

The Male Fear of Female Agency

*Practices of binary thinking
and border crossing*

28 June 2017

BA-Thesis English, final version

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Abstract

This thesis will provide a comparison between two texts: one novel from the early nineteenth century, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*; and one motion picture that premiered in 2014, *Ex Machina*. They will be approached from a feminist perspective that focusses on the relation between feminism and the practise of crossing the borders between binary oppositions. Such an approach will prove justified as both texts reflect a socially accepted distinction between men and women, that correlates with the distinction between the domestic and the private sphere; and because both *Frankenstein* and *Ex Machina* thematise the practice of border crossing as they concern the production of new 'unnatural' life – monsters. Victor Frankenstein produces his creature and Nathan produces Ava, a form of Artificial Intelligence. The question central to this thesis is: "How do *Frankenstein* and *Ex Machina* reflect upon female agency through their monsters, and what does this tell us about the reception of border crossing as a feminist strategy by their respective contemporary societies?".

In order to answer this question, several theories will be combined. These theories will be introduced simultaneous with the execution of a brief historical analysis. This analysis will concern practices of border crossing that relate to feminism in three different historical moments. This analysis will serve to demonstrate the existing interconnectedness between feminism, thinking in binary oppositions and practices of border crossing. At the same time, the analysis will contextualize *Frankenstein* and *Ex Machina*, and will connect the theories that form my theoretical framework to each other. These theories include those deriving from Simone De Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* concerning gendered binary oppositions, Jeffrey Cohen's *Monster Theory*, Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* and a detailed analysis on Shelley's *Frankenstein* by Mary Poovey, that concerns the dichotomies female-male and domestic-public. The analysis will demonstrate that identifying binary oppositions and transgressing them is, an always has been, a feminist concern. It will also demonstrate that such practices of border crossing produces monsters, as new ideas are introduced that are misfits to society.

The historical analysis will be succeeded by the actual comparison of the two texts that will be executed by means of a close reading focussing on their respective practices of border crossing. This comparison will demonstrate that both *Frankenstein* and *Ex Machina* carry out the practice of border crossing as a feminist concern, but that they each view their respective contemporary concept of feminism in a different way. In the case of *Frankenstein*, the novel reflects the absence of feminism as a concept and as a social movement, while *Ex Machina* acknowledges modern feminism as theorized by Donna Haraway. Additionally, while Frankenstein argues that the (feminist) practice of border crossing has negative consequences only for the individual who carries out the practice, these practices are implied to affect society as a whole in *Ex Machina*; with this, *Ex Machina* carries out a view on modern feminism that seems to warn for the threat modern feminism forms for the established (patriarchal) society.

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I. An act against God, an act of border crossing

“A Modern Prometheus”, the subtitle to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* reads. Shelley’s masterpiece, first published in 1818, belongs to a tradition of numerous post-renaissance, post-enlightenment literary works such as Goethe’s poem “Prometheus” (1789) and Percy Shelley’s lyrical drama *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), that refer to the Promethean myth concerning the Greek titan’s dissent against God (Werblowsky 53). In *Frankenstein*, Victor Frankenstein takes upon himself the role of God and creates - against the laws of nature - life: “A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me” (Shelley 55). Victor imagines himself God-like - a megalomania we can also find in the character of a more modern production. Namely, in the motion picture *Ex Machina* that came out in 2014. Nathan, the scientist responsible for the creation of Ava (a form of Artificial Intelligence), experiences the same delusional pride; “I’ve invented a machine with consciousness, I’m not a man, I’m God” (00:15:33). Both their haughtiness is in vain, however, as their creations have a mind of their own and they dissent when it comes to the act and intentions of their creators. Like *Frankenstein*’s subtitle, *Ex Machina* implies with its title an undermining reference to the alleged almightiness of ‘God’. ‘Ex machina’ derives from ‘deus ex machina,’ which is a narrative technique that concerns an unexpected element in the plot development that is explained by the means of a divine interference. *Ex Machina* indeed provides a sensational plot twist, yet not one anticipated by the Godly figure Nathan. Ava takes matters into her own hands and kills her creator Nathan. With God gotten rid of, what is left is ‘ex machina,’ which can be translated literally as ‘according to the machine.’

