's ‘natural’ characteristics when in fact they have been constructed through patriarchal discourse<sup>3,4</sup>

Beauvoir writes that movies are, next to religion, traditions, language, tales and songs, ‘vehicles for these myths, created by men and constructed from their viewpoint, which are then mistaken for ‘absolute truth’.<sup>5</sup> This form of power, Foucault writes, “applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects.”<sup>6</sup> Following Foucault’s formulation of power in terms of discourse, Teun van Dijk writes that the crucial notion of

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<sup>1</sup> Easthope, A. *What a man's gotta do: The masculine myth in popular culture*. Psychology Press, 1992. 1

<sup>2</sup> De Beauvoir herself was determined to shatter the myth of ‘the eternal feminine’ that, she claimed, human civilization has produced. An essence that women are meant to embody, the ‘eternal feminine’ sometimes refers to a biological essence, at others to a spiritual one. It attributes qualities such as inferiority, gentleness, and emotionality to women, and assumes them to be innate and fixed. (Chaudhuri, 16)

<sup>3</sup> As we have seen with de Beauvoir and Friedan, patriarchy itself has long promoted the idea of a feminine essence, which has been used to rationalize women’s oppression and prevent them from changing their situation. (Chaudhuri, 23)

<sup>4</sup> Creed, B. *The monstrous-feminine. Film, feminism, psychoanalysis*. London & New York: Routledge, 1993. (p. 300)

<sup>5</sup> Chaudhuri, S. *Feminist film*, 16

<sup>6</sup> Foucault, M. *The Subject and Power*, 781

power and domination is 'control'. He writes that “power is related to control, and control of discourse means preferential access to its production and hence to its contents and style, and finally to the public mind.”<sup>7</sup> He explains how this discursive power exceeds in this process:

[...] once you control part of the production of public discourse, you also control part of its contents, and hence, indirectly, the public mind - maybe not exactly what people will think, but at least what they will think *about*.<sup>8</sup>

If we look at this process in terms of gender relations, this process creates a form of control that is rooted in the masculine myth, making it a masculine form of control.

## Dichotomies

What is fundamental for the existence of these masculine myths is the logics they are founded on – a dichotomous thinking. Elizabeth Grosz explains that in dichotomous thinking, two terms remain separate, but they're hierarchized such that “one becomes the privileged term and the other its suppressed, subordinated, negative counterpart.”<sup>9</sup> Haraway states that “(all these dualities) have all been systematic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of color, nature, workers, animals... all [those] constituted as others.”<sup>10</sup> Dichotomies, that are embedded in our society, and sustained by the masculine myth, determine the representation and positions of women, and therefore of men, in society.

An example of one of the dichotomies is nature/culture. This dichotomy creates the idea that there is a difference between women and men where nature stands for woman, and culture for man, woman stands for other whereas man stands for self. The nature/culture dichotomy clearly aligns with another dominant dichotomy: mind/body dualism. In this dichotomy, man stands for mind, reason and woman is positioned as irrational and bound to the body, something that needs to be controlled. In order to have this control, logics and machines/technology are needed, i.e. what is codified as masculine which allows the masculine myths and male domination to remain in place.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Van Dijk, T. *Discourse and power*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. viii

<sup>8</sup> Van Dijk, T. *Discourse and power*. viii

<sup>9</sup> Grosz, E. *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism*, Indiana University Press, 1994. 3

<sup>10</sup> Haraway, D. *A cyborg manifesto*. The Haraway reader. 2004. (p. 35)

<sup>11</sup> Grosz, E. *Volatile Bodies*

Dichotomies create power relations that cause the masculine myth to function in its full extent. In order to change these power relations and to break with the institutionalized oppression of feminine bodies we need to address these masculine myths and their dichotomies.

### **Cyborg politics**

The cyborg is an important figure in feminist theory, and a lot has been written about this figure. The cyborg is, according to Haraway, “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction.”<sup>12</sup> As a creature of social reality, cyborgs are part of our everyday lives. An example Haraway gives is machines in medicine. We can think of machines that help us to breathe, that pump our blood through our body or prostheses. Equally it is a creature of fiction because we find several characters and images within the representation of cyborg within for example, film and literature.

Haraway uses the cyborg as a comprehensive metaphor to create a new myth in order to replace the masculine myth. For Haraway the cyborg is capable of replacing the masculine myth, because it transgresses the dichotomies upon which the western patriarchal systems are based. The cyborg is not fully nature (woman/human) and not fully culture (man/machine), it is a hybrid of both. According to Haraway this makes it an important entity in the process of dismantling power structures and dichotomies as it disrupts the alignment of woman with nature and man with culture and technology. With the introduction of the female cyborg, neither purely ‘nature’ nor purely ‘culture’ but a combination of both worlds, we find a ‘cybernetic organism’ that causes ‘traditional boundaries’ between nature/culture to blur. Thus, the cyborg opens up “a way of imagining a world without gender, and therefore without genesis or end.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Haraway, D. *A cyborg manifesto*. 1

<sup>13</sup> Haraway, D. *A cyborg manifesto*. 2

# Theory

In order to understand how the figure of the cyborg intersects with issues of power relations within the masculine myth and with the representation of femininity, I will form a theoretical framework using texts focusing on the work of Shohini Chaudhuri, Barbara Creed, Teun van Dijk, Donna Haraway, Andreas Huyssen and Sadie Plant and, to a lesser extent, Anne Balsamo and Michel Foucault.

