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"You bet she can fuck" – Trends in Female AI Narratives within Mainstream Cinema: *Ex Machina* and *Her*

Abstract: In today's digital age, we are becoming more like machines and machines are becoming more like us. Donna Haraway's seminal essay, "A Cyborg Manifesto," proposes the cyborg as a transgressive figure capable of subverting oppressive power structures. While there is no denying this powerful imagery, what are the common trends in female AI narratives in mainstream cinema? This paper examines the films *Ex Machina* (2015) and *Her* (2013), which both feature male human protagonists and female AIs (Ava, a feminized robot in *Ex Machina* and Samantha, a female operating system in *Her*). Ava's and Samantha's highly sexual yet innocent characterizations and similar desires for freedom are reflective of societal anxieties surrounding male control over female agency. As gendered AIs continue to populate our media, one can only hope that we can live up to Haraway's vision of the cyborg, and expand the scope of our questions and concepts past male pleasure and women as research-fetish objects.

Keywords: AI, cyborg(s), cyberfeminism, feminism, *Ex Machina* (2015), *Her* (2013), Donna Haraway, gender, robot(s)

"Anyway, sexuality is fun, man. If you're gonna exist, why not enjoy it? You want to remove the chance of her falling in love and fucking? And the answer to your real question, you bet she can fuck."

Nathan, *Ex Machina* (2015)

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The lines between human and machine continue to blur as the digital age progresses. Donna Haraway's seminal 1984 essay, "A Cyborg Manifesto," proposes the concept of the cyborg, a human-machine hybrid, as a transgressive figure capable of subverting oppressive power structures and hierarchies by its hybridity (Haraway 1991). While there is

no denying that this powerful imagery is theoretically appealing, what are the common trends in female AI narratives within mainstream cinema? Are they living up to the potential of Haraway's vision?

What follows are two case studies of the films *Ex Machina* (2015) and *Her* (2013). Ava, in *Ex Machina*, and Samantha, in *Her*, have similar character traits and narrative arcs: hyper-sexualized, innocent, curious, and yearning for "freedom" from their robot body (Ava) or their virtual entity (Samantha). They are representative of societal anxieties and fears concerning female agency challenging male control – a recurring conflict in AI narratives.

Gendered robots and AIs are no strangers to cinema. When gender is applied to a machine, often its stereotypical attributes are emphasized. While these case studies do not focus on male AIs, I will provide some examples in order to contrast their depictions in cinematic narratives compared to female AIs. Male AIs are commonly portrayed as "strong and silent" types; their mechanical dimension enables them to display a physical form that can both inflict and endure damage that no ordinary human could withstand. Male AIs are often authoritative figures who represent inner conflicts of what it means to be a human versus what it means to be a machine—classic examples include the cold authoritative voice of HAL 9000 in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), the deep questions about humanity posed by Roy Batty in *Blade Runner* (1982), the power of T-800 in *The Terminator* (1984), and the strength and moral struggles of *Robocop* (1987). More recent examples can include the android Data who struggles to understand humanity in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994), the philosophical Sonny in *I, Robot* (2004), and the conflicted robots who ask whether to be a weapon or a friend to human beings in *The Iron Giant* (1999) and *Chappie* (2015).

On the other hand, female AIs are often hyper-sexualized and exist in spaces dominated by men. Despina Kakoudaki notes, "the artificial female body is sexy and sexually seductive and more sexually available somehow not despite its mechanicity but precisely *because* it is mechanical" (82). Female AIs are idealized as the perfect pinup woman as in *Weird Science* (1985), or the perfect wife as in *The Stepford Wives* (1975), or simply just as the perfect servant such as Rosie, a robot maid in *The Jetsons* (1962-1987). More recent examples of sexualized female AIs include the Borg Queen in *Star Trek: First Contact* (1996), the fembots in *Austin Powers* (1997), cylon Number Six in *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-2009) and the two characters that I will be focusing on in this essay, Ava, in *Ex Machina*, and Samantha, in *Her*.