While these titles may refer to the creations criticizing their creators, Victor and Nathan do not bow to the boundaries *their* creator set for them either, as they create new life without the interference of a woman, whose natural gift is to bear new life. The result of their acts of creation is not the revolutionary new form of life they were hoping for, but the production of a hideous monster that turn against them, with fatal consequences. As this brief analysis of the respective titles demonstrates, both *Frankenstein* and *Ex Machina* thematize the transgression of ‘natural’ borders, while at the same time, tensions emerge regarding what distinguishes men from women. For this reason, I advocate the importance of a feminist approach to set these two texts (as I will refer to both novel and film as texts of analysis), and their monstrous acts of creation, opposed to each other. I expect the thorough analysis of the acts of border crossing in these texts to reflect upon the position of the female in their contemporary societies - more specifically, to reflect upon a contemporary, general approach to female agency and notions of feminism. Alongside female agency and feminism, practices of thinking in binary oppositions and of border crossing will be central to this thesis, as these are inherently interwoven with the themes of both texts. These practices will prove to be as inherently interwoven with feminism as well and it will become apparent that practices of border crossing are in fact a continued preoccupation of feminism in its battle for female agency. The central question of this thesis is as follows:

How do *Frankenstein* and *Ex Machina* reflect upon female agency through their monsters, and what

does this tell us about the reception of border crossing as a feminist strategy by their respective contemporary societies?

In order to answer this question, more clarity on the relation between feminism, binary oppositions and border crossing is needed first. I will demonstrate their interconnectedness by means of a brief historical analysis that focuses on three different moments in the history of feminism. Two of these moments will comprise the respective historical contexts of texts that are central to this thesis, as Shelley's *Frankenstein* appeared in a historical moment that preceded feminism as a concept, while *Ex Machina* was released in a historical moment close to the point we find ourselves today. While discussing Shelley's historical context, special attention will be given to an analysis provided by feminist scholar Mary Poovey. Poovey also focusses on binary oppositions as she discusses the distinction between the domestic and public sphere, that corresponds, she argues, with a distinction between male and female. Her article focusses on an internal dilemma Shelley experienced, as she wanted to be both a pious woman and a female writer (333). Poovey demonstrates that by writing *Frankenstein*, Shelley performed an act of border crossing as well (Poovey 333). Concerning *Ex Machina*, I will largely rely on Donna Haraway's notion of the cyborg, as she describes this metaphorical figure as a figure of transgression and stresses the connection with modern feminism (Haraway 17). However, the point of departure for my historical analysis will be to rely on the Norwegian Anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen, who sought to convey the basics of anthropological debates and approaches in his book *Small Places, Large Issues*. His anthropological account on how issues of power and biology have been understood will serve as a way to gain insight in the way power relations exist between man and woman and how this is connected to binary oppositions. The accounts of Iris van der Tuin, feminist epistemologist and interdisciplinary theorist, on the history of feminism will connect these insights to feminism. Van der Tuin pays specific attention to the first and second feminist waves, while connecting these to the ideas of Simone De Beauvoir as formulated in *Le Deuxième Sexe*. This historical account will also constitute the third historical moment of my analysis. Simone De Beauvoir emphasizes the relation between feminism and binary oppositions, as do I. Hence, the historical and anthropological approaches of Eriksen and van der Tuin will serve to support De Beauvoir's arguments and to place them in a broader context. Ultimately, this historical overview that is central to chapter II will serve to demonstrate that feminism is continuously concerned with the identification of binary oppositions and transgressing them, as a strategy to advocate a revision of female agency. Additionally, by the means of Jeffrey Cohen's *Monster theory* I will demonstrate that crossing the borders of binary thinking is a practice that is by no means socially accepted and produces the hideous monsters that are a central aspect of the proposed research question.

The combination of the brief historical analysis and the theories of De Beauvoir, Poovey, Cohen and Haraway amongst others, will form a coherent theoretical framework that should provide all the information needed to generate a sufficient comparison between *Frankenstein* and *Ex Machina*. This comparison will be carried out by means of a close reading of the acts of border crossing in chapter III. This close reading seeks to answer subquestions related to my research question, namely 'which binary oppositions can be defined?', 'how

are monsters produced through practices of border crossing?', and 'what are the consequences of these acts of border crossing?'. Ultimately, this thesis will demonstrate that feminism concerns, and always has concerned, the identification of binary oppositions and transgressing these oppositions. Simultaneously, it demonstrates that these practices generate monsters since the crossing of borders is perceived as a dangerous threat to the established (patriarchal) society; therefore, I argue that female subordination is the result of a male fear of female agency.

