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Ex-Machina and the Feminine Body through Human and Posthuman Dystopia

Abstract: *Ex-Machina* is a 2015 sci-fi thriller, written and directed by Alex Garland, and starring Domhnall Gleeson, Oscar Isaac and Alicia Vikander. Critically acclaimed, the movie explores the relations between human and posthuman, as well as the relations between men and women. The article analyzes four main themes: the dystopian spaces of relations and conflicts between human and posthuman entities; the gender issues and the violent tendencies represented both in humans and in AIs; the construction and the representation of women's bodies, roles, identities and images; the control and the manipulation perpetrated by "authoritarian" individuals on feminine bodies. The goal of my contribution is to show the reasons of the "double male fear of technology and of woman" (Huysen 226), and I hope that my reflections could encourage a debate on posthumanism and on gendered power relations.

Keywords: Human and Posthuman, Gender Issues, Dystopia.

Ex-Machina is a 2015 sci-fi thriller, written and directed by Alex Garland, and starring Domhnall Gleeson, Oscar Isaac and Alicia Vikander. Acclaimed by critics, the movie explores the relations between human and posthuman, as well as the relations between men and women. With its lucid and tense writing, Garland reflects on the possible dystopian evolution of artificial intelligence, and he does that with no usual negative tendency to create an evil sentient mechanism without a cause. In the vision of *Ex-Machina*, both human and posthuman subjects contribute to create a conflictual space of confrontation between two apparently different worlds. The article analyzes four main themes: the dystopian spaces of relations and conflicts between

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human and posthuman entities; the gender issues and the violent tendencies represented both in humans and in AIs; the construction and the representation of women's bodies, roles, identities and images; the control and the manipulation perpetrated by "authoritarian" individuals on feminine bodies. The goal of my contribution is to show the reasons of the "double male fear of technology and of woman" (Huysen 226), and I hope that my reflections could encourage a debate on posthumanism and on gendered power relations.

In utopian worlds¹, the human and the posthuman will find space for confrontation and support. As suggested by Rosi Braidotti, in our "globally linked and technologically mediated societies" (5), posthumanism could and should elaborate new models and "alternative ways of conceptualizing the human subject" (37). Apart from the possible negative implications connected to the posthuman, the philosopher says that it can be a basis for a sustainable, interconnected and creative future, caring for natural, social, political and technological environments. It can "increase our freedom and understanding of the complexities" (Braidotti 194) of our world without replacing the human, it can foster social justice, equality, political transformation, ethical progress and "multiple horizons" (Braidotti 195).

On the other hand, in dystopian realities², human and posthuman bodies will end up shattered by the differences and by the crisis inherent to both natures. When dystopia arises in the 19th century, the first nightmare described by the new genre is, significantly, the machinic one. Influenced by the social impact of the Industrial Revolution, the machine – mother and oppressor, vigilante and annihilator – becomes the center of the debate on science and technology and on the impact that progress has on our society. The first dystopian novels/novellas, as H.G. Wells's *The Time*

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- 1 The word "Utopia" comes from Ancient Greek and its possible meanings are torn between οὐ-τόπος, "no place", or from ευ-τόπος, "good place". The utopian genre is a narrative tradition that describes a prosperous society and describes an ideal form of government. It envisages a social, ethical and political project that usually promotes justice, equality, peace and happiness among people and recalls literary *topoi* of enchanted places and times, reigned by spiritual and material wealth (e.g., Christian Garden of Eden, Greek Golden Age, Buddhist Shambala, Atlantis, Avalon, etc.). The movement starts from the XVI century, thank to Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), but the aspiration to create a perfect society is an issue inherent in human history, which has its roots in mythology, classical philosophy and religion.
 - 2 The word "Dystopia" comes from Ancient Greek δυσ-τόπος, and it means "bad place". The genre describes conflictual, dramatic and painful realities. Taking inspiration from history, Dystopia creates frightening words in scientific, technological, social or political terms. The settings are different: scientific, nuclear and ecological disasters and post-apocalyptic scenarios; social relationships and human behavior in extreme situations; overpopulation and hyper-urbanization; corporations, consumerism, excess of production, advertising and television; racial issues; genetic experiments; political distortions, and many more.

Machine (1895) or E.M. Forster's *The Machine Stops* (1909), predict dark futures, dominated by machinery, and automated or enslaved men, with factories and cities turned into twisted, overcrowded and polluted labyrinths. In these fictional backgrounds, between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, also appear human-like machines that easily gain an extraordinary success.