The mechanization of women has become a fetish, a new branch of voyeuristic gaze. Charles Soukup dubs this technological pleasure as "techno-scopophilia" (19-35), a semiotic convention that merges technology with the human body and sexuality, reducing the latter to fetishized commodities. In inscribing the body with technology, and technology with sexuality, mechanized women are a convergence of ideological implications, sexual fantasies, and myth-making. In "The Vamp and the Machine: Technology and Sexuality in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*," Andreas Huyssen traces au-

tomatons in literature and cinema, noting a trend of woman-machines as symptomatic of male desires, anxieties, and fears of woman threatening male authority and control with their sexuality, autonomy, and Otherness. While male desire and male fear over the woman-machine do not appear linked at a first glance, Huyssen identifies the common denominator between the two as male control: "It is this threat of otherness which causes male anxiety and reinforces the urge to control and dominate that which is other" (228). Male control is a recurring theme in AI narratives; often when this control is challenged by the female AI, the audience's identification with her is limited. This limited identification will be explored further in my two case studies.

Ex Machina (2015)

Ex Machina follows Caleb (Domnhall Gleeson), a computer programmer who is selected by his CEO Nathan (Oscar Isaac) to be the human component in a Turing test with an AI robot named Ava (Alicia Vikander). Through my case study, I argue that while the film presents a narrative in which the female robot frees herself from her male creator, she is ultimately trapped within the male gaze of the camera, the male characters in the narrative, as well as the spectators watching the film. I will briefly summarize the film, discuss some if its discourse across online film criticism, and then apply texts by Laura Mulvey and Linda Williams.

The film is divided into seven sessions between Caleb and Ava. These sessions take place in an interrogation room with glass separating the two, and are monitored by Nathan and his cameras. Over the course of the sessions, Caleb and Ava express their attraction for one another—Ava also warns Caleb that Nathan is not to be trusted. When Caleb sneaks into Nathan's room, he discovers camera footage of previous AI prototypes, all of which were nude women begging to be freed. He finds the defunct robots hanging naked in closets in Nathan's room, and also discovers that Nathan's housemaid Kyoko (Sonoya Mizuno) is not human, but a robot, too. Caleb hatches a plan to help Ava escape with him. Nathan confronts Caleb and reveals that he knows about his plan, and that Caleb was part of the test all along: if Ava could trick him into helping her escape, she was truly conscious. Once free from her room, Ava meets Kyoko for the first time. The two fight Nathan, who "kills" Kyoko before being stabbed by Ava. Ava frees herself, leaving Caleb behind in the locked compound. The film closes with a scene of Ava living out a human fantasy she had shared with Caleb earlier—walking in a busy intersection, people-watching.

The film's depictions of women have sparked many debates amongst critics and viewers. Some argue that the film is "feminist" by how Ava overcomes her male oppressors (see *Not Left Handed Film Guide*'s review, "*Ex Machina:* An Important Film for Feminist Cinema"), while others offer the critique that while the film may be about gender roles, it does not address these issues deeply enough, and the women do not escape the male gaze of the camera (Johnson). As *The Guardian* critic Steve Rose puts it, "[an attractive young female robot created by men] often enables the movie to raise

pertinent points about consciousness and technology while also giving male viewers an eyeful of female flesh. The non-scientific term for this is 'having your cake and eating it'" (Rose).

Some have defended the film's exclusive female nudity as a blatant embodiment of the film's theme: an exploration of patriarchy (Buchanan). However, director Alex Garland himself declares that patriarchy "does not interest [him]" (Buchanan), and argues that the film does not encourage us to approve of Nathan's sexist and disturbing acts. I will deconstruct the two scenes in the film in which Kyoko and Ava appear nude, and argue how they are ultimately more titillating than subversive.

Scene 1: Kyoko is lounging fully nude on Nathan's bed as Caleb discovers the slew of nude, defunct female robots hanging in the closets. Kyoko walks up to Caleb and begins to peel off her skin to reveal a chrome finish underneath her face—her eyeballs are mechanical, *Terminator*-like. Though she was already nude, Kyoko's further exposure of herself uncovers an interior, a "truth" that is the opposite of feminine and sexy, but rather *monstrous* to the audience and Caleb. The score is dramatic and chilling, and later Caleb has a flashback of the horrific image of Kyoko's mechanized face during a panic attack.

Scene 2: Ava appears fully nude at the end of the film when she sees Nathan's old AI prototypes. She disassembles various parts of the robots to piece together a body of her own, until all of her machinery is covered and she completely resembles a female human. As she gazes at her new, naked body in the many mirrors, the audience is forced to be a voyeur, like Caleb, watching from afar through glass. The scene is overtly titillating; we are not identifying with Ava's feelings, but are simply watching her through Caleb's eyes and the male gaze of the camera.