Foucault writes: “in order to understand what power relations are about, perhaps we should investigate the forms of resistance and attempts made to dissociate these relations.”<sup>14</sup> When we know what these power relations are about, we, hopefully, will be able to change them, overstep boundaries that maintain these relations to keep masculine control, and therefore certain representations of femininity. According to Haraway the cyborg could be an important entity in the process of dismantling power structures and dichotomies.

With the opportunities Haraway's cyborg should bring for breaking boundaries, the transgression the cyborg offers is made into something to fear. The female cyborg is often represented as a lethal hybrid between 'woman' and machinery so it becomes something extra powerful and uncontrollable. In his essay *The Vamp and the Machine: Technology and Sexuality in Fritz Lang's Metropolis*, Andreas Huyssen gives a short historical overview on how the image of the robot changed in the 18th century. The robots changed from a testimony of the genius of mechanical invention to a nightmare and a threat to human life. This idea came from literature about robotics where writers began to discover horrifying traits which resemble those of real humans.<sup>15</sup> Huyssen writes that after this literary 'shift' on the image of robotics, there arose a shift in the preference in gender. Literature, writes Huyssen, "prefers machine-women to machine men."<sup>16</sup> He states:

[Historically, then,] we can conclude that as soon as the machine came to be perceived as a demonic, inexplicable threat and as harbinger of chaos and destruction [...] writers began to imagine the *Machinemensch* as woman.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Foucault, M. 'The subject and Power' *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (Summer, 1982), pp. 777-795 (p. 780)

<sup>15</sup> Huyssen, A. 'The Vamp and the Machine: Technology and Sexuality in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*'. *New German Critique* 24/25 (1981): 221-237. 227

<sup>16</sup> Huyssen, A. *The Vamp and the Machine*. 226

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 226



In this historical shift we can see that ‘machine’ was linked to ‘Woman’. Thus, as Huyssen writes, we can see that “Woman, nature, machine had become a mesh of significations which all had one thing in common: Otherness; by their very existence they raised fears and threatened male authority and control.”<sup>18</sup> He links these ‘threatening of male authority and control’ to the idea that we are facing here a complex process of projection and displacement: <sup>19</sup> that “[t]he fears and perceptual anxieties emanating from ever more powerful machines are recast and reconstructed in terms of the male fear of female sexuality, reflecting, in the Freudian account, the male’s castration anxiety.” <sup>20</sup> This combination is what Huyssen calls it, “the double male fear of technology and of woman”. <sup>21</sup>

Anne Balsamo also addresses this Otherness and the fear that is connected to cyborgs: “[...] cyborgs are a product of fears and desires that run deep within our cultural imaginary. Through the use of technology as the means or context for human hybridization, cyborgs come to represent unfamiliar “otherness”, one that challenges the denotative stability of human identity”.<sup>22</sup> In other words, the female cyborg threatens to break with traditional boundaries within patriarchal society, forcing us to rethink the boundaries of our own identities.. Its presence triggers a fear of being dominated, of being annihilated. That is to say: it represents a fear of losing control.

Huyssen writes about a deeply problematic “homology between woman and technology, a homology that results from male projections.”<sup>23</sup> This as a result of the double fear of technology and woman, and the fear of losing control that comes with it. [...] “The implication is that woman, as she has been socially invented and constructed by man, reflects man’s needs as he serves as her master.” <sup>24</sup> Sadie Plant draws on theories of technology as mimesis, as proposed by feminist and philosopher Luce Irigaray, to discuss this positioning. She writes: “Women, signs, commodities, and currency always pass from one man to another, and the women are supposed to exist only as the possibility of mediation, transaction, transition, transference - between man and his fellow-creatures, indeed between man and himself. In other words, the masculine myth determines the connotation and inferior position of ‘woman’.<sup>25</sup> But, as Huyssen also notes:

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> Balsamo, A. *Technologies of the gendered body: Reading cyborg women*. Duke University Press, 1996. pp 1 – 41 (p. 32)

<sup>23</sup> Huyssen, *The Vamp and the Machine*, 227

<sup>24</sup> Huyssen, *The Vamp and the Machine*, 227

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 93

[...] neither technology nor woman can ever be seen as solely a natural extension of man's abilities. They are always qualitatively different and thus threatening in their otherness. It is this threat of otherness which causes male anxiety and reinforces the urge to control and dominate that which is other.<sup>26</sup>