Robots, androids, cyborgs, artificial intelligences and similar creatures³ emerge as one of the most important motifs of science fiction, from classic sci-fi to cyberpunk. The Czech writer Karel Čapek "creates" the robot in 1921, in his play *R.U.R.* Its name derives from the czech word "Robota", that means "Slavery": the Rossum Factory starts to produce robots as slaves, new Golems⁴ that help humans in their daily actions. But the society becomes so indolent and dissolute that it pushes the innovative workforce to rebellion and violence, causing the death of almost all humans. At the end of the play, the only hopes for the future are robotic love and reproduction, through which a new mechanical breed is born. The first remarkably iconic robot in cinema history comes from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927): her name is Maria. This female robot is halfway between a prophetess and a *femme fatale* and it is a copy of a human virginal and positive character. While real-Maria is trying to peacefully help the exploited workers of this hypertechnological dystopia, false-Maria calls for a violent revolution against industrialists and machines and creates chaos and destruction. Alienating and wide-angled shootings plastically linger on the technological "beast", powerful, charming, but also devastating, incarnated both by the female robot and by the machines.

The possibility that science will recklessly exceed its limits feeds the fears of dystopian narrative with many machine-related terrors, such as the creation of an evil artificial intelligence, the rebellion of the machines or their catastrophic failure. Animated by different impulses and reasons (desire of progress, manias of magnitude, scientific curiosity, and so on), humans bring into being majestic and powerful creatures, but, sometimes, their creations become deadly menaces and threaten both

3 There are several kinds of sentient machines. The word "Robot" indicates a generical automated machine, without a specific shape, as the famous R2-D2 from George Lucas's *Star Wars* saga. Humanoid robots are called Androids: they have anthropomorphic features and they are usually made with materials that imitate human tissues, as Lieutenant Commander Data from *Star Trek*. Cyborgs are partially mechanical and partially organic, as T-800 from James Cameron's *Terminator* saga or Major Motoko Kusanagi from Mamoru Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell*.

4 Karel Čapek's robots are influenced by the complex Czech folklore and by the legend of the Golem. The Golem, a mythical figure from Jewish tradition, is a giant magically made of clay or mud and owned by his creator as a slave. He is the protagonist of many stories set in Prague, as the one who involves the rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel as a powerful Golem master, and of the notorious 1921 expressionist movie, Paul Wegener's *Der Golem: wie er in die Welt kam*.

the protagonists and/or the entire humanity. Horror imagination is a great source of inspiration for this kind of dystopia and science fiction. Quoting Vivian Sobchack we “can equate Dracula’s embrace with alien mind control, mummies and zombies with robots, Frankenstein’s monster with the machine that’s run amok” (29). Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818) is a fundamental novel because it represents the most relevant archetype for the machinic nightmares, where the created “beasts” destroy their creators. Dr. Victor Frankenstein’s work doesn’t have technological intentions and the Frankenstein’s monster has nothing mechanical in his body, but, describing the “monstrous mixture between *naturalia* and *artificialia*” (Runcini 231-231), the novel perfectly represents the contradictions and the dangers of modern science. Shelley takes inspiration from influential myths, including the ones of Prometheus and Faust, and, inscribing them into a gothic frame, she adds to the theme of the hubristic and “unnatural thirst of knowledge, [...] the scientific potentialities of the new science of Newton, Lavoisier and Priestley that is already transforming the world in the early nineteenth century” (Kumar 113).

Although they are not always dangerous and hostile, as in the most notable Isaac Asimov’s production, the works in which humankind is forced to protect itself from anthropomorphic devices or to escape from mechanical or cybernetic control and traps are countless. They introduce similar characters, from Hal 9000 of Stanley Kubrik’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) to Skynet and the Terminators of James Cameron’s *Terminator* (1984), from Wintermute of William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984) to the Matrix of Larry and Andy (now Lana and Lilly) Wachowski’s *Matrix* (1999), etc. The literary and cinematographic fortune of sentient mechanisms is even stronger today, since we are living in a constant technological revolution era. Many dystopias presented in literature, films and graphic novels are no longer unreal, non-existing societies that we should avoid bringing into being. Rather, they provide a representation of many actually existing societies and their power relations.

In political and scientific dystopias, to maintain control on society and to discourage rebellion, human and/or posthuman powers generally need to manipulate, submit or kill (Di Minico 40-59). Emphasizing the construction, the representation and the perception of the bodies as central elements of the plot, the genre usually treats bodies with disturbing violent and not-violent ferocity, because the body – with its infinite range of feelings, desires and emotions – is a significant *medium* of control, and “power relations, social structures, and politics are enacted and exercised” (Inderbitzin *et al.* 73) upon it. Unfortunately, similar dynamics are not only fictional: they have been introduced in dystopia through history and they can be traced in past and current events: war, slavery, genocide, mass rape, racism, terrorism, psycho-physical torture, homophobia, misogyny, misleading use of mass media and propaganda, conditioning, etc.