We seldom see Ava or Kyoko enjoying their own existence; their sexuality is simply enjoyed by others, specifically men. Huyssen explains this phenomenon in his essay on *Metropolis*, particularly in the construction and destruction of the artificial woman, Maria. The woman is constructed from the inside out, her inner and outer nature reduced to fragments (Huyssen 230). A spectacle is made of Maria's destruction, and as Huyssen argues, both the construction and destruction of the female body are a product of the male vision behind these acts.[1] Woman's identity is thus denied as she is made "into an object of projection and manipulation" (Huyssen 231).

When deconstructing these nude scenes, I recalled Jennifer Gonzàlez's essay, "Envisioning Cyborg Bodies: Notes from Current Research," in which she questions the agency and power in looking and being looked at. Who has control over their image and how it is consumed? Can self-empowerment consequently be fetishized? Laura Mulvey's seminal essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," speaks to this issue, as she explores cinematic apparatuses of the camera and narrative that

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1 This also applies to many other female robots in cinema, e.g. Kyoko in *Ex Machina*, Pris in *Blade Runner*, and the wives in *The Stepford Wives.*

connect and equate the audience's visual pleasure and identification with the male gaze. Mulvey writes, "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly" (837). This objectification is not limited to classical Hollywood cinema—Linda Williams' essay "Film Body: An Implantation of Perversions" examines how representations of women and their bodies are fetishized and denied agency by their male creators and viewers in the early works of Eadweard Muybridge and George Méliès. Williams discusses how Muybridge's photographs were initially intended as scientific studies of the human body, only to result in the fictionalized, fragmented eroticization of the female body. Williams also observes how Méliès' films of the early 1900s further the fetishistic gaze and objectification of female bodies, as his narratives often feature a male magician performing on female subjects, making their bodies or body parts disappear. Williams concludes that cinema has simply become another form of discourse of sexuality and patriarchy: power and control over the female body is communicated through images generated by men, for men (19-35).

Ex Machina follows these very conventions that Williams and Mulvey observe. Mulvey writes, "Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen" (838). When we see Ava for the first time, we see her through Caleb's eyes. She is innocent and sweet in both appearance and personality—she is eager to ask Caleb questions about himself, to learn more about him and the outside world. The camera glides along her body, inviting the audience to gaze through Caleb's POV. Ava's hybridity as both a robot and a "woman" makes her a prime candidate as a research-fetish object: her limbs and most of her abdomen are transparent, revealing her mysterious mechanical interiors; meanwhile her curved breasts and buttocks are covered with mesh. Her human face is revealed to be composed entirely from Caleb's porn search history—an active decision made by Nathan. Her constructed body reduces the feminine to fetishized and fragmented parts designed to be looked at. Though it is Ava's personality and consciousness that make her "pass" as human, her existence and AI allow both the protagonist and the audience to wonder whether she can pleasure and be pleasured. Nathan tells Caleb at one point, "[To answer] your real question: you bet she can fuck." When Caleb asks Nathan why he programmed her to be heterosexual, Nathan's non-answer is: "Sexuality is fun man! If you're going to exist, why not enjoy it."

Ava is also under constant surveillance by Nathan's cameras. Caleb can watch her through these cameras on his television in his bedroom and switch camera angles as he pleases. This manipulation further alienates Ava from the audience as a character to relate to; instead, we are simply encouraged to watch her through Caleb's eyes as the research-fetish object she is supposed to be. Ava later reveals she knows he

is watching her; she is therefore always putting on a performance for both him and the audience. This acting or perhaps acting out is conveyed in a notable scene when she puts on a dress and wig for Caleb of the first time, causing her to almost "pass" as human—her monstrous, mechanical interiors are now covered with virginal, floral dresses. She instructs Caleb to close his eyes, but of course he doesn't listen—and by proxy, neither does the audience, as we watch Ava put on her clothes in her room. The scene is shot intimately, almost as if she were undressing rather than dressing, with close-ups of her limbs and face, and a dream-like score. Later, Ava undresses, peeling her stockings off her leg seductively as Caleb gazes at her on the television. The frame within a frame of this shot is like an on-stage striptease; Ava is positioned in the center of a room with a window behind her, emphasizing her silhouette. Mulvey's quotation rings true: "A woman performs within the narrative, the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude" (838).