'Woman'/Other may be defined by man but therefore man is defined by 'Woman'/Other. Woman. is not only positioned in society by man, she also determines the connotation and position of man as she is the reflecting body, enabling man to position and define themselves. "Patriarchy [is] an economy, for which women are the first and founding commodity."<sup>27</sup> This gives women a form of power that is threatening to the position of man because the idea that they might change their fixed position makes the position of men unfixed and unstable. Thus the urge to avoid "crises of masculine identity" as Plant calls it comes into play here. These crises, as Plant explains, are "fatal corruptions of every one: every unified, centralized containment, and every system which keeps them secure."<sup>28</sup> Everything that kept man in place as the dominant one in control is being destroyed. However, as Plant points out, "None of this was the plan."<sup>29</sup> She follows that "what man has named as his history was supposed to function as the self-narrating story of a drive for domination and escape from the earth".<sup>30</sup> This masculine myth is:

Driven by dreams of taming nature and so escaping its constraints [...] But cyberspace is out of man's control [...] man confronts the system he built for his own protection and finds it is female and dangerous.<sup>31</sup>

## **The Monstrous Feminine**

Next to the reinforcement of the urge to control, fear also plays a part in in the representation of femininity. In her chapter on Barbara Creed, Chaudhuri writes about Robin Wood's understanding of the horror film as a society's collective nightmare, staging the return of

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<sup>26</sup> Huyssen, *The Vamp and the Machine*, 228

<sup>27</sup> Plant, S. 'On The Matrix: Cyberfeminist Simulations' in *Cultures of Internet. Virtual Spaces, Real Histories, Living Bodies*. Rob Shields (ed.) London: SAGE Publications, 1996. pp 170-183 (p. 171)

<sup>28</sup> Plant, *On the Matrix*, 181

<sup>29</sup> Plant, *On the Matrix*, 182

<sup>30</sup> Plant, *On the Matrix*, 182

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 182

'all that our civilization represses or oppresses'.<sup>32</sup> Creed refers to this as 'the Monstrous feminine'. This is "the horror film's configuration of woman-as-monster."<sup>33</sup> Chaudhuri follows:

In the horror film, the return of the repressed is enacted in the form of the monster, who not only turns society's dominant norms upside down but also embodies what is repressed in us. The monster is our own and society's 'Other'.<sup>34</sup>

Creed adapts Wood's perspective on the Other in her theory next to Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. One of the aspects of abjection in the horror film, writes Chaudhuri, "lies in the collapsing of boundaries or boundary ambiguities. The monster is what 'crosses or threatens to cross the "border", for example, the border between human and non-human."<sup>35</sup> Thus Creed writes: "[...] the function of the monstrous remains the same - to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability."<sup>36</sup>

Here, Creed and Chaudhuri make a clear link with Haraway's cyborg. This image of the monster as a threatening, transgressive figure that is capable of breaking boundaries combined with the threat of monstrosity clearly connects to the image of the female cyborg, a figure that needs to be controlled in order for masculine identity to stay in its place

Creed uses the signifying practices of the horror film but if we look at the long tradition of female characters/cyborgs in the science fiction genre, we may as well replace 'horror' with 'science fiction. Chaudhuri writes that: "Male castration anxiety has created two particular representations of the monstrous-feminine in the horror film: (1) woman as castrator, and (2) the castrated woman"<sup>37</sup> where the castrated woman is passive/ the one who is controlled and the castrated woman active/ the one who controls/kills. Creed writes:

The castrating woman is not passive like the castrated woman. She represents an active monster. Although this by itself does not make her a 'feminist' or 'liberated' figure, the revelation of woman as castrator does challenge patriarchal views that woman is essentially a victim.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Chaudhuri, *Feminist film*, 92

<sup>33</sup> Chaudhuri, *Feminist film*, 91

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 92

<sup>35</sup> Chaudhuri, *Feminist film*, 93

<sup>36</sup> Creed, *The monstrous-feminine.*, 11

<sup>37</sup> Chaudhuri, *Feminist film*, 100

<sup>38</sup> Chaudhuri, *Feminist film*, 95

Creed's castrated/castrator categories connect with Huyssen's images of the neutral and obedient Virgin and the threatening and out of control Vamp that are both found in METROPOLIS. With the machine-woman, Huyssen writes, "The myth of the dualistic nature of woman as either asexual virgin-mother or prostitute-vamp is projected onto technology which appears as either neutral and obedient or as inherently threatening and out-of-control."<sup>39</sup> He describes the figures as "On the one hand, there is the image of the docile, sexually passive woman, the woman who is subservient to man's needs and who reflects the image which the master projects of her [...]and] the prostitute-vamp, the harbinger of chaos, embodying that threatening female sexuality which was absent (or under control) in the robot."<sup>40</sup> Of course, he adds "the potent sexuality of the vamp is as much a male fantasy as the asexuality of the virgin-mother."<sup>41</sup>