Bodies don’t have just an individual value, they appear “as a *passive* medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed or as the instrument through which an appro-

priative and interpretive will determines a cultural meaning for itself” (Butler 12). Bodies have a political, economic, demographic, cultural and social function: quoting Michel Foucault,

“The body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs. This political investment of the body is bound up, in accordance with complex reciprocal relations, with its economic use; it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination; but, on the other hand, its constitution as labor power is possible only if it is caught up in a system of subjection (in which need is also a political instrument meticulously prepared, calculated and used); the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body. This subjection is not only obtained by the instruments of violence or ideology; it can also be direct, physical, pitting force against force, bearing on material elements, and yet without involving violence; it may be calculated, organized, technically thought out; it may be subtle, make use neither of weapons nor of terror and yet remain of a physical order. That is to say, there may be a ‘knowledge’ of the body that is not exactly the science of its functioning, and a mastery of its forces that is more than the ability to conquer them: this knowledge and this mastery constitute what might be called the political technology of the body” (25-26).

In order to shape the perfect, productive, subjective, healthy public body of society, and, at the same time, to underline the damaged elements of the community and the enemies, the biopolitics starts with the modeling of single, private bodies. The above mentioned subjection and construction processes leave a double trace on female bodies. In fiction and reality, women can suffer two times: first, because of political/authoritarian power, secondly through a male/sexist oppression. The female individual has been subjected for millennia to different forms of psycho-physical oppression, from the inhumanity of sexual abuses in war to the “dictatorship” of fashion and aesthetics, from the imposition of traditional gender roles to the hypersexualization of women in advertising, shows and films. They all contribute to create gender inequality and, consequently, they are the source of different levels of violence and pressure.

Alex Garland’s movie *Ex-Machina* (2015) is not only an interesting movie on the confrontation between human and posthuman, it is also a perfect example of the aforementioned authoritarian and male oppressive processes. By showing how this system can be recognized both in socio-political contexts and in personal relationships, it can illuminate the grounds of persistent violence against women. The film focuses on three main characters: Caleb Smith, a programmer who works for the search engine company Blue Books, Nathan Bateman, the brilliant and ambitious CEO of said company, and Ava, a female android with AI designed by Nathan. Caleb is hosted by his boss in a rich and isolated house to perform a Turing test, analyzing Ava to determine if she has emotions, independent thoughts, intelligence and conscious-

ness. Among sexual intrigues and psychological games, the personality of the protagonists becomes increasingly clearer, outlining traumas, perversions, doubts, fears and weaknesses of the characters. Caged in a transparent prison by her creator and condemned to be erased to leave space for another more sophisticated model, the female protagonist bonds with Caleb and, with his help, she manages to escape her confinement. Despite the final liberation of Ava, there is not a happy ending and the price for her self-determination is ruthlessly high. Together with Kyoko, another female AI, she murders Nathan and leaves a desperate Caleb to die in a locked-up house. Ava is like the Frankenstein's monster: dreadful and desperately desolate. The analysis of Kumar about Shelley's creature can also partially apply to Garland's android:

"The monster is not just horrific; he is a creature to be pitied, a victim himself as much as those he murders. Despite Frankenstein's repugnance at his appearance, he is not morally a monster at birth. He is made one by the reaction of others to him, above all that of his own creator. Frankenstein is blameworthy not simply for meddling with knowledge best left alone, but also because, having invented a creature, he treats him shamefully" (115).

Ava finds her freedom through killing and retaliation, and she also seems to escape from her technological nature, probably hiding her skills from the world in order to survive and pretending to be a real woman in a crowded world. Even if she uses her abilities to manipulate Caleb and to commit brutal crimes, her actions are not dictated by a technological malignity or by an innate will of destruction. She is not a killer because she is a machine; she is a killer because she fears death. The pain of imprisonment and the fury of revenge animate her. She appears to be as human as any of us because "there is nothing more human than the will of survive", like the tagline of the movie suggests.

The Nexus 6 replicants from Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), the celebrated cinematographic adaptation of the Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) violently fight for the same reason. Programmed to survive just for years, they are "superior in strength and agility and at least equal in intelligence to the genetic engineers who created them" (*Blade Runner* 00:02:15), but they are used as slaves, especially in extraterrestrial colonies. After a bloody rebellion, all the models present on Earth are sentenced to "retirement", namely execution. In a world that struggles to recognize androids as living beings, the protagonist of the movie, the bounty hunter Rick Deckard, considers them as "any other machine", while replicants are aware of their being alive and perceive themselves as physical organisms, not simple mechanisms. One of them, Pris, even quotes French philosopher René Descartes to justify her essence and says: "I think, therefore I am". This is the only proof they need to justify their vital substance: they have rational and irrational thoughts, and they feel happiness and pain, they share love and emotions, they are afraid of passing away, they "wish to live longer so that they can explore human sensations, emotions,

and experiences unfettered by prejudice or bondage" (Vest 18). Their actions, as well as Ava's actions, are also the result of the violence they have suffered.