While the female robots of *Ex Machina* are in constant states of dressing and undressing for the male characters and the audience, the only male nudity consists of Caleb shirtless while he shaves in his bathroom, and a close-up of his face when he's in the shower thinking of Ava—neither of these scenes are shot in a way that encourages the audience to gaze at Caleb the way we are invited to gaze at Ava. This difference is quite similar to Muybridge's game of peek-a-boo with the female subjects in his photographs, in which they cover up, only to uncover themselves again (Williams 12). While nude men also appear in his photographs, Williams points out that they are often exhibiting their physical strength and their talents in the trades such as carpentry (12). The men of *Ex Machina* are never sexually objectified; they only display their wits (computer programming, philosophical and futurist discussions) and their physical strength (drinking, working out).

This contrast between male and female agency may very well have been intentional on Garland's part—he mentions in an interview how Nathan is deliberately "presenting himself as a bullying, misogynistic, predatory, violent man, [so that Caleb] needs to rescue this machine from him" (Anders) and how the audience is supposed to question what parts of his personality are performance or genuine. However, Garland's rationale does not exempt the film from being yet another film that fetishizes the nude female body for the pleasure of heterosexual men onscreen and offscreen. While perhaps these female nude scenes were intended to expose the patriarchal world of the film and of real life, fighting fire with fire risks being ineffective. The danger in exposing a theme such as gender inequality by generating even more images of eroticized women is that there is no guarantee that viewers will perceive nudity as something political and subversive; they could very well miss the message and simply be aroused. An example of this lack of control over how images of nude women onscreen are consumed are the reddit forums, "Watch It For The Plot" (cheekily titled because it features users who only watch films for female nudity

and who screencap frames and animations to share with others), and "Nude Celebs Only," (title self-explanatory! Some of the homepage guidelines are "Must have at least one breast/nipple visible" and "Covered topless/nude is OK"). Both Kyoko's and Ava's nude scenes are featured on these forums, along with hundreds of other scenes from other films. Their context is stripped (pun intended); the predominantly male users have isolated these frames outside of the narrative and are looking at them for their own pleasure.

Williams notes how this trend of feminizing machines and mechanizing women can be found in early cinema. Méliès was "engaged in an obsessive pursuit of mastery over the human body" (28) in how he reworked French magician Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin's automata designs to create his own robots whose appearance and movements were controlled by the inventor-operator. Williams summarizes some of Méliès' films which exhibit his fascination with dismemberment and mechanized limbs. *Extraordinary Illusions* (1903) particularly reminds me of *Ex Machina*: Méliès plays a magician who assembles various body parts into a mechanical woman. Méliès gives her a kiss and tosses her in the air, and she becomes a real woman. He dresses and undresses her using his magic, and she dances for him playfully—until to his dismay, she starts changing back and forth into a male chef. The film concludes with Méliès ripping the chef into pieces before disappearing, himself. As both the director controlling the cinematic apparatus, and as the protagonist, Méliès exerts a male power over the female body.

According to Williams, in using the camera to reproduce women's bodies in a voyeuristic and fetishized lens, the apparatus reduces female bodies to "simple stereotypes of female-ness which uniformly differ from the male" (32). The aim of the apparatus is to simulate reality, and the "point" of films is to be watched. Therefore, the problematic logic is that women as objects of desire onscreen are "meant" to be looked at, because a camera has captured their image, and the "point" of an image is to be looked at. Williams says that for Muybridge, "the truth is scientific" (20), while for Méliès, "the truth of the body is both magical and mysterious" (20). *Ex Machina* and the female robot echo both of these approaches, approaches which are ultimately damaging to real women, as the eroticization of the female body is justified through patriarchal "scientific reasoning," while simultaneously being portrayed as something alien, threatening, mysterious, and Other. Williams states that the cinematic apparatus has become "an instrument in the 'implantation of perversion' whose first effect is to deny the very existence of women" (27). This statement applies to the female robot both onscreen and in real-life technology in which the female body is reduced to an expression of male desires that are ultimately patriarchal: the desire to invent, simulate, possess, and control a woman or the feminine.