Here we see the boundary dwelling potential of the castrating woman when it comes to patriarchal connotations of 'woman', the eternal feminine. Creed uses the theory of Carol Clover about the role of the female in slasher films to illustrate her "Femme Castrice". Clover defines the slasher film by its use of knives or other sharp weapons, rather than guns.<sup>42</sup> According to her, its other staple generic features are: the killer, often a psychopath; the 'terrible place', usually a house or tunnel where the victims find themselves trapped; and the 'Final Girl', who survives and subdues or kills the killer after he has murdered her friends one by one. Clover describes the Final Girl as 'a figurative male'. She says the Final Girl is phallicized, given masculine traits: a boyish name, the "active investigating gaze"/ the male gaze and the use of phallic symbols (sharp knives, swords, chainsaws, etc.).<sup>43</sup>

However, Creed disagrees with Clover's view on the positioning as pseudo-man and defines the Final Girl as a castrator/Femme Castrice. She writes that just 'because the heroine is represented as resourceful, intelligent, and dangerous, it does not follow that she should be seen as a pseudo man'. What Creed is making clear is that the idea that women are non-violent and peaceful is just another example of an image that has been used by patriarchal ideology in the interests of control. But "the femme castrice is an all-powerful, all-destructive figure, who 'arouses a fear of castration and death while simultaneously playing on a masochistic desire for death, pleasure and oblivion [in men]'"<sup>44</sup> Therefore she breaks with the patriarchal image of the eternal feminine. There is a paradox in this figure because next to the fact she reflects man's

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<sup>39</sup>Huyssen, A. *The Vamp and the Machine*, 226

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 226

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 229

<sup>42</sup> Chaudhuri, *Feminist film*, 100

<sup>43</sup> Chaudhuri, *Feminist film*, 101

<sup>44</sup> Chaudhuri, *Feminist film*, 102

desire, she also threatens his identity and existence. It is another figure illustrating the crises of men that Plant mentioned; constructed from his desire but a threat man's identity.

## METHOD

*“We can see the social construction of gender in what Althusser called ‘ideological state apparatuses’ – the media, schools, family, and law courts. All these institutions produce discourses that have the power to produce and promote representations of gender, which are then accepted and internalized by subjects. Not least among these technologies of gender is cinema.”* (Chaudhuri, 67)

In order to answer my questions about the connection between control and the representation of femininity in Alex Garland’s *EX MACHINA*, I will use feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis (FPDA) as a method. FPDA, developed by Judith Baxter. Foucauldian discourse analysis, combined with Jacques Derrida's (1976) work on deconstruction, which seeks to dismantle the male/female binary, is a key method in feminist poststructuralist work. <sup>45</sup> FPDA is defined by Baxter as:

An approach to analyzing intertextualised discourse in spoken interaction and other types of text. [...] FPDA regards gender differentiation as one of the most pervasive discourses across many cultures in terms of its systematic power to discriminate between human beings according to their gender and sexuality. <sup>46</sup>

As the name indicates, an important element in FPDA, and relevant to this thesis overall is “discourse”. As Stuart Hall points out, an important thing about discourse is, that it is "about the production of knowledge through language. But it is itself produced by a practice: "discursive practice" - the practice of producing meaning." <sup>47</sup> This means that it is important to stay critical towards discourses because knowledge and meaning are so intertwined. An example is the patriarchal discourse that has the masculine myth that produces all kinds of “knowledge and “absolute truths” about women and their bodies. This connects to what van Dijk said on the discursive power that exceeds when controlling a part of the public discourse.

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<sup>45</sup> Elichaooff, F. and Frost, N. Feminist postmodernism, poststructuralism, and critical theory. 44

<sup>46</sup> Elichaooff, F. and Frost, N. "Feminist postmodernism, poststructuralism, and critical theory." *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer* (2013): 50

<sup>47</sup> Hall, S. *The West and the Rest*. 165

Therefore, discourse analysis is appropriate for this thesis because it enables to analyse certain myths and traditions within discourse. Nollaig Frost and Frauke Elichaoﬀ give the following definition of discourse analysis:

[It] allows for the analysis of language, spoken or written, and of images, symbols, and other media representations. Discourse analysis aims to understand how realities are constructed through these media, and to observe cultural and societal influences on subjective experiences.<sup>48</sup>

Postmodernist thinking, as Frost and Elichaoﬀ write is a way of thinking that “proposes that, instead of the existence of one essential truth, there are multiple subjective, relative truths of personal construction.”<sup>49</sup> These relative truths are “shaped not just by subjective experience, but also by what is available from society, culture, the spoken and written word.”<sup>50</sup> Thus poststructuralism “challenges the notion of “essentialism” that describes “woman” as an identity category that is fixed and unchanging [and] instead, recognizes the social construction of realities and the risk of maintenance and perpetuation of constructions arising from power interests”,<sup>51</sup> Postmodernism and poststructuralism look at interactions between different axes such as gender, sexuality, class and race and their focus is “not only on women's differences from men, but also women's differences from each other”<sup>52</sup> as the different representations of women are a product of “dominant male constructions of realities that emerge from and serve male power interests.”<sup>53</sup>