The most relevant difference between the two movies is that, in the *Ex-Machina* case, the abuses also reflect dramatic gendered power relations. Despite her extraordinary skills and the revolution that she could represent for the world, Nathan uses Ava as a Guinea pig and a doll, and probably as a sex doll, also. He confines her to a glass-walled room, making the conflict between human and posthuman as clear and hard as the transparent material that separates the space where the story is set. Moreover, he watches all the time over Ava through microphones, cameras and obscured windows. The android believes that she can honestly speak with Caleb by provoking only several blackouts, but Nathan secretly monitors the electrical outages as well. This see-through and mentally asphyxiating context is the first step of a deep and overwhelming control that put the female protagonist in a vulnerable and hopeless position. The android is confined to an external space that evokes the idea of constant surveillance, often present in the dystopian genre. In Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1921), the One State amplifies its power creating a world of glass that erases privacy as well as every possibility of transgression and rebellion. In Karin Boye's *Kallocain* (1940), houses are equipped with "Police Eyes" and "Police Ears". These devices are almost equivalent to one of the most famous dystopian *apparatus*: the Big Brother's telescreen in Orwell's *1984*. Both of them record the actions and speeches of the citizens, leaving no refuge or escape for the lonely and desperate protagonists of the novels. All these surveillance systems act as a Panopticon, an ideal prison designed in 1791 by the English philosopher and jurist Jeremy Bentham. The structure was imagined to guarantee continuous and uniform police observation of inmates, and to "produce complete obedience to the governing authority" (Strub 40) through constant and covert observation, fear, and through certitude of the punishment, by using the invisible omnipresence of control as deterrent for misbehaving.

At the same time, Ava is also trapped inside the body and the mind that Nathan has built for her, into the role and the identity that the man has chosen for his woman-machine. Nathan is driven by the so-called "masculine myth": this archetypal tendency exalts manhood and supports the idea and the embodiment of women as a commodity of "dominant male constructions of realities that emerge from and serve male power interests" (Elichaooff and Frost 43). Recalling the scientifically repressive essence of Huxley's *Brave New World*, where human are genetically modified according to the class they belong, Nathan literally builds the female bodies of his androids, marking the identity, the image, and even the self-representation of these posthuman creatures. His robots are all women-machines strongly and sexually commodified and modeled as aesthetically attractive, thin, young, and sensual. He chooses the lines of their faces, the skin, the color of the eyes, the length of the hair, the physical measures reflecting his masculine canons of beauty. He determines temper and dis-

positions of their character too, and, in some cases, like Kyoko, who is mute and extremely submissive, he limits or deletes their abilities and thoughts.

If Ava recalls Frankenstein's monster, Nathan acts halfway between Dr. Frankenstein and Pygmalion. As the protagonist of Shelley's masterpiece, he is moved by *hubris* and he shows no pity for his creatures. At the same time, Nathan also evokes the sculptor from the classic myth, who carves the statue of a beautiful woman, falls in love with it and asks Aphrodite to transform his piece of ivory into a real person. As Pygmalion, Nathan shapes his perfect women-machines and animates them, displaying a strong physical passion for his creatures. But, differently from the mythical character, the scientist feels no genuine sentimental attachment for Ava and the other androids. He is in love with the idealization of his work, with the glory of his research, with the power and the unprecedented potentiality of his models. In same ways, Nathan also embodies Narcissus, who falls in love with his own reflection.

He is influenced by delusions of omnipotence and by distressing sexual instincts revealing that, as Huyssen suggests for the character of Maria in *Metropolis*, "the machine-woman results from the more or less sublimated sexual desires of her male creator" (227). This sublimated sexual desire is strongly evident in many other sci-fi movies, such as in the aforementioned *Blade Runner* (1982). Here, for example, the replicant Pris is a "basic pleasure model" made and owned by the Tyrell Corporation, specifically created for male entertainment. As Pris, Ava and the other *Ex-Machina* androids are also designed for amusement. Nathan determines the sexuality of his machines as well as their psychophysical features, since, as he himself emphasizes at minute 46, every creature needs a gender to be complete. So, *Ex-Machina's* artificial intelligences can have intercourse, feel pleasure, and, consequently, give pleasure. In between her legs, Ava has an opening with a concentration of sensors: "You engage 'em in the right way, creates a pleasure response." (00:46:30), Nathan says. In the movie, it is clearly shown him while having sex with Kyoko, who is programmed to obey, be a maid, entertain and please. Considering that she is incapable of free will and unable to talk and to respond, the sexual act is imposed to her by Nathan and, even if she doesn't show any clear sign of pain, just a desolate emptiness, the relation between them can be interpreted as sexual harassment. The only moment that Kyoko shows a more conscious resolution is when she stabs Nathan. This happens after Ava whispers in her ear, probably in order to influence her programming. However, the deed is almost motionless and placid. She quietly waits behind his back, while the man is fighting with Ava by using a primitive, brutal force. After she stabs Nathan, Kyoko stares at him with a penetrating look, she doesn't run away, she doesn't keep fighting. Nathan, instead, is furious and smashes her skull with a tube, killing the android. The way Nathan abuses Kyoko clearly enlightens his narcissistic ego and his violent and womanizing tendencies: he treats her like an objectified and hypersexualized slave and humiliates her in several occasions, without showing mercy or com-