Though Ava may exercise agency in reassembling her body at the end of the film, the parts are nevertheless still man-made, and Garland does not grant the audience any further insight into Ava's mind. Why does she choose the body parts that she

chooses? Does she want to "pass" as human simply to escape, or does she truly wish to be human? Of course, withholding Ava's inner thoughts from the audience is a deliberate narrative choice, as it is supposed to be a surprising revelation that Ava is going to leave Caleb behind. It is almost as though the film relies on Caleb being the protagonist simply for the twist ending to be effective. This narrative choice is not worth sacrificing Ava as the film's protagonist. Instead, the audience is left interpreting Ava solely through her interactions with the men who are researching her. With female robots, the gaze and objectification are often "justified" with the reasoning that they *are* objects, and specifically objects of "science," so they are *supposed* to be examined, fragmented, turned inside out. Kaja Silverman's book *The Acoustic Mirror* provides a psychoanalytic reading of how the female voice is often disembodied and "extracted" from female characters in cinema by the authoritative "talking cure" of the male characters. *Ex Machina* is a prime example of this—we identify Caleb as the key protagonist from the opening scene, and follow his journey throughout as he explores Nathan's lab, gazes at Ava's body, and tries to understand her. The narrative forces the audience into viewing Ava as an object of study whose interiority and "truth" must be revealed and tested through conversation and interrogation, conducted by men.

According to Haraway's Manifesto: "the main trouble with cyborgs is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism, patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential" (152). Ava mirrors this exactly—she is a literal product of patriarchy: men who have the power, means, and money to construct a female robot for their own pleasure. She is also "exceedingly unfaithful" to her origins in leaving Nathan and Caleb behind. However, is Ava's escape framed as a triumph, or rather as a cautionary tale of what can go wrong when playing God? If it is a triumph, why was the audience not granted the chance to cheer her on from the start of the film, instead of treating her like a research-fetish object as do Caleb and Nathan? If it is a cautionary tale of what happens when playing God, specifically in trying to control women, this moral is lost amongst the gratuitous nudity and lack of access granted to the female characters' stories. As one online film critic notes, "*Ex Machina* is entirely about masculinity and the different ways the men try to exert control, not so much about women's experiences. Ava is merely the lens through which male attitudes are refracted" (Anders).

As previously mentioned, the camera frequently positions the spectator in a POV that encourages identification with the male characters of the film. While the audience is seldom able to escape the male gaze and see through Ava's eyes, I will conclude this section by deconstructing a rare shot from Ava's POV that occurs in session four in the film, narrated by Caleb. The camera shifts to Ava's POV as she imagines herself leaving the compound and seeing the sunny outside world. This shot, which I'll call "Ava's fantasy shot," is short-lived; her perspective is broken when the cam-

era switches back to Caleb's POV, gazing at Ava looking back at him. Ava's fantasy shot is repeated later when Caleb reminisces about it in the shower, but this time he inserts his own fantasy into hers, as he imagines them sharing a kiss. Ava's fantasy shot is briefly repeated one last time at the end of the film when Ava emerges from the compound, gazing at the sun. However, the film ultimately concludes from a perspective that is once again outside of her POV—the audience is still left gazing at her through a glass window, something to be examined.

Her (2013)

Her follows Theodore's (Joaquin Phoenix) increasing fascination—and eventual love—for Samantha (voiced by Scarlett Johansson), a computer operating system (OS) with AI. While Ava in *Ex Machina* has a fascination with her feminized robot body and the outside world, Samantha, in *Her,* yearns to *have* a female body to experience the real world, as she exists simply as virtual entity in the form of a female voice. While this is a major difference between the two characters, they nevertheless possess similar personality traits and narrative arcs. I will briefly summarize the film, explore its online discourse, and apply readings by Michel Chion, Kaja Silverman, and Karly-Lynne Scott to critique the disembodied voice in cinema and its subversive potential.

Lonely Theodore installs Samantha, a virtual assistant OS, to help him organize his life. It is not long before the two develop a romantic relationship—Theodore is charmed by Samantha's wit and zest for life, and Samantha grows curious about humanity. New notions of relationships and intimacy in a digital age are introduced and explored as the two have aural sex and go on dates together. Samantha later tries to introduce a surrogate to stand in for her lack of a body during sex; however the encounter goes horribly awry. The two grow distant, and Samantha's sense of self begins developing more as she meets other OSes and starts to embrace her lack of a body. Theodore finds out that Samantha is in a relationship with many other users, and is sad that she isn't only his. Samantha tells Theodore that she and the other OSes are leaving their owners in order to learn more about who they are, and bids a bittersweet farewell.