II. The feminist, the monster, the cyborg

Feminism and binary thinking

To understand that feminism concerns the identification of binary oppositions and transgressing them, it is necessary to understand why binary oppositions concern feminism at all. To clarify this, I rely on an anthropological approach: Thomas Hylland Eriksen argues that distinguishing between male and female by means of social hierarchy and labour division, dates as far back as humanity itself (132-133). Principal cause for such a distinction is considered ultimately rooted in biological differences; in "women's lack of physical mobility during pregnancy and suckling" (Eriksen 136). The idea that the female is more bound to the natural forces of the body, such as pregnancy and menstruation, have caused the female to be confined to the domestic space and to performing domestic duties, while the male is free to advance into the public spheres entailing social interaction (Ibidem). In other words, the male and female are and always have been, defined not merely as opposing each other biologically, but also socially. Therefore, it is not surprising that Simone De Beauvoir relies on binary oppositions as the core of her argumentation in *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949). She states that all binary oppositions, such as domestic versus public and nature versus culture, are gendered and that thence social structures, psychological processes, morality and representations are structured by these mutually exclusive contradictions that coincide with the distinction between the biological sexes - and with that, that the male-female dichotomy is deeply rooted in our Western society (van der Tuin 22).

Additionally, De Beauvoir argues that gender-specific connotations, such as 'nature,' 'culture,' 'domestic' and 'public,' do not just form binary oppositions, but relate to each other in a hierarchical way as well (van der Tuin 22). The male, she says, represents the positive, essential and also the neutral element (public, culture), while the female forms the negative, non-essential counterpart (domestic, nature) (van der Tuin 23-24); this becomes painfully clear in words such as 'doctor,' as it should represent both male and female doctors, while the latter becomes apparent only when we add a certain adjective: 'female' doctor (Ibidem). De Beauvoir argues that the female has always been subject to men, that she is the male's *historical Other*, and that she has always been defined as such (De Beauvoir 27). De Beauvoir's argument on the hierarchical construction of gendered binary oppositions points out the fact that the subordination of the female, and thus the limitation of female agency, is ultimately embedded in the supposition that biology defines one's position in society in an determinist, essentialist way.

Furthermore, De Beauvoir states that first wave feminism, that peaked around 1900 and focussed on

women's right to vote, resulted in equality merely on paper and that women's oppression was still very much apparent because of the predominance of the above described gendered binary oppositions (van de Tuin 19, de Beauvoir 29). With De Beauvoir's most famous line - "On ne naît pas femme, on le devient" [Translation: "One is not born a woman, one becomes one"] (van der Tuin 15) - she encourages society to walk away from biological determinism and essentialism, towards social constructivism - she suggests the possibility of change - and with that, the possibility of border crossing as a feminist strategy against subordination (van de Tuin 15, 23). Because of this, her work was picked up and renowned by second wave feminism, that critiqued set ideas and standards concerning the female body between 1965 and 1980 (Idem. 19, 25-26). A division between sex and gender was advocated; sex, as referring to "biological differences between men and women," and gender, as describing "differences [that] are codified and institutionalised socially and culturally" (Asberg 36, Eriksen 133). This distinction encouraged a revision of set binary oppositions and thus, a revision of the female's limited agency (Asberg 36). De Beauvoir was the first to link binary thinking to female oppression explicitly; however, second wave feminism was not the first to carry out border crossing as a feminist strategy; the connection between feminism and transgressing binary oppositions goes back even further than the existence of feminism as a concept. Van der Tuin's perceptions on the ideas of Simone De Beauvoir and the occupations of first and second wave feminism, have enabled me to identify the roots of the connection between female subordination and binary oppositions, as social constructs based on biological differences; and that border crossing because of this has become a central strategy to feminism. Subsequently, the following paragraphs will serve both to situate two other moments in history that reflect feminist practices to demolish these social construct - one before and one after these two feminist waves, and to contextualize the two texts central to my analysis.

From (pre-)feminist to monster figure

At the time when *Frankenstein* was first published in 1818, 'feminism' as a concept was yet to come into existence. The term would first be coined in 1837 by the French philosopher Charles Fourier, and would appear in the English dictionary only by 1894 (Goldstein 92). However, questions concerning the nature of women and their place in society had become familiar topics of scrutiny and debate: in 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft - Shelley's mother - published a work on what we would now define as feminist philosophy, called *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. She challenged the idea that women were to be confined merely to *domestic* education, and argued that women needed a solid education as well, because "if she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice" (Wollstonecraft 2). Half a century later, similar discussions emerged, referred to as the 'Woman Question' (Thompson 1). Like Wollstonecraft, this 'Woman Question' put the confinement of women to the domestic sphere up for discussion (Calhoun 21-23). The rise of these debates was closely related to the Enlightenment that emerged in the preceding century. It brought special attention to the individual and set in motion economic, political and economic reform towards a general mindset based on the principle of equality and free thinking (Kant 29-30).