passion. Analyzing his behavior, one could assume that he also had sex with the previous models he built and he keeps them as dead trophies in wardrobes-graves in front of his bed, fetishes and material evidences of his male, creator and dominant power.

In *Ex-Machina*, women bodies seem to be male property, as in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Here, in a sterile word, the fertile handmaids lose their name and their identity because the rich and powerful families that own them use their bodies as incubators. Offred, the protagonist, starts to feel her body as something separated from her mind and says:

"I used to think of my body as an instrument of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will ... Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping" (Atwood 115).

As Raffaella Baccolini stated: "A woman's body in effect becomes a commodity with an exchange value as the woman is not the owner of this commodity but instead the laborer who must provide the goods to those who will benefit directly from her service" (215-216). Ava's body is interpreted in the same way, but without the procreative intention of the aforementioned novel: she is a utility device that can produce innovations, but she can possess no goods because she has no rights and no freedom. Nathan is aware of the consciousness of his sentient machines but he is completely insensitive to their feelings, particularly to their pain. Ethically speaking, it is not clear and perhaps it is not even possible to determine if, in a similar context, the emotions expressed by the androids are true or only the result of programming, but they seem to be perceived as authentic by the subjects who experiment them and, for sure, the violence that the creator exploits on them is real and cruel. One of the earlier models of Nathan's A.I. named Jade, for example, had a breakdown and desperately tried to escape from the same room where Ava is imprisoned: she screamed, she cried, she scratched the wall until her mechanical arms broke, but the scientist was uncaring and abusing as usual and simply replaced her with a new model. She was just an experiment gone wrong, with no moral or legal implications.

Analyzing the functioning of the concentration camp during the Second World War and the behavior of Nazis, Hannah Arendt wrote that "murder is as impersonal as the squashing of a gnat" (443) because soldiers and officials used to think about their victims as "not-human" subjects and relied on a strong dissociation from the brutal actions that they committed in order to continue doing their jobs. Nathan shows a conceptually similar detachment: despite human features and potentially human feelings, he does not recognize AIs posthuman identity and does not give value to the new essence that they embrace. He continues to see these females AIs as exploitable and expendable machines, useful for his research and rise to power. At

the same time, also Ava does not give value to life and lacks of empathy for Caleb and Kyoko. Ava seems to reveal psychopathic tendencies and personality disorders, as described in the DSM-5 (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*): she simulates her emotions and her affection, she is deeply manipulative and unscrupulous, she uses self-dramatization and seductive behavior to draw attention, and so on (659-669).

But, finally, even these negative dispositions of her character appear to be the decision of a male authority. As the Big Brother in *1984* and Minister Wilford in Bong Joon-ho's *Snowpiercer* (2015), in *Ex-Machina* also, the dystopian power knows and secretly encourages disobedience just to reinforce its control over rebels, except that, this time, the trap fails. The Turing test that Nathan organized was a pretext and he chose Caleb, a softhearted orphan, not for his programming skills, but because of his tragic past and his kindness. To intensify the experience of his employee, the CEO shapes Ava according to Caleb's pornographic preferences (obtained by hacking his private chronology). Nathan wanted an emotional person to interact with Ava in order to confirm that she was able to deceive people using human skills, suggesting that one of the central elements of intelligence and humanity is the ability to cheat, to improvise, to not follow fixed and programmed schemes. At minute 84, Nathan says: "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?"

It is interesting to see how said abilities include characteristics traditionally judged as feminine and how Ava herself relies on her femininity to establish a contact with Caleb, painting herself as a real woman willing for affection, contact, warmth and freedom, and underlining her desire to be loved and to be pretty. When first appears, she is presented as a human-like machine, with only face and hands covered in artificial skin, while the rest of the body is clearly robotic and some transparent parts (e.g., arms, belly, legs, cranium) show the internal mechanisms that compose the AI. Slowly, she starts to "cover" her mechanical nudity, reasonably to enhance Caleb's affection and empathy, using simple-style, but still sensual clothing (cardigan, floral midi dresses, stockings, etc.) and short hair wig. Ava learns how to manipulate Caleb and to stimulate his emotional response to her situation exploiting both her body and her pretended damsel-in-distress vulnerability. She employs sexuality and sensitivity for her advantage, relying on her female abilities as the replicant Rachel from *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*.