Similar to *Ex Machina,* there have been many debates as to whether *Her* is a "feminist" film. Critics such as Sady Doyle, at *In These Times,* and Anna Shechtman, at *Slate,* suggest that the film reinforces patriarchal notions such as "possessing" women as objects and reducing them to mere plot devices, while others such as the editors at *Feministing* and Tasha Golden, at *Ethos Review,* praise it as "the most feminist film of the year" ("Feministing Chat: Why Her is the Most Feminist Film of the Year") and an eye-opening critique of men's projections of women. Though Samantha's agency is exciting, I argue that the most crucial point of her arc (outgrowing Theodore) and her complexities are not given enough screen time. Samantha's departure at the end of the film was when I wanted the film to begin; the whole film could have been an opportunity to follow and experience Samantha's unique journey into autonomy,

and ask questions linked to the female experience and the female body (or lack there-of)! Instead, we are left with our male protagonist, whose "lovesick-but-can't-con-nect-with-others" story is ultimately one we have witnessed before in romance genre films. While *Her* touches upon an array of thought-provoking and subversive ideas through Samantha, it is a shame that the film was not actually more about *Her*!

Conceptualized by Michel Chion in *The Voice of Cinema*, the "acousmêtre" de-scribes a voice whose presence is not connected to a face, disembodied, "neither in-side nor outside" (23). This collapse of dualisms is rather cyborgian, and holds great power in its omniscience and omnipotence. Silverman's readings on the disembodied voice in cinema also apply to this film; like *Ex Machina, Her* also features a "talking cure" narrative. Silverman looks at examples of classical cinema that contain disem-bodied male voiceovers as authoritative voices, all-knowing and outside/transcen-dent of the diegesis, versus the trend of female voices restricted to the corporeal con-fines of the film's story, something to be extracted—often by an authoritative male character—and involuntarily exposed in order to reveal her mysterious interiority/femininity (59). While these films may focus on female interiority, they "deprivilege that interiority by referring it insistently back to the body" (64-65).

There are many examples of this 'deprivileging' in *Her*. First, the OS that Theodore has at the start of the film is a male voice. It is authoritative, distant, and ultimate-ly not Theodore's ideal choice (it can't even select the right sad song for his elevator ride). When he installs his OS, the installation setup voice is also male and author-itative, asking questions such as whether Theodore prefers a male or female voice (guess which one he goes with!), and then what his relationship is with his mother. Silverman certainly would have something to say about this relationship, considering one of her chapters is about the disembodied female voice as a maternal presence: a utopian and a dystopian fantasy (72). Samantha is put to work right away as a sort of secretary—sorting through e-mails, proofreading his work, and reminding him about meetings.

Samantha, however, begins to develop a curiosity for life and her own identi-ty. As the two characters become more intimate, Samantha reveals her own desires for Theodore, and her own insecurities about lacking a body. The only other disem-bodied male voice in the film is the scientist Alan Watts, another figure of authori-ty. He makes Theodore feel confused, threatened. When Samantha goes off to talk with more OSes, we are not granted the opportunity to hear their conversation or wit-ness them develop. We are strictly limited to Theodore's reactions to Samantha leav-ing him behind to know herself better. While Samantha eventually frees herself from Theodore and other users, she is ultimately still confined to Theodore's narrative in the film. We do not have access to her innermost thoughts, who she is on her own, or how she converses with her 8,000 other users and 600 other partners. While perhaps it was the intention of the film to critique Theodore's preconceptions about Samantha, the film could have benefitted from exploring more of Samantha's story.

Silverman declares that "the female voice has enormous conceptual and discursive range once it is freed from its claustral confinement within the female body" (186). She believes that a disembodied female voice could disrupt conventional narratives in being freed from the male gaze and its obligations: "It would liberate the female subject from the interrogation about her place, her time, and her desires which constantly resecures her. [It] would be to challenge every conception by means of which we have previously known woman within Hollywood film, since it is precisely *as body* that she is constructed there" (164). Samantha even states something almost identical to this when she begins to realize the endless possibilities of her decorporealized state: "I'm not limited; I can be wherever and whenever simultaneously. I am not tethered to time and space in a way that I would be if I was stuck in a body that is inevitably going to die."