Frost and Elichaoﬀ write that “the exploration of women’s experiences highlights their complexity and variation as women draw on cultural, historical, political and personal constructs to make sense of themselves and their relations to the world they inhabit<sup>54</sup>.” Theresa de Lauretis states that “the ongoing project of feminism, [is] to define a view from ‘elsewhere’ – the elsewhere of current cultural discourse – from the blind spots or space-off<sup>55</sup> of its spaces of representation.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Elichaoﬀ, F.and Frost, N. *Feminist postmodernism, poststructuralism, and critical theory*. 42

<sup>49</sup> Elichaoﬀ, F.and Frost, N. *Feminist postmodernism, poststructuralism, and critical theory*. 43

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 43

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 43

<sup>52</sup> Elichaoﬀ, F.and Frost, N. *Feminist postmodernism, poststructuralism, and critical theory*. 42

<sup>53</sup> Elichaoﬀ, F.and Frost, N. *Feminist postmodernism, poststructuralism, and critical theory*. 43

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 43

<sup>55</sup> ‘the space-off’, a term that “designates space which cannot be seen within the frame yet which can be inferred from it [...] the male-centered representation of Woman inhabits the space of the frame, while women remain outside.” From this quote we can read that Woman is a masculine construct and her functioning within a masculine frame.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 68

Because of the discourse analysis my analysis adds to the exploration of women's experiences by opening up the masculine myth a bit more from 'elsewhere' by analyzing their workings in EX MACHINA, focusing on power relations and meaning and the representation of the feminine through masculine constructs and masculine control.

FPDA gives me all the lenses and tools needed to do a proper analysis because for my research I will be looking at discourses of power and sexuality and try to reveal which structures arise from those discourses. I look at power in terms of control, the masculine myth and the consequences of these discourses towards the representation of the female body.



## ANALYSIS

*'Woman appears to man solely as 'a sexual being', not as an autonomous entity: 'She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other' - Simone de Beauvoir (Chaudhuri,16)*

The analysis that follows takes focus with the connections between masculine control and the representations of femininity discussed in the previous chapters. I will focus on scenes where we can see the relation between the characters Nathan (Oscar Isaac) and Ava, as well as Caleb (Domhnall Gleeson) and Ava. In these scenes I will be looking for particular myths and power structures at work that position the characters and events in terms of dichotomies such as mind/body, woman/man. For my analysis of the types of representations of femininity in the film, I will focus on different scenes in which the female cyborgs, Ava and Kyoko (Sonoya Mizuno), are represented. I will do this in order to find out how and how dichotomies are an important factor in the masculine production of images from which we create meaning about gender and sexuality.

In EX MACHINA, Caleb works as a programmer for the world's biggest search engine. Through a lottery system he gets invited for an exclusive get-together with the big boss of the company, 'God-complex' Nathan. To get there he needs to go by helicopter and we see images of Caleb floating over massive landscapes of unspoiled nature. The pilot drops him off in the middle of this wilderness, without any network on his telephone. In the middle of the belly of Mother Nature there is a high-tech, glass and steel house where Nathan lives. After an awkward first meeting, Caleb receives a tour of the house and is asked to sign a contract, told that if he doesn't, he will miss out on an opportunity that he will regret for the rest of his life. Nathan asks Caleb if he knows what the Turing Test<sup>57</sup> is. After answering this quick pop quiz Nathan tells Caleb he built an A.I., Ava (Alicia Vikander). Ava is a cyborg with a female body made by Nathan. The scene is set for Caleb to be the human component in the Turing Test with Ava.

In an interview with the popular culture & science blog, i09, on the topic his 2015 film, Alex Garland says that the main question in this film is: "Tell us what is going on inside the

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<sup>57</sup> The Turing Test is a test when a human interacts with a computer and if the human doesn't know they're interacting with a computer the test is passed. This 'passing' means the computer has Artificial Intelligence.

mind of this being, whatever this being is. Tell us what is going on inside this being's head. Specifically, what is it thinking?"<sup>58</sup> But, as Garland states, the following happens:

a whole bunch of obstacles are presented to both the protagonist and the audience, which effectively get in the way of asking the question, 'What is Ava thinking?' [So this movie is about] the way we are prevented by the things you are talking about [like gender and sexuality]. They stand in the way of asking the question, 'What is going on inside that thing's head?'<sup>59</sup>

The “obstacles” Garland speaks about, at first seem to get in the way of talking about consciousness, receive a very different treatment, however, when he talks about the role of this AI cyborg in EX MACHINA. In another interview, with The Guardian, we read that Garland is clearly aware of how different types of representations, the “obstacles”, work and he seems to embrace them::

“If you’re going to use a heterosexual male to test this consciousness, you would test it with something it could relate to. We have fetishised young women as objects of seduction, so in that respect, Ava is the ideal missile to fire.”<sup>60</sup>

In this quote we clearly read sexualization, objectification (an ideal missile) and stereotyping of Ava’s body. All of these things are described as something that makes sense, something that is normal and logical to represent in order to test consciousness. Femininity and sexuality are used as a tool here in order to unlock the “bigger question” about consciousness. What is interesting about this choice is to ask *why* Ava needed to be gendered female? *Why* these are the typical things a heterosexual male should relate to? And *why* is this the logical way to approach the question of consciousness?