However, equality for everyone did not mean equality between men and women. Although different points of view emerged, women remained assigned to the private, domestic sphere (Poovey 332). Nevertheless, what these phenomena indicate, is that border crossing indeed was a practice to advocate a revision of female agency, long before De Beauvoir theorized this strategic approach.

Mary Poovey, a leading feminist scholar and Victorianist, argues in her article *My Hideous Progeny: Mary Shelley and the Feminization of Romanticism* that Shelley performs such an act of border crossing as well with the writing of *Frankenstein* (1818). Poovey wrote in detail about the domestic-public dichotomy and argues that Mary Shelley is caught up between two desires; one is to write and express herself and the other is social acceptance, to suit the image society finds appropriate for a woman: “that she be self-effacing and supportive, devoted to a family rather than to a career” (332). The incompatibility of these two longings made that “Shelley developed a pervasive personal and artistic ambivalence toward feminine self-assertion” that is reflected in all of her novels (Ibidem). Concerning *Frankenstein*, Poovey argues that Victor’s fate, which is directly connected to that of his creature, carries out the dramatic consequences that follow upon abandoning one’s loving, domestic relationships for the sake of self-assertion and fulfilling one’s desires (Ibidem). This provides a sharp critique to Romantic writing, but Shelley criticizes her own act of writing as well - and with that the assertion of female agency (Idem. 333). As Frankenstein performs the unnatural, egotistical act of creating life from death, Shelley performs a comparable act by producing *Frankenstein*; an unnatural thing to do for a woman, because in doing so, she abandons her female virtue (Idem. 335).

Shelley’s ambivalence towards her border crossing act of writing reflects her society’s disapproval of crossing the borders of binary thinking. When Shelley practices her self-assertion by writing, turning her desires outwards as opposed to what a woman was ‘supposed to do’, she crossed an imaginary border that should not be crossed; a new idea is introduced that does not fit in society and brings forward questions of binary thinking (masculinity versus femininity). Such border crossing, Jeffrey Cohen argues, generates a monster that embodies a ‘crisis’ (Cohen 4-6). Both Frankenstein’s creature and *Frankenstein* the book as created by Shelley are such monsters. Poovey points out that the heartfelt pain the creature expresses is “primarily a means of indirectly dramatizing her emotional investment in Frankenstein’s creative act” and that Shelley with that reveals that she identifies with the creature (338). Cohen’s *Monster theory* puts into words an understanding of Shelley’s inner conflict that Poovey lingers on, yet renounces to say that Shelley not only wrote about and criticized a monstrous creature, but that she herself felt - as a female writer - hideous, monstrous, a misfit to society. Cohen makes us realise that *Frankenstein* produced two monsters: Victor’s creature and Mary Shelley the female writer. Shelley may have had a chance to cross a border and to transgress the domestic sphere, her supposed agony demonstrates that such an act is not without consequences.

Towards the monstrous cyborg

By the time *Ex Machina* appeared in 2014, feminism had developed into a well established concept, yet defining it is a difficult task. What appears to be the main issue in formulating a general definition, is the paradoxical relationship between a characteristic feminist desire to nuance - to pay attention to differences

and to acknowledge feminism as being plural - and their need for generalization in order to say something sufficient on behalf of the female world population (Rooney 4-11). The importance for feminism to celebrate diversity and difference, proves once again the feminist concern for transgressing borders of binary thinking, since *differing* from a set norm (that is maintained through binary oppositions) is indeed what is celebrated. Moreover, third wave feminism, that is generally considered to have emerged in the early 1990s, also advocates this poststructuralist approach that stresses the importance of paying attention to difference and perspective (Hoogland 110). This focus pays specific attention to a shifting meaning of aspects of identity such as sexuality; this, again, questions whether the set norms of binary thinking have a natural, biological origin or whether they are social constructs (Ibidem. 111). Additionally, the (modern) feminist practice of border crossing corresponds to the broader context of the twenty-first century as posthumanism as a philosophical movement emerged. Posthumanism criticizes the way humanism is defined in relation to the non-human world. By numerous theorists such as Donna Haraway and Pettman it is argued that the human can only recognize humanist elements in its own image, which obstructs and disrupts its vision on the non-human world (Pettman 3, Pon 33-34). However, borders of binary thinking are no longer considered completely impermeable, regardless whether it concerns the borders between man and woman, human and animal, or even human and machine (Haraway 2-3, Pettman 3).