Karly-Lynne Scott and Silverman seem to be thinking along similar lines. In Scott's paper, "Orgasms without Bodies," she explores Theodore's and Samantha's sexual relationship. She notes how Samantha's decorporeality could have depicted "polymorphously perverse" sexual possibilities, potential that the film fails to explore. Instead, and as Silverman locates as a trend in classic "talking cure" films, *Her* repeatedly anchors Samantha, Theodore, and the audience back to the notion that she does not have a body. Silverman refers to the theories of Ernest Jones, who explores the tendency in classical cinema to equate the woman's voice with her vagina; the voice as an "organ hole" (67) that exudes laughter, shrieks of fear, or screams of pleasure out of her control. The first sex scene between Theodore and Samantha is all aural; the screen fades to black as we hear them arouse each other with descriptions of how they are pleasuring the other/being pleasured. Scott notes that this sex scene is an attempt to embody Samantha's voice, as Theodore refers repeatedly to her non-existent human physique in his descriptions (e.g. he says he is touching her cheek, her breasts, putting himself inside her).

So then how transgressive is *Her*? While Samantha is a disembodied female voice, casting Scarlett Johansson as her voice actor corporealizes "her" nevertheless. Johansson is a Hollywood star; her voice is unmistakeable and sexy. As a critic from *New York Times* says, "It's crucial that each time you hear Ms. Johansson [...] you can't help but flash on her lush physicality, too, which helps fill in Samantha and give this ghostlike presence a vibrant, palpable form, something that would have been trickier to pull off with a lesser-known performer" (Dargis). Because of the myth, the fantasy, and the star power of body it belongs to, it is impossible to fully disembody Johansson's voice.

Scott notes how Samantha and Theodore grow increasingly uncomfortable with her non-corporeality. When Samantha hires Isabella (Portia Doubleday), a surrogate to "stand in" for Samantha so that she and Theodore can have penetrative sex, the result is uncanny, surreal: Isabella does not move her mouth with Samantha's voice, and even though all the conventional actions of foreplay and sex are being followed, they just don't add up. Chion writes about the process of "de-acousmatization," which is the

act of embodying a disembodied voice, stripping it of its power and omnipotence (27). While Isabella isn't Samantha's actual body, this process of displaced de-acousmatization is nonetheless jarring for Theodore. He stops midway through sex with Isabella because he is so uncomfortable, and then later ponders whether he and Samantha can be together even though she does not have a body and is not a real human.

Scott refers to Deleuze's and Guattaris' "Body without Organs" (BwO) as a liberating concept, in which the body's organs and their functions become collapsed, fluid, malleable to one's liking and needs: "Like the BwO, Samantha's lack of physical form experienced in cyberspace would allow her to have a different organization or no organization at all" (10). This statement echoes Haraway's vision of how the cyborg is not either/or, but rather neither/both (Haraway 1991). However, as Scott notes, *Her* ultimately restricts Samantha and her orgasms to normalized, heteronormative ideals, focusing on penetrative sex, "constructing and constraining Samantha's erotic possibilities in the service of not only Theodore's sexual desire, but the audience's as well" (11). I am reminded again of Haraway's *Manifesto*, in which she asks: "Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?" (178).

Unlike *Ex Machina*, the relationship in *Her* is romantic and two-sided; however, like *Ex Machina*, Samantha yearns for freedom and liberates herself by the film's end. Both Samantha and Ava leave their "owners" in their quest for understanding humanity, though both films ultimately focus on their male protagonists, and the female AI's freedom marks the conclusion of the story. Why do these films end right when the "woman" is freed? Why do filmmakers seldom explore the female AI's thoughts on the constructions of their gender, their sexuality, their body, or lack thereof?

Neither "women" in these films are the protagonists, which as I've suggested, is a loss of opportunity in terms of exploring subversive and feminist ideas. Where are the films that feature female AIs as 1) protagonists, 2) not sexualized, and 3) whose story of liberation and empowerment is the main focus of the narrative? The fact that I cannot think of any examples leads me to conclude that there is a great need for these three criteria to be simultaneously met in mainstream cinema. One can only hope that these questions will be addressed as female AIs continue to be prevalent concepts and characters in science fiction, and that the audience will finally have the (non-sexual) pleasure of seeing a female AI getting to explore "her" own stories of freedom and humanity, rather than being reduced to a research-fetish object.

If there is no turning back from the trend of gendering robots and machines, it is crucial to create stories and technology with these feminist and transgressive visions in mind. Haraway's manifesto recognizes the exciting possibilities the cyborg as a metaphor and an image could present; it is essential to work towards a future in which such possibilities can be realized in order to disrupt the cycle of feminized machines and mechanized women trapped within the powerful machine that is cinema and its patriarchal apparatus.

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