### **Mythology or misogyny?**

When we look at EX MACHINA’s cyborg, Ava, it would appear most of the time that shw is not the boundary dwelling figure Haraway had in mind. The film seems to reproduce dichotomies that the cyborg is said to confuse, and to highlight an inability to break with

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<sup>58</sup>Garland, 2015

<sup>59</sup>Garland, 2015

<sup>60</sup> Garland, 2015

patriarchal representations of femininity because they are so present in the movie. Ava just seems to be another fly caught in the web of patriarchal culture and the masculine myth. But one of the key ideas of Haraway is:

The hyper-reality of the [...] cyborg post-human predicament does not wipe out politics or the need for political resistance: it just makes it more necessary than ever to work towards a radical redefinition of political action<sup>61</sup>

From this quote we learn that the cyborg can also function as a lens, to get a better, more clear view on the masculine myth. To illustrate this function I will analyse examples from the film that connect Ava with relations of masculine control.

### **The “double fear of technology and woman”**

Within a patriarchal society it is not at all hard to detect this tradition of female gendered cyborgs as defined through the masculine myth. In the film, issues of gender and sexuality are clearly present. We see familiar patterns of how to understand gender and sexuality: male figures wanting to create life, to manipulate ‘other’ bodies and a cyborg that has been gendered female through ‘its’ body, being sexualised, objectified and using seduction to get what ‘that thing’ wants. These familiar patterns, or as Garland calls them: ‘obstacles’, are about masculine control. They are part of a discourse within patriarchal culture, written by and for masculine myths.

Ava is one of Nathan’s cyborg prototypes. Nathan created Ava because: “The arrival of strong AI has been inevitable for decades. The variable is 'when' not 'if', I see Ava not as a decision but an evolution.”<sup>62</sup> Here Nathan has a clear role in determining evolution by creating AI. Nevertheless, this still does not answer my earlier question about *why* Nathan decided that all of his cyborgs had to be gendered female.

Andreas Huyssen has similar questions about the choice of gender of Rotwang’s<sup>63</sup> female robot in Fritz Lang’s METROPOLIS. Huyssen states that, it is precisely the fact that Fritz Lang does not feel the need to explain the female features of Rotwang’s robot, that shows the recycling

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<sup>61</sup> Braidotti, R. *Posthuman, All Too Human Towards a New Process Ontology*. 203

<sup>62</sup> *Ex Machina*, 1.04.33

<sup>63</sup> C.A. Rotwang, a scientist and inventor, is a fictional character in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927)

of the tradition being investigated here, a masculine tradition in which the *Maschinenmensch*, more often than not, is presented as woman.<sup>64</sup>

In the novel by Thea von Harbou, on which METROPOLIS is based, Rotwang gives an explanation for why he made a female robot. He says: "Every man-creator makes himself a woman. I do not believe that humbug about the first human being a man. If a male god created the world ... then he certainly created woman first"<sup>65</sup>. As Huyssen notes, "this does not seem to fit with [the] hypothesis that the machine-woman typically reflects the double male fear of technology and of woman"<sup>66</sup> because why would man create such a fearful creature? Huyssen writes:

the passage rather suggests that the machine-woman results from the more or less sublimated sexual desires of her male creator. We are reminded of the Pygmalion myth in which the woman, far from threatening the man, remains passive and subordinate.<sup>67</sup>

Exactly this idea about woman staying passive and subordinate, like Creed's castrated woman, gives a reason to create a woman despite the 'double fear'. Part of being a God-like man-creator is the idea that Nathan acts from the position that he is, and will stay, the one in control. Huyssen writes: "Rotwang creates the android as an artifact, as an initially lifeless object which he can then control and dominate"<sup>68</sup> We see this same capacity for control and domination in *EX MACHINA*, in the relationship between Ava and her creator.

This is evident in *EX MACHINA* in a number of ways, notably where Nathan keeps Ava locked in a room made of glass and filled with cameras so he can watch, and therefore control, her all the time. Even when Ava escapes this room, we see that Nathan wants to control the situation, demanding Ava to 'go back to her room'.<sup>69</sup> This is an interesting choice of words as it immediately reminds one of a father speaking to his child, demanding its obedience. When Ava comes running towards him during the same scene, he demands her to stop several times, demolishes her arm and drags her away by her legs, like the image we have of a caveman dragging away his female. It was never Nathan's intention to give eternal life to Ava, she was, just like Rotwang's robot, another object to "control and dominate". .