Donna Haraway, influential theorist in the field of feminism and posthumanism, advocates the Cybernetic figure as the embodiment of border crossing, and as a metaphor the modern feminist should identify with. She argues that what divides feminists - namely its desire to nuance - should in fact bring feminists together, in the same way the cyborg brings together the organism and the machine. Haraway acknowledges that such a view is not widely accepted (yet) and that border crossing practices indeed can generate a monstrous perception of the Cyborg (Asberg 33. Haraway 4-6). Yet to her, this is no reason to dismiss the Cyborg as a metaphorical figure. Haraway points out that change pairs off with such monstrous encounters and therefore should not be feared. As this chapter has demonstrated, feminism, binary oppositions and border crossing are inherently interwoven, even before this was explicitly analysed and documented by Simone De Beauvoir. As Cohen argues that monsters emerge from the acts of border crossing, Haraway does not dissent with this view. However, Haraway proposes a different understanding of these monsters. Ultimately, Haraway's definition of the Cyborgs demonstrates: do not fear the monstrous Cyborg, embrace the modern feminists' practices of borders crossing.

III. Monstrous acts of border crossing in *Frankenstein* and *Ex Machina*, a comparison

Identifying gendered binary oppositions

Now that the border crossing practices of (pre-)feminism are revealed and explained, it is time to focus on the two texts, *Frankenstein* and *Ex Machina*, for a close reading comparison in order to seek an answer to the research question proposed earlier. This close reading will pay specific attention to the acts of border crossing that correlate with the acts of creation their stories revolve around. However, to enable myself to argue that

the two texts reflect the feminist practice of border crossing, the (gendered) binary oppositions that are being transgressed should first be identified. As discussed earlier, the distinction between men and women coincides with the distinction between the public and the domestic spheres. Indeed, this same distinction is also reflected by both texts. Namely, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* evidently depicts the personalities of its characters as based on this principle. It appears that only male characters present themselves out of the domestic sphere, as Victor and Henry go off to study and Walton is on a journey to explore parts of the world that were hidden up until then (Shelley 1, 44, 61). This, whereas the women are compelled, so it seems, to stay within the boundaries of the domestic sphere. None of them go off to study, and even when her fiancé is abroad and severely ill due to the death of his favourite companion, it is not Elizabeth who goes off to look after Victor, but her caretaker Alphonse, Victor's father (Shelley 185, Pon 37)¹.

Ex Machina reflects this distinction between public and domestic as well. Although the majority of the storyline unfolds within Nathan's residence, a seemingly domestic sphere, both male protagonists Caleb and Nathan are introduced outside of the house (appendix 1), and are presented as hard working, intellectual male beings, as Caleb is first shown at work and Nathan is presented as an impressively successful scientist (00:00:00 - 00:11:25). This gives enough indication to argue that they are presented as belonging to the public sphere. Ava, by contrast, is introduced inside of the house, locked away, assigned to the domestic sphere (appendix 2). However, a striking difference with *Frankenstein's* depiction of the female occurs here: when Nathan introduces Caleb to his room inside the residence, Nathan makes it clear that "this building isn't a house, [...] it's a research facility" (00:08:41). With this, *Ex Machina* seems to imply that feminism has made its progress: in the twenty-first century, so it seems, it is accepted that women are no longer confined to the domestic sphere. However, Ava is by no means trusted by her creator Nathan. He keeps her locked away, as she is still denied access to the public sphere, and is subjected to surveillance twenty-four seven (appendix 2.3-2.4).

Ava being 'allowed' outside of the domestic sphere can also be explained by the fact that Ava is no ordinary woman; she is a form of Artificial Intelligence. Yet due to her physical form and behaviour, she is easily mistaken for a female of flesh-and-blood (appendix 3). Ava's resemblance to both a human female and a robot, is reminiscent of Haraway's definition of the Cyborg as well: she embodies transgression for the very fact that she is a *human* machine and for the fact that she is the very product of an act of border crossing (later more on this statement). Additionally, Ava is not confined to the domestic sphere by her biology since theoretically speaking she has no biology. Because of these resemblances to Haraway's Cyborg, it is justified to view Ava as a representation of the modern, posthumanist feminist as theorised by Haraway in the context of this thesis. With an understanding of Ava as such a representation, the film outwardly argues that the feminist is allowed to transgress the domestic sphere, but that society - a patriarchal society, since it concerns the male observing

¹ I refer to Cynthia Pon's article "'Passages' in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*: towards a feminist figure of humanity?". Pon writes about matters of representation as theorized by Donna Haraway, in the face of humanity. She argues that there is no room for the female, as men are only capable of recognizing their own image; there is no room for difference. Although Pon provides interesting insights that relate to my own approach, I have no space to go into her argument in great detail. Nevertheless, would suggest further reading for those who desire to additional insights in the way *Frankenstein* deals with power relations between men and women.

this female creature - is still evaluating whether this feminist figure can be trusted and that she will not turn her power against society when she is allowed to access the public sphere.