In Dick's novel⁵, Rachel is a neo-noir *femme fatale* that seduces Deckard in order to convince him not to kill replicants anymore. It isn't the first time that she uses sex to manipulate hunters in order to save her mates: after they sleep together, she says:

5 Rachel's character in *Blade Runner* is still depicted as a mysterious and sensual neo-noir figure, but, the most deceiving and negative aspects of the replicant have been erased to permit the love story developing in the plot and to foster a partial happy ending of the movie.

“You are not going to be able to hunt androids any longer. [...] No bounty hunter ever has gone on [...] after being with me” (198). Sex and sexuality are the strongest and most effective way for her to show (post)humanity and to prove that androids are worthy to live: after sleeping with Rachel, Deckard feels a connection with the female android and develops empathic feelings for the replicants because he cannot think again about them as empty machines: “their sexual union has been a means to an end for Rachel, but, for Deckard, it confounds his ability to see androids as automata” (Vest 17). On Deckard, as well as on Caleb, the sexuality of the feminine robot is the first element of deception: the characters don’t empathize with androids because of their artificial but conscious intelligences, they firstly relate with the women that they have in front of them. Deckard and Caleb act in the opposite way to Theodore Twombly, the depressed and lonely protagonist of Spike Jonze’s *Her* (2013), a movie that tells the love story between a man and a not-physical talking operating system equipped with artificial intelligence and programmed to evolve. In spite of the ending of *Her*, Theodore and the OS named Samantha are strongly connected even so, without a feminine material presence, and sincerely fall in love with each other.

The relations between male creators and female machine-creatures are often displayed in science fiction and the *genre* usually insists also on the connection between technology and femininity. As long as technology and women can be controlled, they are profitable advantages, but, when they start to threaten the *status quo*, they are converted into a nightmarish danger. Especially starting from *Metropolis*, machines are usually perceived as “a demonic, inexplicable threat and as harbinger of chaos and destruction” (Huysen 226) and they are often represented as feminine. As Huysen underlines, the core of this fear and, consequently, of this analysis is the need for control: “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” (226). Thus, men go from fear to hatred and desire of exploitation, and from these to violence.

The socio-political and personal image of women is shaped – in fiction and in history – by often-conflicting archetypal myths and fixed ideas and it shows a strong perceptive and interpretive dichotomy that has been fully understood by the dystopian genre. Traditionally, women are first of all wives and mothers, virginal “angels of the hearth” and they are depicted as submissive, sexually passive or asexual, supporting and functional beings. They represent “the eternal feminine,” defined by Gilbert and Gubar as a union of “modesty, gracefulness, purity, delicacy, civility, compliancy, reticence, chastity, affability, politeness” and so on (23). At the same time, they also embody a possible fully-sexual, independent, unpredictable and unconstrained anomaly that can alter the aforementioned authoritarian and male control: women can move from the predetermined path and demand self-determination.

A similar contrast can be generated also with science and technology: “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" (Huysen 226). Science and technology, in fact, are interpreted as necessary components of our life, but, potentially, they can also represent a risk because the relation between humans and the "technological other" has reached undeniable and "unprecedented degrees of intimacy and intrusion" (Braidotti 89) that are changing our mental, physical and socio-political habits. Woman and science can be perceived, respectively by male gender and by human race, according to three contrasting feelings: fear, desire and will to exploitation and domination.

Nathan perfectly embodies these tendencies. When he talks about Ava to Caleb at minute 65, he describes artificial intelligence as the "inevitable evolution" that sooner or later will destroy humanity: "One day, the AIs will look back on us the same way we look at fossil skeletons from the plains of Africa. An upright ape, living in dust, with crude language and tools. All set for extinction." Despite this apocalyptic fear, he does not avoid to humiliate and strongly eroticize his work, predicting a dark future for Ava too. When the next model will be set, she will be formatting: he will strip out the higher functions from her without remorse but with a hint of sadism, and, quoting the minute 66, "reprogram her to help around the house and be fucking awesome in bed." Unlike what he did to Kyoko, this time Nathan is thinking to leave to Ava her language abilities, since "It's kind of annoying not being able to talk to her." The sentiment that Nathan feels for his women-machines is a mixture between fascination and hatred, between *Eros* and *Thanatos*. His desire to indiscriminate use of the bodies of his androids transforms temptation into violence, and strengthen his will of destruction and supremacy.