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid, 224

<sup>65</sup>Huyssen, *The Vamp and the Machine*, 2226

<sup>66</sup>Ibid. 226

<sup>67</sup>Huyssen, *The Vamp and the Machine*, 227

<sup>68</sup>Ibid, 227

<sup>69</sup>*Ex Machina*. 1:29:25

## Interior and exterior make inferior

As we have read several times now, the masculine myth determines and controls the representation of the female cyborg and her sexuality in the film. In a conversation between Nathan and Caleb, Caleb asks the question of why Nathan gave Ava sexuality:

**Nathan:** “In between her legs is an opening, with a concentration of sensors. You engage 'em in the right way, creates a pleasure response. So if you wanted to screw her, mechanically speaking you could, and she would enjoy it.”<sup>70</sup>

There are different dichotomies at work here like the body/mind split that makes man a rational individual, a person and Ava, as woman tied to her body being objectified into this sexmachine that, “if you wanted to screw her” you would enjoy that. Ava’s sexuality is made into something completely mechanic. It is just a case of ‘pushing the right buttons’; buttons put away in an opening, placed and designed by Nathan.

Here woman is constructed as object of male desire, her body created by masculine ideas on female bodies and pleasure. In this way Ava fulfils Beauvoir’s claim that “[w]oman appears to man solely as ‘a sexual being’, not as an autonomous entity, and she is defined and differentiated with reference to man”;<sup>71</sup> in this case, Nathan’s idea on how a woman should be stimulated in order to experience pleasure.

Later on in the movie we see how Nathan worked with previous AIs and how he, sometimes brutally, shuts down their bodies and lugubriously keeps those bodies, as lifeless shells (some without arms and legs, or without a head) in his closet like trophies.

When Nathan shuts down an AI he just downloads the mind, unpacks the data, adds in the new routines he has been writing. To do that, he has to partially format (erase) the creature’s memories, “but the bodies survive. And Ava’s body is a good one”.<sup>72</sup> This, again, shows an objectification of Ava’s body and how ‘mind’ is disconnected from ‘body’. The cyborg body is presented as a vessel of lesser relevance and value.

Next to her exterior, Ava’s interior is also determined by masculine control. In the film<sup>73</sup>Caleb gets a tour of Nathan’s ‘laboratory’. Here we see all kinds of AI body parts and

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<sup>70</sup>*Ex Machina*, 46:00

<sup>71</sup>Beauvoir 1993: xxxix–xl

<sup>72</sup>*Ex Machina*, 1:06:00

<sup>73</sup>*Ex Machina* 36.30

Nathan explains how he created Ava's brain, her inner life. With the following quote we get more insight into Nathan's intentions when he constructed Ava's brain:

**Nathan:** "To escape she had to use self awareness, imagination, manipulation, sexuality, empathy and she did. And if that isn't true AI, what the fuck is?"

In this comment we see that Nathan gave Ava a list of traits that within the masculine myth are defined as 'typically female'. Manipulation, sexuality and empathy are the female 'weapons' Ava receives, all in line with the qualities of the Vamp and Femme Castrice. She receives these typical traits to help her in seducing Caleb, and in getting what she wants, namely, freedom: to break loose from Nathan's control. Knowing about the double fear of technology and woman, it is interesting that Nathan gave Ava all these 'weapons' that are typically female because of that, ironically, she becomes the embodiment of the double fear. But as we said earlier, the idea of creating woman comes with the idea of *staying* in control. We learn more and more about Ava but only within the conversations between the two men. This conversation is a small discourse within the masculine discourse in which Ava is trapped and her identity and sexuality are defined. Ava's exterior and interior are defined by the masculine myth as we learn how Ava's hardware and software works: all to create the perfect, obedient 'woman'.

"The dividing and fragmenting of women into inner and outer nature"<sup>74</sup> can be seen in other parts of the film as well when Nathan 'builds' these mechanical women and disassembles them again when the research is done. This can be linked to what Huyssen writes: "it is male vision which puts together and disassembles woman's body, thus denying woman her identity and making her into an object of projection and manipulation."<sup>75</sup>

There is a scene,<sup>76</sup> however, where Ava seems to break loose from this masculine myth in *EX MACHINA*. In one of the last scenes, Ava herself constructs her body by taking the skin, body parts, hair and clothing of her fellow, switched off AI's, she uses them to fill in the 'blank's on her body laying the fabricated skin over her cyborg parts and 'replacing' the arm with her damaged one by 'clicking' them off and on. We can read this as a moment in which Ava is constructing herself, building herself an identity and, in doing so, breaking with being an object of Nathan's manipulation. By constructing her own body image, Ava appears to have an element of autonomy, in this moment she is not completely bound by Nathan's construction and ideas of her. However, a paradox in this 'boundary dwelling moment' is that as Ava constructs herself

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 231

<sup>75</sup> Huyssen, A. *The Vamp and the Machine*, 231

<sup>76</sup> *Ex Machina*, 1,34.00.00

but she still does this with bodyparts created by Nathan. Her body is still determined/constructed from the components of Nathan's creation and his image of woman. By knowing this, is it ever even possible for Ava to break loose from Nathan?

### **Virgin, Vamp, or both?**

There are different ways in which the feminine is represented through the bodies of Ava and Kyoko. I will analyse the difference in representation between Kyoko and Ava, and the final scenes of EX MACHINA in which Ava escapes, stabs Nathan and leaves Caleb to die in the compound.