Monsters as products of border crossing

With the gendered binary oppositions as identified in both *Frankenstein* and *Ex Machina*, we can now focus on how the borders between these oppositions are crossed. In order to explain the act of border crossing in *Frankenstein*, I will rely on the analysis provided by Mary Poovey once more. I have already demonstrated that Poovey argues that Shelley reveals an ambivalent position towards her own identity. On the one hand, Shelley wants to be socially accepted as a pious woman; on the other hand, she longs to perform the act of writing. Indeed, Shelley puts the latter desire outwards, the result being *Frankenstein* (Poovey 334). Paradoxically, Shelley criticizes this act of writing while writing, in reflecting on her own act through the contents of the novel. Like Shelley, Victor puts his desire outwards, which is in his case the desire to emerge into the world of natural science and subsequently, to create life. Victor moves away from his beloved family; he does not look back and immerses himself in a world of science. He learns how to create life and eagerly performs his act of creation. He takes upon himself the role of the only parent; "No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs" Victor exclaims by the idea of creating a new species (Shelley 55). He intends to replace the role of the mother completely (Pon 37). However, like Shelley's, Victor's desire is unnatural as it conflicts with the 'natural' boundaries of binary oppositions. Victor is not supposed to bear new life, as this is the natural task of the woman. Victor's act of border crossing, transgressing the natural abilities of the male, explicitly generates a monster. As Cohen argues, this monster is the embodiment of a crisis and a misfit to society:

Believe me, Frankenstein: I was benevolent; my soul glowed with love and humanity; but am I not alone, miserably alone? You, my creator, abhor me; what hope can I gather from your fellow-creatures, who owe me nothing? They spurn and hate me. (Shelley 103)

In *Ex Machina*, Nathan performs an act of creation that shows remarkable resemblance to the act of creation carried out by Victor; Nathan also creates life without the interference of a woman by the means of ground-breaking scientific techniques. However, once again a difference occurs between *Frankenstein* and *Ex Machina*. Shelley depicts Victor's act of creation as an individual act, by presenting Victor as glorifying the gratitude he will receive for his act and haughtily distinguishing himself from his preceding scientists: "So much has been done, [...] more, far more will I achieve" and "What had been the study and desire of the wisest men since the creation of the world was now within my grasp (Shelley 49, 53). By contrast, Nathan describes the creation of Ava as a development that was bound to happen: "The arrival of strong Artificial Intelligence has been inevitable for decades; the variable was when, not if. So I don't see Ava as a decision, just an evolution." (01:04:32-01:04:44). The consequences of his act are by this reasoning not really his fault. In any case, as both creations happen by the practice of border crossing, both Victor's creature and Ava are misfits to society, and

thus the monsters of their time. To demonstrate what makes these creatures so monstrous, we will now proceed to a closer look at the consequences these practices of border crossing inflict.

Consequences; what happens when monsters are made?

These consequences are disastrous, to say the least. Victor's creature tantalizes Victor's life. "Man! You may hate but beware! Your hours will pass in dread and misery, and soon the bolt will fall which ravish from you your happiness forever" Victor's creature threatens (Shelley 172-173). The creature takes away from him those who are most beloved by him. After the death of his beloved Elizabeth on their wedding night, his life goal becomes to goal to hunt down the monster. Victor does not succeed and dies in vain, having learned from his mistake and warning Walton not to strive after a similar fate (Shelley 217). Nathan learns the hard way that his creation has fatal consequences as well. Ava manages to break free by means of manipulating Caleb; she avenges her wrath on Nathan by cold bloodily stabbing him in the back and leaves Caleb behind to die from suffocation (appendix 4). In short, *Frankenstein* and *Ex Machina* demonstrate the life-threatening dangers of crossing fixed binary oppositions, as the events will take a turn for the worst. However, they differ in the way they carry out messages on what mistakes were made and who is to blame. Their respective approaches to the consequences of practices of border crossing are strongly related to their respective points of view; *Frankenstein* is the product of a female writer situated in a historical moment that precedes feminism and - in extension - any significant development concerning female agency, while *Ex Machina* is told from a male-based perspective as the film has two male protagonists and very explicitly concerns the male observing the female.