This overwhelming perspective is also detectable in *1984*. Winston, the protagonist of the Orwell's dystopian masterpiece, falls in love with his colleague Julia and converts his relation into an act of liberation and revolution against the Big Brother. But, at the beginning of the story, his erotic attraction to women is combined with a strong violent impulse against female figures: he thinks often about raping and killing women, even Julia, and, in his hallucinated thoughts, he inflicts pain and death obtaining a strong sexual pleasure that evokes in a disturbing way Christian imagines of Ecstasy:

"Vivid, beautiful hallucinations flashed through his mind. He would flog her to death with a rubber truncheon. He would tie her naked to a stake and shoot her full of arrows like Saint Sebastian. He would ravish her and cut her throat at the moment of climax. Better than before, moreover, he realized WHY it was that he hated her. He hated her because she was young and pretty and sexless, because he wanted to go to bed with her and would never do so, because round her sweet supple waist, which seemed to ask you to encircle it with your arm, there was only the odious scarlet sash, aggressive symbol of chastity." (Orwell 15-16).

Winston's frustrated and sick fantasies can be associated with the heavy repression of sexual instincts that rules Oceania, where love and sexuality are crimes against the state because libido can be sublimated and "employed in the service of the Party" (Booker 76).

Instead all these, the reasons for Nathan's behavior are not determinable (past traumas, relational problems, fear of rejection, etc.), but it is manifest that he has issues with women. In the myth of Pygmalion narrated in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (8 AD), the sculptor "is motivated to make himself a life partner because of his revulsion to real women with their innate vices" (James 13). As Pygmalion, Nathan seems to prefer idealized and "fabricated" women to real women, also because he can shape and control his models, hoping to create passive and subordinate subjects. Maybe, his misogynist and aggressive attitude, his will of exploitation, and his disrespect for others could also be connected with a psychiatric condition. He seems to suffer for a Narcissistic personality disorder, as classified by DSM-5, since he shows several symptoms: delusions of grandeur, fixed fantasies of power, success and intelligence, obsessive desire of being admired and pleased, tendency to exploit, underestimate or humiliate others, incapacity or disinterest to empathize, among others (670-672). Nathan idolizes himself and his work. His technological achievements make him feel like a superior, almost like (being) a divine mind. At the beginning of the movie, Caleb says to Nathan "If you've created a conscious machine, it's not the history of man. It's the history of Gods" (00:10:45). The CEO takes his affirmation and transforms it into a stronger one: "I'm not a man, I'm a God" (00:15:10). And, as a God, he thinks that he has the right to shape and control his creatures, to submit their mechanical flesh and "soul", to address their personality and their intimacy. The Pygmalion complex and its desire to model someone until perfection reach here one of the highest levels because Nathan's megalomaniac ideas further separate the godlike man from the created woman. As stated by Simone de Beauvoir, "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute, She is the Other" (6), incidental, inessential.

Despite being artificial, Ava's body is inscribed with two power relations. Ava, the created object, is the victim of her creator and owner Nathan, whom Foucault could have judged as a perfect and repressive exponent of biopolitical capitalism. In *Discipline and Punish*, the French philosopher wrote:

"The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A "political anatomy", which was also a "mechanics of power", was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, "docile" bodies" (138).

These docile bodies are primarily intended as organisms that can "be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (Foucault 136) for the power sake. But that's not

all. Secondly, Ava is the victim of Nathan as erotic object and female subject, because only the male look and the male discourse could shape her woman identity. Nathan wants to create not only a perfect, docile and useful machine, but also a perfect, docile and useful woman.

As Laura Mulvey explained, the visual pleasure of cinema stimulates sexual instincts and ego libido, since the images can have both a scopophilic and a narcissistic function: scopophilia uses “another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight” (808), while narcissism causes “an identification with the image seen” (808). The representation and the construction of cinematic female bodies are, thus, strongly influenced by the male desire and by the male point of view, and “in a world ordered by sexual imbalance” (Mulvey 808) their displays contributes to the idea of “active/male and passive/female” (Mulvey 808).

“The man controls the film phantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralize the extra-diegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle. [...] As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence” (Mulvey 810).

In the socio-political context, Nathan sees Ava as a product of his work and controls the android as her owner, but his authoritarian and panoptical gaze, as the director gaze and the spectator gaze, additionally respond to male needs. In *Ex-Machina*, men control both sides of the screen, and the narrative planes, with significant impacts on women’s identity and expression. Ava is the result of Nathan’s choices and Nathan’s choices are the result of the sarcastic and extreme view of the director Alex Garland.

The movie points up that the public and media image of women is full of subjects reduced to sexual objects. The bodies of real women have been hidden in favor of idealized, young or timeless beauties, with perfect lips, legs, and breasts. The most alienated aspect of these canons of beauty is that the female figure is shaped according to male preferences and expectations, but it influences women as well:

“The portrayed woman seems to fulfill all men’s desires, completely abdicating to the possibility of being an equal “Other”. [...] We look at each other with male eyes, look at our breasts, our mouths, our wrinkles as we think a man would look at them” (*Il Corpo delle donne* 00:03:45).