A representation is found in the figures of the Virgin and the Vamp Huysen describes that seem to be present through Ava and Kyoko.

In EX MACHINA we see an interesting switch of typical characteristics of these figures between Ava and Kyoko. If we look at the traits of the virgin and the vamp, across the film Kyoko fits the image of the virgin perfectly because she is mute and obedient, her name even carrying the meaning "Respectful Child".<sup>77</sup> We see how Ava, too, fits this image of the virgin, the passive woman, obedient and under Nathan's control. However, the image of the Vamp also fits Ava because she is assertive and she talks back. One of the ingredients that is essential in the characters Huysen describes seems to be switched, and that ingredient is sexuality.

Kyoko, who has all the character traits of the virgin is actually presented very sexually through her body. She has the 'complete' body of a woman with skin and breasts, which we can see fully when she lies on Nathan's bed completely naked.<sup>78</sup> She barely wears clothes and she even offers herself to Caleb, unbuttoning her top, when he's alone in a room with her.<sup>79</sup> Ava, doesn't have skin on her body and is feminine for the eye because of her face and her female shape. When she dresses herself she wears pink and blue clothes and 'girlish' flower prints, that fully cover her body.

Next to the switch in representation of sexuality between Kyoko and Ava, Kyoko also represents the final girl mentioned by Carol and Creed. EX MACHINA is found in the genre science fiction. If we use Carol's definition of slasher film we can also find some overlap with that genre in EX MACHINA. Creed defines the Final Girl as a castrator/Femme Castrice, something that is, according to Huysen, a trait of the Vamp. Kyoko is the girl that is trapped in

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<sup>77</sup> [www.babynames.co.uk/meaning\\_origin\\_name\\_Kyoko.htm](http://www.babynames.co.uk/meaning_origin_name_Kyoko.htm)

<sup>78</sup> *Ex Machina*, 1:10:55

<sup>79</sup> *Ex Machina*, 57:50

a house and she kills the killer, Nathan, after he murdered her friends, in this case fellow cyborgs. She does this, as the definition says, with a sharp knife when Nathan is dragging Ava back to her room. Creed's argument that the Final Girl is seen as a castrator opens up a possibility for these cyborgs to transgress dichotomies that are the basis of the interpretations of them.

I think it is an interesting twist in the movie that Kyoko is the Final Girl because in Creed's theory, the *Femme Castrice* is active, like Ava: thus never simply the obedient, castrated woman that Kyoko has represented throughout the movie. In *EX MACHINA* we see an interesting shift here from this castrated woman as she transforms into the castrating woman. Thus the Virgin is a Vamp: a shift that makes even the obedient virgin into an always lurking threat. This threat is most evident in one of the final scenes where Ava escapes and meets Kyoko in the hallway. They have a moment that is completely abstract to the viewer. There is no way we can understand how, and what they are communicating with each other recalling Garland's opinion on how obstacles like these withhold us from answering the question: "what is going on inside her head" . Their Otherness is highlighted here in the terms Huyssen provides: women are always qualitatively different and thus threatening in their Otherness. This makes the way in which they have always been repressed as changeable and as ungraspable as their difference.

With this redefinition of femininity we find a threat to the definition and identity of woman as being always knowable, making identity of man also unstable. With this, we see a link to the double fear that Huyssen refers to in the way of this discourse of the Other creating a monstrous feminine figure: the cyborg is represented as dangerous, a threat to masculine control and bringer of death in her form as woman and machine, an as castrator.

It is clear that the "obstacles" Garland mentioned still play a very important role in the construction of images of femininity and sexuality. They are trapped in the patriarchal discourse, the site where the production of knowledge and what people think *about* is under masculine control. But with the female cyborg here, it seems this control can never be total.



## CONCLUSION

*Does the body rule the mind or does the mind rule the body? I don't know* - The Smiths

In Garland's *EX MACHINA* we can clearly see the role of masculine control in constructing the female body. There are two types of fear we see, fear of technology and fear of woman. Both carry an Otherness within them that makes them both a threat to masculine identity and control. Femininity is represented through the cyborg as Virgin and Vamp that both carry their own 'typical' female connotations. Next to that she is constantly represented as Other what makes the way in which they have always been repressed as changeable and as ungraspable as their difference.

When used as a myth, Ava and Kyoko are the boundary dwelling figure Donna Haraway talks about in her *Cyborg Manifesto*. Ava is a lens which brings masculine control to light and shows how woman is still connected to fear and threat. The connection of the Clover's final girl and with that Creed's femme castrice, opens up a possibility for these cyborgs to transgress dichotomies that are the basis of the interpretations of them.

When we look at Ava as a real feminine body, instead of a myth, we see that even the cyborg is defined within patriarchal society, giving here the same position as women in society. She is constantly controlled and defined by male characters given 'typical' female traits that go with her female shaped cyborg body. Dichotomous thinking is highlighted as we have seen that body/mind is one of the dichotomies repeatedly returning.

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