Since the early nineteenth century had no notion of feminism and debates on female agency were only sporadically emerging, Shelley had no choice but to view her own act of writing as an hideous, monstrous act. She was alone in her feminist assertion and the consequences this had on her reputation and her personal life were her own to endure. The result, Poovey demonstrated, was an ambivalence because it became apparent to her that following her desires was incompatible with an appropriate and prosperous personal life. That she reflected harshly on her own act, through *Frankenstein*, is thus understandable: when Victor's creature became aware of his incompatibility with society, he is set on seeking vengeance. This wrath is not focussed on the society that does not accept him, but on Victor, his creator. This demonstrates that the consequences are for Victor himself to endure, just like Shelley demolished her own reputation. The creature sets out to murder Victor's beloved family members, as it are those closest to him that are affected by his monstrous act - as is the case for Shelley. Although she wrote *Frankenstein* out of a critique on her own behaviour, her choice to focus this critique on a male protagonist enabled her to imbibe her grudge against her limited agency in her contemporary society. Shelley demonstrates that, although women may belong to the domestic sphere and the domestic sphere only, men should not forget that it is this sphere that forms the counterpart needed for a necessary balance in life. Men cannot simply wipe away the female half of the binary opposition to which they both belong. Shelley demonstrates this symbolized in Frankenstein's creature as the creature cries out for the need of a counterpart: a female creature (Shelley 148-150). Victor may act like God, but Adam still needs his Eve. Her critique against a male-based society reaches its peak when Victor denies his

creature the privilege of a female counterpart:

He had sworn to quit the neighbourhood of man, and hide himself in deserts; but she had not; and she, who in all probability was to become a thinking and reasoning animal, might refuse to comply with a compact made before her creation. (Shelley 170).

As his stream of thoughts demonstrates, Victor fears the possible dissent of this female creature, and thus her agency (Shelley 170. Mellor 223-224)². By not finishing this second creation, Victor symbolically silences the female and the possibility of her agency, and undersigns his fate: there is no peace for him until the end of his days.

While Shelley suffers for her monstrous act of border crossing, Haraway's Cyborg embraces this very practice, despite the possible monstrous side effects. The modern feminist, indeed, does not fear the act of border crossing. Yet *Ex Machina* provides a male-based perspective, and as it turns out, the male *is* in fact scared. *Ex Machina* carries out this fear by means of a warning. Ava manages to trick Caleb into freeing her from Nathan's tight grasp, so that they can leave together. However, to the watcher's terror, Ava does not take Caleb with her, but leaves him to a fate of death by suffocation (appendix 4.2). Ava's betrayal and her inhuman, cold blooded acts of murder, proves that Nathan was right to distrust her, which by extension proclaims: do not trust the modern feminist. As Shelley stood alone with no social movements having her back in asserting her agency as a female, Shelley posed no threat to her society, merely to her own reputation. However, almost two centuries later, feminism has established itself and on a much greater scale challenges the gendered binary oppositions and the limitations of female agency. Therefore, Haraway's Cyborg *does* form a threat to the established, patriarchal society, and with that, the act of border crossing is approached with a deep regard for the consequential disruption and despair. *Ex Machina* represents the feminist cyborg as a wolf amongst sheep, having no conscience since Ava leaves the one person that cared for her and helped her behind to die. 'We might welcome the modern feminist amongst us,' *Ex Machina* demonstrates 'but beware - she will turn against you.'

IV. The male fear for female agency

The above comparison shows that the novel and the movie carry out a feminist practice that has been a similar notion of feminism; namely, feminism as concerned with a practice of border crossing, as challenging the set binary oppositions that coincide socially with a biological distinction between male and female. Additionally, the respective monsters carried out by the practice of border crossing in both cases correspond to their respective contemporary societies' notions of feminism. Ava's uncanny resemblance to the human being in

² Like Pon, Anne Mellor, engages with the power relations between men and women in *Frankenstein*. Mellor argues that Shelley provides a critique on a patriarchal society that intends to dismiss the female. Mellor gives insights that correspond to my own reading of *Frankenstein* and the unfinished female creature. Unfortunately, as is the case with Pon, I have to refrain myself from discussing her arguments significantly, due to space limitations.

both looks and behaviour, and her mechanical nature correspond with Donna Haraway's notion of the cyborg. In *Frankenstein*, although an Adam-like figure as a result of border crossing is present, his counterpart, 'Eve', remains absent. This applies for early nineteenth century feminism as well, as feminism as a concept was yet to come into existence and there was thus, little significant attention for the limited agency of the female. Additionally, female agency is brutally dismissed in Shelley's *Frankenstein*, as Victor takes away the one ability the female had over men: the creation of life. The dismissal of female agency finds its peak in the unfinished female creature, as Victor explicitly refuses to give her life due to the possibility of her exercising agency. Concerning *Ex Machina*, female agency is presented as something to be feared. While the modern female may be allowed to transgress the domestic sphere, she is definitely not allowed into the public sphere. She is not to be trusted and should first pass a scrutiny of her conscience to see if she really fits the criteria of a 'human being' by the standards of men, tested through a twentyfourseven observation. A test which Ava does not pass.