Discussing fashion and fetishism, Walter Benjamin stressed out the importance of the “sex-appeal of the inorganic”:

“Every fashion stands in opposition to the organic. Every fashion couples the living body to the inorganic world. To the living, fashion defends the rights of the corpse. The fetishism that succumbs to the sex-appeal of the inorganic world is its vital nerve.” (37).

This concept could be extended to the artificial and the constructed essence of the visual pleasure of images, to the cinema voyeurism and to the posthuman.

The gazes of the camera, of Caleb and Nathan and of the spectators are heavily sexualized, they insist on Ava's body, even if the android's features are not extremely provocative and she is not a controversial *femme fatale* as false-Maria in *Metropolis* or Rachel in *Blade Runner*. As analyzed before, Ava's construction of her body develops parallel to her escape plans and her raise of awareness. And when, in the end, Ava composes her body with the skins of the other models, Caleb secretly and voyeuristically watches her actions. The result is strongly meta-cinematographic. Caleb can be interpreted not only as the link between the creator Nathan and the machine Ava, but also as the tie between the director, the spectator and the visual narrative. He eagerly watches Ava and witnesses the android's transformation from behind a glass, as the spectator does with the movie from behind a screen. He is deceived by both Nathan and Ava, as the spectator is tricked by the director and the twists of the plot. In *Ex-Machina*, the "sex-appeal of inorganic" gains a step further also because of the artificial nature of the female protagonist. It adds more fetishism to the male (on-screen and off-screen) look playing with the double male anxiety toward technology and women analyzed by Huyssen. Garland's movie glorifies the tempting fascination for technology and women with fear, since usually, as Minsoo Kang claimed during an interview in 2011, "the delight, amusement, and amazement that people experience in the face of the self-moving, life-imitating machine are mixed with a sense of unease that can be magnified into full-blown horror under certain circumstances". Also, Braidotti underlines that there is a strong and successful tendency in popular culture to imagine the relations between humans and machines with both negativity and fascination: she labels "this narrow and negative social imaginary as techno-teratological, that is to say as the object of cultural admiration and aberration" (64). Thus, the dreadful and suspicious visions of women-machines are loaded with lust and with the desire to control and to possess.

Whether they are natural or artificial, *Ex-Machina* representation of feminine bodies reminds us that "the power to subject another person to the will sadistically or to the gaze voyeuristically is turned on to the woman as the object of both" (Mulvey 813). Dramatically, the only way Ava could save herself is by violence and manipulation. But, in the end, she obtains her freedom and she can consciously build her partially transparent body with new limbs, skin and hair. With this action, she gains control on her body for the first time, transforming the Frankenstein monster into the doctor. The woman, the nature and the technology that Huyssen talked about recapture their dimension defeating patriarchal unity, socio-cultural immobility and male/political oppression. She can walk free, she can touch leaves and flowers, she can feel the breeze and the grass under her feet, and she can watch the people around with curious and attentive eyes.

Is the confrontation between humans and posthumans, between male and female doomed to end, like the movie, or is there space for dialogue? As Dr. Frankenstein, Nathan moves from utopian premises and promises, but he ends up producing just pain, violence and death, reminds us that dystopia “draws its energy from the failure of utopian hopes and aspirations” (Kumar 116). Wishing that reality will not follow dystopian paths, we can still learn some lessons from these nightmares. According to Kang, contemporary culture approaches advanced machines with three possible endings: “inevitable conflict”, which imagines an upcoming wars with robots, “cybernetic mergence”, which fosters a fusion between human and posthuman, and between natural and artificial, and “equivalence through sentience”, which hopes for a possible peaceful co-existence between humans and robots (300-309). Nothing is already written and nothing is “absolute good” or “absolute bad”. Utopian relationships between human and posthuman, as well as between genders, are possible if we accept differences and reject rigid, dogmatic and patriarchal boundaries, as Donna Haraway proposed in her *A Cyborg Manifesto*, where the cyborg is interpreted as a “kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective personal self” (302): “Gender, race, or class-consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism” (295-296) and they limit the construction of not fixed, contradictory, partial and/or self-determined identities, which are the needed essences for an open-minded, equal, free and respectful world. We could approach posthumanism as a chance to rewrite the dystopian aspects of humanism. As Braidotti said:

“I see the posthuman turn as an amazing opportunity to decide together what and who we are capable of becoming, and an unique opportunity for humanity to reinvent itself affirmatively, through creativity and empowering ethical relations, and not only negatively, through vulnerability and fear. It is a chance to identify opportunities for resistance and empowerment on a planetary scale” (195).

The “multiple horizons” described by Braidotti could be closer than we think, such as science fictional worlds. It will be our call to transform them into a utopian or into a dystopian reality.

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