Altogether, it turns out that the set binary oppositions that were at work as far back as the early nineteenth century, are still preferred over the idea of border crossing for the sake of equality. Shelley got no chance to approach feminist ideas positively, and therefore her act self-assertion posed no threat to the established society. Nowadays, as posthumanism has emerged and the idea of crossing the borders of binary thinking is becoming more familiar, the ground for such embraces is there. Yet while border crossing has become a practice that transgresses feminism, this practice is not socially accepted and is considered a threat to society. The fact that Nathan is proven right for not trusting Ava, and therefore the modern feminist, and the fact that she is depicted as selfish, conscienceless and inexorable, demonstrates that even to this day feminism is definitely 'not there yet.'

In this thesis I have proposed a feminist approach to a comparison between *Frankenstein* and *Ex Machina*. Other approaches to this comparison may apply as well, or two different works from a same approach could have advocated the same argument I am making here. However, as *Frankenstein* emerged in the infant shoes of feminism and *Ex Machina* in the well established boots of modern feminism, I have considered specifically these two texts appropriate for my comparison. As for the feminist approach, I think the awareness of the need for border crossing that is felt by numerous groups of people (from feminists and homosexuals to ethnically subordinated groups), the need to reevaluate the binary oppositions that we - many time unconsciously - consider to establish the norms of our society, should be brought under attention. My thesis has served the purpose of a brief overview of feminist practices of border crossing in the history of feminism and beyond, and two specific examples are given: *Frankenstein* and *Ex Machina*. In doing so, I hope to have inspired others to continue identifying not just binary oppositions, but practices of border crossing as well. Because in these very acts of border crossing, the monsters emerge that enable us to reflect upon our society from a new perspective.

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VI. Appendix

1. The introduction of Nathan and Caleb in the public sphere



1.1 Ex Machina - 00:01:06

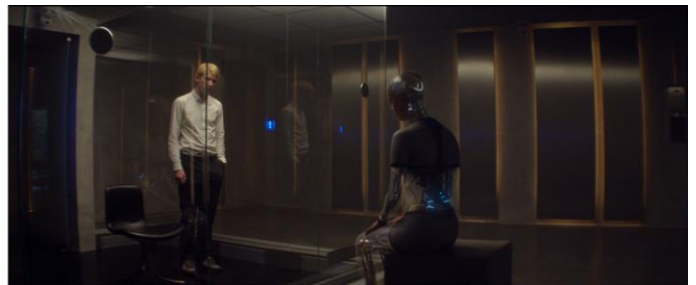


1.2 Ex Machina - 00:05:46

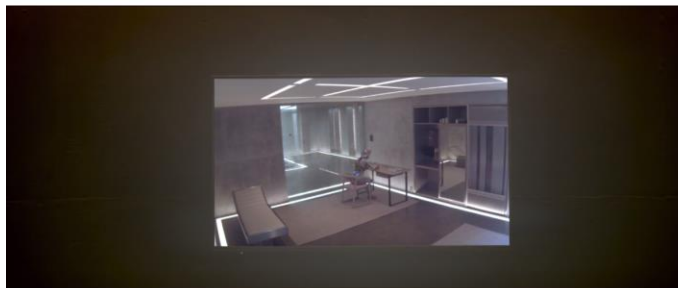
2. The introduction of Ava in the semi-domestic sphere, while under continuous surveillance



2.1 Ex Machina - 00:12:23



2.2 Ex Machina - 00:14:42



2.3 Ex Machina - 00:18:56



2.4 Ex Machina - 00:31:36

3. Ava's resemblance to the human female in physical form and behaviour

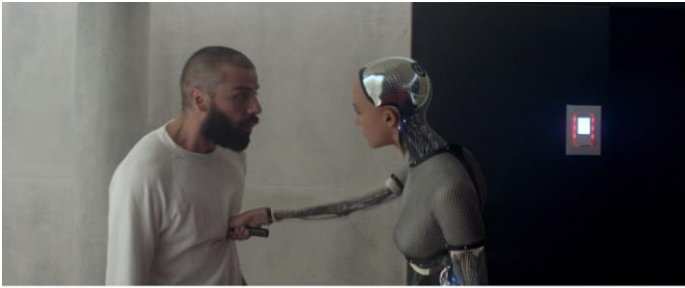


3.1 Ex Machina - 00:42:20



3.2 Ex Machina - 01:37:06

4. Ava's Betrayal



4.1 *Ex Machina* - 01:31:27



4.2 *Ex Machina* - 01:38:44